

HELPING PRESCHOOL CHILDREN BECOME READERS: TIPS FOR PARENTS



Parents and other family members lay the foundation for reading and writing long before children enter school. To help preschoolers begin to develop these skills at home, parents need to provide two things:

- Experiences with language—having conversations, playing games with language and sounds;
- Experiences with print—reading to children, giving children tools for reading and writing.

Learning to read and write should be pleasurable; it does not require tedious drills or forced memorization. When learning is fun, children develop good attitudes toward schooling as they master valuable skills. Below are 12 things parents can do to make learning enjoyable and meaningful. These ideas build on children's

natural desire to communicate and can easily be included in family routines.

1. Have daily conversations with children.

Listening and speaking are the foundation of reading and writing. When parents converse with children, they should listen patiently, even if it means waiting for children to form their thoughts and words. Adult patience creates a climate in which children feel free to talk.

Children like to talk about themselves, their interests, and their feelings. If parents talk about the things

children care about, children will be eager and natural speakers. There are many things parents can do with their children to encourage conversation, for example:

- Looking at pictures in the family photo album and talking about the people and celebrations;
- Joining children's pretend play, letting the child be the leader;
- Providing materials and sharing the child's favorite activities, such as drawing, building with blocks, racing toy cars, or baking cookies;
- Attending sporting events, going for walks, digging in the yard, making a snow fort, or collecting bugs.

BY ANN S. EPSTEIN

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To help the conversation along, parents can make encouraging comments (“I see you made a red circle!”) and repeat the child’s remarks (“You’re happy because Kyla invited you to her party?”). An occasional open-ended question is fine, especially to seek information (“What are you going to serve at your tea party?”). However, too many questions tend to stifle conversation.

Conversation sets the stage for having fun with language. Singing songs, telling stories, reciting rhymes, and moving to rhythmic chants all help children develop phonological awareness—the ability to perceive the sounds of language. For example, the repeated words in “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” help make children aware of the sounds that make up these words. Nursery rhymes like “Eensy, Weensy Spider” call attention to words with the same ending sound, as does encouraging children to make up new endings to familiar rhymes: “Jack be nimble, Jack be red, Jack jump over the _____.”

When parents point out the individual sounds in words, they promote phonemic awareness. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in the language. It can be the sound made by a single letter, such as /s/, or a letter combination, such as /sh/. Phonemic awareness is knowing that words are

made up of sequences of these individual sounds. Phonics, the next step in learning to read, is knowing sound-letter relationships. For example, a parent might say “*Mommy* and *muffin* . . . those both start with the /m/ sound, that’s the letter m.” If a child asks how to spell *dog*, a parent can say, “It starts with the sound /d/, and the letter d looks like this.” Parents and children can also play games with alliteration, that is, with words that start with the same sound. For example, a parent can put three objects that start with the /b/ sound in a bag (such as a ball, block, and barrette) and the child can find something else that begins with b to put in the bag. Guessing games are also fun: “I’m thinking of something in the refrigerator that starts with the /g/ sound—gggg. What do you think it is?”

2. Keep lots of printed materials and writing materials in the home.

Homes should be filled with interesting things to read, including illustrated storybooks, nonfiction books, homemade books, magazines, photo albums, newspapers, catalogs, seed packets, greeting cards, flyers, takeout menus, manuals, junk mail, maps, and so on. Children, like adults, need variety.

Parents should also keep on hand many different types of writing materials, including crayons, markers, chalk, pens and pencils, paper in different sizes and colors, stationery, stamps and ink pads, wooden and plastic letters for tracing and copying. Tools for making books, such as tape, scissors, staplers, a hole punch, and string, will also encourage writing.

Reading and writing supplies do not need to be expensive. Parents can reuse and recycle materials or buy children’s books at yard sales, resale shops, and used-book sales at the library. They can also add their own printing around the house, such as labels for things the child uses every day (“toy box” or “dishes”). Reading and writing materials should be placed where children can easily see and reach them; for example, on low shelves or in baskets and crates.

3. Set up a reading and writing space for children.

To convey the importance of reading and writing, parents can set up a special space for these activities. It may be a quiet place or somewhere close to the center of action, whatever is most inviting for the child and will keep his or her attention. This space should include materials that belong to the child alone and do not have to be shared with adults or other children in the household. This will encourage the child to think of the area as his or her own play or work space. Parents can offer the child a choice of spending quiet time in this special area instead of taking a nap. Or, they can set aside another regular time each day when the child can choose to go to this area.

12 Things You Can Do to Help Your Preschooler Become a Reader

1. Have daily conversations with your child.
2. Keep lots of print and writing materials in your home.
3. Set up a reading and writing space for your child.
4. Let your child see you read and write.
5. Read with your child every day.
6. Point out reading and writing in everyday activities.
7. Make a message board.
8. Encourage your child to “read.”
9. Display your child’s writing.
10. Make a bank or file of words your child likes to write.
11. Go to the library with your child.
12. Use television and technology wisely.

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4. Let children observe parents reading and writing.

Young children imitate their parents, so modeling reading and writing at home is very important. When parents pick up a newspaper or book instead of turning on the television, they send a powerful message about the pleasure as well as the usefulness of reading. At the dinner table, parents can briefly describe something interesting they have read, or mention some reading and writing they did at work that day. Children should see their parents writing, whether they are paying bills or writing an e-mail message to a friend. If a child wants to know something, a parent might say, “Let’s look that up in the dictionary [or in the encyclopedia or on the Internet].” This shows children that

written sources provide information and that answering questions can be an adventure.

5. Read with children every day.

Parents should set aside a regular time each day to read with their children. This might be at bedtime, after school, early in the morning—whatever works in the family schedule. They should read in a comfortable place, without a lot of distractions, where they can snuggle or sit side by side with their child. Children should be able to see and touch the book while parents read to them. Reading with children will be most beneficial if parents follow these simple techniques:

- Be familiar with the book. If the book is new, parents should try to

read it themselves beforehand.

- Read slowly but naturally. Pronouncing the words carefully helps to build children’s vocabulary.

- Read with interest. An expressive voice shows interest and engages the child.

- Use different voices. This helps children differentiate the characters and their qualities.

- Use a finger to follow the words. This shows the connection between spoken and written words. Children will learn to associate sounds with specific letters and letter combinations.

- Stop reading to talk about the book. Children want to talk about the pictures, story, and characters. If a book is familiar, they might predict what will happen next or imagine

different events and endings.

- **Extend the reading.** Reading is enriched when children represent the events or characters through drawing and play-acting. Other ideas include visiting places and doing things that appear in the book or making up stories and games that build on the book's ideas.

There should be a variety of books to choose from and the child should make the choice, even if it is often the same book. Repetition helps children understand the forms of written language and begin to recognize familiar words and letters. Here are some guidelines to help parents choose storybooks for their young child's library:

- **Illustrations.** Are the drawings, paintings, or photographs visually pleasing? Do the people represent a variety of races, ages, and abilities?

- **Storyline.** Is it written in the language the child speaks? Will the activities and messages make sense to the child? Will it encourage discussion?

- **Child interest.** Will the child be curious about the characters and what happens to them? Will the child look at the book alone, even when an

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adult is not available for reading?

- **Adult interest.** Is it a book the parent wants to read and talk about with the child? Is the parent prepared to answer whatever questions the child may have about the book?

6. Call children's attention to reading and writing in everyday activities.

Children are curious about the daily activities adults view as commonplace. Their natural interest provides many opportunities for parents to call attention to reading and writing. These opportunities include making grocery lists and finding matching coupons; pointing out letters and words on signs and buildings while riding in the car or taking a walk; looking up addresses and phone numbers before going places or making calls; reading maps; reading team names and scores aloud at sporting

events; looking at the weather report in the newspaper; reading menus at restaurants or making up menus at home; writing and illustrating children's favorite recipes; labeling pictures in the family photo album; writing thank-you notes; reading the television guide and making a list of the shows the family will watch; writing and mailing fan letters to children's favorite performers and athletes.

7. Make a message board.

A message board lets children know the family's plans for the day. This can be especially important on weekends, when routines may vary. The message board can be a dry-erase board, a chalk board, or just a pad of paper. The board should be hung at the child's eye level for easy visibility and so the child can add his or her own messages. Each day, the parent and child can draw a few simple pictures and label them with easy words. For example, a picture of a swing on one line and a grocery cart with the word *store* on the next line would indicate they were going to the playground and then the supermarket. Parents should encourage children to predict what will happen based on the picture and word messages. At the same time they are learning to read, children are learning about sequences, an important concept in math.

8. Encourage children to "read."

Young children "read" in many ways. Before they read actual words, children pretend to read. They follow the pictures in a familiar book, tell the story from memory, or make up their own narrative. With lots of exposure to books, they come to understand basic print concepts, such as turning pages from front to back, reading from top to bottom, and following lines from left to right. Parents can promote children's early reading in several ways. They can encourage young children to read to them, to other family members, even to dolls and stuffed animals. As children begin



to write, parents can ask them to read their words. If a child asks the parent to take dictation, either the parent or child can read back the words. It is important for parents to write down the child's exact words. This establishes the direct connection between spoken and written language.

9. Display children's writing.

Parents should display all the different forms of children's writing, including scribble letters and words based on word sounds (for example, *bg* for *big*). They can also take photos of and display temporary writing (for example, made with sticks in the mud or sand on a tray). Writing should be mounted at the child's eye level so it can be easily seen. It can be attached with tape, pins, clips, or any other household fasteners. Display surfaces include the refrigerator, a wall, a bulletin board, a bookcase, the side of a dresser, the front of a kitchen cabinet; sticky notes can be stuck to the computer, papers hung from a mobile, and so on. If other family members comment on the writing, children will have a sense of its importance and of their accomplishment.

10. Make a word bank or word file.

A word bank is an illustrated dictionary or file of words a child uses in talking, reading, and writing. It organizes the words that are important to the child. A word bank can be created with an old recipe box and index cards, or with a looseleaf notebook. Each word is put on a separate card or page, written in large and clear letters. Next to the word, the parent or child draws a picture or pastes a photo or magazine picture that illustrates it. The cards or pages are then placed in alphabetical order. A word bank should be kept in a place where the child can easily reach it and look up words on his or her own. Whenever the child asks for help writing or spelling a word, the parent can refer the child to the existing list or help the child add a new entry to the word bank.

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11. Take children to the library.

Libraries offer books and other reading materials, usually at no cost. Parents should find out where the nearest public library is located or if it sends a bookmobile to their neighborhood. Their child's preschool or daycare center may also have a lending library. Library visits should occur frequently, preferably on a regular schedule. A child should have his or her own library card and a tote bag to carry and store books.

Children can check out books, magazines, cassette tapes, and CDs with stories, information, poems, and songs. They should pick the items that interest them. Parents can point out something they think is interesting, but in the end, the child should make the choice. Children should also be the judge of whether a book is too easy or too hard. Reading or re-reading easy books can build a child's confidence. On the other hand, if a difficult book is interesting enough, the child may be up to the challenge of reading it. If a book is boring or too difficult, a child will simply set it aside and pick up something of greater interest.

Many libraries also have regular story hours and other events for young children. Sometimes they have exhibits; for example, an art show by a local artist. Looking at the exhibit together and talking about it is another good way for parents to help develop their child's language skills.

12. Use television and technology wisely.

Young children learn best by doing, not by watching. Television and computers can play a part in early learning but should not replace active exploration and social interaction. Viewing should be limited to one or two programs a day. Parents should

look for shows that help develop the intellectual and social skills children need when they enter school, and they should watch and talk about these programs with their child. If the family has a computer, parents should buy software designed for young children. Drawing and writing programs that allow children to create and read their own pictures, words, and stories are more interesting and promote a wider range of skills than programs limited to memorization and practice.

Finally, parents should remember that they are not alone in helping their child along the path to literacy. They can talk to their child's teacher, the librarian, and other parents. They can share the books and activities their family enjoys and get others' ideas on how to support children's learning at home. With a parent's encouragement, a child will enter school ready to learn how to read and write. With a parent's example, a child will become an adult who reads for information and pleasure.

To learn more about how parents can help young children become readers and writers, and prepare them for school, see the following materials published by High/Scope Press:

- *Helping Your Preschool Child Become a Reader* (Ann Epstein, \$4.95)
- *You and Your Child* Parent Newsletter Series—12 newsletters on topics important to parents
- *All About High/Scope*—10 fact sheets for parents, policymakers, and practitioners
- *The Essential Parent Workshop Resource* (Michelle Graves, 2000, \$25.95). ✍

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