

Pre-literacy skills prepare youngsters for success

Today's toddlers are expected to have a wide range of pre-literacy skills already under their belts when they enter kindergarten. But how, exactly, are parents supposed to ensure that their little ones are getting the right pre-education they need before entering school?

Although it may seem mystifying at first, parents can use every-day activities to help their children learn basic skills—including identifying letters, numbers, and shapes—as well as more advanced skills in carrying on conversations, knowing how to interpret sounds and understanding common print concepts (e.g., that we read words from left-to-right and top-to-bottom of a page.)

Starting early

Literacy education starts the day your child is born. Experts say that parents should be reading and talking to their infants every day. Babies can understand language long before they are able to talk. Talk to your baby often about what he is seeing, hearing, feeling, and doing. Imitate your baby's sounds and smiles to encourage early conversation.

“Having your infant hear you speak and make sounds helps him learn to develop speech patterns,” says a speech pathologist. “Parents can talk to their babies about what they are cooking for dinner or any other daily activities. They also can read them the newspaper or magazine.”

Once your child starts to focus on the world around him and begins to make verbal sounds, it's time to choose books in his or her age range—simple pictures and text. It can be confusing and even discouraging for a little one to try to focus on too many objects on a page. A good guide to remember is:

- Cloth or board books with animal sounds are ideal for babies as they are often easier for a child to attempt to imitate than “real” words;
- Simple books with a single word on each page are great for toddlers; and
- Books with lots of predictable and repeated short sentences or phrases are easier for preschoolers follow.

When reading to your child, try to engage him in the reading process. For example, point to objects in the book and name them; change your voice as you read aloud and make the sounds of the animals the baby see in the book. Ask your baby questions about what's happening on the page, such as, “Where is the duck?” Pause, point, and answer for baby, “Oh, there's the duck!”

“In addition to educating a child, books also entertain,” says a media specialist. “By ensuring that your child's literacy and reading skills are sound, you're not just giving them the key to academic achievement, you are also giving them the lifelong gift of gaining endless pleasure from literature.”

Six pre-literacy skills your child needs

Reading—and reading often—to your child from a young age is one of the best ways to incorporate literacy into her life. A panel of reading experts determined that there are six specific early literacy skills that form the building blocks for reading and writing. And, research indicates that children who enter school with more of these skills are better able to benefit from the reading instruction they receive when they arrive at school.

1. **Vocabulary.** Most children enter school knowing between 3,000 and 5,000 words. Knowing the names of things is an extremely important skill for children to have when they are learning to read. It helps them make a connection with the object and the letters used to spell the object. Help develop your child's vocabulary by reading a variety of books with him, both fiction and nonfiction, and by naming objects in your child's world that you and he may encounter throughout the day. While naming these objects, explain that there are other names for the same things. For instance, if you are playing toy cars with him you could explain that "vehicles" and "automobiles" are other words that can be used for the word "car."
2. **Print Motivation.** This is a child's interest in and enjoyment of books. A child with print motivation enjoys being read to, plays with books, pretends to read books to you or younger siblings, pretends to write, asks to be read to, and likes to take trips to the library to discover new books. Parents can encourage print motivation by making reading a special event (e.g., the whole family sits down to listen to a book that each child and parent has selected for shared-reading time), letting your children see that you enjoy reading (cookbooks, novels, the newspaper, magazines, etc.), and keeping books accessible to children (in baskets on the floor, on the bottom shelf of a bookcase, and in bags in the car.) "I have a basket of children's books and magazines in every room of the house, including the kitchen and bathrooms," says the mother of a four-year-old and one-year-old. "No matter what room we are in we are always within reach of a stack of books."
3. **Print Awareness.** This includes learning that writing in English follows such basic rules as text flowing from top-to-bottom and left-to-right of a page, and that the print on the page is what is being read by someone who knows how to read. An example of print awareness is a child's ability to point to the words on the page of a book. You can help sharpen a child's print awareness skills by pointing out and reading words everywhere you see them—on signs, labels, at the grocery store/farmer's market, post office, etc.
4. **Narrative Skills.** This is when a child is able to understand and tell stories, and describe things he sees. Having these skills is important so that children can understand what they are learning to read. An example of a narrative skill is a child's ability to tell, with a fair

amount of detail, what happened during a recent birthday party, a trip to an indoor play arena, or while playing with friends. Help your child strengthen her narrative skills by asking her to tell you about the book you are reading to her, instead of having her just listen to you read. Also encourage your child to tell you about things he has done that have a regular sequence to them. For example, before it's time for bed, ask him to tell you about what he needs to do (i.e., brush teeth, wash face, go to the bathroom, get undressed, put on pajamas, put dirty clothes in the hamper, pick out a bedtime story). "Narrative skills also teach your child how to converse because they are learning to ask and answer questions and to elaborate upon answers in a sequential way," adds an early childhood education expert.

5. **Letter Knowledge.** This means learning that letters have names and are different from each other, and that specific sounds go with specific letters. An example is a child's ability to say the name of the letter "B" and what sound it makes. Letter knowledge can be developed by using a variety of fun reading and writing activities such as pointing out and naming letters in alphabet books and on signs, playing with alphabet refrigerator magnets, and tracing letters in a workbook or on a dry erase board. For babies, talk about shapes of things (i.e., a plate is round, a piece of bread is square, etc.), and for preschoolers, try drawing letters and simple pictures (sailboat, stick dog, balloon) in the sand and explain what you are drawing.
6. **Phonological Awareness.** This is the ability to hear and manipulate the smaller sounds in a word. It includes the ability to hear and create rhymes, to say words with sounds or pieces left out, and the ability to put two word pieces together to make a word. Most children who have difficulty reading have trouble in phonological awareness. Playing fun word games with your child can help improve her phonological awareness skills. For example, make up silly words by changing the first sound in a word—change cup to gup, lup, nup, rup. Also try saying words with a pause between the syllables ("rabb" and "it") and have your child guess what word you said. Also, read your child stories with rhymes (traditional Mother Goose stories) or books with unusual words (Dr. Seuss books are great!).

Help your child get ready to read

Here are a few things you and your little one can do together to foster a love of books, reading, and learning:

- Visit your local library's free story hours for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers.
- Talk, sing, and tell stories to infants and young children throughout the day. Use short, simple sentences.
- Encourage your children to talk to you about their day, or about anything.

- Read books with your children for at least 10 minutes a day, beginning at infancy.
- Limit television time to less than two hours a day for children ages two and older. Children younger than two years old should not be watching television. (Recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics.)
- Keep your children's book accessible—on low shelves, in baskets on the floor.
- Be a good role model. Read in front of your children (cookbooks, newspapers, novels, magazines), and explain how reading and writing help you to get things done every day.
- Choose childcare providers who understand the importance of reading and talking to children.

Recommended Reading

(Adapted from Amazon.com editorial reviews)

For Babies

Baby Animal Kisses (a touch and feel book) by Barney Stalzburg. What would it feel like to kiss a fuzzy panda cub? Curious babies can find out in this book. Each brightly and simply illustrated page presents a baby animal, including a silky seal pup, a hairy gorilla infant, and a wrinkly elephant calf, each with a textured spot for toddlers to feel and, most likely, kiss.

Fuzzy Bee and Friends (a cloth book) by Roger Priddy. This book is ideal for babies because of the textured fabrics, cloth flaps and tags, and bright colors which help to develop a child's sensory awareness. Additionally, the rhyming text helps little ones improve their listening skills.

For Toddlers

Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown. This wonderful children's bedtime book offers a short poem of goodnight wishes from a young rabbit preparing for—or attempting to postpone—going to sleep. He says goodnight to every object in sight and within earshot. Children will likely enjoy looking through the illustrations to find all the objects the rabbit says goodnight to.

Toes, Ears, and Nose (a lift-the-flap book) by Marion Dane Bauer. This cheerful book is an introduction to various body parts, with fingers behind mitten and toes inside boots. A multicultural crew of children with playful expressions on their faces are dressed in brightly colored outfits that conceal various body parts. The child-appealing language and striking artwork will fascinate children, not to mention that little ones will love to point to their own body parts.

Preschoolers

Chicka Chicka Boom Boom by Bill Martin, Jr. The 26 characters in this rhythmic, rhyming baby book are a lowercase alphabet with attitude. "A told b, and b told c, I'll meet you at the top of the coconut tree." The chunky block illustrations show the luxuriant green palm standing straight

and tall on the first page, but it begins to groan and bend under its alphabetical burden. First the coconuts fall off, then ("Chicka chicka... BOOM! BOOM!") all the letters also end up in a big heap underneath. This nonsense verse delights with its deceptively simple narrative and with the repetition of such catchy phrases as "skit skat skoodle doot." Children will revel in seeing the familiar alphabet transported into this madcap adventure.

Llama Llama Red Pajama by Anna Dewdney. With its sweet rendering of the trials of bedtime and separation anxiety, this book's familiar theme will be a hit with youngsters. This story has a simple rhyme scheme, using natural language that children will enjoy. The large, boldly colored pictures capture children's attention, and the contrast between light and dark enhances the drama in the story. Before long, your child will be reciting the verses with you.