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Parents Hear it All the Time: It's Important to Read to Your Kids

But why exactly is that? And does it matter how — or when, or what — you read to them?

It makes sense that being read to would help kids learn to read themselves, and it's true that being read to supports that crucial learning process. But the benefits of reading together — for kids and for parents — go far beyond literacy.

Language development: From birth, babies are hardwired to develop language skills, and consistent exposure to a wide variety of language patterns is what helps them do exactly that. "Just exposure to words is the single most important thing that you can do to help build the language pathways in your child's brain," says Laura Phillips, PsyD, a neuropsychologist. "Reading and exposure to words helps kids maximize their language and cognitive capacity." Even the tactile experience of holding or touching a book supports babies' cognitive development.

By reading to your child starting at a young age, even before they're able to communicate verbally, you help lay the neurological groundwork for effective language use and literacy. That's partly because books expose children to vocabulary and grammar that they wouldn't normally hear. "When kids are with caregivers or parents, they're exposed to the same language, the same vocabulary words, the same patterns of speaking, which is wonderful," says Dr. Phillips. "But books allow them to hear new vocabulary and new ways of putting words together, which expands their ability to make sense of and use language."

Empathy and emotional awareness: Aside from language and literacy, reading is also an important tool for helping children develop empathy. As kids read books about people whose lives are different from their own (and especially stories told from the perspectives of those people), they gain an appreciation for other people's feelings, as well as other cultures, lifestyles, and perspectives. Books can also help kids learn how to handle their own feelings in healthy ways. Seeing characters in books experience big emotions like anger or sadness lets kids know that these feelings are normal — and gives them a chance to talk about their own difficult feelings, too.

The parent-child bond: Having time to read with a parent or caregiver isn't just about the activity of reading. It's about having consistent, focused time together, without other distractions or demands. Even a few minutes of reading together gives both you and your child a chance to slow down, connect with each other, and share an enjoyable activity.

What to read: Dr. Phillips notes that while being read to is beneficial for kids of all ages, the benefits are somewhat different depending on the child's developmental stage. "When you have a newborn, read whatever it is that you want to read, even if that's the *New York Times*," she says. "It's just about having them hear words and sentences and language."

As kids get older, content starts to matter more. "Reading books with relatable themes can lead to meaningful conversations about what's happening in their lives," Dr. Phillips notes. "The book can be a bridge to discussing something that a child might be experiencing themselves, and give you a way to broach a topic without saying, 'Are you being bullied at school?'"

Of course, reading whatever your child enjoys is just about always a good idea. When kids get the chance to follow their own interests, they internalize that reading is fun and rewarding, and they're more likely to pursue reading on their own.

This applies even for young kids who want to read the same book on repeat. "It's very common for toddlers and preschoolers to want to read the same book over and over again," Dr. Phillips notes. "And that repetition is actually part of how they master language."

And there's no reason to stop reading to kids once they're able to read themselves. Kids often enjoy hearing books a bit above their ability level, for example hearing chapter books when they're still reading picture books on their own. Reading together through elementary school supports their developing literacy and gives you both a chance to stay connected as they grow more independent.

Making it work for you: As important as reading together is, it doesn't have to be a picture-perfect routine. Reading at the same time every day — as part of a bedtime routine, for example — can be comforting and make it easier to build the habit of reading, but anytime your child is hearing language and connecting with you makes a difference.

Dr. Phillips notes that kids' development happens in fits and starts, so kids who are gaining a lot of motor skills quickly might not be excited to sit in your lap and read. When that's the case, it's more helpful to meet kids where they are rather than trying to enforce rules that could make reading a less positive experience.

"I have a nine-month-old now and she has zero interest in sitting still in my lap while I'm reading a book," says Dr. Phillips. "But I'll sit and look at a book myself and then she'll come over and look with me. I can point to some words, say some words, maybe she'll take the book from me or maybe she'll wander away and I'll keep reading while she's playing in the same room. **Whatever you can do is great!**

Source: Child Mind Institute <https://childmind.org/article/why-is-it-important-to-read-to-your-child/>