

Get a head start on learning with a trip to the library

In this day of computers, electronic teaching toys, and educational DVDs, the public library may seem too old-fashioned to be useful to parents of young children—but nothing could be further from the truth. Just as bookstores have evolved to keep pace with our lifestyles and interests, local libraries have changed to meet the needs of today's families. Few places offer the resources and expertise to help us introduce our youngest learners to the exciting world of reading.

A kid-friendly place

At a glance, young children and libraries seem an unlikely match. As parents know too well, young children are not generally "library" quiet and calm. So why would parents even consider taking their toddlers to the library when there are so many other kid-friendly places to go?

A quick visit of the websites of the region's public libraries reveals that today's libraries are no longer hushed places where young children are likely to be considered a disturbance. In fact, libraries are designed to meet the needs of all ages—including the very youngest.

Walk through a library and look for the children's room. There you'll find child-sized chairs, comfortable nooks, puzzles, games, and age-appropriate books. This generation of libraries has made real efforts to make the children's room a friendly, appealing space.

Opening the door to the world of reading

Reading to young children is essential to their education. Books give children a chance to learn about this amazing world. You find yourself talking with the children about many topics that don't usually come up in daily conversation. This adds to their knowledge and improves their vocabulary.

They also learn about how to read. These pre-reading skills include everything from how to hold a book, which ways to turn the pages, even the direction that print is read. Reading to children gives them a chance to listen to rhythm and rhyme of words. This will help children learn phonics, which is the connection between letters and sounds. All of these skills will help the children in your care become successful readers.

And the library is a perfect place to find a vast assortment of age-appropriate books that can start your child on the path to becoming well-read and ready-to-learn.

Even for the youngest children, a library visit is a wonderful way to introduce them to the world of literature. Activities as simple as letting children look around, touch the books, and play with a puzzle or two teach them that the library is fun and exciting—long before they know what reading is all about.

What you'll find

For a lot of children, their first visit to the library is for a story time. When it comes to jump starting a child's preschool education, these cannot be beat. Most libraries offer at least some, if not all, of the following types of programs:

Babies (under age 2) – Programs for babies include simple books, rhymes, songs, and finger plays as ways to familiarize children and their families with how much fun the library can be.

Toddlers (ages 2-3) – Toddler story times are generally based on themes familiar to young children such as families or animals. They include stories, songs, finger plays, simple crafts, and short literature-based videos. Toddler story times are a great place for children to learn to follow instructions from someone other than a parent or caretaker. They let the children be part of a group of children their own age, and develop a sense of what types of books they like and do not like. Parents benefit by learning about age-appropriate literature and activities they can do at home with their child.

Preschool (ages 3-5) – These programs build on what a child will have experienced at toddler story times. They usually include longer or more detailed stories, songs, and crafts. Besides being fun, these activities at the preschool level help teach children how to take turns, share, and raise hands to ask and answer questions—all skills they will need for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.

The wonderful world of books and more...

Here are some tips from the American Library Association on using the library to introduce your child to the wonderful world of books.

- Take your child to the library often. Introduce him/her to the children's librarian.
- Take your child to story hours, even if he/she won't sit through an entire program. Let him/her wander through the stacks and feel good about being there.
- As soon as your child is old enough, have him/her register for his/her own library card. Make it a special event. Call grandma and grandpa or another special person to tell them the big news.
- Let your child check out what interests him/her, not just what you think he/she should read.
- Remind your child when it's time to return the books (this is a great way to teach responsibility early on). An easy way to keep track of the due dates is to mark it on the calendar as soon as you bring new books home.
- Make a special place for your child's books and library books - a bottom bookshelf or basket on the floor where he/she can reach them when he/she wants.
- Display books and magazines prominently in your home so they become a part of everyday life.

- Take your child to plays, puppet shows, musical performances and other live entertainment. Programs like these are offered by many libraries to stimulate the minds and imaginations of young children.
- Burn your child's favorite stories on CDs to play in the car or when you aren't around. Or borrow CDs of popular children's books, songs and nursery rhymes from the library.

Something for everyone

In addition to books, the children's section of the library generally includes a variety of magazines, pamphlets and DVDs on parenting. There are also children's DVDs (*Be careful of DVDs; they offer little opportunity for children to interact and genuinely learn.*), CDs, and games to borrow. Librarians are on hand who can readily answer questions and suggest good books to share with young children.

People seem to have forgotten that a public library can be a great resource. Its shelves are filled with a wide range of children's books, some that are certain to appeal to any child. If something is not on the shelves, most libraries are a part of a service that shares books between libraries—chances are your library can get what you need. The library's programs are presented by professional staff, often featuring child educators or child entertainers—and programs are usually free or at a nominal cost. If you are not certain if the local library is for you and your child, check out its Website or better yet, stop in, look around, and ask questions. You may be surprised by all your public library offers. All it takes is a library card to get it all started.

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Suggestions for reading to babies, toddlers, and preschoolers

- It's never too soon to begin reading. Even if babies can't understand the words, babies love books. Babies develop eye muscles by looking at pictures and will learn many words as you read.
- Toddlers are on the go most of the time, but most are eager for a short story time. If your toddler brings you a book, take time to sit down and read or arrange a time with your child to read it later.
- Preschoolers have longer attention spans than toddlers and may be able to sit still and listen to a complete story. It is also common for preschoolers to be interested in the letters and words on the page and to point to a word and ask what it says.
- Choosing books—For babies, choose books with large, simple pictures and bold colors with high contrast. Choose books with great rhymes; babies and toddlers love the rhythm and rhyme of a simple book. Toddlers love short stories about daily life such as washing and dressing, eating, sleeping, and animals. Preschoolers enjoy both storybooks (fiction) and real life books (nonfiction).

Offer plenty of books with rhymes; they help build children's understanding of phonics. Above all choose something that interests them.

- With babies and toddlers, begin by pointing at the pictures and saying the name. As children become more verbal, you can begin to ask the child to name things. Show your delight when your child names the pictures they see in the book. You can also simply read the words. Children enjoy hearing the rhythm and sound of the language washing over them, even if they don't understand the meaning of all of the words.
- With preschoolers, take time to look at the book's cover and ask your child to guess what the story will be about. When finished, ask open-ended questions such as "What might have happened in the story if it did not rain on the picnic?" or "Why do you think he did that?" With familiar stories or rhyming stories, see if the child can join in or finish the sentence.
- When you are reading to older preschoolers, try running your finger under the words as you read them. This helps children practice following the words with their eyes and introduces children to words, sentences, and punctuation.
- Ask your child to tell the story back to you. This is a great way to see what the child has understood or misunderstood. Discuss what you liked and didn't like about the story.
- Above all, don't worry if things don't go smoothly. The most important thing is to spend that time together sharing the joy of a good book.