

The Child Literacy Centre™

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Reading to Babies, Toddlers and Young Children The Why? The What? And the How?

This page answers these questions:

[What is so good about reading to children?](#)

[Why read to babies?](#)

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[How should I read? - Tips and methods for different ages](#)

[How do I choose books for different ages?](#)

Note: we use 'he' to refer to your child. We apologise to all the millions of parents of girls, but it is very tedious saying 'he or she' every time. Of course, reading is for girls and boys EQUALLY.

What is so good about reading to children?

Reading to your child is the single most valuable thing you can do. Why?

- it gives experience of different types of language, rhythms and sounds
- research shows that pre-school children who are exposed to plenty of language (books and conversation) tend to do better at school
- it teaches about many topics which wouldn't come up in conversation
- it is a wonderful way to bond with your child
- it is very calming

**WARNING: READING must be FUN,
not WORK!**

Reading, and education in general, are serious matters, but they are only meant to be serious for teachers and parents.



If something isn't fun, children won't do it. And they have BRILLIANT ways of avoiding what they don't want to do: such as pretending they can't. Or making you feel guilty.

If your child doesn't enjoy it, he won't try. If he finds it hard, he will think he is not good at it. Your job is to make it FUN and EASY.

But Babies? Surely Not?

Yes, babies benefit hugely. The effort of focusing on pictures develops eye muscles. And each time he hears a particular word, it imprints more strongly in his brain. Think: how do our brains learn? They learn by doing. Each time your baby sees, hears, or feels anything, brain connections form. Eventually, the connections are strong enough to create a skill or a piece of knowledge.

I'm Not Good at Reading Aloud

You really don't have to be good at it. Read very slowly - that's better for your child anyway as he'll be able to hear the words more clearly.

If you feel your reading still isn't good enough, we have two suggestions:

- practise reading a story on your own before reading it to your child
- this is a good time to ask for help. There are organisations which help adults with their reading. Ask your GP, Citizen's Advice Bureau or Local Education Authority. It will be worth it to be able to help your child.

How to Read

First, be comfortable, cosy and relaxed - both of you. On the other hand, hearing a story can be very calming for a child who is in 'one of those moods'.

Next, make sure your child can see the book **the right way up** as you read.

For babies and toddlers up to 2 years

- point at pictures and say or ask names of things (depending on age)
- use a slow sing-song voice

- use different voices for different characters - be entertaining
- spend time talking about the pictures before turning the page
- say a name and ask your older baby or toddler to point to the item
- give huge praise each time your child points at and names an object

For 2-4 year-olds

- give your child time to look at the pictures before you read
- ask, 'Where's the...?' 'What's that called?' 'What's she doing?'
- always follow text with your finger as you read
- with familiar stories, see if your child can join in or finish phrases
- ask questions like: 'Why did he do that?' 'What happens next?'
- discuss things you both liked/didn't like and why

For 4 year-olds and over (and possibly some 3 year-olds)

- as for 2-4 year olds
- ask your child if he can remember the order of events in the story
- try [paired reading](#) (sometimes called shared reading)

Special activity

If you think your child may be ready for a real reading activity, try this: choose a word which appears several times (such as a name) show it to your child and tell him what it says: can your child find the same word again?

This is a first 'Look and Say' or 'Whole word' activity. For information about Look and Say and the other methods of teaching reading, [click here](#).

FINAL TIP:

Let your child see that reading is part of your life. Do you have books and newspapers in the house?

Choosing Books - For Babies, Toddlers and Nursery Children



For babies

Very young babies cannot focus well. You need books with large, simple pictures. Bold red, green, blue and black are usually best.

When you read to a baby you might be doing one of two things. You could be pointing at the pictures and saying the names, which helps your baby focus on specific sounds. However, this can become just a little monotonous especially when your baby is more interested in eating the book.

Or you could just read, so that the baby can enjoy the sound of your voice and hear the rhythms of different types of language, even though he won't have a clue what you are talking about.

Ideally, then, you need three sorts of books for a baby:

- bright, bold picture books to help focusing and identification
- books with poems, songs, or stories of any sort which YOU like reading
- books that you can safely leave in the cot, so that your baby develops a 'taste' for books. (Check safety labels carefully.)

For toddlers and older pre-school children

For children who understand most of what they hear, you need different books. Let your child choose, though some 'guidance' is often necessary.

You need these sorts of books:

- a variety of different types of language to read to your child (including poetry, traditional stories and mystery as well as everyday stories)
- a range of easier books with very few words, so that your child can begin to 'read' independently, by remembering a story which he has heard often
- books which your child really likes for whatever reason

Don't forget: the written word is all around us. We don't only read books - we read shop names, road signs, shopping lists, advertisements, birthday cards.... All are a chance to show your child how reading works. There is even a bit of jargon to describe this writing: ENVIRONMENTAL PRINT.

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