



# BfK BASICS: helping your child enjoy books and reading

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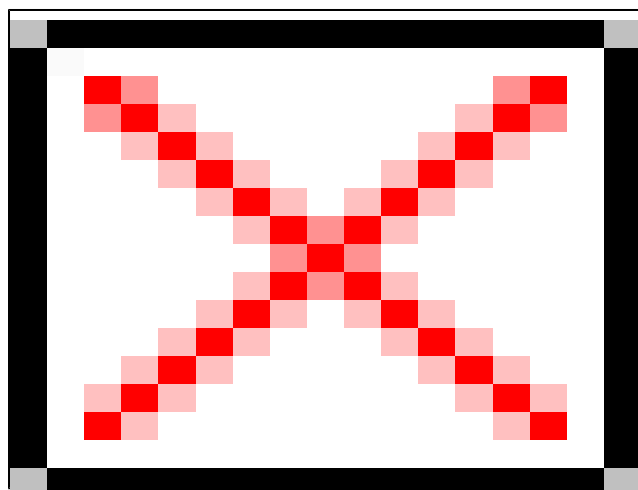
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**Liz Attenborough** advises how to share books with babies.



## Why and how to share stories with your baby

Learning to communicate is one of the most important skills new babies need to acquire. **Liz Attenborough**, who manages the Talk to Your Baby campaign at the National Literacy Trust, explains how sharing books can play a crucial role in developing communication skills. She also suggests practical ways to go about it.

Babies learn to recognise their mother's voice in the womb. (The father's voice can also be recognised from time in the womb.) After the birth it's a huge comfort for newborn babies to hear their mother's familiar voice as they get to know the person attached to the voice. The importance of early eye contact, gentle talking and listening to a baby cannot be over emphasised - they are the best possible way for mother and baby to bond with each other. Young children learn by imitation and they will develop their communication skills well if their parents communicate with them with care.

### Why is sharing books important?

Babies are born to be sociable, coming into the world with a willingness to communicate and learn. Their experiences in their early years shape their future social, communication and learning skills. Sharing books together can be a great way to help babies during this period of discovery.

We, as adults, need stories in our lives. The stories we read and hear help us to make sense of our lives. And so it is for babies. Language is at the root of human communication, something we need to master not only for our learning but also for our social and emotional well-being. We need language in order to think. And what better way to learn language than through books and stories, shared lovingly with a trusted adult?

### What if your baby can't talk yet?

Sharing a story is a simple way to talk to a baby before they have any spoken language of their own. If you aren't sure

what to say to your baby, or think that your young child will not understand what you say, books can provide an easy way to start communicating. Books use the power of words to connect adult to child, and to make associations between what happens on the page and what is happening all around. Through the rhythms of a picture book story or nursery rhyme, and the repetition of that story and pictures, words with meaning begin to emerge, and a new young mind grows.

### **Are there other reasons to share books with babies?**

Yes! Seventy-five per cent of brain development occurs in the first two years of life and babies need stimulation and attention to make the most of this opportunity. This is not as daunting as it may first sound, as stimulation comes from simple, everyday activities such as talking, listening, singing and sharing books together.

Babies need a language-rich home to help them develop in many important ways. You can create this language-rich environment by talking to your baby. Being talked to helps babies learn to listen, and gives them the chance to respond. Over time, their coos, babbles and smiles will move on to first words and sentences. The interaction between parent and baby helps this natural process along.

Storytelling and book sharing are an easy way to have regular, additional talking time. Storytelling introduces structure and language patterns that help form the building blocks for later reading and writing skills. Sharing books is a wonderful way to help your child learn to talk, and it's the ideal opportunity to share a cuddle at the same time. Reading aloud also combines the benefits of talking, listening and storytelling within a single activity and gets parents and carers talking regularly to young children.

### **What about bedtime stories?**

Babies love the sound of their parents' voices and reading aloud has the bonus of being calming during times of distress or unease. It is no coincidence that sharing a book before bedtime is such a favourite activity as it is the best possible way to relax and soothe a baby and encourage a calm shift off to sleep.

### **How to share books with your child**

- \* Find a quiet place and turn off the TV or radio so there are no distractions. As well as reading the story, talk about the pictures. If there's a picture of a dog, talk about a dog that you both know. Give your child time to respond to your chatter, by pointing or babbling or giggling with you.
- \* Don't put any pressure on your child to name the pictures, but if the child copies your words, or tries to, praise her and say the words again. There is no need to cross-examine a child about a book, asking about colours or what is happening. Ask the child instead about things for which there is no 'right' answer, eg about the possible feelings of the dogs or children in the story, and then take care to listen to the child's response and develop it.
- \* Don't read for too long. Young children have a short attention span, so little and often is best. Let others – grandparents, carers and older brothers and sisters – join in too.
- \* Characters, words and sounds discovered through books should be talked about outside of reading time, as books are an important source of new vocabulary.
- \* It's good to share favourite books again and again, even if you have had enough of them! Repetition helps children to understand and remember the language they hear. Visiting your library for different books is a great way to ring the changes. It's free to join and libraries understand that babies can sometimes damage books, so don't worry.
- \* Books with songs and rhymes are especially good for children as the rhymes and repetitive language make it easier for babies to learn language skills. Think how much easier it is for you to learn song lyrics or poems than it is to learn a block of prose.
- \* Be slow and clear when you read and don't be afraid to use sing-song or funny voices for characters, or for words or phrases that are repeated throughout the book. Your baby will be an enchanted audience. After reading a book several times, your baby will anticipate hearing the change in tone and may well show this with a smile, widening of the eyes or

a wiggle.

\* You could use props, such as puppets or a favourite cuddly toy, to help bring the story alive and add actions to your words. It all adds to the appeal of spending talking time together.

\* Give your child time to respond to your chatter. This could be with babble, arm waving or gentle finger movement until the words come. Listening to these responses shows how interested you are in hearing what your child has to say and encourages him in his natural discovery of words, story, meaning and communication.

\* Don't forget to talk about what's going on in the pictures. Learning visual literacy is an important part of becoming fully literate and in many picture books the pictures tell a complementary story to the words on the page.

\* Remember that you are not teaching your child to read. Children learn to talk a long time before they learn to read, and book sharing is a wonderful way to help your child's language development alongside the sheer pleasure of sharing a story together.

**Liz Attenborough** is the Manager of the Talk to Your Baby campaign at the National Literacy Trust.

[www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk](http://www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk) [3]

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