

Raise a Reader

By Kim Ratcliff, *Parents Magazine* and Parents.com, March 2008

Settle into a comfy chair with your child to read a story is one of the best things about being a parent. And if you haven't already made reading a daily habit, you need to start now, since books benefit kids in so many ways. "First of all, reading with your child is a wonderful bonding experience," says Parents advisor Linda Acredolo, PhD, coauthor of *Baby Minds*. Your kid gets to bask in your undivided attention, which makes storytime truly magical. Reading every single day also helps your child learn to talk, expand her vocabulary, build her imagination, and get prepped for school. Our expert tips will get your child hooked on books for life.

Reading with Babies

You can't start the reading habit too early. At 3 to 6 months, your baby will be more interested in chewing her board books, but by the end of her first year, she'll probably pick out favorites.

What They Learn

When you turn pages with your baby in your arms, she'll associate books with snuggling. "As an infant, she's learning to value books because it means she gets to cuddle with her mom or dad," says Dr. Acredolo. But most important, reading to a young baby ultimately helps her learn to talk. She begins to connect pictures with words. At 9 months, she'll be able to home in on your tone of voice, cadence, and the length of sentences. "Parents help a baby learn language by speaking to her often, with varied vocabulary and about topics she finds interesting," says Parents advisor Kathleen McCartney, PhD, professor of early-childhood development at Harvard Graduate School of Education.

- **Make Reading Fun**
- Go for the right touch (and taste!). Babies learn through their senses, so buy cardboard or cloth books that they can put in their mouth.
- Face it. Infants love looking at pictures of faces, especially those of other babies.
- Be silly. Is there a phone in the story? Say, "Ring, ring. Hello? I'm sorry Olivia can't take your call; she's in a meeting."
- Point out things in the real world. When you're taking a walk, talk about stuff you've read about in books. "See the doggie?" This will help her begin to associate the word "dog" with her picture book and the live creature in front of her.

Reading with Toddlers

At this age, kids love simple picture books about a particular topic—flowers, trucks, whatever. Books with movable parts are also irresistible, since lifting flaps and turning wheels make storytime extra fun.

What They Learn

“At around 18 months, a child will begin to understand that words represent objects—for example, a cup is something we drink from,” says Susan B. Neuman, EdD, coauthor of *A Parent’s Guide to Reading with Your Young Child*. Your toddler is also able to predict things and loves to test this new skill. “Beginning in their second year, kids try to memorize the books—what happens on the next page, what words are about to come,” says Dr. Acredolo. Toddlers go crazy for repetition—they’ll want to hear the same book over and over again, which helps them recognize words. Even if you’re tired of the story, don’t try skipping parts; your toddler will call you on it. Print familiarity also kicks in at this age: Kids see that the funny marks on the page represent the words Mommy and Daddy say when they read. “When you see toddlers pretend to write by making squiggles, you know that they’re getting the idea,” says Dr. Acredolo.

Make Reading Fun

- Tune in to your child. A toddler’s attention span is short, so limit storytime to 10 minutes. If he’s into it and wants to read more, that’s fine; but if he seems bored, don’t push it.
- Personalize the story. Make your child the star. Or substitute the kids or animals in the illustrations with family or friends’ names: “Look, Jordan is driving the truck. Grandma is riding in the caboose.”
- Read books throughout the day. Bedtime stories are great, but you should also read before a nap, at snacktime, even when he first wakes up. Leaf through waterproof books in the tub too.
- Make books part of your emergency kit. Carry a few faves in your diaper bag. The next time the waitress takes forever, whip out a book and save the day.

Reading with Preschoolers

Reading becomes a fun game for 3- and 4-year-olds as they become more active participants in story hour. Picture books are ideal for preschoolers, who get even more meaning out of illustrations.

What They Learn

Your child is learning new words and phrases at a feverish pace and beginning to construct longer sentences, so how you read to her is important. “Instead of just reading the text straight through, ask a lot of open-ended questions about the story,” says Dr. McCartney. If you’re reading *Where the Wild Things Are*, ask, “Why is Max so angry with his mom?” This challenges your child to strengthen his comprehension skills; he has to contribute to the conversation, not simply give one-word answers or point to a picture in response. Preschoolers also start to develop phonological awareness—the ability to listen to the sounds in words. “Rhyming books are great because they playfully capitalize on this skill,” says Dr. McCartney. “For example, when children read *Hop on Pop*, by Dr. Seuss, they notice the difference between the ‘h’ sound and the ‘p’ sound at the beginning of the word.”

Make Reading Fun

- Get your child a library card. Going to the library is a fun adventure. Kids love dropping books into the return slot and making new selections.

- Be a social butterfly. Check out storytime at the bookstore or library. Your child will get a kick out of listening to a book with a group of kids.
- Choose a character series. Children this age become attached to certain characters, so don't pass up the chance to get her interested in more books. If she loved Max's quest for red-hot marshmallow squirters in Rosemary Wells's *Bunny Cakes*, chances are she'll want to see him get a makeover in *Ruby's Beauty Shop*.
- Accept his literary taste. Don't be bummed if all he'll read is *Bob the Builder* books. What matters most is that kids are reading, and books based on their favorite TV shows are fine.

Reading with Kindergartners

It's important to keep up storytime at home as your child learns to read and write at school. Let him pick what he wants to read, but make sure you expose him to a wider variety of genres too—folktales, fantasy, and nonfiction.

What They Learn

"At 5, your child will engage in lively conversations about books and might recognize most letters of the alphabet," says Dr. Neuman. He'll be able to write the letters of his name, if not more. (Encourage him to practice, since learning to write is an essential part of learning to read.) Picture books help kindergartners make important connections between characters and their own lives, so choose stories about starting school, becoming a big brother or sister, or visiting the doctor. And you should read aloud to him regularly, since he'll learn just by listening to new language. "The vocabulary that children understand through hearing is so much more sophisticated than what they can express verbally, and the more you read out loud to them, the more you are encouraging those synapses and that wonderful language acquisition," says Lisa Von Drasek, children's librarian at the Bank Street College of Education, in New York City.

Make Reading Fun

- Chat them up. Talk about what you've just read. Relate stories back to their own life: "Do you ever feel homesick when you visit Grandma?"
- Publish a book. Staple a few sheets of paper together and ask your child to dictate a story and make some drawings.
- Give your child's favorite books as birthday gifts. Let her tell you why she adores the book, then inscribe it for her: "Chocolatina loves chocolate as much as I do! From Sydney."
- Use reading as a reward. If your child shared nicely, treat him to an extra story or two and some special cuddle time.

###