

How to Raise a Reader

By [Pamela Paul](#) and [Maria Russo](#)

From the moment you're expecting your first child, you are bombarded with messages about the importance of reading. For good reason: The benefits of reading at every stage of a child's development are well documented. Raising a reader is fun, rewarding and relatively easy.

Start Them Early



FIRST, REACQUAINT YOURSELF WITH READING

If you've let reading slide to the margins of your life, now is the time to bring it back. Make the space, and time, for books you read for yourself, and books you read with your child.

If you want to raise a reader, *be* a reader.

BABY BOOKS ARE A NECESSITY

You may think you're off the hook with books until your baby is at least vertical, but not so. Even newborns benefit from the experience of hearing stories (and they can't complain about your taste in books). So take advantage. Here's how:

Read out loud, every day. Any book. You can read anything to a newborn: a cookbook, a dystopian novel, a parenting manual. The content doesn't matter. What does matter is the sound of your voice, the cadence of the text and the words themselves. Research has shown that the number of words an infant is exposed to has a direct impact on language development and literacy.

But here's the catch: **The language has to be live, in person and directed at the child.** Turning on a television, or even an audiobook, doesn't count. Sure, it's good to get started reading aloud the children's books that will be part of your child's library. But don't feel limited. Just be sure to enjoy yourself.

Use your senses. Babies who are read to are learning that reading is fun and can involve all the senses: the feel of the pages, the smell of the glue (don't go crazy), the visuals of the illustrations, the sound of the parent's voice. **Try it:** Texturized books are especially good for your child's tactile experience.

Mind your audience. Make eye contact, but don't look for a particular reaction. It may seem like babies are not listening, but they are absorbing the experience. And the patterns, routines and attentive habits that are set now will last a lifetime.

Get your baby talking. Babies may start making sounds in response to your reading. This is why many books for this age contain nonsense words or animal sounds — they're easier to mimic. **Try it:** If your child make a noise, respond. It may make no sense to you, but it's communication. There's a straight line from this moment to your first parent-child book club.

TODDLERS

It's hard to overestimate how important reading is to a toddler's intellectual, social and emotional development. When you read with toddlers, they take it all in: vocabulary and language structure, numbers and math concepts, colors, shapes, animals, opposites, manners and all kinds of useful information about how the world works. What's more, when you read out loud, **your toddler connects books with the familiar, beloved sound of your voice — and the physical closeness that reading together brings.** You are helping build a positive association with books that will last a lifetime.

Reading happens throughout the day. Nightly bedtime reading is a familiar routine for parents of toddlers — what better way to get your little ball of energy to relax before bed? Make sure the atmosphere is soothing and not rushed, and choose some of the many books that end, strategically, with a peaceful going-to-bed scene (though friskier books about sleep-avoiding children are fun, too). But **read with your toddler during the day, as well.** Offering to read books with toddlers is one of the best ways — some days, it can seem like the only way — to get them to slow down and focus. Sit close, and enjoy these moments of connection while it's still light outside.

Introduce your own taste. You've been reading a long time, and you have a sense of what you like in grown-up books. As a parent, you have the chance to rediscover your taste in children's books. Pull out your old favorites, and find what's new that catches your eye when you're in bookstores, libraries or friends' homes. The good news is that the best authors and illustrators of children's books aim to please their grown-up audience, too. **Try it:** Tweak the text when you're reading out loud. Many classic children's books are now considered sexist, racist, outdated and, in certain ways, downright awful. Feel free to make them better.

Respect your child's preferences. Your child is already surprising you with independent tastes and opinions. Just as your child doesn't like your kale salad, he or she may not appreciate the exquisite black-and-white crosshatching of Robert McCloskey's "Make Way for Ducklings" as much as you did as a child. You may not be all that excited about fairies or talking trucks, but your child might be. Encourage children to express what *they* like about their books, and find more books like those.

The parent-child pas de deux. The more you can make reading mutually satisfying, the more it will be associated with pleasure and reward. If your child doesn't like your silly ogre's voice, don't use it. Remember, it's your child's story time, too. **Try it:** Let your child turn the pages, to control the pace. (It's also great for developing fine motor skills.)

It's O.K. to interrupt. Don't get so caught up in your own reading that you ignore your child's comments and queries. Interruptions show that your child is engaged. **Try it:** If you find yourself saying, "Just let me finish this page," stop and ask your toddler to repeat the question. If children don't seem engaged by the words, ask what they see in the pictures. Point at things and invite them to explain or narrate the action.

Expand your toddler's world. Sometimes toddlers seem "stuck" on a certain book you're not crazy about. Don't deny them the books they like, but try to actively steer them toward other books as well. Most important, **don't be afraid to expose toddlers to subjects they don't have any context for.** All topics — even geology, the history of art, and life in different cultures — can be broken down into small parts and made interesting by a great children's book. Try it: At a certain age, children may start to gravitate exclusively to stories that feature a protagonist of their own gender. This is not true for toddlers. Take advantage of this time to expose them to a balanced menu of characters.

Choose diverse books. All children need to see themselves reflected in the picture books around them. If your child is a member of a racial or ethnic minority, seek out books that feature children who look similar to yours — they are getting much easier to find. White children also benefit from books that show children with different skin tones and ethnicities. All children need to encounter books that present the variety of cultural traditions and family structures that coexist in our communities. **Exposing children to diversity in books will prepare them for life in a diverse world.**