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9 Ways to Encourage Early Literacy



by Tia Benjamin

Although the idea of hearing one more tuneless rendition of the alphabet song might send a shiver down your spine, it's impossible to overemphasize the importance of literacy development in the home. Even tots who are too young to read aren't too small to enjoy everyday literacy activities. While you might think your kids will be taught reading and writing skills in school, research from the Center for Improvement of Early Reading Achievement found that the schools with the most effective reading programs also made the most effort to get parents involved.

What you do today can have a long-lasting effect on your child's academic development. A 2011 study from Vanderbilt University has revealed that your involvement and interest in your kids' early literacy activities during the pre-K years has a direct and measurable impact on her fourth-grade reading comprehension and word recognition.

It's understandable if you're concerned about burdening your kid with extra learning. Only a few short years ago, your child was a happy-go-lucky toddler, content to play all day. Suddenly she's expected to study, pay attention, and she probably even has homework responsibilities. But you don't have to overwhelm her with formal instruction—encourage literacy with fun, everyday activities.

- **Listen.** It sounds obvious, but think about how often you listen to music in the car while your kid zones out to a movie or video game in the back seat. David Dickinson, a professor at Vanderbilt University, encourages parents to make the most of everyday opportunities for conversations—like car rides and doctor's waiting rooms.
- **Forget the baby talk.** Don't dumb down your language. Using more complex sentence structures and rich language at home will improve your child's grasp of literacy and build a long-term foundation for language. Don't be forced or unnatural—introduce new words in a way that helps them understand it as best you can, and be ready to explain any unfamiliar words. Dickinson

suggests parents visit museums, zoos and historical exhibits, using the experience to introduce complex vocabulary.

- **"Strive for Five."** Dickinson encourages parents not to "flit from one topic to the next; stay with what the child is talking about by asking for clarification, commenting and asking for more information." Ask questions and actively try to extend the topics of conversation. Dickinson says parents should "strive for five," aiming for "back and forth exchanges that are sustained for five speaking turns."
- **Bring back the bedtime book.** Less than half of American children under the age of five are read to daily by their parents, according to "Reach Out and Read," a non-profit organization that promotes early literacy. Fitting in just five minutes a day to read your kid a bedtime story isn't just great bonding—it also builds memory skills, language development and means your child is more likely to learn to read without problems. Don't limit yourself to just fiction. Instead, read a variety of books, both fiction and non-fiction, and consider a subscription to a children's book or magazine service so there are new things coming regularly for your child to bury her nose into.
- **Scrap the script.** When you're reading to your kid, feel free to deviate from the story. She'll get much more from the experience if you point out details about the pictures, ask her questions about the story, or ask her to guess what will happen next.
- **Visit the library.** It's fun, educational, and free. In addition to unlimited books to choose from, your local library probably offers crafts, story time and other activities to keep the kids interested. Let your little one pick out her own books—if she loves fairy tales, she'll be more interested in reading in general if she has a copy of *Cinderella*, as opposed to *Madeline*.
- **Make your own books.** Encourage your kid's creativity and help her to write a simple book based on her own story ideas. Cut and stick pictures from magazines, family photographs, or ask your child to draw the pictures that go along with her text.
- **Expand on school projects.** Talk to your child's teacher to find out what projects and themes the class is working on. If she's learning about the beach, take a walk along the shore and talk about the objects you see. Find library books about the ocean or create an alphabet collage using items collected from the beach, like sand, seaweed and shells for the letter "s."
- **Supermarket sights and sounds.** The grocery store can be so much more than a chore. Don't rush through the task—take your time and encourage your little learner to help you create the shopping list, read the names of the items and match them to the list.

Although your kid will expand her vocabulary and pick up new skills just through being exposed to new words and experiences, she has to actively be taught how to read, according to the Florida Department of Education. Give her positive reinforcement as she learns new skills. Don't correct her or insist that she reads the story exactly instead of telling it to you from memory. Express your pride at her attempts, and you'll reinforce the importance of literacy in the home as well as at school.

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