



Early Reading: Help Your Child to Love Reading

Reading specialist Alison Kelly explains how you can help your child to learn to read – and to learn to love reading.

Start early

The most important step in helping your child to become a 'reader' is to share books with them from a very young age, says Alison Kelly, a leading expert in the teaching of reading and a lecturer at Roehampton University. "You can't start early enough," she says, "and if you do nothing else, that in itself will stand your child in very good stead when they start to learn to read themselves."

Children start to learn the patterns of speech and language very early in their lives and so sharing a book with them will help children develop early communication skills. It also teaches them about the book itself – how the cover opens, how to turn pages – and these are things that will help to boost their confidence as they begin to learn about the letters themselves.

It also teaches them that stories, and reading, are fun.

Understanding stories

Sharing stories with children helps them to learn how a story 'works', says Kelly. "They learn the structure of a story and that 'something happens'. They also learn how characters speak and begin to understand a book's language." This, again, will help build children's confidence for when they start writing and speaking their own stories.

Understanding letters

While you are sharing stories with children, they are also starting to learn the shapes of letters and will begin to pick out letters – perhaps the ones that their name starts with. At the same time, they are learning how language itself is constructed.

Sharing rhymes and songs with children is a wonderful way to help their language develop. It helps them to 'tune in' to how language is constructed and they will need to recognise these sounds later on, when they start to learn phonics.

The world around you

Children are very responsive to the environment around them at this age. You can help them to learn from their surroundings by encouraging them to spot letters in signposts or identify words or letters on cereal packets, for example.

Beginning school

Schools will have their own policies about how parents can support their child's reading at home. Parents will, hopefully, receive clear guidance from the school about how to share books and how to lead a child through the reading process. Do try to set aside time each day to help your child develop their reading skills and to go over what they have learned at school.

Sharing books at home

The most important thing to remember, says Kelly, is to keep sharing books and stories with your child while they are learning to read at school. "Reading aloud with your child should never stop. Keep those bedtime stories going – they will remind your child that reading is for enjoyment and also help your child to develop his or her awareness of stories and language."

Sound games

You can support a child's understanding of phonics by playing 'sound' games with them at home, like 'I Spy', or make actual games where they need to match words up. "It has to be fun," Kelly adds. "It should never get too heavy. The school will be teaching the child the sounds of letters and words, the parents' job is to build pleasure in reading."

Varied reading

Ensure that your child is introduced to different types of books at this stage. Series like the Usborne Reading Programme, which offers more than 200 fiction and non-fiction titles graded in seven levels, can offer this variety. Traditional stories and fairy tales sit alongside books about the Olympics and Robin Hood.

Talk about stories

"Reading books that are distinct from the guided reading programmes that children do at school is very important," says Kelly. "You also need to talk about the stories they are reading or, if they are more stimulated by computers, then share what they are reading on computer games, or use email with them." This helps to give children the message that you are interested in what they are reading and talking about, and doesn't leave a child on their own, struggling with reading and the book they've brought home from school.

'Real' writing

Developing links between what they are learning to read and write and why it matters in the 'real world' is also a good way to encourage them to want to learn to read. "Children should be engaged in reading and writing for real purposes, like writing the shopping list or signing a card for gran. As a child writes, their reading skills are also developing. Don't worry about spelling at this stage."

Make a book

Other ways to encourage them to develop their early writing and speaking skills is for them to tell you a story that you write or type out for them. They can draw the pictures for the story and together, you can make the words and pictures into a book.

Books at home

Ideally, you should aim to spend up to 20 minutes a day sharing books and reading with a child at home. You can also build a home library for them, either by borrowing books from the library or buying them. The important thing is that a child has their own shelf of books to choose from. If you look at series of books like the Usborne Reading Programme, they are very collectable, too – and children love to collect things.