

READING TO TODDLERS—ACTIVE AND READY TO LEARN

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Toddlers, one and two year olds, are very busy exploring the world and mastering new skills daily, including increasing the words they can speak and understand.

Here are several reasons why you should read with a toddler:

Sharing a book can calm a busy child and offer him a break from active play.

Reading can help redirect behavior or emotional outbursts.

Children learn a larger number of new words from books than from hearing words in conversation.

Sharing books helps toddlers focus on spoken words, becoming good listeners, a skill needed for school.

When and how to read with a toddler:

Toddlers are constantly on-the-go and easily distracted. Plan short daily reading times (5 minutes or less), based upon the child's mood or schedule. Have several book choices, then switch if a book doesn't hold your child's interest. When your child won't sit for reading, offer her a nearby quiet activity, such as puzzles or drawing, so that she can hear the stories being read. As attention span grows, gradually increase the length of each book sharing session.

Young children are easily distracted. While reading, turn off the TV and other electronic devices.

Read slowly to help your child understand the story. Explain words that aren't familiar. You don't have to read all the words in a book. Consider pointing to the pictures, then talking about what you see.

Make sounds, do motions, and add funny voices for story characters, encouraging your toddler to repeat them.

Ask questions about the pictures, such as "What is that?" Add description to your child's answer, "Yes, that's a ball. It's blue." If he doesn't respond, answer for him, then try another question later in the story.

Repeating favorite stories helps your child learn and remember new words.

Let your toddler become comfortable handling books, holding them and turning the pages. Introduce her to the parts of a book, such as cover, title, and pages. Go to the library regularly. Attend storytime. Check out books on your child's favorite topics.

Have a special place at home to store books (box, shelf) that your toddler can reach. Include books as a choice for playtime.

Make book sharing a fun, positive experience so toddlers will ask for more book time, increasing their exposure to new words.

What should you read with a toddler:

Introduce board books (cardboard covers and pages), which are not easily torn by eager fingers.

Toddlers like stories related to their own experiences—routines and learning to do things themselves. They are curious about everyday real things, such as pets, bugs, and vehicles. Keep in mind a child's interests when selecting books to share.

Older toddlers can be introduced to books with paper pages and more words in the story. Simple folk tales like Little Red Hen or Gingerbread Man are filled with easy-to-repeat phrases that encourage participation.

Other ideas to help your toddler develop language:

Sing songs and say nursery rhymes that encourage involvement. Don't know the words to Wheels on the Bus, Itsy Bitsy Spider, or Jack and Jill? The library has books and CDs containing children's songs and nursery rhymes. Make up songs for routine activities, such as brushing teeth or cleaning up toys. Your toddler won't care that you're not a professional singer and will join you in song!

Talk with your toddler, not just to him. Talk about what is going on around you.

Use a variety of words to describe things, including a toddler's feelings. "I can tell that you are excited about going to the park today!"

Tell folk tales, family, cultural, or made up stories. In the stories, use names of pets, friends, and family members, including the child's own name, to grab and keep a toddler's attention.

Introduce letters by reading alphabet books and singing the ABC song. Talk about letter sounds.

If you need help finding the right books to share with your toddler, ask the children's librarian at your local library.

Time spent sharing books, telling stories, singing, and talking with your toddler will increase the ability to speak and understand a wide variety of words, developing early literacy skills needed for the preschool years and beyond.