

Helping Young Children Become Readers

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Donna's three-year-old daughter amazes her. It seems she is always bent over a book. She can't read yet, of course, but there she is, looking at the pictures, smiling.

From an early age, Donna tried to instill in her daughter a love of reading with simple activities, like reading books to her every day when she was an infant. Later, they would make up stories using toys as props. Now, it seems, her efforts are paying off.

But what does Donna do for an encore? How does she build on the love of reading her daughter has developed?

In Donna's case, she doesn't have to do much more than she is already doing.

Donna, for example, is an avid reader herself. It helps a great deal when parents read often. Children try to do what they see their parents do. If you watch a lot of television, you can expect your child to want to do the same. If you want to promote reading, read in front of your child regularly.

Donna's regular story time with her daughter should continue even when her daughter begins to read herself. Reading and being read to promotes the love of words and books. Even if a child is too young to understand all of the words, a regular story time builds an appreciation of reading.

When you read to your young child, be enthusiastic and animated. Let your voice reflect the excitement, anxiety, or sadness of the characters. Show that you enjoy reading.

Try to involve your child in the story. Point to pictures and ask your child what they are and what they have to do with the story. Ask what your child thinks will happen next.

Afterward, discuss the story and challenge your older child with other questions. You might ask how your child would feel if he or she were one of the characters in the story, or what your child would have done in a certain situation described in the book. Ask why he or she would do that, and what might happen as a result.

Also, try to create an enriching environment at home. Have books around the house, make them accessible, and give them as gifts.

Remember, children may not want to read every time you do. Go with the flow, and try again another time.

These steps may seem simple, and they are. But they help children enjoy reading and develop skills along the way to becoming accomplished readers.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.