



Transcript

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Arts, Literature and Music

A Good Read - 08

Early Literacy: How books help babies and toddlers

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In recent years the government has invested a lot of money in Australian schools to support programs that address the insufficient literacy standards of many of our children and youth. But when a child starts school they are already 5 years old, and the years where they learn the most information, that is 80% of all the information they will ever use, have already passed. The most important work that children do to develop literacy skills must start when they are born, and their parents are their first teachers.

Research shows that children who are read to by their parents from birth are more likely to do well when they start school. Those children who are not read to from birth are more likely to fall behind when they start school and these children are unlikely to ever fully catch up.

Reading to children is one of the most important things a parent or caregiver can do for them, and what a wonderful thing it is that sharing stories is also a great deal of fun. Sharing books achieves many things in terms of literacy skills but the additional benefit is the bond it creates between parent and child.

So why is it that parents make the best first teachers? Because children love to hear the sound of their parent's voice, who better than the parents to teach the child their first words and sentences, tell them stories that stimulate their learning and their imaginations, and encourage them to have fun learning.

Introducing books to babies promotes a love of books and reading at a very early age. As babies grow to be toddlers, the language they have been exposed to will help them as they begin to use language themselves. A love of books will connect them with some of the best tools to help them develop sound literacy skills.

So, what is the best way to choose books for young children? Library staff can always help you and allowing children to choose their own books can also be fun. But parents can make important choices for their children too.

Between birth and approximately 9 months, babies will enjoy listening to their parents voices but will have very short attention spans. Try board books or durable plastic books that can be washed. Touch and feel books can also be introduced as their awareness of objects in their environment increases.

From approximately 9 months, children will become aware of the emotions of the people around them, begin to understand some language that is spoken to them, and have a greater awareness of the space around them. They are very curious at this age and their short attention spans mean they will divert their attention quickly to new things. From this age parents can introduce other kinds of books such as pop up and lift the flap books.

From approximately 18 months, children will begin to imitate some sounds, follow some verbal instructions, display an increased attention span and rapidly expand their vocabulary. Even if they don't speak themselves, the amount of words they understand will still expand. Parents can introduce simple story books, books that show everyday objects that children can relate to, and books with effective illustrations.

From the age of approximately 2, children will begin naming things in books and the world around them. Their own imagination becomes evident and stories that involve more detailed concepts about actions, family and everyday life can be introduced. They will be able to recite some rhymes as they grow and learn simple actions and songs.

After the age of approximately 3, children will begin reciting numbers in sequence and demonstrate some knowledge of letters. Their fast growing vocabulary will allow them to express themselves more clearly and recount events in their day. When they play they are likely to make up their own stories. More complex story books can be introduced that introduce new ideas about consequences, feelings, actions and values. An emphasis on letter recognition will help them to develop their knowledge of the alphabet.

Public libraries are a great place to access a vast range of materials for babies, toddlers and young children. Staff can provide assistance in the selection of appropriate reading materials and at certain times, families can attend story time programs for either babies or young children. With a few good habits and simple techniques, parents can develop their child's literacy skills easily in daily life.

Parents can try:

- Reading to their child for at least 15 minutes a day. It doesn't always have to be from a storybook. Try reading recipes at meal times or grocery lists at the supermarket.
- Incorporating books into a daily routine such as bedtime, after a meal or after the TV has been turned off. Make sure everyone is comfortable.
- Leading by example. Treat books with respect and allow children to see you reading independently and show your own enjoyment of reading.
- Allowing your child to practice holding books and turning pages. Board books for very young children can help.
- Try to demonstrate how books can be entertaining. When reading to your child, animate characters, voices and actions to help your child understand the story and develop language skills through expressive reading. This will also help your child interact with you during the story.

- Try to buy 'special' books to keep at home if your child develops favourites, but regularly change your collection of books at home by using school and public libraries, sharing with friends/family, and second hand book shops/sales.
- From the age of approximately 2, children can begin to participate in the storytelling in new ways that help their learning processes. Ask your child questions about the pictures or the story and talk through their responses. This can lead to more advanced pre-reading skills.

Children love stories and books and the development of their literacy skills starts from day 1. There are thousands of excellent books for children available to borrow from libraries or buy from book shops and every book will help a child to learn about language, reading and communication. Sound literacy skills will make an enormous difference to children later in life. Their literacy could mean the difference between a job and a career in the future, the ability to read safety instructions, the ability to express themselves well and resolve problems effectively. It could mean better behaviour as children and much healthier minds.

For more information about early childhood development and literacy, contact your local library.