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# Reading Books to Babies

## What Are the Benefits of Reading to My Baby?

Reading aloud to your baby is a wonderful shared activity you can continue for years to come — and it's important for your baby's brain.

Reading aloud:

- teaches a baby about communication
- introduces concepts such as numbers, letters, colors, and shapes in a fun way
- builds listening, memory, and vocabulary skills
- gives babies information about the world around them

By the time babies reach their first birthday, they will have learned all the sounds needed to speak their native language. The more stories you read aloud, the more words your baby will hear and the better they'll be able to talk.

Hearing words helps to build a rich network of words in a baby's brain. Kids whose parents talk and read to them often know more words by age 2 than children who have not been read to. And kids who are read to during their early years are more likely to learn to read at the right time.

When you read to your baby:

- Your baby hears you using many different emotions and expressive sounds. This supports social and emotional development.
- It encourages your baby to look, point, touch, and answer questions. This helps with social development and thinking skills.
- Your baby improves language skills by copying sounds, recognizing pictures, and learning words.

But perhaps the most important reason to read aloud is that it makes a connection between the things your baby loves the most — your voice and closeness to you — and books. Spending time reading to your baby shows that reading is important. And if infants and children are read to often with joy, excitement, and closeness, they begin to associate books with happiness — and new readers are created.

## Different Ages, Different Stages

Young babies may not know what the pictures in a book mean, but they can focus on them, especially faces, bright colors, and different patterns. When you read or sing lullabies and nursery rhymes, you can entertain and soothe your infant.

Babies 4–6 months old:

- Your baby may begin to show more interest in books. Your little one will grab and hold books, but will mouth, chew, and drop them as well. Choose sturdy vinyl or cloth books with bright colors and familiar, repetitive, or rhyming text.

Babies 6–12 months old:

- Your baby starts to understand that pictures represent objects, and may start to show that they like certain pictures, pages, or even entire stories better than others. Your baby will respond while you read, grabbing for the book and making sounds. By 12 months, your little one will turn pages (with some help from you), pat or start to point to objects on a page, and repeat your sounds.

## When and How Should I Read to My Baby?

Here's a great thing about reading aloud: It doesn't take special skills or tools — just you, your baby, and some books. Read aloud for a few minutes at a time, but do it often. Don't worry about finishing entire books — focus on pages that you and your baby enjoy.

Try to read every day, perhaps before naptime and bedtime. Reading before bed gives you and your baby a chance to cuddle and connect. It also sets a routine that will help calm your baby.

It's also good to read at other points in the day. Choose times when your baby is dry, fed, and alert. Books also come in handy when you're stuck waiting, so have some in the diaper bag to fill time sitting at the doctor's office or standing in line at the grocery store.

Here are some other reading tips:

- Cuddling while you read helps your baby feel safe, warm, and connected to you.
- Read with expression, make your voice higher or lower where it's appropriate, or use different voices for different characters.
- Don't worry about following the text exactly. Stop once in a while and ask questions or make comments on the pictures or text. ("Where's the kitty? There he is! What a cute black kitty.") Your child might not be able to respond yet, but this lays the groundwork for doing so later.
- Sing nursery rhymes, make funny animal sounds, or bounce your baby on your knee — anything that shows that reading is fun.
- Babies love — and learn from — repetition, so don't be afraid of reading the same books over and over. When you do, emphasize the same words or phrases each time as you would with a familiar song.

- As your baby gets older, encourage your little one to touch the book or hold sturdier vinyl, cloth, or board books. You don't want to encourage chewing on books, but by putting them in the mouth, your baby is learning about them, finding out how books feel and taste — and discovering that you can't eat them!

## What Should I Read to My Baby?

Books for babies should have simple, repetitive, and familiar text and clear pictures. During the first few months of life, your child just likes to hear your voice. So you can read almost anything, especially books with a sing-song or rhyming text. As your baby gets more interested in looking at things, choose books with simple pictures against solid backgrounds.

As your baby begins to grab, you can read vinyl or cloth books that have faces, bright colors, and shapes. When your baby begins to respond to what's inside the books, add board books with pictures of babies or familiar objects like toys. When your baby starts to do things like sit up in the bathtub or eat finger foods, find simple stories about daily routines like bedtime or bathtime. When your child starts talking, choose books that let babies repeat simple words or phrases.

Books with mirrors and different textures (crinkly, soft, scratchy) are also great for this age group. So are fold-out books you can prop up, or books with flaps that open for a surprise. Board books make page turning easier for infants, and vinyl or cloth books can go everywhere — even the tub. Babies of any age like photo albums with pictures of people they know and love. And babies love nursery rhymes!

One of the best ways to make sure that your little one grows up to be a reader is to have books around your house. When your baby is old enough to crawl over to a basket of toys and pick one out, make sure some books are in the mix.

Besides the books you own, you also can borrow from the library. Many libraries have story time for babies too. Don't forget to pick up a book for yourself while you're there. Reading for fun is another way you can be your baby's reading role model.

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