

# Baby Needs Books

Spend a few minutes daily reading to your child and she'll reap the benefits for a lifetime. Here's the inside story.

By **Deborah Skolnik**

## Baby Needs Books

Like many eager new parents, I created a library of kid-friendly books for my daughter soon after she was born. Each day I'd read a few of them out loud, letting her gaze at the pictures and -- as the months progressed -- turn the pages. The result? A year later, I have a child who pores over the collected works of Shakespeare just for kicks!

Okay, I'm lying. What I actually have is a shelf full of gnawed, worn children's books (my husband calls them "pulped fiction"). And at storytime, our daughter sometimes wanders off after just a few minutes, even if we're reciting the liveliest Dr. Seuss rhymes. Have we given her anything besides a taste, so to speak, for literature?

Absolutely, say some leading experts in the field. Reading aloud to your baby, they are careful to stress, is beneficial both mentally and emotionally, and may even help make her into a better student and a more successful person. Here's all the great stuff that can happen -- and how to make sure it does.

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The right answer is pretty obvious.

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### **The Key to Learning Language**

When you read to her, you increase the amount and variety of words she hears. Your child needs precisely this kind of rich "listening environment" in order to start deciphering language, says Patricia Kuhl, Ph.D., of the Center for Mind, Brain, and Learning at the University of Washington, in Seattle. "The words your baby hears help 'map' her brain, training it to focus on the sounds of her native tongue and tune out extraneous sounds," she explains. By reading aloud on a regular basis, you're providing your child with an abundance of the raw material that allows her to make this important cognitive leap in speech comprehension.

### **A Great Start at School**

How do you sound when you're reading to your baby? Chances are, you use "parentese" -- that is, you speak much more slowly and clearly than you usually do and in a high-pitched voice. Nice going! "Babies prefer parentese to adult-directed language," Dr. Kuhl says. Exaggerated speech also gives your baby a valuable opportunity to discern subtle but crucial differences in the basic components of language -- that "cl" and "pl," for instance, are separate sounds and make the difference between "clay" and "play." This can have a major impact on your little one's success during his school years -- and, potentially, far beyond them. "Our research suggests that an infant's ability to perceive these verbal building blocks may be the best indicator of how well he'll eventually speak, read, and write," Dr. Kuhl explains.

# Getting the Picture

The pictures in books also help your child learn, especially because they prompt you to remark on them. "You may not remember to point to the flower growing by your mailbox and say 'flower,' but if there's a picture of a flower in a children's book, you might identify it then. Later, you may point to one growing in your yard and say, 'Look, here's a flower just like the one we saw in your book,'" explains Nanci Weinberger, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at Bryant College, in Smithfield, Rhode Island. By doing so, you increase your child's symbolic knowledge -- her ability to associate a picture with its proper name and recognize that it represents a real-life object. Books also provide the chance for your baby to learn about lots of fascinating things she doesn't ordinarily see every day, like xylophones and zebras.

## Growing Closer

There's a lot of emphasis on how reading can help your baby's brain. "But the benefits of reading are far more than cognitive -- they're also social and emotional," says Denny Taylor, Ed.D, department chairman and a professor of literacy studies at Hofstra University, in Hempstead, New York.

"Storybook reading brings parents and children together, giving them moments in which they are physically close while sharing this enjoyable activity." So go ahead: Crack open a children's book and cuddle up with your little one -- for the sake of his future and for a better day today.

## As Easy As A-B-C

With so much at stake, it's tempting to read to your child for hours at a time. "But keep it brief, just a few minutes per session at first," says psychology professor Nanci Weinberger, Ph.D. Babies have notoriously short attention spans, and you don't want to overdo it. Here are some other tips for great beginnings and happy endings.

- **Get into a routine.** Try to establish a couple of regular storytimes each day: after lunch, say, and before bed. Your child will look forward to them.

- **Make storytime a snugglefest.** Nestle your baby in your arms or, if she's older, on your lap. "She'll form a positive association between reading and comfort," Dr. Weinberger says.
- **Add interaction.** Once she has good hand control, at about 6 months, she'll love a book like Pat the Bunny, with textured pages to touch. She'll get a kick out of lift-the-flap and pop-up books too.
- **Let your baby take the lead.** Your child may want you to read the same book -- even a certain page -- over and over. Instead of insisting on reading the "adult" way (straight through and sequentially), play along. You'll both have more fun.

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