

ages and stages



Teach Reading Readiness from Birth

by Rasheda K.H. Williams

Chances are your child will not be reading Shakespeare at age 2. Most children usually don't begin to read before age 5 or so. Researchers believe that until that age, most children have not yet formed certain neural connections that allow them to decode printed letters and then mentally combine them to make words. A few children are able to read earlier, but most of them just pick it up; they don't learn through direct instruction.

The key to reading readiness during the toddler years is indirect instruction: this involves introducing your child to books and print in a way that gets him excited about the stories they contain. Basically, your job is to show him that books are important and fun.

"As a parent, you are your child's first teacher and it is important to begin exposing them to books at a young age," says Dr. Mary Mokris, reading specialist for Kumon Math and Reading Centers.

Initially, learning to read is more auditory than visual. It is the joy of hearing your voice. The more you talk to your child, read books to her, sing songs and play auditory games like rhyming, the more familiar she will become with words.

As early as 6 months, babies enjoy looking at simple board books with pictures and labels. Between the ages of 1 and 2, repetitive and rhyming books are most likely to capture your child's interest, and between 2 and 3, he'll begin to enjoy books with more text and simple story lines.

Alphabet books can help toddlers learn to isolate letters within a stream of print, and many children can identify their own name by the time they're 3. A lot of toddlers can also identify the signs and logos they see around them. You may groan inwardly when your toddler chirps "McDonald's!" as you pass the Golden Arches, or asks for ice cream when you pass his favorite ice cream parlor, but this is an important step in learning to read — it shows he understands that written words represent things and ideas. If your toddler's listening to stories and looking at books and has some concept that printed words include letters, he's well on his way to learning how to read.



According to education experts, some literacy skills should be taught way before a child enters the classroom. Mokris says that before formal classroom instruction, children should develop the following skills:

Book knowledge — Children should understand how to hold a book, where the story begins and ends, that words are read from left to right, that stories are read front to back and that pages are turned one at a time.

Print awareness — Children should understand that the words seen in print and the words heard and said are related and that there's a difference between pictures and words.

Phonemic awareness — Children need to be able to identify the separate, small sounds called phonemes that make words and to associate the sounds with the written words. For example, the word "cat" is made up of three sounds /c/, /a/, /t/. Children who have phonemic awareness can take spoken words apart sound by sound and put together sounds to make words. This skill is required for learning to read.

Parents play a key role in ensuring their child is prepared for formal reading instruction once they begin school.

Here are three ways parents can help children establish a strong foundation for learning to read:

- 1) Read aloud to your child. Reading aloud is the single best way to support literacy development. It exposes children to language, teaches them about books and helps them start identifying words and their sounds.
- 2) Make reading fun. Point to words, animate your voice and ask children to predict what will happen next. If your child is interested, it aids in their understanding of the story.
- 3) Be a reading role model. Set an example by letting your child see you read. Children who are exposed to active and enthusiastic readers are likely to model this behavior themselves.



Rasheda K.H. Williams is actively involved in literacy programs and women's entrepreneurial groups in Michigan.

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15 minutes each day

An investment that pays
off for a lifetime.

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