

The Importance of Reading to your Children

Parents hear it all the time: it's important to read to your kids. But why exactly is that? And does it matter how — or when, or what — you read to them?

It makes sense that being read to would help kids learn to read themselves, and it's true that being read to supports that crucial learning process. But the benefits of reading together — for kids and for parents — go far beyond literacy.

From birth, babies are hardwired to develop language skills, and consistent exposure to a wide variety of language patterns is what helps them do exactly that. “Just exposure to words is the single most important thing that you can do to help build the language pathways in your child's brain,” says Laura Phillips, PsyD, a neuropsychologist. “Reading and exposure to words helps kids maximize their language and cognitive capacity.” Even the tactile experience of holding or touching a book supports babies' cognitive development.

By reading to your child starting at a young age, even before they're able to communicate verbally, you help lay the neurological groundwork for effective language use and literacy. That's partly because books expose children to vocabulary and grammar that they wouldn't normally hear. “When kids are with caregivers or parents, they're exposed to the same language, the same vocabulary words, the same patterns of speaking, which is wonderful,” says Dr. Phillips. “But books allow them to hear new vocabulary and new ways of putting words together, which expands their ability to make sense of and use language.”

Research has found that young children whose parents read to them daily have been exposed to at least 290,000 more words by the time they enter kindergarten than kids who aren't read to regularly. And depending on how much daily reading time kids get, that number can go up to over a million words. All that exposure likely makes it easier for kids to expand their vocabularies and understand the variety of texts they'll need to read as they get older, both inside school and out.

Reading also helps kids build a wide base of background knowledge, which is especially helpful once they start school. Kids learn some of this from the books themselves, and some from talking with their caregivers during reading time. With more general knowledge — whether it's about geography, transportation, nature, or countless other topics — kids have more context for the information they encounter at school and an easier time learning about new topics.

Aside from language and literacy, reading is also an important tool for helping children develop empathy. As kids read books about people whose lives are different from their own, they gain an appreciation for other people's feelings, as well as other cultures, lifestyles, and perspectives.

Books can also help kids learn how to handle their own feelings in healthy ways. Seeing characters in books experience big emotions like anger or sadness lets kids know that these feelings are normal — and gives them a chance to talk about their own difficult feelings, too.

Having time to read with a parent or caregiver isn't just about the activity of reading. It's about having consistent, focused time together, without other distractions or demands. Even a few minutes of reading together gives both you and your child a chance to slow down, connect with each other, and share an enjoyable activity.

What's more, that cozy time together has benefits for kids' cognitive development, especially when they're younger. The sensory experiences of sitting with a caregiver, hearing that familiar voice, and feeling a book in their hands are all important for kids' brain development. "Hearing a book read over Alexa just isn't going to give kids the same holistic benefit," says Dr. Phillips.

When young children's language capacities are developing, being exposed to words and language at the same time as those meaningful sensory experiences makes that exposure even more valuable. "The physical contact that you get from being held by your parent while you're reading actually helps to engage neurons in the brain, which make kids more receptive to the language and the cognitive stimulation that they're getting from that experience," Dr. Phillips says.

Being read to is beneficial for kids of all ages, and there's no reason to stop reading to kids once they're able to read themselves.

As important as reading together is, it doesn't have to be a picture-perfect routine. Reading at the same time every day — as part of a bedtime routine, for example — can be comforting and make it easier to build the habit of reading, but anytime your child is hearing language and connecting with you makes a difference.

Resource:

Sheldon-Dean, Hannah. "Why Is It Important to Read to Your Child?" Child Mind Institute, December 2, 2024.