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INTRODUCTION

I have loved books my whole life. I was fortunate to be raised in a home that valued words and literature, and my parents read to me throughout my childhood and beyond. I vividly remember my father reading to me in my early teens; though, perhaps, he was reading to my younger brothers and I was just part of the action. Regardless, I was hooked by the sound of words being recited by someone I loved and admired. My mother, also a teacher librarian, filled our house with quality books. She introduced me to some of my all-time favourites, including *Dacey's Song* (Cynthia Voigt), *Came Back to Show You I Could Fly* (Robin Klein) and John Marsden's iconic *So Much to Tell You* – which blew my angsty teenage brain!

When I had my first child it came as something of a shock that others around me were not reading to their babies. And in my role at the time as national vice-president of the Children's Book Council of Australia, I was asked several times over by the media and parents about the 'right age' to start reading to children. The answer seemed obvious to me – from birth, of course! I would tell people that books were an essential newborn accessory. But I also had to be mindful that not everyone had my upbringing or training or knowledge of childhood literacy. On a personal level, fostering a love of reading in my children seemed to be the easiest part of parenting. I find being a parent a very hard job at times and every stage of child-rearing seems to be filled with guilt. I do, however, feel confident that I will be able to look back and say, 'But I read to them and gave them the joy of books' and know that I did my best.

I have been a primary school teacher and teacher librarian for

over twenty years now. As a parent and educator, I know how beneficial it is for children to enter the education system bubbling with excitement about words, images and ideas. Flashcards or early online reading programs won't instil this joy in your little one, but gorgeous books will. Immersing your child in language in all forms – stories and songs and nursery rhymes – is one of the best ways you can give them a head start and help them to reach their academic potential. We educators are always so grateful to the families who read to their children and support the education process in this way. It is possible to encourage the joy of recreational reading and still engage with crucial skill development plus meet the demands of the school curriculum and data requirements, but families are instrumental in helping us achieve this.

Raising Readers is a guide for parents and caregivers, and a resource for educators. Like all good non-fiction books (my teacher librarian hat is on now), you can dip into this book as needed or you can read it from start to finish. I will walk you through each stage of a child's literacy development – from birth to adolescence – and offer advice, connect you with the right books at the right times, share pieces of wisdom from my literary friends, as well as some tips and tricks to ensure your family's or classroom's reading journeys are as memorable and as engaging as they can be.

Throughout the book I refer to school libraries and library staff as if they exist in every school. I do this because they darned well should and the research supports this. I don't believe good school libraries and quality teacher librarians and library staff are a thing of the past, but if you are in a school without a library or teacher librarian, I hope that this book offers you guidance. We all have an invaluable part to play in ensuring the young people in our lives fall in love with books. It is a gift they will cherish forever.

CHAPTER ONE

RAISING A READER – THE EARLY YEARS



FROM BABY TO TWO YEARS OLD

Literacy learning begins at birth and the foundations for becoming a reader are firmly established during the early years of life.¹ Shortly after birth, infants respond to sound, often turning towards it, and start focusing their vision. After three to four months of listening and looking at the world, many infants will begin to reach for objects.² As they gain control over their movements, babies will explore books in the same way they do a rattle or toy. They will chew them, turn them over and stare at them. They will be intrigued by bright, contrasting colours, and soothed by a calm voice reading a story or singing a song. For babies, hearing the rhythm of words and the expression in voices builds a rich and diverse network of language in their developing brains.

I read a large number of novels when I had newborns as I found myself sitting in chairs rocking or feeding the baby for many hours a day. I became adept at cradling my e-reader in one hand in exactly the right position – at this stage paper books didn't seem safe as I needed to use two hands and no one wants to drop a brick of a

novel on their newborn! I mostly read my books aloud and while I'm sure the content was wildly inappropriate, I figured that my babies didn't understand the words. I did know, however, that they were hearing language that was far more complex and diverse than if I was just having a casual chat with them – though, of course, casual chats are also extremely important!³ Some people may feel silly reading to a baby or wonder what the point is, but the key here is exposure. The more you read aloud to a child, the more words they'll be exposed to and the more solid their oral language foundation for future literacy skills will be.

From around six months old, babies who have been read to regularly will begin to identify a book as more than just a colourful object – the book will signal that 'it's time for a story'. This is especially the case when parents or caregivers respond by reading the book whenever the baby hands one to them.⁴ Babies may develop a liking for a particular book and frequently pick it up to be read, or become animated and excited when a favourite book is re-read.

Very early on, a baby develops literacy skills using all their senses, including touch. The sense of touch enables babies to attach meaning to objects, from cups and shoes to the pet dog and, of course, books. They explore the mechanics of how books work by turning pages and touching the covers and illustrations. Lift-the-flap and touch-and-feel titles are wonderful for babies and toddlers because they encourage physical engagement with books. Touch and physical contact are finely integrated in language development,⁵ from the parent or carer cuddling the child when reading, to the child exploring the physical nature of a book, and then later, as early readers, when they follow words with their finger as they read text or manipulate digital texts on a tablet device. Having plenty of books around the home and within easy access of children provides ample opportunities to hold, explore and play with books.

From around ten months old, babies may comprehend their first word, and by twelve months many will say their first word. Acquiring and comprehending words is a slow process until around eighteen months when many children become rapid word learners.⁶

Toddlers are little sponges, soaking up everything there is to learn. They adore words, nursery rhymes, songs and books. Of course, toddlers can also be destructive! Because they are still learning how a book works and because they use *all* their senses to ‘read’, chewing and ripping may occur. Do not let this stop you from reading to them. This is the time to get your kids hooked on books.

For younger toddlers I think board books are a great option for unsupervised book time as they are relatively indestructible. However, the text in board books is often minimal, so they should not make up your entire collection for this age group. It’s important to also introduce beautiful picture books rich in both language and artwork. Exposing little ones to gorgeous illustrations, exquisite writing and the joy of story is the best way to help them fall in love with books and lay strong oral foundations.

The social nature of reading comes into play around this time, as toddlers become aware of their peers and are able to engage in literacy opportunities in unstructured learning environments.⁷ Toddlers in childcare or playgroups may use books in the same way they will use toys – one may show another how it works, there will be tussles over favourites and, *eventually*, there will be sharing and exchanging of books. When toddlers share a book they are supporting each other in their learning,⁸ for example, one child might name the animals in the illustrations and the other might make the sounds. In an early education centre, toddlers will often be observed reaching for a book that was previously shared by an educator. They may ‘re-read’ the book for themselves and this independent and unstructured reading time is as meaningful as the group reading session; in fact, it is one of the earliest forms of literate behaviour.

Reading with babies and toddlers

Here are some tips to help make reading with your baby or toddler a fun experience for you both, the operative word being FUN!

- Choose a time when your baby is content and alert.
- Cuddle up with your child. Reading is the perfect time for physical bonding.
- Choose books with fabulous pictures and minimal but engaging text.
- Keep reading sessions short, snappy and regular. Don't feel like you have to finish the book. You might only get through a few pages at a time.
- Babies and toddlers love looking at pictures of themselves and their loved ones, so consider making a photo book – a lovely keepsake as well as a literacy tool.
- Feel free to bounce or tickle or rock your baby as you read – anything that makes reading fun. The same applies to toddlers. Allow them to wriggle and spin as you read. They are (mostly) not going to sit still for the length of a book.
- Modulate your voice and use expression to make the story come alive. Add in animal noises or other sound effects.
- Allow children to chew, touch and smell their books to encourage engaging their senses. This approach may not be ideal in an early-education environment but it's totally okay at home!
- Be prepared to lose a book or two. When there are toddlers in the house, have a selection of books within their reach so they can instigate reading sessions, but keep your precious ones higher up for one-on-one reading time. That said, forget pop-up books for the time being. They'll be shredded in a nanosecond.