

Reading Tips from Some of Our Experts & Other Sources

Reading and talking to your child stimulates essential neural & sensory development. A child's brain reaches 80-85% of adult brain size by age three. The language center is literally at the center of the brain and verbal stimulation aids in the development & integration of all the other senses. Reading early & often helps learning in school and improves life opportunities. It has other benefits such as developing essential pre-literacy skills, fostering a love of reading, and developing a greater attention span. Some tips:

Make It Fun, Develop a Routine! Reading time should be enjoyable, not viewed as a chore. Recommend developing a routine of bath, bedtime story & sleep with no electronic use before bedtime.

Pick Quiet Place. Pick a designated place with few distractions. It's important that your baby can hear your voice; it has a calming, soothing effect even if they don't yet understand the words. Use a comfortable chair or beanbag with good lighting. Light music may help with concentration too.

Cuddling. Cuddling your baby in your lap is an extremely important emotional bonding experience. The child will enjoy snuggling and listening to your voice. Feeling safe and secure will help build your baby's confidence and foster a love of reading.

Cuddling Alternatives. If a child won't sit in your lap, use pillows and create a "snuggle space" in the corner of the couch. A bean bag or a highchair can help the child sit still. You can also lay on the floor. You can reinforce attention with some "cheerios" or similar snacks but make it random.

Pick a Position Your Child Likes. Some children like to look at books, some like to look at the mom or reader when they're reading. Some like to do both. Start with the baby facing you so he/she can see your face and see if that works. Pick a position that appeals to the child.

Book Selections. Pick baby-friendly books. ZERO to THREE's "Read Early and Often" provides a nice summary of children's ages, types of books and tips for parents. Also see BabyRead's handout on book types and recommended books in Helpful Links. (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1833-read-early-and-often/>)

Keep Books Within Reach. Keep age-appropriate books nearby and within reach (e.g., easy to hold, board books and chewable books for younger children, waterproof books for the tub). Provide encouragement when he or she reaches for a book. Read or talk while doing routine tasks like cooking & shopping.

Crawling, Playing & Reading. If your child is a crawler or is playing, read to them. The sound of your voice is important – especially repetition – and they are *learning to listen*.

Pointing & Associations. Move your finger under the words in the picture. This helps the child learn directionality (left to right) and can help focus their attention. Explain to your child that the words on the page describe the pictures on the page to help build associations between words and objects.

Make Interesting Sounds. Talk, cluck, rhyme, sing. Change your voice & make funny sounds. Ham it up! Babies love sound effects. Mimic the sound an animal or object makes. Give raspberries. You can tickle them too. *Respond to sounds and gestures they make.* They are communicating with you! Read with humor & expression across all ages. As they get older and can talk, let them be one of the characters in the story.

Use Props. Puppets and stuffed animals help maintain attention. Touch and feel books provide tactile stimulation. So do books with flip ups & hidden objects. Wooden puzzles and educational toys such as stacking rings can be a useful diversion that also help develop the senses & motor skills.

Orientation. Depending on the child, you can have them hold the book and turn the pages. This helps with book orientation and keeps them involved.

Counting. Count objects on some pages, if appropriate. Example: “Look, there are three doggies or kitties playing in the yard. One, two, three.”

Stop Then Go. Expect a toddler to have a short attention span. If your child loses interest in the book then stop, don't force it. You can try again right away with a different book or try again later. Consider reading in short sessions several times a day. Using different intonations may help too.

Reading Time. Observe your child and determine when they are most attentive. When practical, choose that time to read. Try to develop a routine. Consider signals (e.g., song, rhyme or a sign) to indicate you're ready to start reading.

Make Mistakes. For toddlers, repetition through singing & rhyming is important. When your toddler learns the rhyme, occasionally make mistakes on purpose and see if you get caught.

Be Observant. When out and about or reading different stories, observe what interests your child and pick reinforcing books.

Play Before Reading? If the child has a lot of energy, let them play a bit before sitting down to read. It will burn off excess energy and may contribute to quiet time.

Provide Breaks. Give your child a break every 15-20 minutes. For little ones it provides an opportunity to provide some attention. Encourage your child to move around during the breaks as it can help children stay focused. Remember – keep it fun!

Questions & Responses. Ask toddlers questions about the story, the pictures & its characters and respond to what your child says. *Even if you don't read the words, you can talk about the pictures, especially if attention is an issue.* The complexity of questions will change as your child gets older.

Sounds & Repetition. Have the child make the sound of one of the characters (e.g., animal sounds) each time you come to them. Pick any character that says the same thing each time. Use *pattern* books that repeat the sentence and just change one word.

Skip Words. You don't need to read every word on the page. If the child wants to turn the page, let them – they're involved in the process. If attention is a problem, summarize the page and move on. *You want to maintain the child's interest.*

So Many Choices. Providing choices will reinforce that they are choosing to read. Pick books & stories that appeal to their interests. Pick engaging books. Toddler books with textures & flaps keep hands busy. Books with animals & machinery provide the opportunity to make sounds. Hidden objects encourage discussion.

Visit the Library. A library visit lets them choose, provides breaks and a chance to burn off some excess energy when picking books.

Combine Old & New. Kids often have their favorite books. Use the library to provide new ones for variety and to foster an appreciation for more & different books.

Try New Places. Visit a park or safe outdoor space to change the venue. It adds excitement and may provide opportunities to observe new things.

Provide Reading Feedback. Tell your pre-schooler how much you like to read with them and that you really enjoy story time.

Book Quantity & Quality. Quantity and variety are important for younger children. In general, quality is more important for 3 – 5 year-olds.

Sources:

Kathy Whitmire, former Director, Center for Early Learning, Oconee County Schools, and current Director, Center 4 ADHD. Current BabyRead Advisory Board member.

Ellen Sanford, Former Leader of Reading Recovery, Oconee County Schools and Adjunct Clemson University professor. BabyRead Advisory Board member.

Jennifer Rich, School District of Oconee County and former Reading Coach

Oconee County First Steps, Tips for Reading to Your Children, <https://oconeefirststeps.org/tips-for-reading-to-your-children/>

Everyday Reading, "12 Tricks for Reading to a Squirmy Baby or Toddler." <https://everyday-reading.com/12-tricks-for-reading-to-squirmy-baby/>

Global Student Network, "How to Help Your Child Focus When Reading." <https://globalstudentnetwork.com/how-to-help-your-child-focus-when-reading/>

Reading Rockets, "Reading Tips for Parents of Babies." <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/reading-tips-parents-babies>

Jenny Kim, Krostrade, "How You Read A Book While Holding A Baby." <https://krostrade.com/blog/how-you-read-while-holding-a-baby/>

Reading Eggs, "8 Ways to Improve Your Child's Attention While Reading." Applies to older children. <https://readingeggs.com/article/2015/06/03/Improve-childs-attention-while-reading/>