

Early Literacy for Babies

The title of this column may sound puzzling-if literacy includes reading and writing skills, how does that relate to babies? Early literacy refers to everything that a baby or child knows about reading and writing before they actually read and write. It is not the teaching of reading. We used to think that a child's grade 1 teacher was the only important factor impacting on a child's ability to learn to read. Now we know that early experiences prior to school create the foundation for success. Early literacy is not early reading. It does not require a parent to use workbooks, memorization, or flashcards, to teach a child to read.

A parent's role is to provide the pre-reading and language experiences that lay a strong foundation for reading and writing. And the sooner, the better! The experiences with sounds, words, and communication that a baby has, prepare them to eventually read.

How can a parent provide early literacy experiences for babies?

- Babies need to hear and use sounds. Read daily to your baby, tell stories and show picture books. Make reading with your baby part of your daily routine.
- Visit the public library. Ask your children's librarian for ideas for books for babies. There are many interactive parent and child sessions that you can participate in.
- Say rhymes, verses, and fingerplays to your baby. It doesn't matter that they don't understand the words.
- You can also do rhymes and verses with actions involving gently touching your baby.
- Sing-this is a great thing to do in the car. Songs make words easier to remember.
- Talk about what is going on as it happens-point out things you see out the window, what you are preparing in the kitchen, if you are folding laundry-basically a play-by-play of your and your baby's day as it unfolds.
- Respond to your baby's babbling. Repeat the sounds he or she makes, and make real words out of sounds. Smile, hug and encourage baby's sounds.
- Ask questions like 'what's that?'
- Provide books for your baby to hold, chew, and touch. Babies like durable board books, small enough for their small hands, with bright pictures. Babies show a preference for pictures of faces.
- Have books, magazines and other reading materials in your home. Model reading as an activity of choice.
- As your baby grows, provide more books with other pictures and topics, such as pictures of babies and children doing familiar things, books about bedtime, books about saying hello or goodbye, books with only a few words on each page, and books with rhyme, repetition and predictability.
- Encourage and allow your baby to turn the pages of the books. Don't worry if several pages/words are skipped.
- Keep your baby's books in a place easy to get. Your baby will start bringing you books to read to him or her.

To build up a home library for your baby, try garage sales and second hand stores. Buy durable, easy to clean, good quality books. Even brand new, these are really not that costly, when compared to the cost of some toys, and you can use the same book over and over again. Talk to your friends and consider sharing or trading books. Have fun and start your baby off on a lifetime of reading.

By Laurie Lafortune. Laurie Lafortune is a former teacher and the coordinator of the Understanding the Early Years Project. For more information about parenting, or to access books and toys from the Toy Lending Library, call Family Services of Central Alberta, 403-343-6400 or go to www.fsca.ca