

## Read, speak, sing to your baby: How parents can promote literacy from birth



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**L**earning to read starts from birth. Newborn babies learn how to read signals all around them by listening to voices, watching faces and reading body language.

Babies need to hear and use sounds, sound patterns and spoken language. This helps prepare them to eventually learn to read printed words.

The table below provides more information on your baby's early skills related to literacy and what you can do to nurture them.

Here are some tips on how you can help provide these opportunities from the moment your baby is born.

- **Read to your baby.** Making books, stories and storytelling a part of your baby's daily routine will help nurture a love of reading. Even very young babies love picture books, and it's helpful to make storytime a part of your baby's routine, such as before naps or at bedtime. You don't even have to read the story all the way through. Just talking about some of the pictures is enjoyable for young babies.
- **Use rhymes, games and songs.** Babies respond to them almost from birth. And they don't need to understand the words for these moments to be learning experiences, especially when they're sharing them with mom or dad.
- **Talk about what's going on.** Whether you're changing a diaper, bathing your baby or taking a walk, use words that describe the actions and the things around your baby. You'll help him develop vocabulary before he can even talk.
- **Babies babble.** It's how they learn to make sounds with their own voices. Repeat these sounds, and turn them into real words. You'll help your baby recognize which sounds form language. And he'll eventually make the connection between the sounds and an object or person, like "dada."
- **For newborns and very young babies,** try rhymes that involve gentle touch, such as patting their feet or giving them a little bounce while you're talking.
- **Reward your baby's first tries at making sounds with smiles and hugs.** This early communication is exciting for your baby, and your approval will encourage him to keep trying.
- **Once your baby starts talking,** help her find the words for the things around her. By repeating words, you'll help your child remember them.
- **Ask questions.** When you say, "What's that?" and name the picture in a book, it teaches your baby that things have names.
- **Encourage your baby's involvement.** Babies like to put books in their mouths, so be sure your baby has access to sturdy and clean board books. At first, your baby will need your help to turn the pages. As he gets older, you can let him turn the pages on his own.
- **Sing songs.** Music makes the words easier to remember, and is a fun way to make language come alive for you and your baby!
- **Visit the public library.** Even babies can get a library card! There are lots of free resources to encourage your baby's love of reading. Many libraries have free programs for parents and babies or young children that use books, rhymes and songs. Ask a librarian for more ideas.

### For more information

*Read, speak, sing: Promoting literacy in the physician's office*, a Canadian Paediatric Society position paper developed by the Psychosocial Paediatrics Committee, is available at <[www.cps.ca](http://www.cps.ca)>.

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**A Note from the Doctor**

**Developmental milestones related to early literacy**

<b>Age</b>	<b>The kind of books that babies like</b>	<b>Early literacy milestones: Physical skills related to books</b>	<b>Early literacy milestones: Cognitive (thinking) skills related to books</b>	<b>What parents can do to help develop literacy skills</b>
0–6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board books with photos of babies</li> <li>• Brightly coloured books to touch and taste</li> <li>• Books with pictures of familiar objects</li> <li>• Small-sized books for small hands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocalizes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looks at pictures</li> <li>• Prefers pictures of faces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold your baby comfortably; look face-to-face</li> <li>• Follow baby's cues for "more" and "stop"</li> <li>• Point and name pictures for baby</li> </ul>
6–12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board books with photos of babies</li> <li>• Brightly coloured books to touch and taste</li> <li>• Books with pictures of familiar objects</li> <li>• Small-sized books for small hands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reaches for books</li> <li>• Puts books to mouth</li> <li>• Sits in your lap</li> <li>• Turns pages with your help</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looks at pictures</li> <li>• Prefers pictures of faces</li> <li>• Vocalizes, pats pictures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold your baby comfortably; look face-to-face</li> <li>• Follow baby's cues for "more" and "stop"</li> <li>• Point and name pictures for baby</li> </ul>
12–18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sturdy board books to handle and carry</li> <li>• Books with images of babies and children doing familiar things, like sleeping, eating and playing</li> <li>• Goodnight books for bedtime</li> <li>• Books about saying hello and goodbye</li> <li>• Books with only a few words on each page</li> <li>• Books with simple rhymes and predictable text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sits without support</li> <li>• May carry book</li> <li>• Holds book with help</li> <li>• Turns board pages, several at a time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No longer mouths the book right away</li> <li>• Points at pictures with one finger</li> <li>• May make the same sound for a specific picture</li> <li>• Points when asked: "Where's ...?"</li> <li>• Turns book right side up</li> <li>• Gives book to adult to read</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respond when your child wants to read</li> <li>• Let your child control the book</li> <li>• Be comfortable with a toddler's short attention span</li> <li>• Ask "where's the...?" and let your child point</li> </ul>
18–24 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sturdy board books to handle and carry</li> <li>• Books with images of babies and children doing familiar things, like sleeping, eating and playing</li> <li>• Goodnight books for bedtime</li> <li>• Books about saying hello and goodbye</li> <li>• Books with only a few words on each page</li> <li>• Books with simple rhymes and predictable text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turns board book pages easily, one at a time</li> <li>• Carries book(s) around the house</li> <li>• May use books as a transitional object</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Names familiar pictures</li> <li>• Fills in words of familiar stories</li> <li>• "Reads" to dolls or stuffed animals</li> <li>• Recites parts of well-known stories</li> <li>• Attention span changes, not consistent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relate books to your child's experiences</li> <li>• Use books in routines and during bedtime</li> <li>• Ask "what's that?" and give your child time to answer</li> <li>• Pause and let your child complete the sentence</li> </ul>

*Table adapted with permission from the Reach Out and Read National Center in Somerville, Massachusetts*

This information should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your physician. There may be variations in treatment that your physician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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