

Building Literacy Skills, Age 3 - 5

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When should children learn to read?

Parents can start creating an environment which values literacy and encourages reading when their child is an infant. Encourage your child to try out and practice pre-reading skills through their toddler and preschool years. But, before age 5 or 6, *don't insist* that they read, and *don't worry* if they can't read. If you create a literacy-rich world, some children may learn to read at age 3. But most don't. This doesn't mean that they're delayed – it may just mean they're focusing attention elsewhere now. Maybe they're working on motor skills or social skills which are really important things to learn at this age as a foundation for their future. And they will catch up in reading. By age 8, kids who didn't learn to read till they were 6 are just as skilled at reading as the children who learned at age 3.

Be relaxed about reading. Treat it as a fun social activity, not something your child *must* succeed at.

If you are curious about whether your child is on track, and what you can do to help, check these screening tools: www.readingbrightstart.org/reading-screener/ is for children age 3 – 5. For 4 year olds, use https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/2014/t2k_screeningtool.pdf.

If your child is five or older, and not yet reading, you will want to start focusing more actively on teaching them how to read. There are great resources at readingrockets.org/helping-all-readers

The Motivation to Read

Early literacy should be focused on creating an environment where books are so cool and the ability to read is so amazing that your child just can't wait to learn how. Here are some things we can do:

- Model how powerful reading is.
 - When they want to learn how to do something, instead of just telling them, look up instructions (in a cookbook, on the web, in an appliance manual...) and read the instructions to them. If they ask questions, look up the answers. This shows that whenever we want to learn anything new, we can read about it.
 - Point out the words that are all around us – signs, menus, etc. They help us know which way to go, what we can choose to eat, and so on.
- Model reading as something that you yourself do for pleasure. Whether you read books, magazines, Facebook, or blogs on your tablet, let your child see you enjoying reading.
- Literacy is a social process, which happens in the context of relationships with family, caretakers and teachers. There's a wonderful connection that happens you snuggle up with a book: give your child your full attention, and enjoy sharing an experience together.

When and where to read

Don't just save books for in the bedroom at bedtime. Have them scattered around the house, in the car, and so on. Share books every day – at breakfast, naptime, the grocery store, the doctor's office, when you arrive at a class or meeting early... show that we can always enjoy a book!

It's OK to read for just a few minutes at a time – don't worry if they just flip through several books quickly or glance at one, then want to run off to play. On the other hand, if they want to read a book slowly, lingering over one page, going back to it over and over, don't feel like you need to rush them.

How to read

- Run your finger along the words as you read.
- Define new words, explain new ideas.
- Talk about the pictures, point out familiar things (“he has a toy train just like you do”)
- Use different voices for characters; read at different speeds (some books are slow and gentle, others fast and rollicking); play up emotional tone: are characters happy? Scared? Silly? Mad?
- Ask questions about what’s happening in the story. Begin with the concrete things they can see evidence of on the page. As they get older, get more abstract - how does the character feel? What were they hoping would happen? What do you think might happen next?
- Books can serve as a conversation starter. Beyond what’s on the page, ask about other things in the book, or help your child connect what’s in the book to her everyday experiences.
- It’s OK if kids wander around while you read – they can still listen while moving.

What kind of books do kids love?

Younger children love “mirrors” - books about things they encounter in their everyday world. Pets like theirs, food they eat, toys they play with. They like stories which relate to their lives, and characters who are like them and the people they know. Choose books with rhythm, rhyme and repetition.

Older children like “windows” to learn about new things outside of their world: dinosaurs, trains, planets, fairies and people who are like them in some ways and different in other ways. They are able to enjoy longer stories, and stories about things outside their daily experience. Follow their interests. Read books they enjoy about things they care about. Don’t worry whether it’s “classic literature.”

Aim for a mix of familiar books and fresh ones – kids love to hear the same book over and over - the familiar is comforting and repetition helps them learn. New books introduce new ideas and new things to fall in love with. At any reading session, offer multiple books and let them choose.

When you read to your child, make it fun! Choose books *you* will enjoy reading!

Other ways to help them learn about reading and writing

- Make books together – make photo albums, or cut pictures out of magazines. Or have them dictate a story – they tell it, you write it out, then they can illustrate the pages.
- Practice writing, drawing, painting, writing with a stick in the sand or the mud. Make letters with play dough or pipe cleaners. Have them work with puzzles made of letter shapes.
- Act out stories that you have read or made up, or do puppet shows.
- Sing songs and play rhyming games – these slow language down so it’s easier to understand, and are easy to memorize. Later, try memorizing a story and telling it over and over.
- If your child uses electronics, look for apps that build literacy skills. For recommendations: <https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/ed-tech-and-digital-media/articles/how-find-quality-apps-children> and www.commonsemmedia.org/lists/reading-apps-games-and-websites
- Visit the library often. Make it a special time in your week’s schedule.
- Take them to story time. <https://www.peps.org/ParentResources/by-topic/early-learning/why-story-time-rocks>

Resources:

Collection of fabulous articles on building literacy skills at <https://www.readingrockets.org/reading-101>

Book recommendations <https://tinyurl.com/8bc8ct2e>. A collection of videos of children’s songs and rhymes: <https://kcls.org/content/>

Learn to use the King County library: <https://gooddayswithkids.com/using-the-king-county-library/>