

# Books beyond bedtime



Reading needn't be reserved for the rocking chair. Expose baby to literature throughout the day to reap lifelong learning advantages. **BY LAUREN BROCKMAN**

**B**edtime stories have long been a nightly ritual looked forward to by children and parents alike. But the tender time just before sleep sets in serves as more than an excuse for extra cuddles and calming kisses. As it turns out, a regular reading routine can play a big part in helping baby achieve every parent's dream of a bright future ahead.

## Wake up to reality

"Reading aloud with young children is one of the most effective ways to expose them to enriched language and to encourage specific early literacy skills needed to promote school readiness," suggests a recent policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). It recommends that pediatricians

promote early literacy development from a young age because of the lasting value of the cognitive, social-emotional and language skills reading aloud builds.

"Babies are learning from the moment they're born, learning language, learning about emotional give and take, learning about the world," says Perri Klass, MD, national medical director of Reach Out and Read and contributing author of the AAP's policy statement. From the day

*Reading aloud to a child—pointing to the words, relating the words to pictures and to actual objects in the environment—is one of the best and most important things we can do for our children.*

—Candace Kendle, PharmD, president and co-founder of Read Aloud 15 Minutes

your baby arrives, reading aloud to her can stimulate optimal patterns of brain development and strengthen parent-child relationships.

And that kind of stimulation early on is critical. You see, babies are born with nearly twice as many brain cells as they need. "From birth to about age 3, our brain cells respond to stimuli from our environment and make connections with and across the various lobes of the brain," explains Candace Kendle, PharmD, president and co-founder of Read Aloud 15 Minutes. Every child. Every Parent. Every day., a national campaign promoting the importance of reading from birth. By reading aloud, Kendle says, "You are feeding a child's brain, providing stimuli for building connections between the brain cells and allowing for complex thinking around letters, sounds, colors, dimensions, pictures and everyday objects."

Around age 3, tots begin shedding the excess unused brain cells. So, "If you wait, it's too late," warns Kendle. Research shows that children who miss out on the limited-time opportunity often struggle with reading later on; children who are read to in their infancy and preschool years tend to have higher language skills when they reach school-age and an easier time learning to read on their own.

Without doubt, early exposure to the winning combination of brain-boosting language and interaction that babies glean as they sit on mom's lap and listen to words, rhymes and stories is imperative.

## Play with prose

The significant impact a certain familiarity with Dr. Seuss and his comrades can have on your tiny tot is clear, but the ins and outs of how to ensure your babe is receiving maximum payback may be less so. Should

your reading list consist only of Caldecott Medal winners? Is the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare more likely to secure a college scholarship? Does it matter that your snuggly sack of potatoes couldn't seem less interested? Rest assured



**If you read aloud to a child for 15 minutes every day from birth, you will read more than 450 hours before she enters kindergarten.**

Source: ReadAloud.org

that as long as you're reading aloud and doing so often, "There is no 'right,'" assures Kendle.

Klass agrees: "Reading to a baby should be comfortable for the parent and baby—and even for an older child who comes along and wants to join in. Find a comfortable place to sit, turn off any screens in the vicinity, hold your baby on your lap, and make it a time of cuddling and enjoying one another."

Your time with tomes doesn't have to be a formal affair, and you don't even have to read all the words verbatim. "Point to the pictures," encourages Klass. "Name what you see, and elaborate: *That's a dog. What does a dog say? A dog says woof!*"

Children's literature can be delightful, but there's no need to limit your library. "Find a book, a newspaper, a grocery list, a catalog or anything with words to help you along," suggests Kendle. The words (and pictures) on the page serve to spark the conversation. Once you've read the words, expand on them. Direct baby's attention to the corresponding pictures, or share a memory that relates to the topic



**Creating a predictable routine, like reading after breakfast or before bed, helps your little one learn when to expect story hour. With time, she'll recognize that books follow baths and grow excited for what's coming next.**

at hand. Impromptu reads are a terrific way to expose a child to broad topics, like cooking, space, fashion, cars, gardening and beyond, says Kendle. "The more word-and-picture combinations, the more opportunity for exploring letters, sounds and word meaning."

In fact, one of the key advantages of reading a book (or flier or birthday card) is that it encourages you to use—and therefore introduce baby to—words outside of your normal vocabulary, says Kendle. You don't have to read from the dictionary: This is true of even the simplest books. It's not likely you often talk about lemur

or walruses, for example, but an animal-themed board book will bring them into the conversation, broadening babe's exposure to language.

Remember that reading together is about interacting with your baby, strengthening your bond and piquing her interest in learning through words. "Your voice is the most important voice in your baby's world," says Klass, "and hearing that voice will help your baby start to love books." Go ahead and try on different voices (even if your British accent is rubbish) and incorporate ample inflection. "Once you understand you are nourishing your baby's brain and building brain cells, you feel less foolish," Kendle assures. Besides, baby will mirror your enthusiasm, and you'll soon find her excitement and giggles to be contagious.

### Feast on feedback

You might be doing most of the talking at first, but don't be too quick to think the conversation is completely one-sided. "Even infants will give you feedback," says Klass. "They'll pay attention, respond to the pictures or to your voice and generally let you know that they're engaged."

As your baby grows, she may begin to coo back at you or mimic your facial expressions. Acknowledge her by reciprocating the sounds and faces she makes. When she's old enough to respond, ask



### Rhythm and hues

**"For very young babies, look for books with lullaby rhythms, stories that repeat and soothe," advises Perri Klass, MD. "Rhyming books are wonderful for entertaining children and also help them learn how language works." Colorful picture books with bold illustrations can also be eye-catching for developing eyes. "Talk your way through a picture book, telling your baby about the pictures, naming the world around you."**

her questions, suggests Klass, like "Where's the house? Who lives inside the house?" "Let your baby point, name the pictures and be part of telling the story," she says.

Your little one might also begin to show interest in the book itself by reaching for it or even gnawing on its pages. Switch to sturdier reads, like board books, that allow your literary enthusiast to safely explore them. The more involved she can be in the discovery process, the better.

If you've got a squirmer on your hands, there's no need to confine your busy bookworm to your lap. "Reading can also be done while children play," notes Kendle. "Not all children can sit easily when you first start reading. Let them play with toys, games and other books, [allowing them to] reach out to you when they hear something interesting."

Regardless of how the plot of your story-time unfolds, let baby write the ending. "Follow your baby's cues," advises Klass. "If she's having a wonderful time, go on reading; if she's had enough, try something else, and maybe read again later." The key is to make it a frequent and familiar part of baby's day. "As she grows, she is likely to want more reading—in part because she will learn to love the books and in part because more reading means more of you."

P&N

### WHAT BABIES WANT

**According to Reach Out and Read ([reachoutandread.org](http://reachoutandread.org)), little ones like ...**

- board books
- pictures of babies
- rhymes and songs from the same book over and over
- when you point at pictures



**Check out your local library**

It might have been a while since you last visited a library, but the brick-and-mortar book havens still have a lot to offer. Borrow your favorite reads from childhood (and discover new favorites!), or attend a weekly storytime. Your baby will have a chance to interact with other wee ones, and you may even meet some mama friends. Locate the library nearest you at [atyourlibrary.org](http://atyourlibrary.org).