

How can I encourage my child to like reading?

Question 1 from *Helping Your Child Become a Reader*
(Scanlon, Anderson, Barnes, Morse, & Yurkewecz-Stellato, 2024¹)

We are all more enthusiastic about doing things we enjoy. Children who develop a love for reading (and writing) are more likely to become strong readers and writers. Therefore, encouraging children to like/love reading and writing is extremely important. Below we name activities that caregivers might do to encourage this love when reading to and with children.

BE ENTHUSIASTIC!! Share your love of reading and your interest in and excitement about the things you read for your own purposes and the texts you read to/with children.

Read, enjoy, and learn from texts together. It is important to read to children both before they begin to read on their own and as their reading skills develop. Reading to children allows them to experience more complicated texts than they can read on their own. It will also allow them to focus more on enjoying, understanding, and learning from texts. Choose texts, authors, and topics that are of interest to children including both texts that tell stories and texts that provide information about areas such as science, nature, and history. Reading multiple texts on the same or related topics can help children to better understand and learn about that topic and expand their vocabularies.

Discuss and enjoy the texts you read together. Some ideas to prompt discussion during and after reading include:

- Talk about what the characters are doing and why.
- Make predictions about what will happen next in the text based on what has already happened. Explain the thinking behind your predictions and encourage the child to do the same. For example, you might say something like “I think that....because.....” Or, you might ask “What do you think will happen next? What makes you think so?” Then, read to find out if your thinking and/or the child’s matches the author’s thinking. Conversations such as these help children to develop into active readers who think about the author’s message as they read.
- Compare characters, events, and/or information from different texts to people and experiences in your own and/or the children’s lives.
- Share your feelings about what happens in texts and ask children to share their feelings as well. Talk about characters’ thoughts and feelings and invite your child to do so.
- Help children understand the purposes for reading and writing. To encourage interest in learning to read and write, children need to understand that people use reading and writing every day and in all kinds of ways. Children need to know that people read to get information AND for pleasure. Try engaging children in reading and writing for everyday purposes such as: leaving/sending messages, making and using shopping lists, making plans, accessing information on the internet, sharing their learnings, etc.



¹ The complete 23 question booklet can be accessed at: eltep.org/isa-parent-booklet
All individual questions and the complete booklet can be shared for non-commercial purposes.

- Talk about what you learned from reading, especially what you found fascinating/puzzling/surprising, etc. Have genuine conversations about the interesting parts of the texts you read. Consider developing questions based on what you have learned that you may attempt to answer by reading another text. For example, “I was so surprised to learn that a big whale eats the equivalent of 80,000 Big Macs in one day! I wonder how much a shark eats?”

When listening to a child read:

Be a supportive partner. When children begin to read texts on their own, be encouraging and enthusiastic. Listen carefully to their reading and help them when they come to words they don't yet know. Even though you may, at times, be surprised that a child has trouble identifying some of the words, be careful not to make the child feel pressured or anxious. Rather than saying something like “You know that word! You just read it on the other page!” consider saying something like “Let's think about that word, what are the sounds for the letters?”. Then, you might say “Now let's think about a word with (some of) those sounds that would make sense here.”



Note that, early on, children may only know the sounds for a few letters and, depending on the instruction they receive in school, may only have had the opportunity to read texts that include the sounds that have been taught. However, in reading with caregivers, children will often be interested in reading texts that include words which they cannot yet fully sound out. In these instances, it can be useful to read the text to the child and then offer the child the opportunity to read part (or all) of it themselves, relying on the letters and sounds they do know and their familiarity with the text.

Of course, if children know little or nothing about printed language, they are apt to “read” books by retelling stories that have been read to them. They do not know what printed words are, but they know what adults do with books and want to do the same.

It is also important to note that, in English, there are many words that cannot be accurately sounded out by beginning readers. Consider, for example, the words *was* and *they* which, when “sounded out,” would rhyme with *pass* and *key*, respectively. For such words, it can be useful to tell children the word and, particularly for words that occur often, to encourage them to name the word and name the letters in the word a few times. This conversation can help them learn the word so that they can identify it more easily in the future.

Avoid asking children to read when they are tired. For beginners, reading takes a lot of concentration and effort. Asking a tired child to read can lead to unpleasant experiences. If such experiences occur often, the child might come to think of reading as being unpleasant.

Promote intrinsic motivation. Motivation plays an important role in learning to read and write and in learning more generally. We want children to be “intrinsically” motivated to engage in reading and writing – that is, to want to read and write because of the pleasure and satisfaction that they bring. Motivation can be promoted when the caregiver is supportive, gives children some choice about what they read and write, helps them to pursue their interests, and provides lots of opportunities for easy reading.

In addition, it is important to avoid offering rewards to children for reading or to do so only on a very limited basis². We want children to see reading as a source of pleasure and as a form of entertainment. Rewarding them for engaging in reading can send just the opposite message (it is something one does to get a reward). Instead of saying things like “Let’s get your reading done and then you can watch TV” (which makes reading a job and TV the reward), caregivers can treat reading as a reward. For example, “Let’s get this room cleaned up and then we’ll have time for two books!”

Noticing what children do well and telling them also helps to promote intrinsic motivation. It is helpful to be specific and focus on children’s efforts. Tell children exactly what was done well. For example, rather than saying, “Great reading!” caregivers might say “You’re thinking like a reader! You thought about the sounds of the letters in the word. That helped you figure out what the word might be, then you checked to see if your word made sense in the sentence.”

As children’s reading and writing skills develop, it is useful to engage them in thinking about how they are changing as readers and writers. It might help to remind them of how easy it is to do something that was once challenging to them (like walking or riding a bike). Helping them understand that this progress will happen with reading and writing too can be very motivating... as long as they are not frequently being asked to read or write things that are too challenging for them.

² Rewards may be necessary to get some very reluctant readers to read. But, if caregivers are successful in finding reading materials that interest them and that they can read without too much difficulty, the rewards should be eliminated/forgotten about as soon as possible.