

Creative Ways to Lead Kids to Reading and Writing



by Karen Stephens

Every child's birthright is the capacity to grasp spoken as well as written language. From achieving success in school and career, to forging loving bonds with family and community, language mastery is a lifelong asset. As with most things worth learning, parents and caregivers contribute enormously to children's abilities to read and write. The first step along that path is motivating children to WANT to do so. As children comprehend the relationship between using language and getting their needs met, (getting what they want, when they want it), language usage increases quickly.

Children need experiences that gradually introduce them to the skills required to listen, speak, read, and write. Adults take language for granted, but it really does require coordination of multiple skills. Some are quite complex.

For instance, to make sense of a spoken word, children must be able to hear the difference between the sounds. To perceive the difference between the two written words, they must see the small difference between letters. Take two very simple words, "bad" and "dad." You have to admit; those words look more alike than different. Even the letters "b" and "d" look a lot alike! The difference is just a matter of where you put the stick on the round circle. The difference in how a letter sounds or reads may be small, but that difference makes or breaks communication.

And, of course, to make things more complicated, understanding sound-alike words takes even more finesse. Kids must adjust to *situational* spelling and pronunciation: "She read the paper," is very different from "She red the paper." And even words spelled the same turn out to SOUND different according to tense and context. "Read" is pronounced differently in "I read the paper," than it is in "I'd like to read the paper."

One little misunderstanding in pronunciation, writing, or reading undermines communication — and can make you feel stupid, to boot. When communication problems arise, other problems brew, too. Kids can tell you that confusion doesn't lead to being able to follow directions or doing what parents or teachers expect.

Mastering language takes alert observation skills and the ability to focus on small details. The good news is, almost all kids are good at those tasks — especially when properly motivated and gradually prepared. Following are ideas to build skills needed to help children learn to read and write. Find time to put a few into practice. (For developing language skills related to listening and speaking, see Parenting Exchange column "*Early Experiences Lay the Foundation for Language Development.*")

- Be a good role model. Talk with children daily. Make them real back and forth conversations about things that interest the kids. Don't lecture and ramble on. It's boring and puts your own language skills to more use than the child's.)
- When you converse with the children, be engaged, animated, and responsive. Avoid responding with vacant "uh-huhs" or children won't be able to refine their own speaking skills through give and take conversation.

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- When responding to children's questions or comments, gradually include new words to build their vocabulary.
- As your child grows in language ability, use increasingly complex sentence structure. Small increments are best; otherwise you overwhelm kids and leave them clueless about your intent and/or meaning.
- Within kids' eye-shot, read daily for pleasure as well as business. Keep books, newspapers, and magazines around. When kids ask a question you don't know, be honest and show that you, too, turn to books to learn.
- Visit the children's library together often.
- Work on puzzles and play matching and memory games.
- Enroll your child in a book club through your child care. The paperback books are a real deal, and kids are always excited when they arrive.
- Read together daily. With younger kids, you should read out loud. As children begin to read, take turns reading aloud. And be warned, even when children can read, don't assume they no longer want you to read aloud to them. Some kids pretend they CAN'T read because they're afraid their parents will stop reading to them! (Endearing, don't you think?)
- Do all you can to associate reading and writing with pleasant experiences and family routines, traditions, or rituals. For instance, include kids in regular communication with extended family, first by drawing pictures and later by adding written sentiments.
- Use routines to highlight reading — the breakfast cereal box, school or child care lunch menu, bus schedule, or even newspaper headlines. And of course, reading together is a wonderful way to ease kids into naptime and bedtime. There are even plastic books these days so little tykes can read during bath time!
- Create a space so children have a special reading nook of their own. Provide a scaled-down book case, expense doesn't matter, just stability. Use whatever is available, wood shelving or a plastic crate. A bookcase of their own helps kids take pride in their personal library and teaches them to care for books with respect. Stock the bookcase with stories and magazines geared to their age and interests.
- To add comfort to the book nook, provide a good light and a child-sized rocker or a bean bag or even an easy chair. A plant, aquarium, or stuffed animals make the spot cozy and inviting. Book jackets from picture books can be made into posters or a hanging mobile for the area.
- To encourage interest in writing, provide a small table with chair or even a small desk. A chalk board with colored chalk encourages kids to draw pictures, letters, and numbers. Provide paper and writing tools, like crayons, markers, or colored pencils.
- Provide items that encourage language through pretend play. For instance, a business office can be set up using your junk mail and an "in" and "out" box. Kids can read the mail and pretend it is bills or letters. Blank envelopes and paper, with an old checkbook from mom or dad, let kids act out paying the bills. Kids also love to create a school, post office, or newspaper room through pretend play. And don't forget practice for speaking skills. Kids enjoy creating their own television or radio station with old boxes and such.
- To build pride and name recognition, give kids a water-based ink pad and a wooden stamp with their name printed on it. They can use them to label their books. (The first letter in the name should be upper case and the rest lower case. That model helps kids learn the rules of written language.)
- Kids can also create their own book plate by using permanent markers to write their names on cutout 4" squares of ConTac® paper. Let them create a colorful design around the book plate borders to make them unique and as fancy as *store-bought*.
- Show how reading and writing are used in real daily life. Take a grocery list to the store with you. Let your child check off items placed in the cart. Explain how you read signs in aisles to know where to find specific foods. At restaurants, point out items on menus that inform people of choices.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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