Learning to read is an intellectual milestone. Parents fret over it, teachers focus on it and children learn to see it as a mark of competence. As with other aspects of a child’s development, language development and reading skills emerge step by step through time with young children.

Young Children and Learning to Read

Many parents want their children to learn the alphabet and begin reading at very young ages. Such encouragement is important. However, as with many skills, learning language and literacy is something that children develop as they become ready. Pushing children to read too early is not likely to improve their abilities. Parents and caregivers should provide opportunities, encouragement and instruction, but also should be patient and have reasonable expectations.

Most children are ready to really start learning the basics of reading (letter recognition, sounding out words, etc.) around ages 4 or 5. The foundations for reading begin much earlier, though, with listening to stories, making sounds, commenting on books and talking with adults. Reasonable expectations for engaging young children in reading activities are offered in the sections that follow.

Newborn to 3 Months

- A new baby likes the sound of a familiar voice, a book or newspaper read aloud, or soft singing. Content is not as important as the comforting, caring sound of a parent’s voice.
- Be aware of your baby’s cues that he or she has had enough – turning his or her head, fussing, hiccups, etc.
- Sing and dance with your baby; gentle rocking is soothing.
- Contentment with reading to your baby will depend highly on the child’s mood and interest, and may be very brief.
- Hold books close enough for child to touch and see – this helps develop depth perception.
- Supporting a baby’s head and neck while holding a book may be challenging at times. Put the book at the side of the crib or flat on the floor for the baby.
- Use cardboard or cloth books with brightly colored pictures. Touching and grabbing the book is as important at this stage as anything.

4 to 6 Months

- Chewy books – vinyl or washable – are appropriate.
- More touching is important now, so have books that babies can handle within easy reach.
- Treat books like toys at this age.
- Sing songs during routine times, such as diaper changing time, nap time or bath time.

7 to 9 Months

- Newly developed hand skills now allow young children to turn chubby pages, board books, etc.
- Paper is appealing for its sound and texture (be careful of choking hazards).
• Point to things in picture books and name them, make sounds, etc.
• At this age, having pictures upside down, and opening and closing the book frequently, is normal for a child.
• Follow the child’s lead when he or she is done with reading.

9 to 12 Months
• A book’s content, pictures and colors capture attention now. Let children at this stage linger over pictures or colors.
• Children still need chubby pages or cardboard books.
• Enjoy books about family or familiar items, such as foods, toys or animals.
• Paper pages still cannot survive this toddler!
• Large, clear, realistic pictures are important.
• Have a basket, shelf or other place for books to teach children the value of books.

12 to 18 Months
• A child is beginning to blossom in language skills at this age.
• Children like verse, rhythm and repetitive words.
• They relate to thematic books that become interesting (farm animals, pets, colors, etc.).
• Children like action with nursery rhymes.
• Give lots of attention to the three R’s – rhythm, rhyme and repetition.
• Have more than one “book and snuggle time” a day – don’t just save books for bedtime.
• Children enjoy the same book over and over and over again!
• Books at bedtime make a good transition between active and restful times, and help establish a clear bedtime routine.

1½ to 3 Years
• Children enjoy books about the main events in their life, such as potty, mom and dad, siblings, eating, toys, animals, etc.
• Rhyme lets the toddler participate verbally in reading by repeating a phrase.
• Children can begin to predict what will happen in logical sequence.
• Children like pop-up books, bathtub books and flip-up page books.
• Children can repeat nursery rhymes.

3 to 5 Years
• Children recognize books by the cover.
• They understand that books are read from front to back.
• They understand that printed words and pictures tell the story.
• Children begin to recognize letters within words, especially those in their own name.
• Children play with language, using sing-song and nonsense sounds, and simple poems.
• They may play out roles of characters in favorite stories.
• Encourage the young child to join you in reading familiar parts or filling in the blank.
• Read together every day. Spend time talking about stories, pictures and words. Ask many open-ended questions and take time to answer.
• Children may not always sit still for a story (depends on mood and personality), but they will listen while drawing or playing.
• Be a reader and writer yourself. Children learn habits from the people around them and may pretend to read a book themselves, modeling after adults who read.
• Visit the library often – story time, computers and other exciting activities await.
• Share conversations with your child during mealtimes and at other times you are together – kids learn words more easily when they are heard often.
• Children will enjoy concept books, such as A-B-C books, and will begin learning letters of the alphabet and pointing them out.
• Children will make efforts to draw letters, their own name, familiar words, etc.
• Begin spelling out names or objects and help children learn the names of letters.

Suggested Books for Young Children

Toddler
Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown
I Am a Bunny by Richard Scarry
Mother Goose
Pat the Bunny by Dorothy Kunhardt
Sam Who Never Forgets by Eve Rice
Shopping Trip by Helen Oxenbury
Taste the Raindrops by Ann Hines
The Very Busy Spider by Eric Carle

3 to 4 Years
Caps For Sale by Esphyr Slobodkina
Freight Train by Donald Crews
Jamberry by Bruce Degen
Rosie’s Walk by Pat Hutchins
The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown
The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats
The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter
The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle

5 to 6 Years
Alpha Bears by Michael Hague
Bear’s Shadow by Frank Asch
Bedtime for Frances by Russell Hoban
Mike Mulligan by Virginia Lee Burton
Napping House by Audrey Wood
Planting A Rainbow by Lois Ehlert
The Little Engine That Could by Watty Piper
Will I Have A Friend by Mariam Cohen

Books Good for Babies (cloth, laminated pages)
Baby’s Clothes; Baby’s Home; Baby’s Toys; Mommy and Me by Neil Ricklin
The Cow Says Moo by J. Miller
Zoo Animals; Pets; Field Animals by V. Greeley
Count-A-Saurus by Nancy Blumenthal
How Many Kisses Goodnight? by Jean Monrad
Numbeears: A Counting Book by Eric Carle
Read To Me, I’ll Read To You by Kathleen Hague
Where’s Spot? by Eric Hill
Where’s the Bunny? by Ruth Caroll
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Web Sites and Organizations

The America Reads Challenge was a four-year grass-roots initiative designed to promote reading across the United States. Information and resources from that initiative can be accessed on the Internet. The Web site is at www.ed.gov/inits/americareads/

The International Reading Association is an organization that promotes literacy and is a well-developed resource base for parents and professionals interested in reading. It publishes a number of brochures for parents and single copies are available free. For titles and ordering information, go to the Web site or write to IRA, 800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139. The Web site is at www.reading.org/

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). This organization is perhaps the foremost resource for outstanding research and practical ideas on learning and education of young children. NAEYC has dozens of resources (pamphlets, books, videos, etc.) available on the topic. The Web site is at www.naeyc.org.

The National Education Association has a Web site that includes a variety of valuable and interesting resources, including reading news, home and classroom activities, and reading resources for parents. To access the parent resources of the NEA, visit the Web site on the Internet. The Web site is at www.nea.org/parents/index.html.

Reading is Fundamental Inc. is a national nonprofit organization associated with the Smithsonian Institution that works to stimulate reading and learning with children. For further information or to access its excellent resources, visit the Web site on the Internet. The Web site is at www.rif.org/.

Read to Me International is an organization that works to help parents bring the joys and benefits of reading to their children. It has information on good children’s books, parent resources and other topics related to reading at home. The Web site is at www.readtomeintl.org/index.cfm.

References


