

HOW

to read books to babies!

Firstly, I would like to encourage both Mums *and* Dads to read to their babies. Children of all ages *love* to have Dad read to them. Their deep rumbling voices and hilariously funny sound effects are especially appealing to young children! Also, Dads often miss out on many bonding opportunities with their newborn babies, so stories are a beautiful one-on-one treat to share with one another!

Reading with your baby or toddler can occur anytime, anywhere, but pick your moments, reading should never be forced with young children. Sometimes a quiet story (or a silly one!) will settle a restless baby or toddler, other times they will simply be too restless to snuggle up and listen. Many parents make reading a story a wonderful ritual before bed but try not to make that the *only* time you read with them. Here are some useful tips for reading with babies and toddlers:

Remove distractions

First things first, remove as many distractions as possible – turn off the tv, phone, stereo, or radio. This will not only help stop interruptions, but will demonstrate to your baby, how important reading is and how important your time together is. And if that perfect scenario can't happen, won't happen, and will simply never happen, then snatch any moment you can to read to your baby!

Find a comfy spot

Find a quiet and comfortable place to read. Try lying on the bed together, or snuggling up on the couch, or in a bean bag. Whatever works best for you and your baby. For very young babies, get as close as possible. This is a time for snuggling and cuddling. Not only that, but make sure they can hear and *feel* the sound of your voice. The rumbling and vibration of your voice through your body is incredibly comforting for babies!

Book placement

Remember a newborn baby's eyesight is limited so be sure the book is within their range of vision (about 30cm for the first four weeks). As they get older and begin to grasp things, you will need to pull the book further away, or even give them something to hold or chew on while you read. Toddlers *love* to be involved in reading time so get them to help turn the pages, point things out in the pictures, make animal noises, or '*brroom, brroom*' like a car or '*beep beep*' like a truck!

Choose the 'right' story

There are some exceptionally beautiful books written for young children all of which can help with learning. There are literally hundreds of thousands of them and if you have no idea where to begin, then your local library or childcare centre, are a great place to start (I have also included a list of great picture books on my website – www.sarahprince.com.au). Books for babies are usually in soft muted colours, with rounded comforting shapes (not the harsh black and red jagged lines found in books for teenagers!). In baby books there is a minimum of words, accompanied by large, simple images for babies to focus on. If there is too much text babies and toddlers will get bored waiting. The older a child gets, the more complex the words and illustrations become, but for babies, choose simple stories and simple pictures. There are board books and cloth books, even waterproof books for the bath – there's no shortage to choose from!

Take your time

There is no rush. It doesn't matter if you finish the book or not. If your baby becomes restless, you could try changing books or positions, but if that doesn't work, then simply stop. Finishing the book is completely irrelevant. Never force a baby or young child to read with you. Storytime is supposed to be fun and enjoyable, not traumatic!

There is another very important reason not to rush when reading with a young baby – babies need *time* to look, focus on, and comprehend what they're seeing. Read slowly and take time to point things out in the pictures, but then sit quietly and wait while your baby absorbs what they're seeing. You will soon get to know when your baby is ready for the page to be turned. Babies are easily overwhelmed, black and white pictures, or soft, pastel colours allow young babies to focus for a surprisingly long time, but many babies will turn away from bright bold colours. Too much colour and detail is an assault on the senses for a young baby.

Use your voice

Use your voice, eyes, hands and whole face to tell a story. Listen to the *tone* of your voice as you read, ensure it is light-hearted and fun. Make your voice BIG when reading the word 'big', and little when reading the word 'little'! *Emphasise* key words and *exaggerate* your voice and facial expressions.

Point to the words

For the 2 to 4 year-olds, when you read, point to the words as you do so. This will help your child make the connection between sounds, letters, words, and sentences. In other words, one day they will work out that all those black squiggles on the page actually mean something! That they're called *letters*, which all have *sounds*, which joined together make *words*, and words joined together, make *sentences*! By asking questions you develop important thinking skills. With babies, ask and answer questions about the story – '*Where is that cheeky monkey? Look there he is, he's hiding!*', but for toddlers ask questions and wait for their answers, or get them to guess what might happen next, this will develop vital critical thinking skills. '*What will that naughty puppy do next do you think?*'

Talk about the pictures

If the text talks about a box or an elephant, then point to the box or the elephant. Your baby will have no idea what a box or an elephant is of course, but one day they will! If there are animals in the pictures, then make the sounds they make, and make them as funny as possible – Dads are particularly good at sound effects! You could change the story to make it about your baby and their world. Include tickling, singing, dancing and clapping. As your baby gets older they will *love* being involved in the story, get them to point to piggy noses, or elephant ears, then their own noses and ears. Get toddlers to help you read by turning pages; asking them questions (and *waiting* for their answer!); getting them to guess what might happen; and getting them to act like the animal or make the animal noises etc. The more they can interact with the story the better!

Don't worry if you're not a 'good' reader

It doesn't matter whether you are a 'good' at reading or not, or whether you are a slow reader or not – your baby will never know! In fact the slower the better for young children, and just like a child, the more you read, the better you'll be at it. If you're not a confident reader, then talk to your baby, tell them you're both learning together, especially if English is your second language. The important thing is – you're reading and you're doing it together!

Above all – have fun!