

# “Why should we read to babies?”

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Babies don't understand words spoken by adults, right? What, then, is the point of reading aloud to an infant? The concept of reading to infants perplexes many adults, but the truth is that reading aloud to a young child is the single most effective thing adults can do to help prepare our youngest learners for success in school.

Comprehension isn't what matters in language and literacy development during the very early months of a baby's life. What's most important is that infants and toddlers are hearing numerous words every single day. It should come as no surprise that reading to children of all ages is important, but starting at birth is best.

What difference does quantity of words really make? The recognized Hart & Risley research study compared 8-month-old infants who heard an average of 600 words per hour to infants who heard 2,000 words per hour; the infants who heard more words at eight months of age had a much larger vocabulary by age three. This study and the longitudinal research that followed demonstrated an unmistakable connection between vocabulary size present in toddlers and language test scores and reading comprehension at ages nine and 10.

Still, fewer than half of U.S. children ages 5 and under are read to every day, placing them at risk for struggles with reading and school failure.

If we know that a child with a larger vocabulary is more likely to have improved reading comprehension by age nine, then just by reading books aloud to a young child we can reduce the instance of reading difficulty and illiteracy in later years, which contributes to school failure, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy.

## **The why and how of reading aloud to infants and toddlers**

When parents and other adults talk to infants and toddlers something remarkable happens. That simple act of uttering words to a young child serves as the foundation for early language development. Babies need to hear sounds and words. They are able to use their senses—listening, seeing, touching.

Soon enough, these little beings begin to make sounds. They coo, gurgle, babble and, eventually, talk.

By exposing an infant or toddler to language, we are helping young children build language and speech skills, a love for reading and school readiness. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, which strongly recommends reading to children every day starting after they are first born, reading stimulates

brain development and helps fuel a closer emotional relationship between parent and child. Infants love to hear the voices of their parents.

### **Tips for reading aloud**

- Take every opportunity to read aloud —while waiting in the doctor’s office, pushing the cart in the grocery store, at the breakfast table, as a nightly bedtime ritual.
- Talk about what you are reading—before, during and after a read-aloud session. These conversations make reading come alive while helping children associate the story with real-life experiences.
- Read for as long as your baby/toddler can pay attention. Gradually read for longer periods of time as their attention spans grow. Put the book away as your child loses interest.
- Board books work best for babies who prefer bright pictures against solid backgrounds and stories that feature only one or two objects per page.
- Encourage a baby to join in—moo like a cow or finish a repetitive phrase.
- Play with words, sing and make up rhymes; include the baby’s name. Toddlers too enjoy rhymes, which facilitate a feeling of competency and mastery by encouraging participation through predictable words that toddlers can remember.
- Toddlers are beginning to make sense of concepts such as size, color, shape and time. Read books that reinforce what they know.
- Toddlers also enjoy reading about daily routines such as using the toilet, taking a bath and brushing teeth.
- Repetition is not a bad thing. Toddlers enjoy reading the same books again and again.
- When discussing pictures, focus on the details your toddler might overlook.

### **Bringing literacy resources to children in need**

For the past six years, Durham’s Partnership for Children has teamed up with Barnes & Noble at Southpoint for its Annual Holiday Book Drive. The book drive provides an opportunity for members of the community to purchase books at the Southpoint store that will go to young children who might not otherwise have access. The Partnership distributes all donated books to more than 20 local agencies, including the Durham Literacy Center, the East Durham Children’s Initiative, the Salvation Army and Healthy Families Durham. Each year needs across the Durham community increase. Community partners have requested infant and toddler board books, as well as bilingual reading materials, more than anything else this giving season.

### **Community resources for building early literacy skills**

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#### **Durham County Library**

(919) 560-0100, [www.durhamcountylibrary.org](http://www.durhamcountylibrary.org)

Offers books, programs and other reading resources at branches located throughout Durham

#### **Durham Literacy Center**

(919) 489-8383, [www.durhamliteracy.org](http://www.durhamliteracy.org)

Helps teenagers and adults gain reading and writing skills, English language skills and educational

credentials (GED)

**El Centro Hispano**

(919) 687-4635, [www.elcentronc.org](http://www.elcentronc.org)

Offers Spanish-speaking parents referrals to resources, advocacy, interpretation/translation, ESL classes, parent education and family literacy activities

**RAYCE (Reading Aloud for Young Children Enrichment), Durham's Partnership for Children**

(919) 403-6960, <http://www.dpfc.net/VolunteerOpportunities.aspx>

Community volunteers visit local child care centers to read aloud to young children

**Welcome Baby Family Resource Center, Durham County Cooperative Extension**

(919) 560-7341, [www.welcomebaby.org](http://www.welcomebaby.org)

Provides parenting education and support to families with young children