Story time

Want to spend time with your youngster, build her reading skills, and help her learn to love books? You can do all three when you read aloud to her. Here are some suggestions.

Read regularly
Try to read to your child every day. You might aim for 10–15 minutes of bedtime reading for a peaceful end to the day. Bring along a book, and read to her during a sibling’s sports practice. Or curl up together with a book when you get home from work.

Take turns choosing books
Your youngster may want to hear old favorites again and again. Use your turn for new titles and variety (nonfiction, poetry).

Let her participate
Ask your child to turn the pages while you read. Also, she can finish sentences that rhyme or fill in words she knows.

Go slowly so she has time to understand the story and look at the illustrations. She’ll enjoy read-aloud time more if she plays an active role.

Be playful
You can use different voices for different characters (a high, squeaky voice for a mouse or a deep, booming voice for a horse). Or substitute your youngster’s name for the main character’s name, and use family members’ names for other characters. Note: You don’t have to be an expert reader — your child will love it when you read aloud because it’s you.

Writing that makes sense
When a child first learns to write, his stories may not always make sense to others. Help his writing flow logically with these two ideas.

1. Let him read his stories to you. Ask questions to encourage him to add information (“What did you do with your friends at recess?”) or to clear up a confusing part (“Who said, ‘Let’s go home’—you, or your brother?”).

2. Even if he isn’t writing sentences yet, he can tell you stories. He might describe the new class pet or something funny that happened at lunch. He’ll practice relating events in a logical order, and that can help when he puts his thoughts and ideas down on paper.
Read between the lines

Learning to infer, or “read between the lines,” is one key to good reading comprehension. Consider these tips for helping your youngster make inferences when he reads.

Describe the setting. Pick a book, and read a few sentences to your child (without him looking). Leave out words that name the setting. Example: “Sand stretched in all directions...cacti dotted the landscape.” Can he infer where the story is set? If he isn’t sure, give him a hint. (“Where do you see lots of sand and cacti?”)

Wordplay

Use these activities to build your child’s phonemic awareness — her ability to hear sounds in words:

• Choose a three-letter word, such as cap. Have your youngster substitute different beginning sounds from the alphabet to make new words (lap, map, nap, rap, sap, tap, zap). How many can she think of?

• Pick a long word, and tell her to clap once as she says each syllable. For mozzarella, she would clap four times: mozzo-re-lla.

• Ask your child to say a word without the first sound. Example: “Can you say sit without the s?” (Answer: It)

• Think of a word, and give your youngster a “sound” clue to figure it out. For instance, “I’m thinking of a word for something that you chew. The word has an /th/ sound in the middle.” (Answer: Gum)

All kinds of words

A large vocabulary can turn your child into a better reader and writer. Try these everyday ways to help her learn new words.

Keep your ears open. When you and your youngster go places, point out words that people use. Maybe a waiter describes an entree or the dentist talks about molars. Encourage your child to figure out what they mean by the way they’re used.

Go beyond nouns. Help your youngster add verbs and adjectives to her vocabulary. Sports and games offer opportunities to use action words. Let your child hear you comment on the softball that soars or the runner who sprints. When she sends thank-you notes or greeting cards, suggest descriptive words (a polka-dot shirt, a fantastic birthday).

Parent to Parent

Build, read, and write!

My son James loves to play with blocks. At our parent-teacher conference last month, his teacher suggested that we use blocks to fit in extra reading and writing practice.

We found books about things he could make, such as castles, skyscrapers, and monuments, and I put them with his blocks for inspiration. At first, I thought he’d just look at the pictures, but he has started pointing out facts that he reads, like how moats kept enemies away from castles. I also encouraged James to write signs to go with his buildings. When he made an airport, for example, he wrote “Tickets,” “Bags,” and “Taxi” on slips of paper and taped them to the blocks.

I’ve noticed that James’s buildings are more creative — and I’m happy that he’s reading and writing while he plays.