


Rocking and Rolling. Reading with Babies Matters!

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During her lunch break, Sasha visits the infant room to nurse her 5-month-old daughter, Emma. She notices Anat, Emma’s caregiver, reading the photo book Sasha made when she first enrolled Emma in the center. Emma is sitting in Anat’s lap along with another infant, and she is paying close attention to the pictures of her family. Anat says to Emma, “Here is your mommy in the book, and look—here is your mommy at the door ready to feed you!” Emma looks up and smiles when she sees Sasha. Anat realized early on that if she reads to Emma, it makes waiting for her mom to come by a little easier. Now, Anat is starting to read to the infants throughout the day, as she is finding that they enjoy the illustrations and the way she gives each character a unique voice.

In the child care center in the opening vignette, each family is asked to make a book of photos featuring the most important people in their child’s life. These photo books, along with board books, are found in a basket located in a cozy reading corner, where there are a few pillows for teachers to sit on and read to the children throughout the day. Even though the children in this room are under a year old, the teachers know how important it is to share books, stories, and songs with them. As a result, they have intentionally incorporated reading into their daily routines with the children.

For years, researchers have shown that reading to infants is good for their language and cognitive development and is important for building children's vocabulary and prereading skills. A recent study demonstrated that both the quality and the quantity of shared reading in infancy are predictive of children's vocabulary, reading skills, and name-writing ability at age 4 (AAP 2017). But many adults wonder what is considered quality shared reading. A key factor is being conversational while reading aloud, including talking about and labeling pictures and characters' emotions (AAP 2017).

Many educators want to engage the littlest learners in books, but infant and toddler settings are very busy places—especially infant rooms when all of the children are under 12 months old. So much time is spent performing the routine care of feeding, diapering, and sleeping that reading can get lost if teachers are not intentional about incorporating it into the day.

Here are some tips that can make reading easier for you and more beneficial for the infants and toddlers in your care.

- Make books readily accessible to both you and mobile babies by placing several baskets or trays of books on the floor in different locations around the room.
- Make books part of daily routines, such as when lulling a baby to sleep or feeding a baby.
- Invite families to make homemade books featuring familiar family members, including pets. (This also makes for a great family engagement activity to do at your center so that you can involve families that may not be able to afford their own craft supplies.)
- Read aloud in a casual, conversational manner, pausing to point to the illustrations and label the objects and characters.
- Read to children in their home language, if you are fluent in it.
- Ask questions, even of preverbal children. Wait for children to respond in their own ways (facial expressions, body movements, sounds) before you start talking again.
- Talk to children about the story—for example, “See the baby pat the bunny?”

- Use an animated voice when reading to babies. This is a good way to show that you're interested and you enjoy reading! If you're engaged, babies will be too.
- Find books that provide sensory experiences, like *Pat the Bunny*, by Dorothy Kunhardt, and the Baby Touch and Feel series from DK.
- Help children learn to turn the pages of a book. Starting at about 9 months old, babies can pick up small objects with the pointer finger and thumb, which aids them in beginning to grip and turn pages.
- Read for as long as the child is interested. It's fine to not finish the book.

Think about it

- How do you feel about reading? Is it something you enjoy and feel confident doing?
- What role did books play in your family when you were a child? Were you read to often?

Try it

- To make photo books similar to the one described in the opening vignette, ask families to share pictures of people who are most important, including family members, fictive kin, pets, and close family friends. Because many people store their photos on a smartphone, ask families to text or email photos to you so you can print them out. Alternatively, you can take photos of families at drop-off and pickup times.
- Make a cozy and inviting reading corner using pillows and other comfy cushions, as well as lots of books—and use your reading corner regularly! This sends the message to babies that the reading corner is a comfortable place where they can cuddle up, enjoy each other's company, and read books.

- Try to read to each child every day.

Reading to babies is an intimate, shared experience that boosts development and learning. Making time for story sharing in busy infant settings is essential for children's vocabulary development and later reading ability. Being intentional about embedding literacy experiences in babies' everyday routines creates joyful, loving moments in the short-term and builds critical skills in the long-term.

Connecting to Language and Literacy Standards

National organizations' standards describe optimal classroom environments and effective teaching practices with respect to language and literacy. NAEYC-accredited programs align with best practices that address the kinds of books stocked in early childhood environments. For example, they require that each infant and toddler classroom have two or more picture books, wordless books, and rhyming books available. It is also important to have books that show a variety of cultures and languages so that children see diverse families, including their own families and home languages, in the stories they read.

Zero to Three's Critical Competencies for Infant–Toddler Educators states that teachers engage in the following language- and literacy-enriching book-reading behaviors:

L&L-3a—Frequently engage children in book exploration, storytelling, and reading activities.

L&L-3b—Point to pictures while labeling them, using facial expression, varied vocal tone, and gestures to communicate the meaning of words; reinforce the meaning of words by connecting them to real-life experiences at home and school.

L&L-3c—Promote positive attitudes toward books by making them available for children to explore independently, modeling shared and independent reading activities, rereading favorites, and modeling appropriate care for books.

L&L-3f—Promote many types of books, including picture story books, participation books, patterned concept books, predictable books, wordless books, folktales and fables, poetry, nursery rhymes, and informational books. (Dean, LeMoine, & Mayoral 2016, 64–65)

Rocking & Rolling is written by infant and toddler specialists and contributed by ZERO TO THREE, a nonprofit organization working to promote the health and development of infants and toddlers by translating research and knowledge into a range of practical tools and resources for use by the adults who influence the lives of young children. The column can be found online at NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/yc/columns.

References

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