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**ZERO to THREE**

Early connections last a lifetime

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## Supporting Language and Literacy Skills from 12–24 Months



**The idea of babies and toddlers talking and reading can seem incredible. It isn't necessary to "teach" very young children, but learn how you can begin to help your child develop their language and literacy skills.**

It is hard to imagine them debating with you about curfews or curling up with the newest Harry Potter book. But language and literacy skills start early—from birth. Watching your baby and learning how she communicates through sounds, facial expressions, and gestures are all important ways to help her learn about language and the written word.

It isn't necessary to "teach" very young children. Formal classes and other activities that push babies and toddlers to read and write words do not help their development or make them do better in school. In fact, they can even make children feel like failures when they are pushed to do something they don't enjoy or that is beyond their skills.

Early language and literacy skills are learned best through everyday moments with your child—reading books, talking, laughing, and playing together. Children learn language when you talk to them and they communicate back to you, and by hearing stories read and songs sung aloud. Children develop early literacy skills when you give them the chance to play with and explore books and other written materials like magazines, newspapers, take-out menus, markers, and crayons.

Language and literacy, while two different skills, build on one another in important ways.

## **What You Can Do**

### **Chat with your child.**

Research has found that the more parents talk with their children, the larger vocabularies those children develop. These children also use more advanced sentence structures. So chatting with your toddler—in the car, at the playground, during bath time—is very important.

## **Notice and build on your child's interests.**

Your child will let you know what interests and excites him by using his actions, facial expressions, and speech. When he points out the window or gives you a questioning look, put his actions into words: Yes, that's a squirrel. Look at him running along the fence.

## **Use new words when you talk with your toddler.**

A snack can be many things: good, healthy, yummy, crunchy, round, etc. Talk about what you are doing (I have to wipe the crumbs off the table) and about what you see your child doing (You are knocking down your block tower. Watch it go boom!).

## **Name pictures in books.**

Point out connections between books and your child's "real" life. For example, after you see the picture of a school bus in a story, you can watch one chug down the street later that afternoon. Help him make the connection.

## **Ask questions as you read.**

Where is the caterpillar? You can also begin to ask your child questions like: Would you like to read a book? What book do you want to read? Soon your child will toddle off to pick up a book and bring it back to you.

## **Don't make a big deal about speech mistakes.**

There is no need to correct your child. Simply repeat the correct pronunciation. If your child says, "Gamma", you might respond by saying, "I see that Grandma gave you a cookie, yum yum!" to give your child a chance to hear how the word sounds. Correcting your child can make him less likely to try saying new words.

## **Be a translator.**

If other adults have difficulty understanding your child's speech, you can "translate" what he is saying. Give your child a chance to speak first, and then explain: "Ben is telling you that this is his new truck."

## Repeat.

Choose books with stories that repeat words or phrases. Children learn new words and pronunciations through repetition. One good choice for this age group is *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?* by Eric Carle. Other good choices include books that:

- Encourage your child to speak, such as books that pose simple questions like *Where Is Baby's Belly Button* by Karen Katz;
- Books with clear pictures of common objects (name the pictures for your child); and
- Simple stories with predictable plots.

## Read lots of books with your child.

Reading together helps your baby develop a love of reading. It also helps her learn the skills to read books (such as turning the pages, reading the words, talking about the pictures). Reading aloud also nurtures your child's language and listening skills.

## Recognize that not all books are winners.

Toddlers have strong likes and dislikes. Follow your child's lead and let her decide which books to read. Forcing a child to hear a story does not build a love of literacy.

## “Read” the world around you.

Point out stop signs, open/closed signs, your street sign. Let your child play with and “read” all kinds of written material—magazines, newspapers, catalogs, take-out menus.

## Let them move.

Keep reading. Children are often still listening even as they move around. In fact, some kids, who have a strong need to be on the move, listen better when they are in motion!

## Encourage your child to act out the story you are reading.

For example, you can ask him to jump like the frog in the book.

## **Tell your child a story.**

Instead of reading a book, tell your child a story. Children still gain important literacy skills by listening. They learn new words. They also learn how a story unfolds in a sequence (beginning, middle, and end). Put the book down when your child shows she is totally uninterested.

## **Follow your child's lead and do some active play for a while.**

Come back to the book later. Forcing children to read can lead to negative feelings about books.

## **Let your child help "read" the book.**

Let your child hold the book and turn the pages. This helps her learn how a book works. See if she would like to read to you in whatever way she likes. She may want to point to the pictures and have you say what they are. Or she may babble as she "reads" the words on each page.

## **Talk about pictures in the book.**

That bunny is getting tired. He is in his bed. He is going night-night. Night, night, Bunny. Talking about the pictures helps children develop a better understanding of what is happening in the story. Sometimes, instead of reading the actual words in the book, you can simply talk about the pictures on each page.

# **Parent-Child Activities to Promote Language and Literacy**

## **Go on a name safari**

Walk around your house or neighborhood with your toddler. Point out and name different objects. Encourage your child to repeat the words after you. Ask your child where he wants to go next and follow his lead. See if he points to "ask" you what an object is.

## **Make an animal book.**

Cut pictures of animals from magazines or take photos of animals in your neighborhood (cats, dogs, birds, etc.). Glue these pictures to sturdy 4×6 index cards. Punch a hole in the upper left corner of each card and tie them together with a short piece of yarn. Show your toddler each page, name the animal, and make its sound. Which animal is your child's favorite? Which animal sound can he make first?

## **Play “can you find...”**

Toddlers enjoy helping out. Give your child a simple task: Go get your shoe. Make sure the object is in sight. As her receptive language (the words she understands) grows, you can ask your child to get a familiar object that is not in sight: Can you find your dump truck. This is a great way to help your toddler learn new words and to listen and follow directions.

# **Frequently Asked Questions**

## **Why does my toddler insist on having the same book read over and over again?**

Children learn through repetition. Although adults may tire of the same book, young children need to hear the same story many times to fully understand it. Hearing a story over and over also helps toddlers learn about the sound, meaning, rhythm, and tone of words. You may even find that your toddler enjoys practicing how to read a book. She may sit down with a favorite story and “read” it to a favorite stuffed animal or doll.

## **My 18-month-old has started to get up and run off halfway through a book. Should I make him come back and finish the story?**

This is quite common. Since toddlers are very active, they may only be able to stay still for a story for a few minutes. Forcing your child to read is not a good idea since it can create a negative feeling about reading.

The good news is that while toddlers may run off, they will often return to the story many, many times. Follow their lead when you are reading together. Your child may just want to flip through the pages or go back and forth between a page or two. Sometimes your

child may get up and play with other toys while listening to a story. Although you may think he is no longer interested, he probably wants you to keep reading. Toddlers sometimes need to be up and about, playing with toys while listening to a story or song. As they grow, children are able to sit longer and longer for stories. Watch your toddler to decide how long to read and when to take a break.

**How can I make reading with my child more action-oriented? My 22-month-old never wants to sit still anymore and isn't that interested in books right now. I'm worried that he won't grow up to be a reader. I hear so much about how important reading is, even with little ones.**

As children enter the toddler years, they delight in what their body can do—walking, running, jumping, bouncing, rolling, sliding. So sitting still to hear a story may not be at the top of your son's favorite activity list.

But if you can't beat 'em, join 'em: Instead of always expecting your child to sit down to read a story, build reading into his other activities. What's most important for developing early reading skills is a love of books. It doesn't matter whether your child holds the book upside down, picks the same two books over and over again, or is doing somersaults as you read to him. Try the following:

- Look for books that feature interesting actions or motions. For example, there are several storybook versions of the “Wheels on the Bus” song that can be great fun for you and your child to act out together. Instead of reading a story, tell your child a story, anytime, anywhere—in the car doing errands, while taking a walk to the park, etc. You can adapt stories from your child’s favorite books or pull from your own childhood experiences (or his). You’ll find that your toddler loves to hear about when he was a “little, bitty baby, once upon a time, very long ago.”
- Sing and play music to foster your son’s love of words, sounds, rhythm, and rhyme. Look for songs that encourage dancing, marching, bouncing, and spinning. Try out different kinds of beats so that your child can experiment with moving his body in different ways: fast or slow, big or small, quiet or loud movements.
- Look for letter magnets or blocks that your child can arrange and rearrange to his heart’s content. You can spell words out for him and let him stack the letters up and knock them down again.
- As your son continues to learn and grow, his interests will change. In a year or so, when he really begins to understand that letters are symbols for words and ideas, he may be fascinated with books. The key is to find creative ways to support a love of reading now.

**Browse our full suite of resources on early childhood development.**

