

How to prepare a young child for reading

Can we help young children read?

The great thing about helping a very young child with reading is that you don't need to behave like a teacher! The focus at this age should be all about having fun and doing things which your child enjoys. What we are trying to do as parents is build up our children's motivation, so that they WANT to learn to read when they get to school. Children's attention spans can be very short at this stage, so 'a little and often' approach is definitely best!

Lots and lots of talking!

It might seem strange but the most important thing parents can do to help their children become readers is to give them lots of practice speaking and taking part in conversations. Talking with our children as often as possible, about anything and everything is THE best start for them. And although we feel like we do this a lot, sometimes it is worth setting time aside to make it special: try turning off the telly at home when you're doing an activity together (like making a jigsaw, playing with a ball, building duplo™). These conversations can extend your child's vocabulary and will also help her to express her own ideas in full.

Sharing Books

Of course, reading books often with your child is an excellent start for them. At this stage, sharing books is not about teaching your child any particular reading skills. It simply allows your child to see that books are a great part of life. If you love books, you can bet your bottom dollar that your child will do so as well! They will almost certainly enjoy sitting together, having a cuddle and looking at a book. If your child enjoys books before they go to school, then they will be very motivated to learn to read when they get there and will understand what books are about - when it comes to learning to read, motivation really is half the battle.

Songs and Nursery Rhymes

Singing songs and nursery rhymes together is also a great preparation for reading. Chants and rhymes establish a poetic vocabulary and also introduce children to rhyming words. Nursery rhymes use words which are a bit different from our everyday talk, this means they show children that words can be 'played with': Bash, cash, dash, mash... or pants, rants, mants... children generate strings of rhymes which are not always real words. This is very useful when it comes to learning to read. As children get older, they often like to change the words for newer and sometimes naughtier versions which either rhyme or begin with the same sounds. This is all part of playing with words.

Signs and Labels around us

As children turn 3, they can start to connect all those number 3s on their birthday cards with numbers they see on signs and car number plates. This leads to spotting the first letter in their name - on road signs, on buses, in book titles etc. Some children find this very exciting, and so do their parents! It is sometimes not long before children recognise some shop names and logos. They are not really reading them, but they are recognising their shape and colour. This is very important because it helps children to feel that they are beginning to be a part of the world of reading. So encouraging the hunt for 'their' letter is all part of the process of helping your child to read.

Guess what happened to me!

Telling a story is not just something that happens in a book! We can tell stories about ourselves - we just call them anecdotes. Guess what happened to me on my way home...! Children who listen to stories like this, and who are encouraged to tell their own, benefit hugely. We can also 'tell' our children the fairy stories and myths of our own culture - without the need for a book! The importance of TELLING stories of all sorts - anecdotes, made up stories and traditional tales - cannot be exaggerated. These anecdotes and stories plant in the child a deep-down understanding of how stories work and an awareness of some of the story phrases used in them. Children who have been told oral stories find the world of book-stories a very familiar place indeed when it comes to reading.

Parents who Read

It's not often as a parent that we're advised to 'veg-out' on the sofa reading a magazine, but from time to time - it's a good idea! If your child sees you reading things for your own interest, then reading will seem both important and normal. It's not just something for children to do, grown-ups do it too! It is a fact in education, that children do as we do, not as we say! Parents who read a lot are more likely to produce children who do the same!

Instructions

Children quite often see us reading when we're looking at instructions - on food packets, recipes or flat-pack furniture. Involve your child in this process as often as possible. Read aloud what it says (in simple language!) so that your child can help out. This lets your child understand that we read to find how to do important things. Reading is not only fun, it is very useful! Take any opportunity to demonstrate this - reading lists, recipes, birthday cards, post cards, etc.

Playing 'I spy'

Nowadays when children start learning to read, their teachers will use phonics to help them. This means that they are taught to listen for, and to identify the sounds in words. A good and fun way to help your child to start finding the first sound in words is to play 'I spy with my little eye'. Use the first sound in the word (not the letter), to make it easy for your child to join in the game. As they get good at this, you can change it to 'I spy with my little eye, something that rhymes with bear!' (Chair)

Libraries

Trips to the library can be a great free way to pass an hour or so. Allow your child to pick some books himself or choose three or four books you think he would like and ask him to pick his favourite. Draw attention to non-fiction sections as well - the photographs and pictures in children's information books are often terrific. Lots of children like to choose the same book over and over again, and others only choose books with pink covers! Both ways of choosing are completely normal. The library trip should be fun - for all concerned!