



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

How Can I Help My Young Child to Become a Reader?

Can parents help their young children become readers? Yes! Parents are their babies' first teachers and can support their babies' budding language abilities so that they develop good reading skills and enjoyment of reading as they grow older.

Learning to read is a skill that takes a long time to develop, and it begins during infancy. As you might guess, teaching a baby about reading is different than teaching an older child to read. Babies first start to learn about reading by learning to speak and understand language — in essence, by learning to communicate with others. Parents, by responding to their babies' communication, help build babies' language skills. As soon as babies hear language, their orientation to literacy has begun. Research shows that babies who hear many words in the first years of life and who are actively engaged in communicating have higher scores on achievement tests in elementary school than babies whose exposure to language is not as rich.

There are many different things parents can do with babies and toddlers to help develop the basic language and communicative skills that will prepare them to learn to read.

For Babies

Talk with your baby while feeding, bathing, and diapering. Language is the cornerstone of reading development, so the opportunities parents have to talk with babies — while feeding, during bath time, and when diapering — are important. When you talk to your baby during the course of the day, you are really

giving him or her a double bonus! You are teaching language and letting your baby know that he or she is an important person to communicate with.

Tell nursery rhymes or sing simple songs with your baby. This provides infants with the opportunity to predict “what comes next,” an important part of literacy development.

Offer your baby cardboard books. Picture books created for babies provide the opportunity for infants to begin having independent experiences with reading materials. And, reading the books to a baby provides the literature exposure, the pleasure of the physical contact, and the opportunity to experience reading as a positive experience.

For Toddlers

Use books with your toddler to ask and answer questions. Toddlers' rapidly expanding “wh” verbal skills (who?, what?, where?, why?) provide many opportunities for parents to use books to help children ask and answer questions. While reading books to toddlers, parents can ask questions that help them practice the new things they're learning (“what does the cow say?”), learn about cause and effect (“what will happen?”), develop sorting and organizing skills.

Comment on things that happen around your toddler throughout the day. Adults help toddlers process their “wh” experience (who?, what?, where?, why?) by commenting on situations around them: “I wonder who lives there?”, “what does that sign tell us we have to do?”, “where's the milk for breakfast?”, “why is this wet?”.



Encourage your toddler to use crayons, markers, and pencils. Toddlers are developing the fine motor skills necessary to hold and use writing utensils. Because writing is part of the literacy experience, providing toddlers with supervised writing and marking activities is not only important, but also pleasurable, as toddlers explore their “I do it myself!” approach to life.

For Preschoolers

Create a “print-rich” environment for your preschooler. Preschoolers are very aware of the signs and symbols that represent their names, their ages, where they live, the materials that they use, and many other aspects of their daily living experience. Parents can help them become used to reading and writing by pointing out public signs (traffic signs, billboards, restroom and exit signs, etc.), asking preschoolers to help make grocery lists, and playing organized games (alphabet Bingo) and spontaneous games (“let’s all look for the letter B”).

Use grocery shopping to encourage reading.

While grocery shopping with preschoolers can be challenging, looking for specific items and brands creates opportunities for children to “read” packages and aisle signs, and match coupons to corresponding products.

Use meal preparation to encourage reading.

“Reading” a recipe, whether written or drawn, helps preschoolers learn the left-to-right orientation that is part of a reading experience. Children can also match the written language of recipes with the real materials involved, again helping them understand the relationship between printed material and the objects that the print represents.

The first years of a child’s life provide many wonderful opportunities for parents to cultivate their babies’ basic language and communication skills. Through simple, everyday experiences with language and with warm, loving caregivers, very young children will come to learn the joys of communicating, exchanging ideas and thoughts, and of the written word.

By Sherilyn Goldsmith, M.Ed., University of Minnesota Child Care Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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For More Information

For more information about helping your very young child become a reader, contact the Early Childhood Family Education program in your local school district or call 1-800-KIDS-709. Or go to <http://www.zerotothree.org>.

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Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

**University of Minnesota
Center for Early Education and Development
1954 Buford Avenue, Suite 425
St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108**

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The “Question About Kids” series is published by the Center for Early Education and Development to provide state-of-the-art information about young children and families. They are reviewed by a panel of child development experts at the University of Minnesota. For further information, contact the Center at 612-625-3058.