

A to Z's of Early Childhood

THE SCIENCE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

R is for Reading

Shared Book Reading with Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

Shared book reading between a caregiver and child has been found to have broad developmental benefits. The interactions that occur during shared book reading support brain development, social-emotional connections, and language and literacy skills. Given the benefits of shared book reading vary across different ages and developmental stages, what and how caregivers read to infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children matters. Research shows many benefits for children's language and literacy skills when caregivers read to them consistently throughout early childhood.

Strategies for Shared Book Reading

Here are four effective strategies for shared book reading.

Strategy 1:

Find books that are age appropriate and interesting.

Finding the right books at the right time encourages positive experiences for infants and young children. Choose books that are relevant to the child's life and meet their interests and abilities.

Strategy 2:

Incorporate shared book reading into daily routines.

Spending time every day in shared book reading can increase early learning and language development, including for infants as young as 6 months of age. For older infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, caregivers can positively respond to children's interests in books and book reading by:

- Engaging in shared book reading several times a day.
- Following the child's lead about how long to read, which books to read, and how they are read.
- Focusing on making book reading an enjoyable experience that leads to positive interactions between the child and those who are sharing the reading experience.

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Strategy 3:

Use strategies that support language learning.

How you read to a child is as important as what you read. Use strategies that foster language development.

Research shows that **naming characters or animals** in books helps engage infants' attention. If books do not have names of characters, making up names can also help engage infants' attention. For example, you could name a picture of a duck "Mr. Waddles."

Follow the child's focus of attention during shared book reading to allow for embedded learning opportunities. For example, if a toddler is looking at a book, sees a red truck, and says, "truck," while pointing to the truck, you can say, "Yes, it's a red truck." This is an opportunity to learn a color name during shared book reading.

Use **"wait time."** When you or the child turns the pages of the book, wait a few seconds to see what the child does or says. Affirm what the child does or says and build on it. For example, if an older infant points to a picture of a duck on a page, you can build on their interest by saying, "Yes, that is a duck. That is Mr. Waddles."

For older toddlers and preschool-age children, **draw connections between what the child is reading and their experiences.** For example, if a child says a character in the book is feeling sad, you might say, "Yes, she is sad. Remember when you lost your toy? Did you feel sad?" These types of back-and-forth interactions are vital for building social-emotional connections and early communication and language skills.

Strategy 4:

Build early literacy skills.

In addition to building language skills, shared book reading can also build early literacy skills. Encouraging toddlers to explore books by holding them or turning pages out of order (according to which pages engage their attention) helps them learn print concepts.

Caregivers might ask older toddlers and preschool-age children to help them identify when words rhyme or sound the same, name letters, and identify what sound a letter makes. For example, a caregiver might say, "Hickory-dickory-dock. The mouse ran up the clock. Listen! Clock-dock. Those words rhyme! What sounds like clock and dock?" These early literacy skills are an important foundation for later literacy success.

What We Are Doing

The Anita Zucker Center and our collaborators work to support families and practitioners to promote language and literacy development in infants and young children.

Shared Book Reading With Toddlers (19-24 mos)

Strategy 1:

Find books that are age appropriate and interesting.

- Introduce short stories with plots.
- Look for books that include humor and rhymes.

Strategy 2:

Incorporate shared book reading into daily routines.

- Read together in the same place around the same time each day (e.g., in the morning, before a nap, or bedtime). Children at this developmental stage find familiar routines especially reassuring and calming.
- Find a quiet and comfortable place to engage in shared book reading routines. Create a small, quiet place near a play area for the child to read alone or with others.
- Allow space for the toddler to wiggle or move during shared reading. Be patient if the child runs away while you read. If you keep reading, they will keep listening, and may come back to hear more.

Strategy 3:

Use strategies that support language learning.

- Be expressive, act out what you read with your face, hands, and voice and encourage the child to copy you.
- Look for ways to connect the child's energy to the story (e.g., asking the child to hop like the rabbit in the book).
- Respond to children's communication. A toddler might be able to name objects with simple sounds, words, or short phrases. For example, they may exclaim "Cow, moo!" when they see a picture of a cow. Expand their answer by saying, "Yes, moo. A cow says 'moo'."

Strategy 4:

Build early literacy skills.

- Encourage the child's growing independence by encouraging the child to turn the pages.
- Pause before you finish a favorite line or phrase in the story to see if the toddler will fill in the final word (e.g., "The wheels on the ___").
- Talk about what is happening in the pictures in the book and ask questions about them (e.g., "Who is climbing the tree?").
- Sing rhymes or simple finger-play songs that go along with pictures in a book (e.g., "Itsy-bitsy Spider" or "Pat-a-Cake") and encourage the child to participate by vocalizing or moving their limbs.