

Babbling and Books

Language and Literacy in Infants and Toddlers

If you are talking to your baby, you can read to your baby. It's never too early to introduce books to your baby. Babies delight in your voice and in hearing language. They babble and coo, imitating your sounds, the beginning of conversation. As you immerse your baby in talk, rhyme and song, you are starting a journey into language and literacy.

Parents frequently say, "Reading to an infant or toddler...you must be kidding...they just chew on the book, grab, wiggle, and walk away." It can be very frustrating, but don't give up! Reading begins with the baby looking and exploring the book anyway he wants. A sturdy board book with the magic of rhythm and rhyme, such as Mother Goose, is a good first book choice.

Baby's first books should contain pictures that are simple and uncluttered and are a part of his world such as familiar people, objects, and animals. Homemade books featuring the baby and his world are easy to create using photos glued to paper, printed from computers, or, if you want to get very fancy, uploaded and printed as a hardcover book from an online company like snapfish.com. Babies will point at the recognizable cat as the parent responds with the name and noise of the animal. This "point and say" interaction with the book begins the baby's knowledge of words, objects and their meanings, as he is beginning to make sense of his world. Pictures and words in books are symbols that stand for the real things in his life. As the baby grows and interacts with books, he becomes more curious about the story and what will happen next. Babies explore the world using their mouths. Don't be discouraged if your baby is as interested in eating books as in reading them!

The young toddler is constantly reassured as the story and pictures follow an order and consistency. This predictability is so satisfying to the toddler that his response is often, "Read it Again!" It takes many "agains" to convince the toddler that all is well after each reading, that the ending never changes. As the toddler become familiar with the book, he can retell the story from the pictures and provided the appropriate word or phrase to fill in a pause. The toddler sees himself in the picture book whether the story is about a truck or a bear or a boy or girl. The toddler empathizes with the feelings and emotions and situations that the character is experiencing: the fears, failures, and triumphs. In this way, he can safely experience a range of emotions, and you and your toddler have begun the love affair with literature, and the beauty, imagination, and magic that the world of books brings.

As parents, you must not fail to introduce infants and toddlers to books simply because the experience may be challenging. Waiting until the child is 4 or 5 to experience the wonder and excitement of books is too late! Even after a bad day, reading and cuddling up together can restore peace. Sharing a book with your infant or toddler is an enriching and powerful experience that binds a lifelong relationship with literature.

- Beth Kolehmainen

Tips for Reading with Infants and Toddlers

1. Hold the baby or toddler in your lap
2. Timing is important—choose a time when the baby seems alert, curious, and interested.
3. Have a reading routine: although books should be read at any time, having a special time helps the toddler know when to expect a story.
4. Point and Say – point to the objects and characters as you read.
5. Use your voice dramatically and creatively making different voices, animal sounds, sound effects.
6. It's okay to jump around in a book. Read only as much as a child wants to hear.
7. Let the toddler help turn pages and name things.
8. "Talk the book" - you don't have to read all the words in order, just talk about the illustrations.
9. Identify characters in the books using names of people the toddler knows.
10. Read the same book over and over and over.