

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Reading with Toddlers

Promoting the Life Skill of Communicating in Toddlers

Seven Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: How can I help my toddler develop an interest in reading?

In a landmark study, Catherine Snow of Harvard University and her colleagues followed a number of families over several years to determine which experiences provided to children made the biggest difference in their language, literacy and reading skills. One of their most significant findings was the importance of family support of children's literacy. Snow explains:

These were [families] that had bought children's books; that ensured that children [were] read to regularly by parents and by other adults; that had pencils, paper, and crayons around and encouraged children to write. [These were] homes in which the parents themselves also engaged in regular reading, got a daily newspaper, or read magazines and books regularly.

There are many things you can do to develop your toddler's interest in reading while also promoting the life skill of Communicating.

- 1. Be a role model.** Children learn what they see and live. It is powerful to show your child that you enjoy reading, too. To help encourage your child's interest in reading, books need to be part of his or her daily life. You can create family traditions around story time, like always reading the same book at a particular time of year or telling stories at meals.
- 2. Create a reading together routine.** Toddlers do well when things are predictable. You can create an interest in reading by making it a predictable part of your day. It is a good idea to set aside a regular time for reading together. Reading before naptime or bedtime creates a comforting routine that can help with the transition to sleep, while also supporting your toddler's language development.
- 3. Offer choices and embrace repetition.** Toddlers love to have control through choices. You can offer two or three books and let them choose. Children learn also through repetition so it is a good sign if your child always picks the same book. Go ahead and read it over and over again.

Talking with your child about what you are reading is what's most important, says Snow:

The book creates a platform on which the conversation takes place. [The adult is there to] interpret, to name the pictures, to describe the action, to explain what's going on.

This is one of the reasons why research shows that families in which children are read to regularly are families whose children are more likely to arrive at school ready to learn, with bigger vocabularies and a greater capacity to participate effectively in classrooms. [It's] because they've had this kind of focused conversation with adults.

- 4. Talk about books.** Reading books provides an ideal opportunity to have conversations, which is what really prompts literacy.
 - Start a conversation about what's going on in the story by naming the pictures you are looking at together. Take turns pointing at what you see.
 - Asking "what" and "why" questions are great conversation starters. They help your child talk through his or her understanding of the story. For example, questions like:
 - "What sound does the animal in this picture make?"
 - "Why is that doggie hiding?"

- 5. Make it fun.** It can be more fun for both of you if you read stories in a dramatic way. If a cow is going “moo,” or a car is going “beep, beep,” you can make that sound. Or if a gorilla is thumping its chest, you can imitate the action. And if you see something in your everyday life that reminds you of the book, talk about that too: “Look the fire engine is going “Whirrrr,” just like in your book. Can you make that sound?”

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests helping children make connections between their own lives and the stories you read. You can ask questions like, “That girl in the picture is laughing; she looks happy. Do you remember when you laughed so hard?”

- 6. Go back and forth in talking together.** The best conversations for learning involve what researchers call “**serve and return**”—you or your child does something (serves) and the other responds (returns), back and forth like a game of ball. “Children learn language in a situation where they talk to you about what they’re interested in and you respond,” says Catherine Snow.
- Use books to watch your child’s response to the words and pictures. Build on what your child says (with sounds, with looks, with words or movements) and extend it.
 - Listen and be responsive to your child, with or without books. If your toddler talks about a stuffed animal, play along: “Does your bear want to go night-night? Let’s give your bear a nap.”
 - A central purpose of literacy is communicating and communicating centers on conversations—with sounds, with words, with movements and with facial expressions. Explore various ways to communicate with your child. Use gesture, facial expressions, words, songs, or silly sounds to encourage his or her interest in sounds, words and language.
- 7. Use rich and expressive language in talking with your child.** In taping family dinnertime conversations over the course of several years, Catherine Snow and her colleagues found that parents who used a large vocabulary in conversations with their children had children with better literacy skills later on.

Catherine Snow explains:

[[I]n some of the families ... there’s wonderfully interesting conversation about how the construction of the expressway is going to influence the neighborhood. And these conversations are full of wonderful words like budget and proposal and neighborhood—words that children might not use [and] probably don’t understand fully. We found that families that used words like that in their dinner table conversations had children with much larger vocabularies two years later.

- Make sure to use new words, as well as different ways of saying familiar words.
- Use a variety of verbs, nouns and adjectives.

These seven strategies will promote the life skill of Communicating and move from managing behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Communicating involves much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what you want to communicate and realizing how your communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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