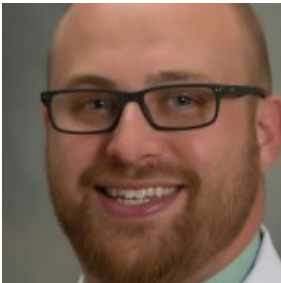


Opinion: Reading to a child is critical

By Jonathan Halem

Can you recall a favorite nursery rhyme from childhood? How about a favorite book?

Some of my early favorites were the “Incy Wincy Spider” song and “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?” picture book.



Jonathan Halem

Early language development is intricately linked to a child’s exposure to reading, talking, and singing starting from infancy. Though infants may not talk back, research shows a child’s language exposure at an early age predicts his or her success in school.

According to the 2012 National Survey of Children’s Health, more than 35 percent of U.S. children enter kindergarten without the language skills needed to effectively learn how to read. This challenging start can cause academic difficulties in the years to come.

Help your child get an early start with his or her reading skills. Here are storytelling tips I have compiled with recommendations from pediatricians and the American Academy of Pediatrics to help stimulate early brain and language development.

- **Make it fun.** Cuddle up and make reading time a comforting interaction. Infants recognize and favor their parents' voices and faces from when they are only a few days or weeks old. Read with emotion and mix up the volume with whispers, sing-song tones, and silly voices. Although infants may not comprehend the words or story, they will respond to vocal emotions and facial expressions when you read or talk.
- **Make it tactile.** Select colorful and durable books. Children respond excitedly to bright colors and, as they get older, may like holding the book or putting it in their mouth to experience the feel. Though a young child may lose interest in a story after a few minutes, continue to read, talk, and sing with your child frequently. This interaction stimulates the child's interest and expands his or her attention span.
- **Make it insightful.** Stories open the opportunity to ask questions and talk about feelings. Can you show me the train? Which animal says "tweet"? In time, as comprehension expands, your child may identify what is in the picture. Suggest what emotions the characters in books might be feeling and give your young child a chance to share if he or she sometimes feels similar emotions, such as happy, sad, or mad.
- **Make it interactive.** Preschoolers can be chatty and very curious. At this age, they may retell parts of their favorite stories or make up their own. Build on this cognitive development by asking your child follow-up questions. What do you think will happen next? What is the character thinking or what is this character feeling? These conversations not only help develop language and reading skills, but also spark creativity and curiosity.
- **Make it a routine.** Read with your child every day. Make it a calming activity – this is especially beneficial for the bedtime routine or afternoon downtime.

Your child is never too young or too old to enjoy reading a book with you. Get inspired from attending “Mother Goose on the Loose” and other storytimes at the public library. Expand your book collection by checking out library books or exchanging books with other families. Then have your child pick out a book, get comfortable, and enjoy this important time.

Jonathan Halem is a pediatrician at Barton Pediatrics in Stateline.