

How Parents Can Help Their Children as They Learn to Read

From the Nemours Foundation

Listening and Learning

From kindergarten through third grade, kids' ability to read grows by leaps and bounds. Although teachers provide lots of help, parents continue to play a role in their child's reading life.

Kids who are first learning to read get more information from listening to books than from reading them independently. This is especially true of vocabulary — they'll learn more about what words mean by hearing books read aloud and discussing words with parents than from reading on their own.

And even as your child's reading skills improve, reading aloud together can foster a sense of closeness and help improve vocabulary and reading skills. Encourage talking about characters or share reactions to books to reinforce the connection between books and everyday life.

Your Growing Reader

Here's how reading usually progresses from kindergarten to third grade:

Kindergarten. This is the time when most kids begin learning to read. By the end of the school year they will probably know most letters and their sounds, match words by beginning or ending sounds, and read and write several simple words. They might be able to read simple text as well.

First grade. In this year, most kids learn to read many more words. They sound out words with a variety of phonics patterns, recognize a growing list of words by sight, and connect meaning to the words and sentences they read. Most first-graders can read simple books independently by the end of the school year.

Second and third grade. Kids should continue to learn more phonics patterns and sight words for reading and spelling, use reading to learn new words and discover more about the world around them, read aloud more expressively, and enjoy specific authors and types of books. You should see that reading is becoming more automatic and fluent by the end of second grade or the beginning of third grade.

If you have concerns about your child's reading level at any time, talk to your child's teacher, school counselor, and doctor. Kids who are not making good reading progress might have a reading disability, such as dyslexia. With the right educational help, most kids can become readers, but finding the problem and addressing it early will bring the best results.

What to Read

As your child becomes a more confident reader, continue to introduce a wide range of books. When it comes to reading aloud, look for two types of books — those that could be read alone and those that are above your child's current reading level. With this mix, your child can re-read some of these books

independently, while you'll have to do the reading (or at least help) with the challenging ones that allow your child to enjoy a more sophisticated story and learn new words.

Let your child's interests lead the way when you are choosing books. Sports? Music? Dinosaurs? Look for books on topics you know are of interest and ones that relate to these things. For example, if you know your child is interested in whales, look for books that talk about famous explorers or historical fiction set on whaling boats. As your child gets older, you will find that he or she enjoys increasingly complex books that can each about the world and introduce social and ethical issues.

Talk about the books your child is reading independently and for school and about favorite topics and authors. If the author writes a series of books, encourage your child to read them all. Some kids enjoy keeping a checklist of favorite authors' books.

Other types of books kids might like include:

- biographies of famous people
- books about kids dealing with challenges
- books containing plot twists or language play
- mysteries
- science fiction and fantasy

Another way to grab your child's interest is to pick books that have a personal connection. Introduce your childhood favorites and talk about why you love them. Your child may also like to read junior versions of the same magazines you read.

When and How to Read

The school-age child's schedule can be a busy one. You may be having dinner on the go as you scoot from soccer practice to music lessons. But if you can find 30 minutes a day to read with your child, you will help ensure future reading success.

Use the same strategies you did when your child was younger — talk about what you read before, during, and after, asking open-ended questions that encourage your child's involvement. Read expressively and with enjoyment.

But at this age, be sure to let your child read a book to you. To help with less familiar words, you can "practice" them in advance by having your child point to the words you say on a given page, or even in a specific line of text. Or you might choose to take turns reading.

If your child is reading and can't sound out a word, encourage skipping it to read the rest of the sentence before deciding what word would make sense. As your child becomes a strong independent reader, you might allow some mistakes while reading, then ask questions to reveal them ("Do you think that word makes sense in this sentence?"). Be careful about correcting every error your child makes, as this may be frustrating. If your child seems discouraged or tired while reading, offer to take over.

If you're reading a longer chapter book over time, here are some tips for maintaining your child's interest:

- Save questions for the end so your child can simply enjoy the story, but before you begin the next chapter, talk a little bit about what happened in the previous one.

Re-read lines your child found funny.

Let your child read too (if he or she wants to).

If a block of text is too challenging for your child, don't be afraid to summarize or skip over it.

Ask your child's opinion about a character's actions or decisions. What would he or she do in the same situation?

Offer your own honest opinions about what you've read, and ask for the same from your child.

Making Time to Read

Reading aloud isn't the only way to encourage kids to read. Provide other chances during day-to-day life, like cooking together and having your child read you the recipe. Or when you play a new game, ask your child to read the directions aloud.

Buy a dictionary for kids so that your child can look up definitions of new words, and help look up the answers to questions in an encyclopedia or online.

Kids should have a library card and lots of opportunities to use it. Let yours make selections or ask the librarian for help finding books.

As your child gets older and spends less time every day with you, reading together can be a way for you to connect on a daily basis. Talking about books gives you a window into a child's imagination and thoughts about the world.