

# A parents' guide to... early reading

Sharing stories is the key to learning to read, says *Cassie Surrey*

Parents are regularly described as their children's 'first and most enduring educator'. This is particularly true when it comes to learning to read, and one of the best things that you can do as parent is to share books regularly with your child.

## SHARING STORIES

Reading together will benefit your child in important ways. A regular storytime:

- introduces children to the world of reading
- inspires a love of books and enthusiasm for reading, and learning to read
- makes children aware that the marks on the pages have meaning
- shows them how a book 'works' – for example, that we read a book from front to back and text from left to right
- opens up subjects to talk about, enhancing their language skills and vocabulary
- lets them make links to – and develop their understanding of – their own experiences
- gives them insights into new experiences.

## Picture books

Sharing picture books with your child is particularly important. These are stories that combine text and pictures, though some can be wordless. This type of book benefits

children in many ways and, crucially, makes learning to read easier later on. For example, picture books will help your child to:

- understand what a story is, its structure and sequencing
- predict what might happen next in a story
- use their imagination
- draw meaning from a text that they cannot yet 'read' by making connections between the words and pictures
- learn the vocabulary of story, such as beginning, end, plot and character
- learn vocabulary
- develop their communication skills by discussing characters, events and pictures
- develop their comprehension skills. Reading is not just about recognising words and letters, and linking their sounds to other words, but also about a child making sense of everything that has been read to them.

## Storytelling

To help your child get the most out of a regular storytime:

- Use your in-depth understanding of your own child to pick books with characters, themes, storylines and illustrations that will capture their imagination.
- Appear interested in the books to motivate your child to enjoy stories with you and help

them to realise the pleasure that books can offer. Only with regular experiences of books can your child develop a love of stories and a positive attitude towards reading.

- Use techniques such as running your finger below the text as you read to help your child understand the structure of the book and make links between the word, its sound and meaning.
- Engage your child in the story as you read the book and make the most of the pictures, as it is through the pictures that your child will initially draw meaning from the story. Highly observant, young children are often better at 'reading' picture books than adults, as they examine the illustrations in more depth with each reading, gaining more meaning, whereas adults tend to focus on the words.
- Encourage your child to retell the stories or create their own endings or versions.
- Share the same story again and again. Your child will have acquired new language, knowledge and experiences and heard other stories between readings, all of which will help them gain a greater understanding of the story and its characters.

## ENVIRONMENTAL PRINT

While sharing books with your child is vital, their path to becoming a reader is also helped by engaging with 'environmental print'. This relates to words and symbols that we encounter in our everyday lives.

For example:

- Road and street signs.
- Symbols such as arrows.
- Logos for familiar brands.
- Labels on items such as baked beans.

Draw your child's attention to these words and symbols in a fun, interactive way as they help your child to understand that print has meaning, and provide an opportunity to discuss letters and their sounds.

## SIGNS OF LEARNING

Your child is on the path to becoming a reader if they are:

- looking at a book from front cover to back cover in the right direction
- turning pages
- recognising the print on the page
- understanding that print carries meaning
- tracing their finger over words from the top to the bottom of the page, in lines from left to right
- talking about the pictures in books
- recognising, or ascribing their own meanings to, signs, logos and other environmental print. ■

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