**How to raise a reader**

**by Mary VanClay
Reviewed by the** [**BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board**](http://www.babycenter.com/prkit-advisoryboard) **Last updated: October 2011**

It's never too early {or too late} to steer your child toward books. But for toddlers, the goal is not to make sure they can read the classics before they're out of preschool.

"The phrase to remember is 'developmentally appropriate,'" says Roni Leiderman, associate dean of the Family Center at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. "Parents often come to me wanting to push academics too much, too fast, too soon. In fact, children learn best through play. Make reading a joyous event for them."

There are many developmentally appropriate – and fun – ways to help your little one learn to love books and stories. And, surprisingly, not all of them involve sitting down with an actual book.

**Use books to bond**
"It's not about reading the words," says Leiderman. "At this age it's about learning to love the interaction with Mom, Dad, or a caretaker." When your child sits in your lap as you read aloud, she doesn't just enjoy books, she also enjoys the security of your undivided attention.

**Set up a ritual**
A regular reading time establishes a calming routine young children love – that's why the bedtime story is a time-honored tradition. But don't forget that many other daily events also provide good reading opportunities.

Once in a while try starting a new ritual with a breakfast story, a bathtub story, a just-home-from-daycare story. Some toddlers (and older children) who are heavy sleepers are able to face the day much better when their parents "read them awake" rather than hustle them out of bed.

**Choose appropriate books**
Toddlers love board books, bathtub books, and pop-up books – any type they can hold easily and manipulate on their own. They love stories accompanied by bright, clear, realistic pictures. And of course they love rhymes.

That's not to say your 2-year-old won't appreciate the stories her big brother chooses – who knows, Rocks and Minerals may end up being her favorite book. Just make sure she has access to simpler books as well.

**Repeat, repeat, repeat**
Stifle your yawns if you've read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* every night for the past month and your child still asks to hear it again. [Repetition](http://www.babycenter.com/404_my-child-loves-repetition-hearing-the-same-sounds-and-storie_6891.bc) is a hallmark of the toddler years.

"The reason children love to read the same stories over and over and over again is that they're so thirsty to learn," says Leiderman. You'll soon find that your toddler has memorized his favorite passages and is eager to supply key phrases himself – both signs of increasing reading readiness.

**Ham it up**
Lose your inhibitions when you read to your child. Growl like the Papa Bear in *Goldilocks*, squeak like Piglet in *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

Kids love drama as much as adults do – in fact, your youngster may love to pretend to be the scary wolf in *The Three Little Pigs*. Encourage her, even if it slows the story's progress. She'll get more out of the story if she's participating actively.

**Minimize screen time**
Watching television is passive – that's why doctors recommend that children younger than 2 not watch any TV, and older children limit all screen time to just an hour or two a day.

Children learn best from others, so give your child's brain a boost with unplugged play, like reading. Reading with your child and doing other interactive, unstructured activities are the most effective ways to develop your child's reasoning skills and teach him to think creatively.

**Follow her interests**
Choose books about her favorite activities – visiting the zoo, swimming, playing ball. Back up your kids' favorite videos and TV shows with books about the characters. You may be mystified by the appeal *Barney,* but if your child loves the goofy, purple dinosaur, she'll love the books about his exploits as well.

Follow her lead, but do experiment with a wide variety of books before you decide you know exactly what your child will like. Your little girl who loves dress-up and dolls may, to your surprise, also be the one who asks to hear *Godzilla Likes to Roar* or *Monster Bugs* over and over.

**Go to the library**
Even babies like library story hours, and they're wonderful adventures for toddlers. Your child may well discover a new favorite when it's presented by a beguiling librarian with a soothing voice and perhaps some pictures or puppets to illustrate the action. And, of course, libraries let parents – and kids – try out countless stories without spending a bundle.

**Push play**
Many wonderful books exist in MP3 format or on CD. Your toddler may not be interested in them because what he really likes about books is the interaction with you, says pediatrician Laura Jana, a national trainer for Reach Out and Read.

But if your toddler does happen to like them, great. He may want to sit with the picture book while he listens to the recording, or you may want to put it on while the two of you do other things. You could also record yourself – or another relative or friend – reading stories.

Just remember, says Jana, that recorded stories can't take the place of sitting down together.

**Don't make books a reward**
Don't tell your child she can listen to a story if she finishes her dinner. When reading is associated with systems of reward and punishment, it isn't a positive experience. Instead, pick times to read that feel natural, such as when you want your toddler to quiet down before her nap.

**Dealing with the wigglers**
Some wiggly youngsters just won't sit still through all of *Blueberries for Sal*. What to do?

"Sit down and leaf through something short for just 30 seconds, and then say, 'Wow, we read this whole book!' Then let them go," says Leiderman.

The next day you can try a little longer session. "Some children will always be more interested in motor activities than in reading," she says. "Respect that, and don't make reading a negative experience."

**Make storytelling a part of life**
"Promoting reading readiness is more than reading a traditional book," says Leiderman. While you're at the dinner table or in the car, tell stories – standards like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, anecdotes from your own childhood, or stories that feature your child as the central character. Make books of your child's drawings or favorite photos, and tell stories about them – or ask him to be the narrator.

**Point out words everywhere**
Wherever you go, you can show your child that words are an important part of everyday life. Even the youngest toddlers quickly learn, for example, that traffic signs say STOP.

Vinyl alphabet wall decals are staples in many homes. Other families label objects around the house, such as the shelves that house BLOCKS, DOLLS, and other toys.

If your child is in daycare or preschool, slip a daily note into her lunchbox. Even if she can't yet read CAT, seeing the word printed on a piece of paper, along with a drawing or sticker of a cute kitten, will be a high point in her day and help excite her interest in reading.

If this seems too ambitious, try drawing a heart or smiley face with a simple "I love you," which will help get your toddler excited about the meaning behind words.

**Talk**
Children learn words more easily when they hear them often. Engage your child in conversation while eating dinner together, on walks, during car trips – whenever you can.

Talk with your toddler, and don't be afraid to use complex words and phrases. Encourage his questions and explanations. Toddlers are curious and wonder endlessly about the world, so don't be shy about trying to explore his interests with him.

**Demonstrate your own love of books**
Your child wants to imitate you. If she sees books all around the house and knows that you like to settle down with one whenever you have a moment to yourself, she'll learn that books are essential to daily life. Modeling your own love of reading is more powerful than making your child sit through a rigid story time.

**Books for you**
Numerous books have been written for parents who want to nourish a love of reading. Try Jim Trelease's *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, E.D. Hirsch's *Books to Build On*, Elizabeth Wilson's *Books Children Love*, and Bernice Cullinan's *Read to Me: Raising Kids Who Love to Read*.