

U.S. Department of Education
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Helping Your Child Become a Reader
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Foreword

Years of research show clearly that children are more likely to succeed in learning when their families actively support them. When you and other family members read with your children, help them with homework, talk with their teachers, and participate in school or other learning activities, you give your children a tremendous advantage.

Other than helping your children to grow up healthy and happy, the most important thing that you can do for them is to help them develop their reading skills. It is no exaggeration to say that how well children learn to read affects directly not only how successful they are in school but how well they do throughout their lives. When children learn to read, they have the key that opens the door to all the knowledge of the world. Without this key, many children are left behind.

At the heart of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* is a promise to raise standards for all children and to help all children meet those standards. To help meet this goal, the President is committed to supporting and promoting the very best teaching programs, especially those that teach young people how to read. Well-trained reading teachers and reading instruction that is based on research can bring the best teaching approaches and programs to all children and so help to ensure that “no child is left behind”. However, the foundation for learning to read is in place long before children enter school and begin formal reading instruction. You and your family help to create this foundation by talking, listening, and reading to your children every day and by showing them that you value, use, and enjoy reading in your lives.

This booklet includes activities for families with children from infancy through age 6. Most of the activities make learning experiences out of the everyday routines in which you and your children participate. Most use materials that are found in your home or that can be had free-of-charge from your local library. The activities are designed to be fun for both you and your children as you help them to gain the skills they need to become readers. Enjoy them!

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Introduction

You could say that your baby starts on the road to becoming a reader on the day she[□] is born and first hears the sounds of your voice. Every time you speak to her, sing to her, and respond to the sounds that she makes, you strengthen your child's understanding of language. With you to guide her, she is well on her way to becoming a reader.

To understand the connection between a child's early experiences with spoken language and learning to read, you might think of language as a four-legged stool. The four legs are talking, listening, reading, and writing. All four legs are important; each leg helps to support and balance the others.

This booklet gives you information about how you can use your language skills to build your child's skills. It offers suggestions about how you can:

- Talk with and listen to your child.
- Read together with her.
- Help your child learn about books and print.
- Encourage your child's early writing efforts.
- Help your child learn to read if his first language is not English.
- Prepare your child for success in school.

The major portion of the booklet contains activities that you can use with your child to strengthen her language skills and encourage her love of reading. However, these activities are only a starting point. We hope that you and your child will enjoy them enough to create and try many more on your own. As a parent, you are your child's first and most important teacher. You don't need to be the best reader to help—your time and interest and the pleasure that you share with your child as part of reading together are what counts. If you would like more information about helping your child with reading, this booklet also provides lists of books and Web sites and the names of groups that you can contact.

We all know that older children can do things that younger ones can't. This is true for reading, too. To help show when children can take certain learning steps, this booklet ties the discussion and activities to four age groups:

Baby = birth to 1 year

Toddler = 1 to 3 years

Preschooler = ages 3 and 4

Kindergartner/early first-grader = ages 5 and 6

[□] **Please note:** In this book, we refer to a child as "him" in some places and "her" in others. We do this to make the book easier to read. Please understand, however, that every point that we make about reading is the same for girls and boys.

Keep in mind, however, that children don't all learn at the same pace. And even though they learn new things, they may have "old favorites"—books and activities from earlier years—that they still enjoy. You are the best person to decide which activities will work best for your child.

Children become readers step by step. By age 7, most children are reading. Some take longer than others, and some need extra help. When children receive the right kind of help in their early years, reading difficulties that can arise later in their lives can be prevented. This booklet offers steps that you can take to start your child on the way to becoming a successful reader. It is an adventure that you will not want to miss, and the benefits for your child will last a lifetime.

“As parents, the most important thing we can do is read to our children early and often. Reading is the path to success in school and life. When children learn to love books, they learn to love learning.”

- Laura Bush

Becoming 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.
- Read simple books.
- 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**, page 38).

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.

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,” page 11.)

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,” page 13.)

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!

Reading books with their children is one of the most important things that parents can do to help their children become readers.

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," page 27.)

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.

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!" page 20.)

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,” page 18.)

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,” page 14.)

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

- 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," page 14, and "Write On!" page 25.)

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.

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.

<p>For a list of multiple-language books, see Resources for Children, page 51.</p>

Activities

What follows are ideas for language-building activities that you can do with your child to help her build the skills she needs to become a reader. Most public libraries offer free use of books, magazines, videos, computers, and other services. Other things that you might need for these activities are not expensive.

For each set of activities, we give an age span that suggests when children should try them. From one activity to the next, we continue to talk about children at different stages: babies (birth to 1 year), toddlers (1 to 3 years), preschoolers (ages 3 and 4), and kindergartner/early first-graders (ages 5 and 6). Remember that children don't always learn the same things at the same rate. And they don't suddenly stop doing one thing and start doing another just because they are a little older. So use the ages as guides as your child learns and grows. Don't consider them to be hard and fast rules.

You'll see that your role in the activities will change, too. Just as you hold up your child when he's learning to walk, you will help him a lot when he's taking his first language steps. As he grows, you will gradually let go, and he will take more and more language steps on his own. That is why in most of the activities we say, "The first activities . . . work well with younger children. As your child grows older, the later activities let him do more."

As a parent, you can help your child *want* to learn in a way no one else can. That desire to learn is a key to your child's later success. Enjoyment is important! So, if you and your child don't enjoy one activity, move on to another. You can always return to any activity later on.

Baby Talk

For babies from birth to 1 year

Babies love hearing your voice. When you answer your child's sounds with sounds of your own, she learns that what she "says" has meaning and is important to you.

What to Do

- Talk to your baby often. Answer her coos, gurgles, and smiles. Talk, touch, and smile back. Get her to look at you.
- Play simple talking and touching games with your baby. Ask, "Where's your nose?" Then touch her nose and say playfully, "There's your nose!" Do this several times, then switch to an ear or knee or tummy. Stop when she (or you) grows tired of the game.
- Change the game by touching the nose or ear and repeating the word for it several times. Do this with objects, too. When she hears you name something over and over again, your child begins to connect the sound with what it means.
- Do things that interest your baby. Vary your tone of voice, make funny faces, sing lullabies, and recite simple nursery rhymes. Play "peek-a-boo" and "pat-a-cake" with her.

It's so important to talk to your baby! With your help, her coos and gurgles will one day give way to words.

Books and Babies

For babies from age 6 weeks to 1 year

Sharing books is a way to have fun with your baby and to start him on the road to becoming a reader.

What You Need

Cardboard or cloth books with large, simple pictures of things with which babies are familiar

Lift-the-flap, touch-and-feel, or peek-through play books (For suggestions, see **Resources for Children**, page 51.)

What to Do

- Read to your baby for short periods several times a day. Bedtime is always a good time, but you can read at other times as well—while you're in the park, on the bus, or even at the breakfast table (without the food!).
- As you read, point out things in the pictures. Name them as you point to them.
- Give your baby sturdy books to look at, touch, and hold. Allow him to peek through the holes or lift the flaps to discover surprises.

Babies soon recognize the faces and voices of those who care for them. As you read to your baby, he will begin to connect books with what he loves most—your voice and closeness.

Chatting with Children

For children ages 1 to 6

Continue talking with your older child as you did with your baby. Talking helps him to develop language skills and lets him know that what he says is important.

What to Do

The first activities in the list below work well with younger children. As your child grows older, the later activities let him do more. However, keep doing the first ones as long as he enjoys them.

- Talk often with your toddler. When feeding, bathing, and dressing him, ask him to name or find different objects or clothing. Point out colors, sizes, and shapes.
- Talk with your child as you read together. Point to pictures and name what is in them. When he is ready, ask him to do the same. Ask him about his favorite parts of the story, and answer his questions about events or characters.
- Teach your toddler to be a helper by asking him to find things. As you cook, give him pots and pans or measuring spoons to play with. Ask him what he is doing and answer his questions.
- Whatever you do together, talk about it with your child. When you eat meals, take walks, go to the store, or visit the library, talk with him. These and other activities give the two of you a chance to ask and answer questions such as, “Which flowers are red? Which are yellow?” “What else do you see in the garden?” Challenge your child by asking questions that need more than a “yes” or “no” answer.
- Listen to your child’s questions patiently and answer them just as patiently. If you don’t know the answer to a question, have him join you as you look for the answer in a book. He will then see how important books are as sources of information.
- Have your child tell you a story. Then ask him questions, explaining that you need to understand better.
- When he is able, ask him to help you in the kitchen. He might set the table or decorate a batch of cookies. A first-grader may enjoy helping you follow a simple recipe. Talk about what you’re fixing, what you’re cooking with, what he likes to eat, and more.
- Ask yourself if the TV is on too much. If so, turn it off and talk!

Talking and having conversations with your child play a necessary part in helping his language skills grow.

As Simple as ABC

For children ages 2 to 6

Sharing the alphabet with your child helps her begin to recognize the shapes of letters and to link them with the sounds of spoken language. She will soon learn the difference between individual letters—what they look like and what they sound like.

What You Need

Alphabet books (see **Resources for Children**, page 51)

ABC magnets

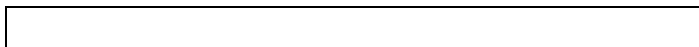
Paper, pencils, crayons, markers

Glue and safety scissors

What to Do

The first activities in the list below work well with younger children. As your child grows older, the later activities let her do more. But keep doing the first ones as long as she enjoys them.

- With your toddler sitting with you, print the letters of her name on paper and say each letter as you write it. Make a name sign for her room or other special place. Have her decorate the sign by pasting stickers or drawing on it.
- Teach your child “The Alphabet Song” and play games with her using the alphabet. Some alphabet books have songs and games that you can learn together.
- Look for educational videos, DVDs, CDs, and TV shows such as “Between the Lions” that feature letter-learning activities for young children. Watch such programs with your child and join in with her on the rhymes and songs.
- Place alphabet magnets on your refrigerator or on another smooth, safe metal surface. Ask your child to name the letters she plays with and to say the words she may be trying to spell.
- Wherever you are with your child, point out individual letters in signs, billboards, posters, food containers, books, and magazines. When she is 3 to 4 years old, ask her to begin finding and naming some letters.
- When your child is between ages 3 and 4, encourage her to spell and write her name. For many children, their names are the first words they write. At first, your child may use just one or two letters for her name (for example, Emily, nicknamed Em, uses the letter *M*).
- Make an alphabet book with your kindergartner. Have her draw pictures (you can help). You can also cut pictures from magazines or use photos. Paste each picture in the book. Help your child to write next to the picture the letter that stands for the object or person in the picture (for example, *B* for bird, *M* for milk, and so on).



When you show your child letters and words over and over again, she will identify and use them more easily when learning to read and write. She will be eager to learn when the letters and words are connected to things that are part of her life.

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