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Early Literacy and Reading Aloud to Your Child

Why read a book to an infant who does not yet know the meaning of a word and would rather gnaw on the book's spine? Listening begins well before speaking. Reading aloud stimulates the growth of a baby's brain, and 90% of human brain development takes place in the first five years. This is why early literacy, the reading and writing behavior which takes place between birth and when children typically read and write, is of utmost importance.

Recent studies show that reading aloud regularly to a child from infancy is the most important factor in building a foundation for enjoyment and success in reading. Children who are read to develop background knowledge of a range of topics and build a large vocabulary, which later assists in reading comprehension and development of reading strategies. They become familiar with rich language patterns and gain an understanding of what written language sounds like. Reading aloud to children helps them associate reading with pleasure and encourages them to seek out opportunities to read on their own.

Research shows that a primary indicator of school success is the child's vocabulary upon entering kindergarten. The words a child already knows determines how much of what the teacher says will be understood. Regular family conversation takes care of the basic vocabulary and reading to your child greatly expands upon that vocabulary. Surprisingly, the vocabulary of children's books is three times richer than parent-child conversation.

An added benefit of reading aloud is the development of your child's patience, attention span and ability to listen – all of which are learned behaviors and skills strengthened with practice. It is only minute by minute, page by page, and day by day that these develop.

Children “learn to read” to “read to learn.” However, it is not until around 3rd grade that children's reading comprehension is strong enough that they can really “read to learn.” It is therefore important to read aloud to your child until at least the 3rd grade.

Reading with your child not only stimulates development of your child's brain, but also deepens the relationship between you and your child through a meaningful shared experience.

Early Literacy and Reading Aloud to Your Child (continued)

Here are some tips on reading aloud to your child:

- Choose books that are good quality and rich in vocabulary – ones that will stimulate your child’s emotions, mind, and imagination, stories that will stay with your child for years to come. Make sure they are developmentally-appropriate – not too easy but not too advanced.
- Read books with a variety of subject matters, genres, and illustrative styles. A balanced read-aloud diet will give your child an appreciation for the many different kinds of texts. Wander over to the non-fiction and folktales sections of the library.
- Reread favorite stories. This will allow your child to focus on unique features of a story and reinforce previous understandings.
- Share your own reading. Point out an interesting caption to a photo in the newspaper, read aloud a recipe that your child might enjoy.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage discussion and help your child focus on details of a book. For example, look at the cover together and ask, “What do you think this story is about?” Point to the pictures and talk about them. Comment on the story and relate it to your child’s personal experiences: “Have you ever felt like...”
- Occasionally point to the words while reading. This will help your child see that there are spaces between words, that you read from the top of the page to the bottom, and that you read from left to right.
- Read expressively. Talk as the characters would talk, make sound effects, make expressions with your face and hands, and vary the pitch of your voice.
- Read slowly enough for your child to build mental pictures of what is heard.
- End the reading session if your child becomes restless or fussy; avoid forcing a reluctant listener. The goal is to have fun.

For more information, an excellent resource is “The Read-Aloud Handbook” by Jim Trelease. This classic handbook on reading aloud to children has been in publication since 1979 and is now in its sixth edition.

This article is written by Kathy Balch, founder of BookTree, a children's book-lending service that is available at a growing base of pre-schools, corporations, and neighborhood centers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The BookTree service is designed to expose young children to a wide variety of writing and illustrative styles, concepts, and story themes. Each monthly set of ten books balances fiction vs. non-fiction, stories vs. concepts, authors/illustrators, and breadth of subject matter. Sophistication levels range from infant up to about age 7, making it possible to meet the needs of a child as he or she grows. Founded in 2004 and headquartered in Daly City, California, BookTree LLC is a privately held company. Please visit www.booktree.us.