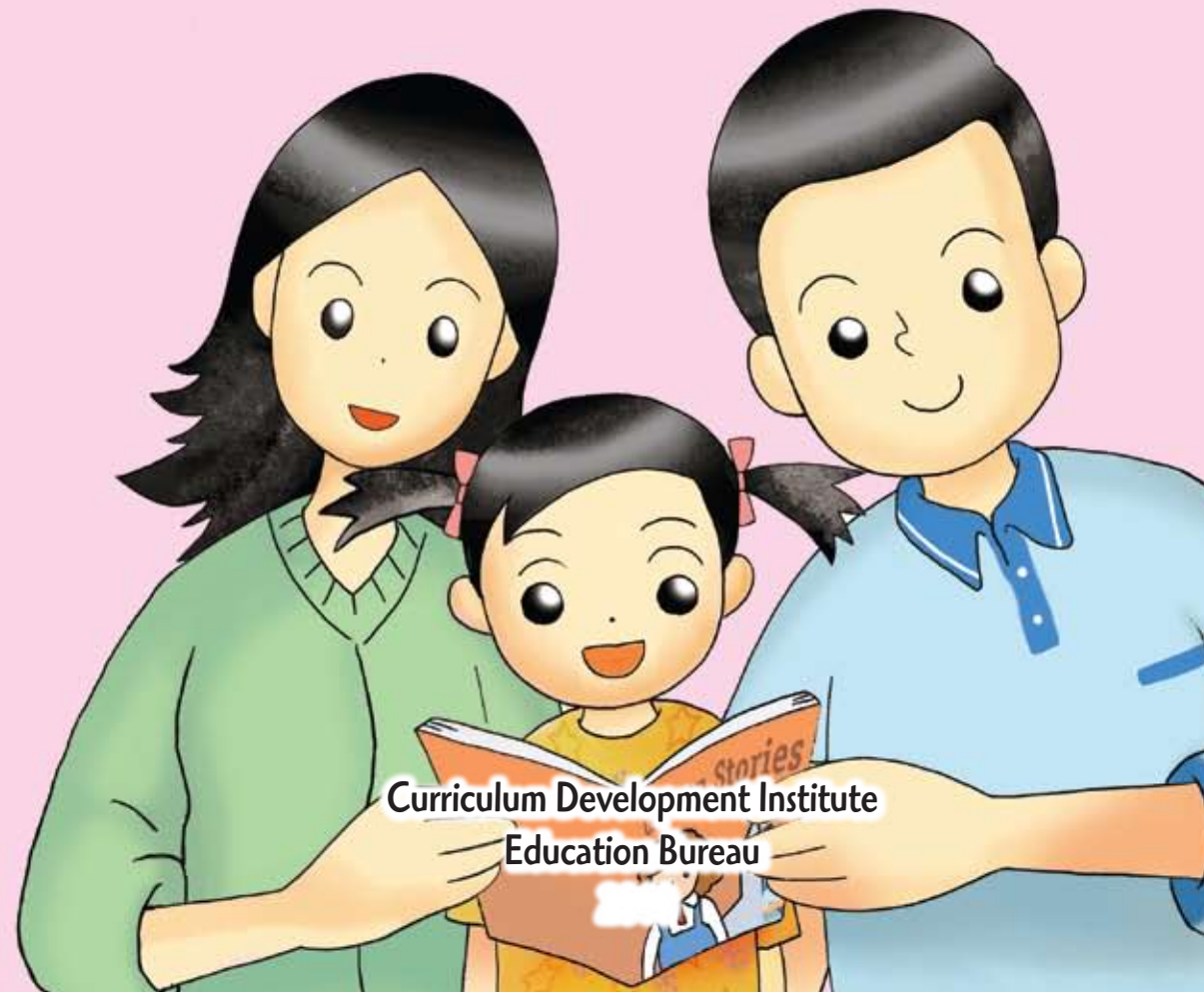


Parent-child Reading is Fun

for Parents of Children Aged 0 to 3



Curriculum Development Institute
Education Bureau

PREFACE

Reading is the foundation for learning. Early childhood is a critical stage in the developmental process. The development of a good reading habit in the early years can enhance language learning and knowledge acquisition. During this important period, parents should seize the opportunity to develop their children's interest and competence in reading so as to help them prepare for life-long learning.

The Education Bureau has always been keen to promote a 'Reading to Learn' culture, and schools have been working hard on it. In this respect, teacher guidance and home-school co-operation are equally important. In fact, the development of a child is a concerted effort. The home is the first learning environment for young children and parents are their first teachers. It is the best place to begin the cultivation of reading habits.

By reading together with their children, parents provide the opportunity for children to enjoy themselves and learn at the same time. Communication is enhanced through fun and sharing of feelings. Family members thus learn and grow together.

In 2001 and 2006, Hong Kong participated in 'The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study' (PIRLS). The 2006 findings showed that 9 to 10-year-old Primary 4 students of Hong Kong ranked second amongst those from 45 participating countries and regions. The PIRLS highlighted three factors which affected students' reading ability, including family reading activities, parental attitude towards reading, and family educational resources. Based on the results of the study, we have prepared this series of booklets to introduce parent-child reading and make suggestions on the related activities.

We hope that this series of booklets can help parents nurture their children based on their developmental characteristics and experience reading with them as a fun-filled family activity. With parental guidance and encouragement, young children would be able to develop good reading habits and build a strong foundation for communication skills and learner independence.



INTRODUCTION

The learning ability in a child is inborn. After birth, infants start learning from the environment through their sensory organs – eyes, ears, mouth, nose and skin. The more stimulation they receive, the stronger the brain cells develop, and the more intelligent the infants grow.

Family members should talk to infants frequently to stimulate the growth of audio nerves and help develop their language ability. Babies are exposed to a large amount of real-life vocabulary used by adults in the mother-tongue, which lays the foundation for reading ability.



Though babies cannot read words, they can 'read' gestures and facial expressions of adults. So it is essential for parents to talk, sing, smile and gesture to their babies.

By the age of 2 or 3, young children begin to recognise different symbols and words in their living environment. These symbols and words are everywhere – street signs, shop and restaurant signboards, station names, etc. Young children are motivated and interested as they learn and use them in their everyday lives.

All children love to play. Most parents buy toys for children on a regular basis. Smart toys stimulate the young minds. Picture books are smart toys. Help children develop a passion for 'playing' with books. Then, they will learn about book concepts, and reading habits will gradually be developed.

Young children are precious little darlings of the family. They need the guidance of adults in the learning process, and in return parents enjoy seeing them grow day by day. Through parent-child reading activities, the reading habit can be developed and a harmonious and happy family atmosphere will also be enhanced.

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1. Can an unborn child read?

Parents' words and actions

A child needs a peaceful environment to grow up. During the prenatal period, the unborn child can hear external sounds. So during pregnancy, if the mother is gentle, her child can feel the harmony and comfort inside her body. Expectant mothers should read according to their own likes. They could also start reading quietly and clearly to their unborn children to make them familiar with their voices. Parent-child relationship thus begins.



2. Reading literacy starts with listening and speaking

Babies have enormous learning abilities. Their sensory and cognitive intelligence are developing quickly. The eyesight of 5 to 6-month-old babies can follow moving objects with ease. They can imitate sounds of adults and start to babble. Around 8 months, babies can respond to simple instructions such as 'Give it to Mama' or 'Bye-bye'. At this stage, parents should expose them to plenty of brightly-coloured toys, talk to them gently and clearly, play with them and tell them stories. These can stimulate babies' visual, audio and cognitive development. They would gradually become aware of their surrounding through sounds and verbal expressions, and build up everyday vocabulary for a strong foundation in reading.

Talking frequently to children

The amount of vocabulary that children are exposed to influences their language development. From birth, parents should talk frequently to their children. Before young children acquire language skills, they have to go through the stage of listening to people talking. Parents are children's role models.

When talking to children, parents must make the message simple and clear with soft and gentle tones. They should use facial expressions to make children know that they are talking to them. Parents should not only ensure that children are listening, but also provide them with opportunities to respond and give positive feedback.

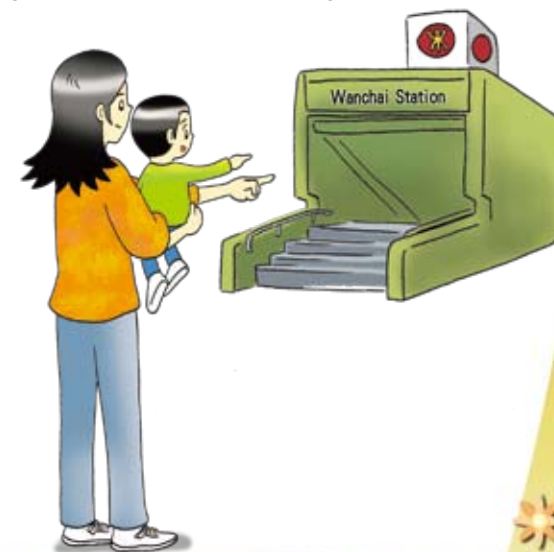


Be positive when talking to children. If children are always exposed to positive statements and words of praise such as 'well done', 'good job', they will be more confident in expressing themselves. Sometimes parents might use negative expressions such as 'don't', 'no', 'not so loud', etc. However, do not forget to point out what behaviour is acceptable and what can be done. When children start to behave properly again, praise them for positive reinforcement.

Fostering young children's interest in symbols with words from their surroundings

The sensory organs of 0 to 3-year-olds are developing rapidly. They are curious about everything. Parents should talk to them more frequently, arouse their curiosity towards the environment and develop their observation skills.

In general, starting from 3 months, parents can start naming children objects around them. Focus on letting them listen without insisting on any response.



For 9-month-old babies, parents can add and replace words in sentence patterns when talking to them. For instance, with a red balloon in their hands, parents can start saying, 'a balloon', and then 'a red balloon'. Then changing to a yellow balloon, parents can say 'a yellow balloon', and so on.

By the age of one, parents can talk about things as they occur in their daily lives. For instance, when walking along the street, if a child points to a vehicle and says 'car, car', the parent can respond by saying, 'Yes, this is a bus' or whatever vehicle type it is. At this stage, children are unable to speak in complete sentences, but are capable of grasping the meanings of adult speech.

By the age of two, children are capable of using limited vocabulary and short sentences to express themselves. Parents should encourage children to form complete sentences from broken phrases. Parents should accept that this is a transitional stage and it takes time to build up vocabulary and confidence in speaking.

There are plenty of reading resources for children in their living environment. Parents should make good use of words or symbols from their daily lives to motivate their children to explore language. Resources, e.g. brand names, bill boards, road signs, signposts, names of train stations, menus, can be found everywhere. Parents should make good use of opportunities they come across to read and explain the words or symbols to children. With continual effort, children would be able to make connection between what they see and what they hear.



The PIRLS 2006 found that the more family reading activities conducted in the early years, the greater were the children's reading abilities. These activities include reading picture books, story-telling, singing, playing letter games, word games, reading signboards and labels.

3. What can babies read?

At this stage of development, babies obviously cannot 'read' books. However, they can 'hear' books, which prepare them for reading. Sensory activities using lullabies, 'body' rhymes, and nursery rhymes are good starters for parent-child reading.

Lullabies

The soft beats and beautiful lyrics of lullabies pacify and put babies into sweet slumber. As parents caress gently and sing softly, babies can feel love, pleasure and security. For them, nothing is happier than sleeping with a parent's affection and company, and being lulled by their singing.



'Body' rhymes

'Head, shoulders, knees and toes' is a popular traditional 'body' rhyme. It runs like this, '...Head, shoulders, knees, and toes, knees and toes, eyes, and ears and mouth and nose'.

Parents gently hold both hands of babies while singing 'head, shoulders, knees, and toes'. In tune with the beat, parents can dance with young children to make them happy.

Young children love listening to the voices of parents and being caressed by them. 'Body' rhymes are thus very suitable reading materials for babies.

Modern 'body' rhymes go well with various body movements. With small children, parents can sing the songs in a lively manner while pointing at the child's body parts as they occur in the lyrics. With older children, parents can sit with them face to face, singing and demonstrating for their children to imitate. Such parent-child activity is good for both children's language and physical development. Most important of all, both parents and children will also have a strong sense of enjoyment.

Children's songs and nursery rhymes

Learning can be fun using children's songs and nursery rhymes. Children's favourite melodies help them move spontaneously and can be very enjoyable.



Parent-child Reading is Fun

4. Start 'playing' with books

Picture books are fun

It is important to help children love books in their early years. Children love to play and parents are willing to spend money on toys for them. Yet, do not be mistaken that toys and books are different. In fact, books are like 'toys' for children. There are plenty of books for babies in the market. They come in a variety of materials and designs and are durable educational 'toys'. Some are made of cardboard or cloth. There are also audio books and pop-up books.

Young children have no idea about books. When they pick up a book, they sometimes treat it like other toys, which they bite, throw around, grab or tear up. Parents need not be too concerned about such behaviour. Instead, they may pretend to be in pain and say to the child, 'Oh, it hurts.' When the child hears this, he/she usually stops misbehaving. Then parents can resume their reading with the children.

The PIRLS 2006 found that the more books children had at home, the better were their reading abilities.



Choosing books for young children

Most young children start reading picture books. So choose books which are simple, colourful and with limited words or no words at all. Look for simple stories which are related to children's everyday lives. It is preferable to have animals or young children as the main characters so as to arouse empathy and interest in reading.



In selecting books for children, parents should avoid those with sharp edges or loose parts as they are hazardous to children.

Parent-child Reading is Fun

From 'playing' with books to reading them, and from reading to 'loving' books

If young children have easy access to books and enjoy reading with parents, they will easily develop a liking for books. Parents should place children on their laps and read together. With young children, parents can start with wordless picture books. Pointing to the pictures, parents can tell children what is going on in a gentle voice. If there are words, parents can point to the words and read them out loud to children to make them know that apart from pictures, there are words in books. Children will gradually find out the difference between books and other toys and start to enjoy reading.



Parents can show children how to hold a book, the book title and the orientation for reading. They should start with the book cover, read the title, talk about the picture on the cover and let children turn over the pages to share the joy of reading.

Pleasurable parent-child reading activities

Through parent-child reading, parents can help young children get into an infinitely interesting world of new things and stories to develop their interest in books.

Suggested activity 1: Story-telling

Parents should talk frequently to young children to help them acquire different vocabulary for language development. Telling children stories in the mother-tongue is very effective in enriching their vocabulary.

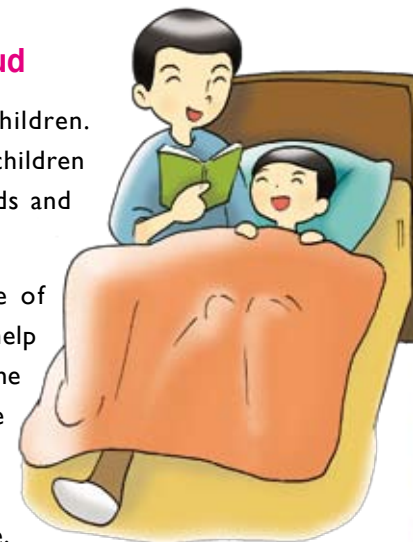
Young children love listening to stories. Great varieties of human characters, animals and things in stories involve different emotions and behaviour. Children may not have direct contact with these story-related vocabulary and behaviour in their daily lives but through reading, they can build up their vocabulary and widen their life experiences.

Suggested activity 2: Reading aloud

Parents can read stories aloud to children. The benefit of reading aloud is to help children recognise the relationship between words and their sounds.

To start off, parents can make use of pictures to talk about the storylines to help young children understand the content of the story. For instance, after reading 'The little rabbit runs and runs', parents can pause to ask, 'Where's the little rabbit?'. As young children point at the rabbit in the picture, parents can point at the words 'little rabbit'.

This helps children understand that apart from the picture which stands for the rabbit, the words are symbols which do the same thing. In this way, young children are helped to develop their interest in reading.



Suggested activity 3: Listening and singing songs

Children's songs are starters for children's literature. Children's songs bring knowledge as well as happiness with their own beat and rhythm. Young children are good at imitating and picking up the tune after a while. Listening to songs with them and listening to their singing also create a harmonious atmosphere at home. This will lead to further development of parent-child relationship.

5. Developing reading habits at an early age

It is only when young children find that reading can be fun would they continue to read. They enjoy the company of their parents and find all activities with parents fun-filled. So if parents wish children to develop good reading habits, they have to develop the habit of reading with them first.

Daily reading time

Sit comfortably and place young children on their lap. Make sure there is adequate lighting for reading. Spend not less than 30 minutes a day and be persistent. Young children do not have a long attention span. The 30-minute reading need not be completed in one go but can be made up of several small intervals. As children grow, the reading time can be gradually lengthened.



Parent-child Reading is Fun

Positive attitudes of parents

When reading with children, suspend other activities. Turn off the television. Give them full attention to make them concentrate on reading.

Always speak gently while reading to children and make changes to the intonation as the storylines develop. In this way, parents will attract children's attention and make reading fun.

Young children often request the same story or book to be read over and over again. Some parents may worry that they learn nothing new. In fact, young children are attached to things which are familiar to them and stories are no exception. They often imagine role playing their favourite characters in the book and enjoy the process repeatedly. So parents should be alert to children's reactions. There is no problem reading a book again and again if the child loves listening to the same story.



Maintaining a happy atmosphere

The younger the children, the shorter their attention span. When children show reluctance to go on reading, it is time to stop. There is no need to finish reading the whole story but parents can pick up the same story some other time. Forcing children to continue will provoke resistance to reading. So, if parents are in a relaxed and happy mood, children will enjoy the reading time.

Parent-child Reading is Fun

6. Tips for parents

Lots of praise, lots of encouragement

After birth, young children need to acquire life skills and knowledge through learning. Praise is often the driving force that motivates children to advance. Parents' recognition and encouragement give a sense of achievement for children to strive for further improvement.



Parent-child reading – no substitute for parents

If parents can form an intimate relationship with babies in the first year of birth, young children will develop a sense of security. And when children grow up, they will have more confidence and trust with the world and other people.



Child-rearing is the parents' mission. The bond between parents and children is by birth. Working parents may have to rely on nannies to look after their children. Though a good nanny can give parents some peace of mind, there is no substitute for the role of parents. No matter how busy they are, parental involvement in parent-child reading activities cannot be replaced.

Experiencing the joy of reading

Young children should acquire language skills in their daily lives. The richer their life experiences are, the more easily their vocabulary grows. Parents should give children plenty of opportunities to make use of such vocabulary in their daily conversations. At this stage, children's performance should not be 'assessed'. There is no need to worry or get upset by their mistakes.

Every child is unique, not only in personality, learning style and reading interest, but also in learning approach and pace. Parents should neither make comparisons among children, nor should they get over-anxious and give them undue pressure. As for pronunciation and word recognition, parents should not demand too much from their children. Rather, parents should demonstrate and provide guidance in a more natural way in accordance with their children's performance. To prevent children from losing interest in reading, parents for instance could say, 'Would you like to read this with me?'

Parents can nurture reading interest and habits based on children's personality and preferences. They should schedule an appropriate and regular reading time to keep children's interest alive. The main purpose of reading in the early years is to help develop a love for reading.

Reading stories which are short

Young children have a very short attention span. When children are in a happy mood, parents should tell and read short stories to them over and over again, in simple language using gestures, pictures and objects. This will help children learn about adult speech. Long-winded stories should be avoided for reading aloud.



Appendix: Websites for parents



Award-Winning Chinese and English Books for Children and Young Adults (Book Lists), Education Bureau
<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/4-key-tasks/reading-to-learn/reading-and-learning-resources/award-books/index.html>

English Campus, Hong Kong Reading City
<https://www.hkedcity.net/english/en/>

Reading to Learn, Education Bureau
<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/4-key-tasks/reading-to-learn/index.html>

Recommended Reading, Hong Kong Public Libraries
<https://www.hkpl.gov.hk/en/kids/recommended/reading.html>

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The full text of this booklet is available at:
<http://www.edb.gov.hk/pere>

Comments and enquiries

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