

Activities -- Helping Your Child Become a Reader

<https://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/reader/part5.html>

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.



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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.](#))

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.

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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.

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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](#))
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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What Happens Next?

For children ages 2 to 6

Books with words or actions that appear over and over help your child to predict or tell what happens next. These are called "predictable" books. Your child will love to figure out the story in a predictable book!

What You Need

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Predictable books with repeated words, phrases, questions, or rhymes (For suggested titles, see [Resources for Children](#).)

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. But keep doing the first ones as long as he enjoys them.

- Read predictable books to your child. Teach him to hear and say repeating words, such as names for colors, numbers, letters, and animals.
- Pick a story that has repeated phrases, such as this example from *The Three Little Pigs*:

Wolf Voice: *Little pig, little pig, let me come in.*

Little Pig: *Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin!*

Wolf Voice: *Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in!*

Your child will learn the repeated phrase and have fun joining in with you each time it shows up in the story. Pretty soon, he will join in before you tell him.

- Read books that give hints about what might happen next. Such books have your child lifting flaps, looking through cut-out holes in the pages, "reading" small pictures that stand for words (called "rebuses"), and searching for many other clues. Get excited along with your child as he hurries to find out what happens next.
- When reading predictable books, ask your child what he thinks will happen. See if he points out picture clues, if he mentions specific words or phrases, or if he connects the story to something that happens in real life. These are important skills for a beginning reader to learn.

Predictable books help children to understand how stories progress. A child easily learns familiar phrases and repeats them, pretending to read. Pretend reading gives a child a sense of power and the courage to keep trying.

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A Home for My Books

For children ages 2 to 6

Starting a home library for your child shows her how important books are. Having books of her own in a special place boosts the chance that your child will want to read even more.

What You Need

Books from bookstores, garage sales, flea markets, used book stores, and sales at your local library

A bookcase, a cardboard box, or other materials to make a place for books

What to Do

- Pick a special place for your child's books so that she knows where to look for them. A cardboard box that you can decorate together might make a good bookcase. Or you might clear one of the family bookshelves and make a special place for her to put her books.
- Help your child to arrange her books in some order—her favorite books, books about animals, holiday books. Use whatever method will help her most easily find the book she's looking for.
- Borrow books from your local library. (See "[Visiting the Library](#).") Go to the children's section and spend time with your child reading and selecting books to take home and put in her special place. You might even have a box or space just for library books, so that they don't get mixed up with your child's own books.



- Encourage family members and friends to give books to your child as presents for birthdays and other occasions.
- When you and your child make your own books, you can add them to your home library. (For ideas on how to make books, see "[As Simple as ABC](#)," and "[Write On!](#)")

When collecting and reading books are a part of family life, you send your child a message that books are important, enjoyable, and full of new things to learn.

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A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words

For children ages 3 to 6

Books that have no words, just beautiful pictures, invite you and your child to use your imaginations to make up your own stories to go with the pictures.

What You Need

Wordless picture books (For suggestions, see [Resources for Children](#).)
 Old magazines
 Safety scissors
 Construction paper

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. But keep doing the first ones as long as he enjoys them.

- Look through the whole picture book with your child. Ask him what he thinks the story is about. Tell the story together by talking about each page as each of you sees it.
- Ask your child to identify objects, animals, or people on each page. Talk with him about the pictures, and ask him if he thinks that they are like real life.
- Have your child tell another child or family member a story using a wordless picture book. Doing this will make him feel like a "reader" and will encourage him to continue learning to read.
- Have your child create his own picture book with his drawings or pictures that you help him cut from magazines.

Using wordless picture books can help improve children's language skills and spark their imaginations.

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Rhyme with Me: It's Fun, You'll See!

For children ages 3 to 6

Rhyming activities help your child to pay attention to the sounds in words.

What You Need

Books with rhyming words, word games, or songs

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.

- Play rhyming games and sing rhyming songs with your child. Many songs and games include clapping, bouncing and tossing balls, and playing in groups.
- Read rhymes to your child. As you read, stop before a rhyming word and encourage your child to fill in the blank. When she does, praise her.
- Listen for rhymes in songs that you know or hear on the radio, TV, or at family or other gatherings. Sing the songs with your child.
- Around the home, point to objects and say their names, for example, clock. Then ask your child to say as many words as she can that rhyme with the name. Other easily rhymed words are ball, bed, rug, sink, and toy. Let your child use some silly, or nonsense, words as well: **toy—joy, boy, woy, loy, doy, hoy, noy.**
- Say three words such as **go, dog, and frog**, and ask your child which words sound the same rhyme.
- If your child has an easy-to-rhyme name, ask her to say words that rhyme with it: **Jill—bill, mill, fill, hill.**
- If a computer is available, encourage your child to use it to play rhyming games. (For computer game suggestions, see "[Learning with Computers](#).")

Children around the world have fun with rhyming games and songs. Here are a few rhyming books to look for: *Shake It to the One That You Love the Best: Play Songs and Lullabies from Black Musical Traditions* by Cheryl Warren Mattox; *Read Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young* by Jack Prelutsky; *Diez Deditos: 10 Little Fingers and Other Play Rhymes and Action Songs from Latin America* by Jose-Luis Orozco; and *My Very First Mother Goose* by Iona Opie. (For more suggestions, see [Resources for Children](#).)

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Match My Sounds

For children ages 3 to 6

Listening for and saying sounds in words will help your child to learn that spoken words are made up of sounds, which gets him ready to match spoken sounds to written letters—an important first step toward becoming a reader.

What You Need

Books with nursery rhymes, tongue twisters, word games, or silly songs

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. But keep doing the first ones as long as he enjoys them.

- Say your child's name, then have him say words that begin with the same sound; for example: **David—day, doll, dish; Jess—juice, jam, jar.**
- As you read a story or poem, ask your child to listen for and say the words that begin with the same sound. Then have him think of and say another word that begins with the sound.
- Read or say a familiar nursery rhyme such as "Humpty, Dumpty." Then have your child make it "Bumpty, Lumpty" or "Thumpty, Gumpty."
- Help your child to make up and say silly lines with lots of words that start with the same sound, such as, "Sister saw six silly snakes."
- Say two names for an animal, and tell your child to choose the name that begins with the same sound as the animal's name. Ask, for example, should a horse's name be Hank or Tank? Should a pig be Mattie or Patty? Should a zebra be Zap or Cap?

Helping children learn to pay attention to sounds in words can prevent reading problems later on.

Take a Bow!

For children ages 3 to 6

When your child acts out a poem or story, she shows her own understanding of what it is about. She also grows as a reader by connecting emotions with written words.

What You Need

Poems or stories written from a child's point of view

Things to use in a child's play (dress-up clothes, puppets)

What to Do

- Read a poem slowly to your child. Read it with feeling, making the words seem important.
- If your child has a poem she especially likes, ask her to act it out. Ask her to make a face to show the way the character in the poem is feeling. Making different faces adds emotion to the performer's voice. After her performance, praise her for doing a good job.
- Tell your child that the family would love to see her perform her poem. Set a time when everyone can be together. When your child finishes her performance, encourage her to take a bow as everyone claps and cheers loudly.
- Encourage your child to make up her own play from a story that she has read or heard. Tell her that it can be make-believe or from real life. Help her to find or make things to go with the story—a pretend crown, stuffed animals, a broomstick, or whatever the story needs. Some of her friends or family also can help. You can write down the words or, if she is old enough, help her to write them. Then help her to stage the play for everyone to see!

Play acting helps a child learn that there are more and less important parts to a story. She also learns how one thing in a story follows another.

Family Stories

For children ages 3 to 6

Telling family stories lets your child know about the people who are important to him. They also give him an idea of how one thing leads to another in a story.

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. But keep doing the first ones as long as he enjoys them.

- Tell your child stories about your parents and grandparents or about others who are special to you and your family. You might put these stories in a book and add old photographs.
- Think out loud about when you were little. Make a story out of something that happened, such as a family trip, a birthday party, or when you lost your first tooth.

- Have your child tell you stories about what he did on special days, such as holidays, birthdays, and family vacations.
- If you go on a trip, write a trip journal with your child to make a new family story. Take photographs of special events. Writing down special events and pasting photographs of the events in the journal will tie the family story to a written history. You can also include everyday trips, such as going to the grocery store or the park.

The storyteller's voice helps your child to hear the sounds of words and how they are put together to make meaning.

Write On!

For children ages 3 to 6

Reading and writing support each other. The more your child does of each, the better she will be at both.

What You Need

Pencils, crayons, or markers
 Yarn or ribbon
 Writing paper or notebook
 Cardboard or heavy paper
 Construction paper
 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.

- Write with your child. She will learn a lot about writing by watching you write. Talk with her about your writing so that she begins to understand that writing means something and has many uses.
- Have your preschooler use her way of writing—perhaps just a scribble—to sign birthday cards or make lists.
- Hang a family message board in the kitchen. Offer to write notes there for your child. Be sure that she finds notes left there for her.
- Ask your preschooler to tell you simple stories as you write them down. Question her if you don't understand something.
- Encourage your preschooler to write her name and practice writing it with her. Remember, at first she may use only the first letter or two of her name.
- Help your child write notes or e-mails to relatives and friends to thank them for gifts or to share her thoughts. Encourage the relatives and friends to answer your child.
- When she is in kindergarten, your child will begin to write words the way that she hears them. For example, she might write **haf** for **have**, **frn** for **friend**, and **Frd** for **Fred**. Ask her to read her writing to you. Don't be concerned with correct spelling. She will learn that later.
- As your child gets older, she can begin to write or tell you longer stories. Ask questions that will help her organize the stories. Answer questions about alphabet letters and spelling.
- Turn your child's writing into books. Paste her drawings and writings on pieces of construction paper. For each book, make a cover out of heavier paper or cardboard, then add special art, a title, and her name as author. Punch holes in the pages and cover and bind the book together with yarn or ribbon.

When a child is just beginning, she tries different ways to write and spell. Our job as parents is to encourage our children's writing so they will enjoy putting their thoughts and ideas on paper. Provide them with spelling help when they ask for it.