

Reading at home together: Tips for parents of young children



Remote Learning

Reading books with your child is an incredibly powerful way of supporting your child's learning. Shared reading is a significant and positive influence on children's early oral language which forms an important foundation for all later learning. In other words, reading with your child gives them an advantage in all areas of their academic learning.

Shared reading is beneficial for:

- **Vocabulary development:** story book reading exposes children to more varied vocabulary and linguistically complex language than any other activity. For example, a book about jungle animals will introduce children to vocabulary they would not normally encounter in their daily lives.
- **Understanding of rhyme and phonological awareness,** the ability to hear the various sounds that make up words
- **Alphabetic knowledge,** particularly alphabet books
- **Knowledge of print concepts,** such as letters, the direction of print, as well as word recognition
- **Cognitive skills,** including numeracy skills
- The ability to sustain attention

It is well documented that vocabulary plays an important role in becoming a proficient reader, and greater vocabulary knowledge is associated with better comprehension. Shared book reading also strengthens your relationship and interaction with your child by encouraging both physical closeness and emotional connectedness as you experience the ideas and emotions of the story together.

Tips for reading with your child, toddler or infant

- **Encourage children to read for enjoyment,** make reading fun and follow children's interest. Children who are allowed to choose books and take the lead in reading (perhaps by holding the book and turning the pages) demonstrate higher levels of interest in reading, are more likely to initiate reading and to attend to the information and skills being demonstrated.
- **Provide a range of appropriate choices,** books that are not too complex but extend your child in some way. Read a variety of books including information books, rhyming texts, nursery rhymes and poetry. Don't be limited to printed books, but also tell your child stories (fairy stories can be the easiest to retell, or tell them stories about themselves and their siblings), look at e-books and use puppets and props. This is important for infants and toddlers as well as older children.
- **Read the same stories over and over again,** which is found to help children learn vocabulary, engage in dialogue and develop more elaborated interpretations of the story. Infants and toddlers are likely to demand many retellings! With repeated readings, children have a safe context in which to learn language, and are likely to imitate your reading, perhaps even memorising the text and 'reading' the book to themselves.

- **Ensure an active role for your child.** For example, invite your child to actively puzzle over the events of the story, or encourage them to 'read' particular parts of the book using the context or pictures as clues, or by matching the rhyme, for example.

There are two main ways to support children's learning from books (both of which can be used together). The first is pausing during the story to **engage in discussion** about what you're reading, and the second is **pointing to the features** of print while you are reading. These strategies work for infants and toddlers as well as older children.

Discuss the story

Use questioning and thoughtful responses to children's interests when reading stories to stimulate dialogue and discussion that promotes learning.

- **Before reading, discuss the title of the book and the cover illustration.** Ask 'what do you think the character is doing?' or 'what do you think this story might be about?'
- **Talk about the illustrations:** label the things you see, comment on and ask questions about the illustrations.
- **Ask open-ended questions** (what, where, when, who?). Affirm children's responses, and repeat and expand on what your child says, or try to follow children's answers with another question, such as 'Would you like to ride on a train like that?'
- Help children understand and interpret text by **drawing on real-life experiences:** 'Do you remember the train we went on last year? It wasn't quite like this one, was it?' This kind of decontextualized language is important for developing literacy skills.
- **Focus on new vocabulary** by pointing out new words, explaining their meaning, providing examples, and finding ways to practise the new vocabulary outside of the story. For example, you might set up play contexts related to children's favourite books, such as toy dogs, beds, leads, food bowls and blankets for Hairy McClary.
- When reading with infants and toddlers, focus on learning vocabulary and using pictures to spark conversations. You might deviate from the text and find ways to get your child's attention by pointing to, labelling and commenting on the pictures.

Pointing to print

Encourage children to focus on the nature of letters and words, which is found to improve children's knowledge of print.

- **Point to the text of the title** as you read it. Name the author and explain words like 'illustrated by'.
- **Comment about words**, for example, comment on words that rhyme, or about words that start or end with the same sound, such as 'Hank's Pranks'. Point out important words, for example, 'this word says DANGER'.
- **Talk about the letters.** Ask questions such as 'do you know this letter?' and 'which one starts with s?' Play a game to find the letters of your child's name on the page.
- **Point to the words** when reading or talking about the story, and read words embedded in illustrations.

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Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.