

Becoming a Reader -- Helping Your Child Become a Reader

Every step a child takes toward learning to read leads to another. Bit by bit, the child builds the knowledge that is necessary for being a reader. Over their first 6 years, most children

- Talk and listen.
- Listen to stories read aloud.
- Pretend to read.
- Learn how to handle books.
- Learn about print and how it works.
- Identify letters by name and shape.
- Identify separate sounds in spoken language.
- Write with scribbles and drawing.
- Connect single letters with the sounds they make.
- Connect what they already know to what they hear read.
- Predict what comes next in stories and poems.
- Connect combinations of letters with sounds.
- Recognize simple words in print.
- Sum up what a story is about.
- Write individual letters of the alphabet.
- Write words.
- Write simple sentences.
- Write to communicate.
- Read simple books.

Children can take more than one of these steps at the same time. This list of steps, though, gives you a general idea of how your child will progress toward reading. (For more details, see [Typical Language Accomplishments](#) for Children, Birth to Age 6.)

Talking and Listening

Scientists who study the brain have found out a great deal about how we learn. They have discovered that babies learn much more from the sights and sounds around them than we thought previously. You can help your baby by taking advantage of her hunger to learn.

Hearing you talk is your baby's very
first step toward becoming a reader,
because it helps her to love language
and to learn words.

From the very beginning, babies try to imitate the sounds that they hear us make. They "read" the looks on our faces and our movements. That's why it is so important to talk, sing, smile, and gesture to your child. Hearing you talk is your baby's very first step toward becoming a reader, because it helps her to love language and to learn words. (See "[Baby Talk](#)".)

As your child grows older, continue talking with her. Ask her about the things she does. Ask her about the events and people in the stories you read together. Let her know you are listening carefully to what she says. By engaging her in talking and listening, you are also

encouraging your child to think as she speaks. In addition, you are showing that you respect her knowledge and her ability to keep learning. (See "[Chatting with Children](#).")

Reading Together

Imagine sitting your baby in your lap and reading a book to him for the first time. How different from just talking! Now you're showing him pictures. You point to them. In a lively way, you explain what the pictures are. You've just helped your child take the next step beyond talking. You've shown him that words and pictures connect. And you've started him on his way to understanding and enjoying books. While your child is still a baby, reading aloud to him should become part of your daily routine. Pick a quiet time, such as just before you put him to bed. This will give him a chance to rest between play and sleep. If you can, read with him in your lap or snuggled next to you so that he feels close and safe. As he gets older, he may need to move around some as you read to him. If he gets tired or restless, stop reading. Make reading aloud a quiet and comfortable time that your child looks forward to. Chances are very good that he will like reading all the more because of it.

Try to spend at least 30 minutes each day reading to and with your child. At first, read for no more than a few minutes at a time, several times a day. As your child grows older, you should be able to tell if he wants you to read for longer periods. Don't be discouraged if you have to skip a day or don't always keep to your schedule. Just get back to your daily routine as soon as you can. Most of all, make sure that reading stays fun for both of you!

What Does It Mean?

From the earliest days, talk with your child about what you are reading. You might point to pictures and name what is in them. When he is ready, have him do the same. Ask him, for example, if he can find the little mouse in the picture, or do whatever is fun and right for the book. Later on, as you read stories, read slowly and stop now and then to think aloud about what you've read. From the time your child is able to talk, ask him such questions about the story as, "What do you think will happen next?" or "Do you know what a palace is?" Answer his questions and, if you think he doesn't understand something, stop and talk more about what he asked. Don't worry if you occasionally break the flow of a story to make clear something that is important. However, don't stop so often that the child loses track of what is happening in the story.

Look for Books!

The books that you pick to read with your child are very important. If you aren't sure of what books are right for your child, ask a librarian to help you choose titles. (For more information on what libraries have to offer, see "[Visiting the Library](#)")

Introduce your child to books when she is a baby. Let her hold and play with books made just for babies: board books with sturdy cardboard covers and thick pages; cloth books that are soft and washable, touch-and-feel books, or lift-the-flap books that contain surprises for your baby to discover. Choose books with covers that have big, simple pictures of things that she sees every day. Don't be upset if at first your child chews or throws a book. Be patient. Cuddling with the child as you point to and talk with great excitement about the book's pictures will soon capture her interest. When your baby becomes a toddler, she will enjoy helping to choose books for you to read to her.

As your child grows into a preschooler and kindergartner, the two of you can look for books that have longer stories and more words on the pages. Also look for books that have repeating words and phrases that she can begin to read or recognize when she sees them. By early first grade, add to this mix some books designed for beginning readers, including

some books that have chapters and some books that show photographs and provide true information rather than make-believe stories.

Choose books with covers that have
big, simple pictures of things that
she sees every day.

Keep in mind that young children most often enjoy books about people, places, and things that are like those they know. The books can be about where you live or about parts of your culture, such as your religion, your holidays, or the way that you dress. If your child has special interests, such as dinosaurs or ballerinas, look for books about those interests. From your child's toddler years through early first grade, you also should look for books of poems and rhymes. Remember when your baby heard your talking sounds and tried to imitate them? Rhymes are an extension of that language skill. By hearing and saying rhymes, along with repeated words and phrases, your child learns about spoken sounds and about words. Rhymes also spark a child's excitement about what comes next, which adds fun and adventure to reading. (For rhyming activities, see "[Rhyme with Me: It's Fun, You'll See!](#)")

Show Your Child That You Read

When you take your child to the library, check out a book for yourself. Then set a good example by letting your child see you reading for yourself. Ask your child to get one of her books and sit with you as you read your book, magazine, or newspaper. Don't worry if you feel uncomfortable with your own reading ability. It's the reading that counts. When your child sees that reading is important to you, she may decide that it is important to her, too. (For ideas on how to help your child love books, see "[A Home for My Books](#).")

Learning about Print and Books

Reading together is a perfect time to help a late toddler or early preschooler learn what print is. As you read aloud, stop now and then and point to letters and words; then point to the pictures they stand for. Your child will begin to understand that the letters form words and that words name pictures. He will also start to learn that each letter has its own sound—one of the most important things your child can know when learning to read. By the time children are 4, most have begun to understand that printed words have meaning. By age 5, most will begin to know that not just the story but the printed words themselves go from left to right. Many children will even start to identify some capital and small letters and simple words. (For some ideas on learning letters, see "[As Simple as ABC](#).")

In late kindergarten or early first grade, your child may want to read on his own. Let him! But be sure that he wants to do it. Reading should be something he is proud of and eager to do and not a lesson.

How Does a Book Work?

Children are fascinated by how books look and feel. They see how easily you handle and read books, and they want to do the same. When your toddler watches you handle books, she begins to learn that a book is for reading, not tearing or tossing around. Before she is 3, she may even pick one up and pretend to read, an important sign that she is beginning to know what a book is for. As your child becomes a preschooler, she is learning that

When your toddler watches you
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that a book is for reading.

- A book has a front cover.
- A book has a beginning and an end.
- A book has pages.
- A page in a book has a top and a bottom.
- You turn pages one at a time to follow the story.
- You read a story from left to right of a page.

As you read with your 4- or 5-year-old, begin to remind her about these things. Read the title on the cover. Talk about the picture on the cover. Point to the place where the story starts and, later, where it ends. Let your child help turn the pages. When you start a new page, point to where the words of the story continue and keep following the words by moving your finger beneath them. It takes time for a child to learn these things, but when your child does learn them, she has solved some of reading's mysteries.

Early Efforts To Write

Writing and reading go hand in hand. As your child is learning one, he is learning the other. You can do certain things to make sure that he gets every opportunity to practice both. When he is about 2 years old, for example, give your child crayons and paper and encourage him to draw and scribble. He will have fun choosing which colors to use and which shapes to make. As he holds and moves the crayons, he will also develop muscle control. When he is a late toddler or early preschooler, he will become as eager to write as he is to read. (For more ideas on how to encourage your child's desire to write, see "[As Simple as ABC](#)," and "[Write On!](#)")

Your preschool child's scribbles or drawings are his first writing. He will soon begin to write the alphabet letters. Writing the letters helps your child learn about their different sounds. His very early learning about letters and sounds gives him ideas about how to begin spelling words. When he begins writing words, don't worry that he doesn't spell them correctly. Instead, praise him for his efforts! In fact, if you look closely, you'll see that he's made a pretty good try at spelling a word for the first time. Later on, with help from teachers (and from you), he will learn the right way to spell words. For the moment, however, he has taken a great step toward being a writer.

Reading in Another Language

If your child's first language is not English, she can still become an excellent English reader and writer. She is on her way to successful English reading if she is beginning to learn many words and is interested in learning to read in her first language. You can help by supporting her in her first language as she learns English. Talk with her, read with her, encourage her to draw and write. In other words, do the same kinds of activities just discussed, but do them in your child's first language.

When your child first enters school, talk with her teacher. Teachers welcome such talks. They even have sign-up times early in the year, though usually you may ask for a meeting at any time. If you feel that you need some support in meeting with the teacher, ask a relative, neighbor, or someone else in your community to go with you.

For a list of multiple-language books, see [Resources for Children](#).

When you do meet, tell the teacher the things that you are doing at home to strengthen your child's speaking and reading in her own language. Let the teacher know how important your child's reading is to you and ask for support for your efforts. Children who can switch back and forth between languages have accomplished something special. They should be praised and encouraged as they work for this achievement.