

WHY

read books to babies?

Babies are never too young for books and stories (or songs and singing!). You can begin reading right from day one to your newborn baby, in fact, you can start while they're still in the womb! It doesn't matter that they don't understand at first, they soon will, and reading to babies helps develop so many vital skills, it's amazing!

For example, reading books to babies helps:

Brain Development

Our brains, particularly a developing one, are absorbing information *constantly*. They do this through all five senses – touching, tasting, smelling and of course, in the case of books – seeing and hearing. Our brains then form pathways and connections, linking all this complex information together, and hey presto, just like that, we're learning! Reading stories to babies, is like putting them into the fast lane for learning, and the learning lasts a lifetime!

Language Learning

Babies learn language through hearing others talk and having conversations, and by listening to stories. When you're reading to a baby or young child, without knowing it, they are naturally learning how we use language and what it's for. They hear *how* we use words, *which* words we use, and *why*. They learn how sentences are constructed. They learn when and where we pause, stop, change tone, emphasise certain words, how emotions are expressed, and how humour is used.

Speech and Communication Skills

By the time your baby is just a few months old, they have already heard all the sounds they need to learn their native language (or whatever languages are being spoken in your home). By listening to stories and conversations they hear how words and sounds are 'put together'. They hear how words and sentences are constructed, then used to provide information and communicate with one another. Babies watch your mouth and how it moves when you speak and read, and naturally try to copy you, which is of course how they learn to speak.

Vocabulary and 'School Skills'

The more a young child is read to, the more words they hear, and the more words they can then understand. Studies have shown that children who are read to in the early years, have a much larger and more complex vocabulary, than those who aren't. They are more confident speakers, pick up reading and writing skills much easier, do better in school, and are even able to make friends more easily. All these skills then extend into adulthood. Books also introduce children to rare and unusual words, that aren't part of everyday speech. Those who grew up with Beatrix Potter and her flopsy bunnies, will still remember how *soporific* they became, after eating lettuce and lying in the sun!

Understanding and Comprehension

Reading helps babies make connections with the real world and their own experiences. For example, they hear and see the word dog, see the picture of a dog, then see an actual dog – enabling them to make the connection between words, pictures, and the world around them. Reading also helps them understand all sorts of ideas, emotions, different points of view, and surprisingly complex situations.

They can understand why little bear gets jealous when baby bear is born, helping them learn how to deal with their own feelings of jealousy, anger, fear, sadness, or frustration.

Social and Emotional development

When reading to babies and young children it is important to make full use of your voice. Be aware of the *tone* of your voice and how *expressive* it is, *emphasise* key words, demonstrate *emotions*, and *exaggerate* your voice and facial expressions. Reading time should be fun, cuddly, cosy and warm, helping you and your baby build stronger bonds with one another. Such bonds help develop stronger more emotionally stable adults. Books are often about other children and their families, reading about them and seeing how they live, helps build a child's social skills and helps children understand other peoples' points of view, creating tolerance, empathy, and compassion. Story books for children under five, are not just about silly fun things (as many adults tend to think), but are often about overcoming problems, and dealing with difficult emotions, such as loss, anger, or jealousy. All of which help with social and emotional development.

Enhance Observation Skills

Books for young children are usually in the form of illustrated texts or picture books where the words are accompanied by often quite stunning illustrations (see my handout on *Children's Literature* on my website www.sarahprince.com.au for more explanation on the types of books written for young children). When reading to babies and young children it is important to talk about the pictures as well as read the words. Point to the pictures and discuss what you see – ‘*Look at that piggy's nose, it's not like your nose!*’ (then point to your baby's nose). You can also emphasise certain words to increase observation and comprehension skills, for example, ‘*Look how BIG that elephant is, compared to that little mouse!*’

Consolidate Basic Concepts

Books introduce babies to all kinds of basic concepts, helping them to learn about and understand the world they live in. For example, colours, shapes, size, sounds, letters, numbers, patterns, animals, even distance and time. There's simply no end to the learning available in books!

Improve Memory

You will soon discover that even the youngest of babies have their favourite books they like to hear over and over again! Repeating the same stories helps consolidate learning and improves your child's memory, which is vital for later when learning how to read and write. It won't be long before your toddler can repeat entire pages word-for-word and woe betide any tired parent who tries to skip any!

Stimulate imagination and creativity

There is such a vast array of different styles of books available for young children. There are *fact books* in which children can learn about tigers, cars, machines, any number of things from the world around them. There are *fantasy stories* about fairies, unicorns, mermaids and make believe. There are *wordless picture books*, which contain only illustrations, so you and your child make up the story together. There are *interactive books*, where your baby or toddler can lift the flap, to find out the answer. *All books*, whether fact or fiction, help create well rounded, emotionally stable, balanced, happy individuals, and encourage children to think, imagine, dream and invent!

As always with reading – have fun!