

Reading to Your Baby in the Neonatal ICU



Even before infants are born, they can hear! When inside the mother's body, infants begin hearing sounds at about 25 weeks. We know that because they respond to loud noise (e.g., heart rate and breathing patterns change). By 32 weeks, they begin to learn (e.g., infants begin to know mother's voice, simple music, normal everyday sounds).

Before birth, the mother's voice is the most important sound for infants to listen to while their hearing is developing. But when infants are born too soon and need to stay in the hospital NICU, the sounds they hear are not what they are used to. Instead of human voices and noises of daily life, they hear monitors and other equipment, as well as long stretches of no sound at all. This change in what they hear can slow down infants' language development later on. Hearing human voices early on is needed for normal speech and language skills development. The time between 32 weeks and 39 – 40 weeks is key for brain development (and continues through the age of 3 years). While in the NICU and beyond, parents and caregivers can help their infant's language development during this important time.

So what should you do?

- Read to your child using a calm, steady voice. Don't read too loudly or change the volume of your voice up and down too much.
- Watch how your baby is acting to see if he/she is ready to enjoy and be a part of this activity. Lower your volume or slow the pace of your voice if you see your baby is stressed or not paying attention. If your baby continues to be stressed or isn't interested, stop reading and soothe your infant.
- You can also talk to or sing simple lullabies to your infant, keeping a steady rhythm and volume.

While you're helping your baby's language development, you're also building a closer relationship with your baby, improving your baby's health. Reading, talking or singing to your baby can be done at any time, whether skin-to-skin or in when he/she is in the isolette.

If you have more questions, please contact Children's Therapy at 425.656.4215 and ask to speak with a NICU Speech-Language Pathologist. If you would like to donate books to future Valley NICU families, visit the Starlight Children's Foundation Wish List at valleymed.org/childrenstherapy.

Birth Center Neonatal ICU Pediatrics

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Reading to Your Toddler and Preschooler

Between the ages of 0 – 2 years, babies and toddlers start to enjoy book reading with others, learning to turn pages, holding the book right-side up, learning to tell print from pictures, understanding rhyme, and pretending to read when others are reading.

Reading skills continue to grow into the preschool years as children ages 2 – 5 years start to understand:

- Letters have sounds by learning the alphabet song and recognizing and naming letters
- Print is read left-right
- Pages need turning to get to the next part of the story

Toddlers and preschoolers also begin dividing sentences into words and words into syllables, rhyming, and blending sounds together to make full words. Finally, they are learning to see their own name in print and may recognize signs in their environment (e.g., store and restaurant names).^{*} However, as babies grow to toddlers and become more active, reading books together can feel more challenging!

If you have concerns about your child's speech or language development, talk with your pediatrician family medicine doctor about a referral to a Speech-Language Pathologist

So what can you do to help?

- **Don't worry about reading all the words!** If your child is not ready to listen to a long story, use words or short phrases to talk about the pictures instead.
- **Make it fun and active!** Use a silly voice or a sing-song tone. Tap the pictures to get your child's attention. Open the pages very slowly...to make it more exciting! Act out what you see!
- **Share books face-to-face.** Sit side-by-side so that you can look at both the book and each other's faces. Use dramatic facial expressions to make the book come alive!
- **Give your child chances to join in the fun.** Use each page as a chance to take a turn—first you do it, then help your child do it.
- **Point to a picture and name it, or make a sound.** Talk about the action on the page, then act it out: when a character runs, pretend to run! When a character cries, pretend to cry!
- **Look for books that are interesting to your child.** Find topics your child likes (from favorite animals to movie characters); lift-the-flap books; touchy-feely books with textures. Ask your librarian for help.
- **Allow your child to request the same story MANY times!**
 - Doing things over and over helps children learn. And just like children enjoy hearing familiar songs, they enjoy familiar books.
 - Children especially enjoy when they can look forward to a "routine" in a book. For example, "I know when I touch the lion picture, Mommy will make a loud growl!"; "I know when Daddy points to the truck. I will say, "Beep!"



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