

# Early Literacy

From [www.zerotothree.org/BrainWonders](http://www.zerotothree.org/BrainWonders)

## What We Know About Early Language and Literacy Development

Early language and literacy (reading and writing) development begins in the first three years of life and is closely linked to a child's earliest experiences with books and stories. The interactions that young children have with such literacy materials as books, paper, and crayons, and with the adults in their lives are the building blocks for language, reading and writing development. This relatively new understanding of early literacy development complements the current research supporting the critical role of early experiences in shaping brain development.

Recent research supports an interactive and experiential process of learning spoken and written language skills that begins in early infancy. We now know that children gain significant knowledge of language, reading, and writing long before they enter school. Children learn to talk, read, and write through such social literacy experiences as adults or older children interacting with them using books and other literacy materials, including magazines, markers, and paper. Simply put, early literacy research states that:

- Language, reading, and writing skills develop at the same time and are intimately linked.
- Early literacy development is a continuous developmental process that begins in the first years of life.
- Early literacy skills develop in real life settings through positive interactions with literacy materials and other people.

## Early Literacy Does Not Mean Early Reading

Our current understanding of early language and literacy development has provided new ways of helping children learn to talk, read, and write. But it does not advocate "the

teaching of reading" to younger and younger children. Formal instruction which pushes infants and toddlers to achieve adult models of literacy (i.e., the actual reading and writing of words) is not developmentally appropriate. Early literacy theory emphasizes the more natural unfolding of skills through the enjoyment of books, the importance of positive interactions between young children and adults, and the critical role of literacy-rich experiences. Formal instruction to require young children who are not developmentally ready to read is counter productive and potentially damaging to children, who may begin to associate reading and books with failure.

## What Infants and Toddlers Can Do - Early Literacy Behaviors

Early literacy recognizes that language, reading, and writing evolve from a number of earlier skills. Judith Shickedanz first described categories of early literacy behaviors in her book, *Much More Than The ABCs*. Her categories, listed in the box below, can be used to understand the book behaviors of very young children. They help us to see the meaning of these book behaviors and see the progression children make along the path to literacy.

Early literacy skills are essential to literacy development and should be the focus of early language and literacy programs. By focusing on the importance of the first years of life, we give new meaning to the interactions young children have with books and stories. Looking at early literacy development as a dynamic developmental process, we can see the connection (and meaning) between an infant mouthing a book, the book handling behavior of a two year old, and the page turning of a five year old. We can see that the first three years of exploring and playing with books, singing nursery rhymes, listening to stories, recognizing words, and scribbling are truly the building blocks for language and literacy development.

## Early Literacy Behaviors

### Book Handling Behaviors

Behaviors related to a child's physical manipulation or handling of books, such as page turning and chewing.

### Looking and Recognizing

Behaviors related to how children pay attention to and interact with pictures in books, such as gazing at pictures or laughing at a favorite picture. Behaviors that show recognition of and a beginning understanding of pictures in books, such as pointing to pictures of familiar objects.

### Picture and Story Comprehension

Behaviors that show a child's understanding of pictures and events in a book, such as imitating an action seen in a picture or talking about the events in a story.

### Story-Reading Behaviors

Behaviors that include children's verbal interactions with books and their increasing understanding of print in books, such as babbling in imitation of reading or running fingers along printed words.

## What Young Children Like in Books

### Infants 0-6 months

- Books with simple, large pictures or designs with bright colors.
- Stiff cardboard, "chunky" books, or fold out books that can be propped up in the crib.
- Cloth and soft vinyl books with simple pictures of people or familiar objects that can go in the bath or get washed.

### Infants 6-12 months

- Board books with photos of other babies.
- Brightly colored "chunky" board books to touch and taste!
- Books with photos of familiar objects like balls and bottles.
- Books with sturdy pages that can be propped up or spread out in the crib or on a blanket.
- Plastic/vinyl books for bath time.
- Washable cloth books to cuddle and mouth.
- Small plastic photo albums of family and friends.

### Young Toddlers 12-24 months

- Sturdy board books that they can carry.
- Books with photos of children doing familiar things like sleeping or playing.
- Goodnight books for bed time.
- Books about saying hello and good-bye.
- Books with only a few words on each page.
- Books with simple rhymes or predictable text.
- Animal books of all sizes and shapes.

### Toddlers 2-3 years

- Books that tell simple stories.
- Simple rhyming books that they can memorize.
- Bed time books.
- Books about counting, the alphabet, shapes, or sizes.
- Animal books, vehicle books, books about play-time.
- Books with their favorite TV characters inside.
- Books about saying hello and good-bye.

## Ways to Share Books with Babies & Toddlers

### Make Sharing Books Part Of Every Day

Read or share stories at bedtime or on the bus.

### Have Fun

Children can learn from you that books are fun, which is an important ingredient in learning to read.

### A Few Minutes is OK—Don't Worry if You Don't Finish the Story

Young children can only sit for a few minutes for a story, but as they grow, they will be able to sit longer.

### Talk or Sing About the Pictures

You do not have to read the words to tell a story.

### Let Children Turn the Pages

Babies need board books and help turning pages, but a three-year-old can do it alone. Remember, it's OK to skip pages!

### Show Children the Cover Page

Explain what the story is about.

### Show Children the Words

Run your finger along the words as you read them, from left to right.

### Make the Story Come Alive

Create voices for the story characters and use your body to tell the story.

### Make It Personal

Talk about your own family, pets, or community when you are reading about others in a story.

### Ask Questions About the Story, and Let Children Ask Questions Too!

Use the story to engage in conversation and to talk about familiar activities and objects.

### Let Children Tell the Story

Children as young as three years old can memorize a story, and many children love to be creative through storytelling.

Visit [www.zerotothree.org/BrainWonders](http://www.zerotothree.org/BrainWonders) for more information. BrainWonders is a joint project by **BOSTON UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER, ERIKSON INSTITUTE, and ZERO TO THREE.**



Copyright 2003. ZERO TO THREE  
Source: BrainWonders & Sharing Books with Babies  
[www.zerotothree.org/BrainWonders](http://www.zerotothree.org/BrainWonders)

This may be freely reproduced without permission for nonprofit, educational purposes. Reproduction for other uses requires express permission of ZERO TO THREE.

Sharing  
Books  
with  
Babies