

# Reading to Children: Why It's So Important and How to Start



Babies and young children are sponges that soak in practically everything in their environments. It's true! Even during story time, their minds are at work, taking in all the language they hear and lessons the characters learn.

Reading to your child — at any age — will boost their brain development, your bond, and so much more. And all it takes is a few books, motivation, and a little time.

Here's how to get started.

# What are the benefits of reading to children?

First, set the scene in your head. You choose a book. You sit down in your favorite armchair, with your child in your lap, and open to the first of many smooth, colorful pages. You begin to read, and your child is utterly captivated by the story. It's magic. What's even better is that your child isn't just having fun, they're learning! Reality may look a little different: Just know you're not alone if your baby tries to eat the book or your toddler wanders around the room instead of sitting patiently. But the benefits of reading remain the same.

## Bonding

Reading provides a wonderful opportunity for you and your child to connect. It's a nice way to spend time together and slow down during an otherwise hectic day. [Research from 2008](#) pointed out how reading can support a solid parent-child relationship. Kids feel [secure](#) when they're read to. Plus, caregivers who have a positive attitude toward books and reading in turn help their children view literacy in a positive way.

## Listening skills

Hearing a story read aloud involves some level of comprehension on your child's part. And comprehension is dependent on paying attention — in other words, listening skills.

The [experts](#) at Scholastic explain that listening is a skill kids must acquire before they can read themselves.

They suggest that books on tape are a great addition to reading one-on-one with your child. These often provide entertainment value, too, like silly voices, music, and other embellishments.

# Cognitive and language development

Even the youngest children benefit from hearing their caregivers read to them. A [2013 study](#) showed that babies who are read to and talked to score higher in language skills and cognitive development, like problem solving.

[Research from 2018](#) suggests that this link extends throughout childhood into the teen years. In fact, researchers say that verbal interactions (reading, talking, etc.) between parents and young kids may promote higher language and IQ scores all the way up to age 14.

## Expanded vocabulary

Experts from the [National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning](#) also explain that reading books to kids helps expand the number and variety of words they use. Think about it: The books you read often contain words you might not otherwise use in your everyday communications.

While reading a book, you might end up using more specific names for different plants or animals or use more adjectives (descriptive words) altogether. And this adds up.

One [2019 study](#) [Trusted Source](#) estimated that children who are regularly read to in the 5 years leading up to kindergarten are exposed to 1.4 million more words than children who aren't read to during those years.

## Attention span

Dinah Castro, a bilingual family well-being educator with Cornell Cooperative Extension, [shares](#) that reading to children helps them develop key concentration and self-discipline skills.

You've probably dealt with a squirming, distracted toddler at story hour. But what you may also notice is that — over time — regular reading gets kids listening in order to comprehend.

And when they're listening, they're more likely to sit still, develop a longer attention span, and even work on their budding memory-retention skills.

## Creativity

Books and stories open up a whole new world to your child. Yes, there are plenty of nonfiction books on dinosaurs, bugs, and airplanes. Fiction stories, though, go beyond the real world and employ fantasy elements that get kids thinking outside the box. Children have vivid imaginations as is, so reading serves to further feed their creativity. And [experts at PBS](#) note that creativity is important for developing interests and ideas, as well as for fostering emotional health.

## Life lessons

Books provide an opportunity to talk about real-world situations in age-appropriate ways. Kids especially enjoy books that feature children their own ages doing things they do in everyday life. Along with modeling what happens in various situations, reading books on targeted subjects may help children not feel alone when they deal with something new, like moving across the country, or something potentially uncomfortable, like going to the dentist.

## Social and emotional development

[Castro](#) also says that reading to young children teaches them how to cope with “difficult or stressful experiences.” She further explains that reading stories about potentially emotional situations, like starting at a new school, can help get a conversation going and show children that their feelings are normal.

## How and when should you start reading to children?

Start today! Babies, toddlers, preschoolers, and even older children all benefit from having a caregiver read to them. You don't even need a large personal library of books to get started.

Think beyond the store — you can find a wide variety of books at your local library, secondhand shop, or [Little Free Library](#). You can even encourage your child to borrow books from and lend them to their friends.

## Reading to your baby

The youngest babies (under 6 months old) benefit from books that have simple but bold or bright images with lots of contrast. Talk to your baby as you look at the books, but words on the page aren't necessary.

As they get a bit older (7 to 12 months), you may want to expand your collection to books with simple phrases or just a line of text that relates to the picture on the page.

Babies ages 12 to 18 months may find books with pictures of other children doing everyday things interesting. Same goes for books that have animals, television characters, or other familiar scenes in them. For this age group,

you may look for books that have more detailed pictures and a simple story or progression of events.

As your baby starts to babble and eventually talk, try involving them in what they see on the page.

For example, point to a picture and ask “What’s that?” or declare “That’s a banana!” to get your child engaging with the book. Keep it positive and try to repeat your child’s words back to them (“Yes — that looks like a cat, but it’s actually a squirrel!”).

There are lots of books, so try not to get too overwhelmed. Nursery rhymes, especially ones you might have memorized, are a good choice for babies.

And as far as construction, look for sturdy books that are made from cardboard (board books), fabric, or vinyl. Books with handles are also fun and let your baby transition from reading time to play time.

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## **Reading to your toddler**

Kids between the ages of 19 and 30 months also enjoy books that feature familiar characters. At this age, they tend to favor books with lots of action, pictures, and details versus lots of words on the page. Look for books that contain short stories, particularly those with cause-and-effect relationships or a problem that the characters must work to overcome.

Repetition is important at this age, so try to find books that allow you to rhyme, sing, or otherwise repeat the text in some way. While you're at it, take some time to pause as you read books with repetition to see if your little one fills in the blank. You may also want to take time to draw connections between a main character and your child. For example, you might point out, "He's sleeping in a big boy bed, just like you!" By the way, you can start introducing books made with paper pages versus board books at this age. Just be sure to supervise to guard against your child ripping the pages.

## Reading to your child

Preschoolers and elementary school-aged kids have a wide range of reading abilities. It's a good idea to take their lead when it comes to simple versus complex books. Younger kids (and even some older ones) may still appreciate pictures with little text. That said, you can start introducing stories that have more complex plots in them and books with more words than pictures — even chapter books. As your child begins reading on their own, you might involve them in the process of reading together by asking them to read words or sentences out loud along the way. This is great practice. Ask questions as you move through the text, too — you don't have to wait until the end of the book or chapter to check your child's comprehension. Try open-ended questions like "What do you think might happen next?" These will help your child delve deeper, rather than surface questions like "What color is the house?" Experts recommend engaging in literacy activities (like reading) for around [30 minutes](#) per day. But you can also think outside the book here. Try reading traffic signs or cereal boxes, singing songs, listening to audiobooks together, or having your child read to you to the best of their ability. It's all good.

# Reading to your older child

Librarian Donna Jeanson [says](#) that you shouldn't stop reading to your child once they learn to read themselves. While independent reading is certainly important, reading out loud to kids as old as age 14 still holds benefits, both academically and emotionally.

At this age, it's about your older child's reading fluency and comprehension. It may be helpful for them to follow along in the book as you read. And consider asking questions about the text to gauge their comprehension.

## Tips for reading to children

Again, all you really need to do is take the time to read to your child. It's truly as simple as that. However, you might be wondering how to make the experience more enjoyable for everyone.

Here are some tips:

- **Be consistent.** Whether it's one book per day or 15, try to make reading a part of your regular routine. And while you're at it, you don't have to read different books each time you sit down. Kids love hearing the same stories over and over again — and they learn through this type of repetition.
- **Take your time.** Be sure to leave enough time to read versus sneaking it in or — worse — making it a chore. Of course, you won't have loads of time each day to read, so some quickies are just fine. However, your child should see reading as a dedicated activity and one that you give your full attention to.
- **Make it fun.** Use different voices for characters, pauses, songs, or other dramatics to make the story come to life. Reading with flair will help your child better understand the story. It also provides a good



model of expressive and fluent reading for kids who have begun reading by themselves.

- **Point out connections.** Children love applying stories to their own lives. It not only makes the text more meaningful, but it also may help your child cope with different situations they encounter in their everyday experience. Point out those connections to your child. Note where the character was brave about that monster beneath their bed. Applaud the character who used the potty for the first time.
- **Don't stop with books.** Any exchange of words is beneficial to kids. So, if you're uninspired by books one night, turn to telling stories. You can also look at pictures and talk about what you see or ask your child to be the storyteller. Anything that gets language flowing between you and your child is golden.

## Takeaway

When it comes to early literacy and language skills, both the quality and quantity of the words you speak to your child matter. Books provide an excellent opportunity to get talking, telling stories, and connecting with your little one.

If you still don't know exactly how to start, consider hitting up your local library and chatting with a librarian in the children's department. You can get book suggestions, take out books and other media for free, and sign up for events (like in-person or virtual story hours) that'll get your whole family inspired to read.

# Can you teach a toddler to read?

The answer to this question is “sort of yes” and “sort of no.” There are a number of things that go into developing the skills for reading. While some kids — even young kids — may pick up on all of these things quickly, this isn’t necessarily the norm.

And beyond that, sometimes what people observe as their kids reading may actually be other actions, like mimicking or recitation.

This isn’t to say you can’t expose your little one to books and reading through activities like reading together, playing word games, and practicing letters and sounds. All of these bite-sized lessons will add up over time.

Reading is a complex process and it takes the mastery of many skills, including:

## Phonemic awareness

Letters each represent sounds or what are called phonemes. Having phonemic awareness means that a child can hear the different sounds that letters make. This is an auditory skill and does not involve printed words.

## Phonics

While similar, phonics is different from phonemic awareness. It means that a child can identify the sound that letters make alone and in combinations on the written page. They practice “sound-symbol” relationships.

## Vocabulary

That is, knowing what words are and connecting them to the objects, places, people, and other things in the environment. With regard to reading, vocabulary is important so kids can understand the meaning of the words they read and, further down the line, whole sentences.

## Fluency

Reading fluency refers to things like the accuracy (words read correctly versus not) and rate (words per minute) with which a child is reading. A child's phrasing of words, intonation, and use of voices for different characters is also part of fluency.

## Comprehension

And very importantly, comprehension is a big part of reading. While a child may be able to make out the sounds of letter combinations and put together words in isolation, having comprehension means that they can understand and interpret what they're reading and make meaningful connections to the real world.

As you can see, there's a lot involved. It may seem daunting, prompting you to research different products meant to help teach even the youngest babies and tots to read.

A [study](#) from 2014 examined media designed to teach babies and toddlers to read and determined that young children do not actually learn to read using DVD programs. In fact, while parents surveyed did believe their babies were reading, researchers say they were actually observing imitation and mimicking.

Related: [The most educational TV shows for toddlers](#)

# Understanding toddler development

First and foremost, it's important to understand that all children are different. Your friend might tell you that their 3-year-old is reading books at a second grade level. Stranger things have happened. But that's not necessarily what you should expect from your tot.

Facts: Most children learn to read sometime between the ages of 6 and 7. Some others may gain the skill (at least somewhat) as early as age 4 or 5. And, yes, there are those exceptions where kids may start reading earlier. But resist the urge to try to force reading too early — it should be fun!

Experts in the field explain that literacy for toddlers does not equal reading per se. Instead, it's a “dynamic developmental process” that occurs in stages.

Skills toddlers have and can develop:

- **Book handling.** This includes how a toddler physically holds and handles books. It can range from chewing (infants) to page turning (older toddlers).
- **Looking and recognizing.** Attention span is another factor. Babies may not engage much with what's on the page. As kids get a bit older, their attention span increases and you might see them connecting better to the pictures in books or pointing out objects that are familiar.
- **Comprehension.** Understanding books — text and pictures — is a developing skill as well. Your child may imitate actions they see in books or talk about the actions they hear in the story.
- **Reading behaviors.** Young kids do verbally interact with books as well. You may see them mouth the words or babble/imitate reading the text as you read out loud. Some kids may even run their fingers

over the words as if following along or pretend to read books on their own.

As time goes on, your child may also be able to recognize their own name or even recite an entire book from memory. While this doesn't necessarily mean they're reading, it's still part of what leads up to reading.

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# 10 activities to teach your toddler to read

So what can you do to foster a love of language and reading? A lot!

Literacy is all about exploring. Let your child play with books, sing songs, and scribble to their heart's content. Remember to make it enjoyable for both you and your little one.

## 1. Read together

Even the youngest kids can benefit from having books read to them by their caregivers. When reading is part of the daily routine, children pick up more quickly on other building blocks for reading. So, read to your child and take them to the library with you to choose books.

And while you're at it, try keeping the topics of these books familiar. When children can relate to a story in some way or have a good reference point, they may be more engaged.

## **2. Ask ‘what will happen next?’ questions**

Talk to your child as often as you can. Using language is as important as reading when it comes to developing literacy skills. Beyond asking “what will happen next” in a story (to work on comprehension), you can tell your own stories. Be sure to incorporate new vocabulary when and where it makes sense.

Over time, your tot may make the connection between the words you speak and the words they see written on the pages of their favorite books.

## **3. Point out letter sounds and combinations**

Words are all around us in the world. If your child is showing an interest, consider taking the time to point out words or at least different letter combinations on things like their favorite cereal box or the street signs outside your home. Don’t quiz them just yet. Approach it more like: “OH! Do you see that BIG word on the sign over there? It says s-t-o-p — STOP!”

Look at labels on clothing or words on birthday cards or billboards. Words don’t just appear on the pages of books, so eventually your child will see that language and reading is everywhere.

## **4. Make text a game**

Once you’ve observed the words and letters all around your child’s environment, turn it into a game. You might ask them to identify the first letter on the grocery store sign. Or maybe they can identify numbers on the nutrition label of their favorite snack. Keep it playful — but through this activity, you’ll slowly build your child’s text awareness and recognition. After a while, you may see that your child initiates this activity or that they are starting to pick up on full words on their own.

## 5. Practice sight words

Flash cards aren't necessarily a first choice activity at this age — they tend to promote memorization, which isn't the key to reading. In fact, experts share that memorization is a “lower level skill” compared other more complex language skills kids gain through meaningful conversations.

That said, you may consider introducing sight words in other ways, like with phonetic reading blocks. The blocks offer practice with rhyming skills, too, all while allowing your child to twist and create new words.

[Shop for phonetic reading blocks online.](#)

## 6. Incorporate technology

There are certainly apps you may want to try that can help introduce or reinforce reading skills. Just keep in mind the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends avoiding digital media for children under 18 to 24 months and limiting screen time to no more than an hour daily for kids 2 to 5.

[Homer](#) is a phonics-based app that lets kids learn letter shapes, trace letters, learn new vocabulary, and listen to short stories. Other apps, like [Epic](#), open up a huge digital library for reading age-appropriate books together on the go. There are even books that will read aloud to your child.

When looking at different apps, just remember that toddlers can't learn to read using media alone. Instead, look at technology as a bonus to the other activities you do together with your child.

## 7. Play writing and tracing games

While your little one is probably just learning how to hold a crayon or pencil they may enjoy the chance to work on their “writing.” Spell out your child’s name or have them trace it on a piece of paper. This will help show your little one the relationship between reading and writing, reinforcing their reading skills. Once you’ve mastered short words, you might go on to your child’s favorite words or perhaps working together to write short notes to family members or friends. Read the words together, allow them to dictate, and keep it fun. If your little one isn’t into writing, you might try getting some alphabet magnets and forming words on your refrigerator. Or if you’re OK with a mess, try writing letters in sand or shaving cream in a tray with your index finger.

[Shop for alphabet magnets online.](#)

## 8. Label your world

Once you’ve gotten the hang of some favorite words, consider writing up some labels and placing them on objects in your home, like the refrigerator, couch, or kitchen table. After your child has become more practiced with these labels, try collecting them together and then having your child place them in the correct location. Start with just a few words at first and then increase the number as your child becomes more familiar.

## 9. Sing songs

There are lots of songs that incorporate letters and spelling. And singing is a lighthearted way to work on literacy skills. You can start with the regular ABCs song. Blogger Jodie Rodriguez at [Growing Book by Book](#) suggests songs like [C is for Cookie](#), [Elmo’s Rap Alphabet](#), and [ABC the Alphabet Song](#) for learning the alphabet. She also suggests [Down by the Bay](#) for rhyming skills, [Tongue Twisters](#) for alliteration, and [Apples and Bananas](#) for phoneme substitution.



## 10. Engage in rhyming games

Rhyming is an excellent activity to develop literacy skills. If you're in the car or waiting in line at a restaurant, try asking your child "Can you think of words that rhyme with bat?" And let them rattle off as many as they can. Or alternate rhyming words. PBS Kids also maintains a short list of [rhyming games](#) children can do online that feature favorite characters, like Elmo, Martha, and Super Why.

## 13 books to teach your toddler to read

Your child's interests may guide your book choices, and that's a good idea. Bring your tot to the library and let them choose books that they can relate to or that cover a subject they might enjoy.

The following books — many of which are [recommended by librarians](#) or beloved by parents — are appropriate for early readers and help reinforce things like learning the ABCs, writing, rhyming, and other literacy skills.

Reserve these books at the library, visit your local indie bookstore, or shop online:

- [Chicka Chicka Boom Boom](#) by Bill Martin Jr.
- [ABC T-Rex](#) by Bernard Most
- [ABC See, Hear, Do: Learn to Read 55 Words](#) by Stefanie Hohl
- [T is for Tiger](#) by Laura Watkins
- [My First Words](#) by DK
- [Lola at the Library](#) by Anna McQuinn
- [I Will Not Read This Book](#) by Cece Meng
- [Harold and the Purple Crayon](#) by Crockett Johnson

- [How Rocket Learned to Read](#) by Tad Hills
- [Do Not Open this Book](#) by Michaela Muntean
- [Not a Box](#) by Antoinette Portis
- [Dr. Seuss's Beginner Book Collection](#) by Dr. Seuss
- [My First Library: 10 Board Books for Kids](#) by Wonder House Books

## What to look for in books

You might be out in the library browsing around and wonder what is most appropriate to bring home for your tot. Here are some suggestions based on age.

Young toddlers (12 to 24 months)

- board books they can carry around
- books that feature young toddlers doing routine things
- good morning or goodnight books
- hello and goodbye books
- books with only a few words on each page
- books with rhymes and predictable text patterns
- animal books

Older toddlers (2 to 3 years)

- books that feature very simple stories
- books with rhymes that they can memorize
- wake-up and bedtime books
- hello and goodbye books
- alphabet and counting books
- animal and vehicle books

- books about daily routine
- books with favorite television show characters

## Takeaway

Reading books and playing with letters and words can help set your toddler on a journey to becoming a lifelong reader, whether or not they start fully reading at a young age.

There's so much more to literacy than reading chapter books — and building the skills to get there is half the magic of it all. Academics aside, be sure to soak in this special time with your little one and try to enjoy the process as much as the end result.