

Exploring Books with Babies



From *Parent & Child* magazine: *Susan Straub*

Babies don't so much read books as explore them. It's not about the words, the story, or the sound of your voice. It's not about the pictures. It's not about the physical book itself. It's actually about **all of the above, combined**. Babies use all their senses to take in a book. Your job is to keep your mind open to the possibilities -- for example, that "eating" a book can be just as satisfying as reading it -- and have fun. It can take a lot of patience to get through even a short picture book with a baby, but you'll be rewarded with a child who's received an excellent start to literacy -- and life. Here are some dos and don'ts for you and your budding reader:

Do:

- **Expand your child's "library."** Very little babies have no real idea what you're reading, so why not read aloud to her from whatever you're reading, like a novel or a magazine? That way you both get to hear terrific stories together.
- **Expose baby to art.** Show your baby pictures from the family photo album or a coffee table art book -- just be careful she doesn't grab precious pages! Babies enjoy looking at images and respond well to simple, high-contrast pictures.
- **Get tactile.** Touch-and-feel books, like the classic *Pat the Bunny*, are great sensory as well as literary tools. Guide your baby's hand over various textures while you read.
- **Follow your baby's lead.** Some babies like to open and close books, hand them back to you, or stack them like blocks. That counts as "reading," too. The more you use books for fun, the more likely she'll see that they are an enjoyable part of her daily life.
- **Keep books handy.** Stow board books in your stroller, diaper bag, car, near the highchair, at the changing table, or even in the bathtub (there are some wonderful waterproof bath books). You'll always have a book ready to distract and entertain.
- **Read enthusiastically.** Use silly voices, make animal sounds, and read with drama.
- **Hand your baby a book.** When your baby's reached the "grabbing" stage, he's likely to take the book out of your hands. Let him; just have a couple books on hand so you can switch back and forth and read them all at once.
- **Be prepared to repeat, and repeat, and repeat.** Babies often get stuck on a particular favorite, and will zoom right to that book on the shelf even if you offer others. Repetition and familiarity are soothing to babies and toddlers. Let her have her way -- she'll pick a new favorite soon enough.

- **Point to pictures.** For your pre-literate baby, illustrations are just as important (sometimes more so) than words. Don't feel you have to read every page every time, but do point at the pictures ("Look at the green car!" "Where's the moon?") as you flip pages.
- **Join the public library.** It's a great way to expand your reading repertoire. You can join story-time groups and classes and meet other families.

Don't:

- **Take it personally when baby rejects reading.** Your infant may have seemed relaxed and ready to settle in to "read" with you, but after one page he starts squalling. Just put the book aside; he'll have a better moment again soon.
- **Stop your baby from mouthing books.** This is one of the ways your baby explores books; it's part of how she learns about everything in her world.
- **Be surprised when your toddler crawls away.** Two things to remember about a toddler: he is more interested in moving than sitting still, and he can still hear you. Keep reading -- he'll come back (and if not, you can try again later).
- **Get mad at ripped pages.** Has she ripped off a dinosaur's head? Don't get upset with her. Babies are stronger than most books! Plenty of baby-friendly board books are made just for the purpose of being gnawed and chewed. Just refrain from giving children under 2 pop-up books and from reading "good" books that you'd like to save for when she's older. Toddlers may be interested in helping you fix torn books. Keep some tape handy for repairs.
- **Think you have to finish every book you start.** For your baby or toddler, the process is more important than the outcome. You may not have reached the end of the book, but you did share some nice reading time together.
- **Give away baby books prematurely.** Even when he grows into the next stage, he may like to revisit her old, gummed, and torn favorites.
- **Read at the same pace all the time.** Speed up or slow down, depending on your baby's interest.
- **Underestimate your baby.** You may not be able to see it right away, but your baby is profiting sensually, intellectually, and socially thanks to your reading.