

MAYA *Smart*

What to Read to Babies and Why



Picture Books

to Set Your Child Up for Reading

It's never too soon to start reading aloud to your child, because the benefits to their development are monumental from the start. Any and all reading together will help your little one learn to love books and set them on the path toward reading themselves, but certain titles are especially engaging for kids at certain stages or especially useful for building specific early literacy skills. This list recommends a selection of books that will get your little one off to a smart start.

One note: Engaging with your child around the books you read aloud is key. *How* you read to them (not just *how often*) matters. Research shows that interactive parent-child reading is golden for building kids' language—from babyhood on. This means, for example, discussing the book, asking questions about it, and treating your child's "interruptions" as chances to engage. Even before babies can talk, it's worthwhile to ask questions and wait for their responses. Their answering babbles are signs of cognitive stimulation and crucial brain development.

Engaging Baby Books

It's important to read to your baby from the very start. But with infants, you don't have to be reading *stories* per se. In fact, there don't even have to be words on the page at first. Early on, the idea is to capture babies' attention and engage them with your voice, gestures, and facial expressions to spur any response from them. Coos, babbles, and book grabs encouraged!

As they get older, they'll tune into the words and stories more, and notice the mechanics of how you crack open the book and turn the pages. They'll discover that books are for reading (not just chewing), that they're read in a particular direction, and that they convey certain ideas that parents return to each time they open them. These simple elements are crucial building blocks toward reading.

So what books should you "read" to your baby? Whatever captures their interest—and yours!—but it's a good idea to include titles from the categories below. We've suggested some wonderful books in each category to get you started.

Noise Books

Books that draw attention to the sounds animals, vehicles, and objects make are cute, naturally popular with babies, and excellent for building awareness of the sounds that make up spoken language. This sound awareness, or “phonological awareness,” is crucial for later reading.

Chugga-Chugga Choo-Choo By Kevin Lewis
Do Cows Meow? (A Lift-the-Flap Book) By Salina Yoon

Rhyming Books

Nursery rhymes, whether classics or modern, are also powerful for bringing babies’ attention to the sounds of language. Little ones love the rhythmic, sing-song reading even before they understand the words, so these stories also promote the engaged, interactive reading that’s so beneficial. In addition to collections of classic nursery rhymes, try these modern volumes:

Bitty Brown Babe By Deborah LeFalle
You Are My Sunshine By Dare Coulter
Girl of Mine By Jabari Asim

Baby Books with Named Characters

Many baby books don’t name the characters (or even *have* characters) and, as noted above, that’s fine. But reading some books with faces or objects that were individually named, babies learn more and show more specialized brain responses, compared with books with no labels or the same generic labels under each image. Plus, learning in infancy is associated with benefits years later in childhood.

Sweet Dreams, Zaza By Mylo Freeman
Leo Can Swim By Anna McQuinn



Photography Books

Books that feature real photography are especially engaging and useful for infants, who are just learning to identify *pictures* with the real objects and people they represent. Studies show that little ones are more likely to connect realistic images of objects with the objects themselves than with more abstract artistic representations or less lifelike cartoons.

Hey Baby! A Baby's Day in Doodles By Andrea Pippins
My Hands By Catherine Hnatov

Bold & High Contrast

We now know that babies are able to see a whole range of colors from birth (unlike what experts once thought), but very young infants still don't see all that well at first. Books with bold, bright, high-contrast patterns and shapes are especially engaging for newborns during their first few months.

Hello, Bugs! By Smriti Prasadam
Baby Sees Colors By Akio Kashiwara

Face (and Mirror) Books

Babies are naturally drawn to faces and even face-like shapes, so any baby book collection should include titles that feature faces—including your baby's own! So look for volumes with a mirror, too. Plus, face books offer a valuable opportunity to expose your infant to people from diverse backgrounds.

Baby Young, Gifted, and Black: With a Mirror! By Jamia Wilson
Baby Says By John Steptoe
Global Babies series from the Global Fund for Children

Books for Building Print Awareness

Before a child can read print, they must notice it. Books are a handy tool for teaching the abstract concept that the lines and curves on paper, products, and signs *mean* something. Reading together is a great time to bring your child's attention to letters and words, as well as conventions like reading from left to right and top to bottom.

Certain children's books with simple drawings (or even none) and large, noticeable text are particularly good for focusing kids on print. This helps them understand the link between the letters on the page and the words they're hearing. Draw their attention to the text with a pointing finger and a few choice comments. (E.g., *This says book. This is a B.*)

The Book with No Pictures by B.J. Novak
Dream Big, Little One by Vashti Harrison
Follow Your Dreams, Little One by Vashti Harrison
Whose Knees are These? By Jabari Asim
One by Kathryn Otoshi
Freight Train by Donald Crews
Little Dumplings by Jekka & Krissy Kuhlmann
Be Who You Are by Todd Parr
Can I Play Too? by Mo Willems



Books for Teaching the ABCs

Kids can and should learn the alphabet well before kindergarten, which means parents are the top candidates to teach them. But don't worry, you don't have to set up an elaborate home classroom or diligently march through a letter-of-the-week curriculum.

You just need to incorporate some (appropriate) letter learning and practice into your everyday life together, here and there over the years before elementary school. Simply and gradually call attention to letters in isolation, in your daily environment, and, of course, in books. Say their names, point out their shapes, and tell your child what sound they make.

Alphabet books are ubiquitous, and they can indeed prompt valuable letter learning—if you choose them wisely, read them thoughtfully, and explain them intentionally. Here are some high-quality ABC books to get you going. Keep in mind that your discussion around the book may be as important as the book itself.

Itchy's Alphabet

Chicka Chicka Boom Boom by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault

The Handmade Alphabet by Laura Rankin

LMNO Peas by Keith Baker

An ABC of Equality by Chana Ginelle Ewing

Eating the Alphabet by Lois Ehlert

Touch Think Learn: ABC by Xavier Deneux

Alphabet Family Band by Sarah Jones

Once Upon an Alphabet by Oliver Jeffers

Discovering Words by Neepin Auger



Books for Nurturing Phonological Awareness

“Phonological awareness”—consciousness of the individual sounds that make up words—is right up there with oral language and letter knowledge as a pillar of literacy.

The ability to discern and manipulate speech sounds (from individual letter sounds to syllables and more) takes time to develop, so it’s best built slowly over the years leading up to formal schooling. Kids who enter kindergarten with strong phonological awareness are poised to thrive, while those without it tend to struggle.

Don’t worry, though—like with teaching your child the alphabet, you don’t need to follow a curriculum or become a kindergarten teacher to build this important skill. Everyday life provides plenty of opportunities to play with sounds and attune your child’s ear to the nuances they’ll need to recognize to read, write, and spell well later. Rhyming books, sound games, and tongue twisters are all fun fodder for this kind of learning.

The Neighborhood Mother Goose by Nina Crews

Miss Mary Mack by Mary Ann Hoberman

Sheep in a Jeep by Nancy Shaw

Did You Take the B from my -ook? By Beck and Mark Stanton

Faint Frogs Feeling Feverish: And Other Terrifically Tantalizing Tongue Twisters by Lilian Obligado



Inspiring Picture Books for Preschool & Beyond

As kids grow, stories can inspire them to dream, spark their empathy, and support their emotional development, along with building their brains and informing them about the world. Books can even inspire them to read more books. Here are a few favorite titles that spark kids' curiosity about language and their motivation to read on their own.

The Oldest Student: How Mary Walker Learned to Read by Rita Lorraine Hubbard

An Inconvenient Alphabet by Beth Anderson

Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library by Carole Boston Weatherford

The Book Itch: Freedom, Truth & Harlem's Greatest Bookstore by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson

Dreamers by Yuyi Morales

How to Read a Book by Kwame Alexander



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