

As a pediatrician one of my goals is not only to promote strong, healthy bodies in our children but strong, healthy minds as well. One way of doing this is to stress the importance of early literacy to the parents of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Early childhood brain research over the past 20 years has changed our understanding of how children develop reading, writing, and language skills. We now know that literacy is a continuous developmental process that includes listening, speaking, reading and writing. These skills begin to develop before formal instruction in reading takes place in grade school. This development is very dependent on environmental influences. Young children who are exposed early to books and reading will develop a greater love of literacy, will become more proficient readers when they are older, and invariably will succeed in school. A 1985 National Commission on Reading study reported that reading aloud to children is the single most important activity for literacy development and continued reading success.

Believe it or not, we begin to discuss reading and books with parents of children as young as six months of age. At this age children are able to sit up, grab a book and respond to their parents. This shows parents that the child enjoys the reading experience. Small infants, from 6-9 months of age, do well with durable board books that they can chew. The books should have bright colors and be sized for their small hands. Books with pictures of babies, faces, and familiar objects are perfect for this age group.

Young toddlers, 12-18 months, still need sturdy board books, though you might pick those with more than one or two words on each page. Pictures of children doing every day things- playing, sleeping, eating are good subjects for this age group. Children will enjoy books with simple rhymes and topics like animals. Keep in mind that you don't have to read the story- simply looking at the pictures together and talking about what is on the page is sufficient. You should encourage pointing and naming and let your child be in control by having her choose the book. Remember a short attention span is normal at this age so don't always expect to get through a whole book.

Older toddlers (from 2-3) who have grown up with books can have remarkable early literacy skills, enjoying long and complex stories, committing numerous books to memory, and establishing strong emotional bonds with their favorite books. Many children at this age are able to handle paper pages and enjoy stories about families, food, animals, and trucks. Stories with silly themes, jokes and funny pictures are perfect for three year olds. These children may "read" favorite books to themselves or to dolls or stuffed animals.

Four and five year olds are ready for a wide range of books on a broad range of subjects. Preschoolers like stories about children who look and live like them but also are intrigued by themes about children from different cultures and countries. Counting and alphabet books, stories about making friends and going to school, and informational books about the world will interest this age group. By now your child's

attention span will allow her to enjoy a whole book from beginning to end. Encourage your child to help tell the story, discuss the pictures, and guess what is going to happen next in the story. They might even begin to pick out individual letters, sometimes words.

One aspect of daily life that can undermine reading success is excessive television viewing in the preschool age group. Studies are beginning to show that children who watch more than two hours of TV daily may have shorter attention spans and greater difficulty focusing when they go off to school. These children are more likely to have more reading delays than others. For these reasons be selective when allowing your children to watch TV. Don't have the television on as background noise throughout the day and try to resist the urge of placing a TV in your children's bedroom.

Parents can be role models for their children when it comes to reading. If your child sees that reading and books are important parts of your life, that you take time out of your day to read for pleasure, they will likely follow in your footsteps.

We all have aspirations and dreams for our children, Most of us would be thrilled to see our son or daughter attend Duke or Chapel Hill and become a lawyer, teacher or nurse. These dreams are well within your child's grasp. With your encouragement of early reading and a lifetime of loving books, you are putting your child on the path to future success.