

READING WITH PRESCHOOLERS

Mem Fox, an Australian writer of children's books and an educationalist specialising in literacy, advocates reading with children for 10 minutes a day, which roughly equals three books a day. If you read 3 books a day to your child from birth, they would have heard around 5000 stories by the time they reach the age of five. Even if you only read half that many, or a third, that is still a wonderful amount of sharing, bonding and learning that is taking place.

The benefits of reading to children are many. The human brain is most open to environmental influences in the first few years of life with 90% of brain development occurring between birth and the age of five. Research has shown that children whose parents read to them when they are young learn to speak, read and write more easily. What preschoolers know before they enter school is strongly related to how easily they learn to read when they start school.

What do preschoolers need to know?

Imagine learning to read is like building a house. You would not try and build the walls without first laying strong foundations. Emergent literacy skills, or pre-reading skills, are the strong foundations of reading. Children need to have these early skills before they can learn to read. Emergent literacy skills include:

- The ability to recognise and name letters of the alphabet.
- General knowledge about print, for example, which is the front of the book and which is the back, how to turn the pages of a book and that (in English) we read from top to bottom and left to right.
- The ability to identify and manipulate sounds, also called phonological awareness (the sounds in words).

How do children learn these skills? By being regularly read to and by having access to lots of great books to explore. So try and make time to read at least one book a day.

Why else should we read with preschoolers?

- Young children need lots of special one on one time with their parents and caregivers. Reading together is a simple and enjoyable way to take time out from hectic schedules and bond with your children.
- Books can help children discover the world around them. There might not be that many dinosaurs roaming the streets but there are plenty in books!
- Story time can be one of the most rewarding and memorable moments you can spend with a child, and one that both of you will treasure for years to come.

What do preschoolers like?

Sometimes it just takes one wonderful book to start a lifelong love of reading, but with so many picture books available, how do you find the books that will become your child's favourites, the ones that they will remember as adults and then want to read to their children?

- You know your child best. Be guided by their interests. If they are mad about trains, read books about trains. If they are spending their days hunting for fairies, read books about fairies.

- All children love predictable books, books that have a pattern, a predictable plot or lots of repetition. These books are a great choice for preschoolers as they can guess what is going to happen next and start 'reading' them to you.
- Hearing and using rhyme is a fun way of making sounds, words and stories memorable. Preschoolers love to chant along and participate in the story.
- Other characteristics of favourite books for 4 and 5 year olds include humour, suspense, and imagination. If you are still stuck then try well-loved, classic books that stand the test of time, such as 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar', 'Who Sank the Boat?' or 'Possum Magic'.

Ten tips for sharing books with a preschooler:

Sharing a book with a preschooler is a perfect opportunity to enjoy a great story, while helping develop their pre-reading skills. Children at this age learn best through play and experience, rather than formal instruction:

1. Make sure the book is age-appropriate and about something that interests them. To develop children's interest and enthusiasm for reading, books must capture their attention, captivate their imaginations and make them want to return to them again and again.
2. Make reading fun! Use expression and different voices for different characters. Tell your child the words and let them 'read' the part of their favourite character.
3. Read as often and as much as you can. Be prepared to read their favourite books over and over again. If they say "Read it again!" you have found a winner. It may be boring for you but it's essential for their brain development and early learning.
4. Read the title of the book and talk about the pictures. Encourage your child to predict what the book is going to be about.
5. Look at who the author and illustrator are. Do you know any other books by the same people? Make a list of favourite authors and illustrators to look for at the library or bookshop.
6. When you read to your child, run your finger under the words from time to time as you read them. This will teach him that you read from top to bottom and left to right.
7. Ask questions about the story, but make sure there is no right or wrong answer. Ask if there are any words they don't know and explain the meaning of them.
8. Provide a wide variety of reading materials such as non-fiction, magazines, poetry books and joke books. Browse libraries, garage sales and second hand book stores.
9. You don't have to read just at bedtime – read any time of day, anywhere! Keep books near your child's toys or play areas so they are always available. Take a book everywhere - in the car, while waiting for appointments, while travelling on public transport.
10. Visit your local library together and sign-up your preschooler for their very own library card. Let them choose some books to borrow. If they have chosen the book they will be more interested to listen to it.

Other things that you can do:

- Encourage family and friends to give books as gifts.
- Share books with friends/families with young children, and ask what they are enjoying reading.
- Find someone else to read to your child. Most libraries offer free Story Time sessions for young children. You can also borrow some story CD's or audio books.
- Make your own books together with your preschooler. Print out photos, write simple sentences on each page and staple together. Preschoolers love a book about themselves!

The preschool years are an important time in developing a lifelong love of reading, so try and make the time to read a book (or three) every day!

(This article is contributed to by Raising Literacy Australia, a not-for-profit organisation committed to enriching Australian lives through literacy.)