

SO...WHY SHOULD I READ TO MY BABY?

BY TAM SPITZER, PH.D.

If you overhear Budding Readers volunteers, you will hear suggestions like, “snuggle up with your baby for 15 to 20 minutes each day and read, right from birth; make it playful and word-filled; keep appropriate books in reach so they can be explored; let them see you reading, etc., etc.” Young parents hear similar messages from pediatricians. In 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics made it policy for pediatricians to routinely advise parents of infants and toddlers about the importance of regular reading, even with newborns.⁴

Having spent 35 years as a college professor teaching and researching children’s learning, let me guide you through the research leading to this advice. **How should you read with young children, especially infants? What types of books are best? How are children affected who are read to regularly? What about those children who are not read to regularly?**

The research is clear; it is not just the **quantity** of time spent reading with young ones, but also the **quality** of the shared reading experiences that matter. The time between birth and age 3 is critical.^{1,5} Infants and toddlers are constantly learning, but learning is most effective when **interactive**.^{1,2} Shared reading sets the stage for such interactions, while also creating a reliable and secure daily cuddle time for parent and child.³ Interactions include pointing at pictures, naming objects, singing rhymes, using facial expressions, making “mistakes” for them to catch, having them point at items in the pictures, and using voice tone and volume to accentuate mood and meaning.

Babies and toddlers need adults to make a picture book “work,” to tell the story, to make the animal sounds, and make the pictures talk.²

Books for infants and toddlers generally contain a more diverse set of words than we typically use in conversation, so shared reading exposes young ones to more vocabulary.² Infants under two are most receptive to simple picture books with objects to name and explore. Two-year-olds begin to show interest in a simple story, but don’t forget your interactive role! Ask questions; have them guess what’s next in the story; help them relate the story to their own lives.⁵



Research has established **clear cognitive benefits** for children who are read to early and often: **better language development, larger vocabularies and better visual imagery**. They are **more school-ready** and are more likely to learn to read on schedule.⁴ This advantage is apparent as early as 18 months of age, and frequently mirrors income level.⁴

Recent research demonstrates that these cognitive gains in young children who are read to regularly are due to **greater brain activity and greater growth of brain networks and neural connections**, especially in the parts of the brain that are used for visual imagery and later used in reading.³

Other studies show that early shared reading strengthens children’s **creativity** as well as **emotional, social and character development**. Children read to regularly show **decreased levels of aggression, hyperactivity and attentional difficulties**.¹ Shared reading exposes them to situations, words and facial expressions they can learn from to describe their feelings and better control their own behavior.^{1,2,4}



Never underestimate the power of **the loving bond** that grows during the many one-on-one cuddle sessions of shared reading and the child’s desire to please that adult and do what that person values.

SOURCES

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