

Using Stories Effectively with Infants and Toddlers

Allow freedom and choice

Participating in story time should not be mandatory for very young children. Invite them to look at a book, but don't force them to do so. Also, pay attention to their cues of which story they may be interested in. Try to share stories with children throughout the day, not only at certain times (i.e., bedtime). Initiate stories when the situation seems right, and make time when children do the initiating.

Adjust expectations to fit children's abilities and preferences

Timing is everything. A hungry child will not usually be interested in a story, even if that story is one of her favorites. A toddler busy pushing his doll in the stroller will probably not want to stop for a story, either. And even if it seems like the optimal time for sharing a story, when distractions seem minimal, toddlers often will wander away if they are not ready for the type of story being shared or if something else captures their attention.

Show pleasure and enthusiasm

Our attitude as we share stories is critical if we want these experiences to be successful for infants and toddlers. Very young children are influenced greatly by our behavior, and they are keen observers of what we do and say. If we are enthusiastic, interested, and clearly enjoying the story, children will be more likely to feel these things, too. Pleasure is contagious – and so is boredom.

Be expressive

Being expressive when sharing a story helps young listeners engage with what they are hearing. Being expressive might mean using a soft voice for a gentle bedtime story, or making your voice loud and growling like a tiger when telling a story about zoo animals. This also entails changing your tone of voice or accent for different characters. Another part of being expressive is using gestures, facial expressions, and body language in ways that support the storytelling.

Follow children's cues

Children give many different cues or signs about how they like the stories we share with them. For the youngest children, those cues are likely to be conveyed through sounds and body language, such as gestures, wriggling, and facial expressions. As infants become toddlers, they can respond more explicitly by saying things such as, "Again," "More story," and "No," or even by getting up and simply walking away. Whenever possible, repeat a story that children express interest in hearing again. Depending on the length of the story and children's interest level, some story sharing could be quite long, while others will be much shorter. The desire for repetition, which is valuable for building vocabulary and developing language skills, shows that children are engaged.

Progression of a Young Child's Learning to Use Books

- Looks attentively at pictures in a book
- Recognizes a particular book
- Is able to turn the pages of a board book
- Points to pictures in a book
- Holds a book right side up
- Looks at a book from front to back, or whatever way is appropriate for the language in which the book is written and the culture from which it comes
- Recognizes a book by the cover
- Has a favorite story or book
- Makes comments about pictures in books
- "Reads" the words in a book (telling the story by looking at the pictures)
- Uses a word or phrase that clearly comes from a book or story with which the child is familiar
- Indicates that an adult reading a book has left out or added some words or skipped a page in a favorite story
- Predicts what might happen next or what the book is about from looking at the cover
- Tells a simple story
- Pretends to be "reading" to other children or to a doll or teddy
- Takes notice of letters and words in a book by pointing to them or asking about the print

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