

Keeping Their Eyes and Ears Open: Help Young Children to Read, Write and Make Connections

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Literacy is more than just being able to read. Understanding that speech sounds, letters of the alphabet, and words are all connected is really what literacy is all about.

We all have a natural ability to speak and learn language from birth. You can't teach a child to speak. But, from birth, you can support your child's abilities to speak and eventually reading by making sure she is hearing speech sounds and seeing words and print every day. The more children see and hear, the more connections they will make between words and print, and eventually, they'll have the skills to read and write well.

Talking and Reading with Infants and Toddlers

It's easy to help your child with literacy - just talking and reading to your baby or toddler is the best way to get him off to a great start. As a parent, holding, looking at, talking to, playing with, and reading to your baby is nurturing his language and literacy skills. Do this every day. Young children are never bored with hearing the sound of your voice, singing the same song, or reading the same book over and over. These activities will help your young one to thrive:

Talking with Babies and Toddlers

- **Talk and sing to your child from birth.** Your baby loves hearing your voice. As you talk, babies hear the speech sounds, and start making connections between the sounds and what you are doing with them.
 - Talk about everything: what you are doing together (eating, bathing, changing diaper), what you are seeing, and what you are feeling.
 - Play games, such as "peek-a-boo" and "pat-a-cake".
 - Recite nursery rhymes or words to songs that have strong rhythms and repetitive sounds.
 - Sing lullabies, the alphabet song, or just make up songs.
 - Imitate your baby's sounds back to her - coos, gurgles, babbling or whatever. She will know that her sounds get a response and have meaning.
- **Point out things in the environment.** Build your baby's vocabulary by naming things you see and do every day. Help your baby by naming objects (toys, books, trees, animals) and people in your everyday life.
- **Get toddlers in a conversation with you.** Most toddlers are beginning to speak. Give them words and language to use. Toddlers will have a lot of questions.

Explain things in simple and short words and sentences. Toddlers learn from repeating, so they may ask the same question many times.

- **Play music to get your toddler moving and singing.** Toddlers can't be still - so take advantage of their energy. Music is a great way to get your toddler moving and learning the rhythms of speech and sounds. There are a lot of children's songs and rhymes available on tapes and CDs.

Reading with Babies and Toddlers

Listening to you talk helps build your child's vocabulary. She will hear nouns, verbs, adjectives - what something "is", what it "does", and what it "looks and feels" like. All of these words have sounds and letters that they will begin to attach meaning to, and all of this is part of reading (and eventually writing). Here are a few suggestions to support your baby or toddler's reading skills.

- **Read to your young one every day.** Get comfortable, sit with the baby in your lap, in your arms, or in a high chair. Read stories that are right for your baby's or toddler's age. Point to the pictures. Let your baby or toddler hold the book, turn the pages or pretend to read. Show that you enjoy reading to and with them.
- **Be expressive with your voice and face when reading.** Say each word slowly and "with feeling". This not only makes it more interesting for your baby, but, it helps them to hear the sounds clearly. Imitate the characters in the story, changing the sound of your voice sometimes.
- **Give your toddler paper and crayons or markers** to scribble and start the beginning of writing. Let your toddler scribble on paper. It is the beginning of writing. It helps with their eye-hand movements and gets them used to holding a crayon or writing tool in their hands, even if it's just with a closed fist.
- **Make sure there are materials with words in your home.** Write your child's name and let her see it. Have books, paper, crayons, or magazines around.

Talking and Reading with Preschoolers

At ages 3 and 4, preschoolers are well on their way to building their reading and writing skills. Continue with the activities you did with your preschooler when they were younger. Children at this age are much more interactive and you can have more conversations. You can help stretch their thinking skills and imaginations. Here are some helpful activities for talking and reading with your preschooler.

- **Talk about what you are doing** every day when you are out: eating, shopping, walking, playing, or visiting relatives or friends.
- **Go to new places and try different things.** Talk about what is new and different. Everything is new and a wonder to preschoolers. Go to places your preschooler has never been. Discover zoos, museums, parks, and other child-friendly places.
- **Help your child follow directions.** Use short, clear statements. Start with simple one or two-part directions, such "Sit in the chair", or " Get the book and bring it to me."

- **Keep reading to your preschooler.** Read him a lot of different kinds of books. If your preschooler likes a certain character or subject, he is more likely to want to read about it. Reread his favorite books, even if you get tired of them before he does.
- **Read predictable books.** Your child will begin to recognize the repeated words and phrases and have fun saying them with you. Read books that rhyme.
- **Ask your child what she thinks will happen next in a story.** Get your preschooler to start thinking about the storyline and making predictions. Get excited when she finds out whether her guess was right.
- **Point out words and letters everywhere you can.** Read street signs, traffic signs, billboards, and store signs. Point out certain letters in these signs. Help your preschooler learn to recognize his name in print.

What Child Care Providers Can Do

Child care programs are an extension of the learning that occurs in the home. If your child is in child care, here are things you should see that will let you know reading, writing, and literacy are being supported at the program.

- There are lots of books and magazines for children to read and handle.
- Print is everywhere: on walls, labels, signs, and posters.
- There are writing materials, including paper, pencils, crayons, and markers for children to use.
- Children are read aloud to everyday, from many different kinds of books.
- Child care providers speak with children throughout the day and listen carefully to what they say.
- There are many games played that encourage children to listen, such as "Simon Says" and "Mother, May I?"

Your Child's Progress

Providing opportunities for your child to use language and learn how it connects to reading and writing is one of the most important things you'll ever do for your child. Remember that all children learn and develop differently and may not all be at the same level when it comes to reading and writing. Try not to compare your child to others, unless you notice a great difference in their reading abilities. If your child is progressing, that's the most important thing.

Many children also have reading or language disabilities that have nothing to do with "how much" they are exposed to speech or are read to at home. But there are many resources and strategies to help your child if she is struggling with reading. If you think your child may be having difficulties, always ask your physician and follow-up by getting an evaluation.

Reading is key to succeeding in school. Studies show that young children who are read to every day start school with a better chance at succeeding in reading and literacy. The

foundation for reading and writing and understanding language starts at birth. Parents are the only on who have the ability to start that foundation from day one.