

# TRUE / SLANT

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## The Young Parents' Guide to Teaching Kids to Read

After I left my first teaching position and moved to another state for grad school, I stayed in touch with many of my former students via e-mail. More than once in the years that followed, I received messages that contained the words "I'm pregnant." Although it was not my place to judge, I was disappointed to see that in almost every case, my talented girls' college plans were derailed. Feeling frustrated and wanting to be supportive in some way, I decided to put my energy into helping them become good "first teachers" to their children. This meant, first and foremost, a focus on language development and literacy.

In the beginning, I simply bought children's books for the girls and emphasized the importance of reading to their kids each day. Later, I decided more support might be in order, so I put together a detailed letter (below) for them. Because I was in a different state, I wasn't able to model any reading strategies for my girls. When I returned to the classroom last year, though, I did this with some of my juniors and seniors who had babies. I would sit next to them and read through a few pages of a children's book as if they were the children. Along the way I explained what I was doing and why (e.g., changing the inflection in my voice, pointing to things, asking questions). Then, I had them read the second half of the book to me as if I were a child.

I think all young parents could benefit from reading the following letter and seeing these reading strategies modeled for them by friends or relatives who have experience reading to children.

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Dear Jessica,

A couple of years ago, I was hanging out with my friend Justin and his wife Kelsey. Their two-year-old daughter, Eden, approached me with some books; she wanted me to read to her. As she sat on my lap and we began flipping through the book, it was clear I had no idea what I was doing. Justin made fun of me for weeks, but he also shared some of his strategies for reading with Eden. About a month later, Eden approached me with another book. This time I was ready, and Eden and I had a great time reading about Curious George's movie theater adventure.

Reading is the key to most things in life. In elementary, middle, and high school, good reading skills are necessary to succeed not only in English, but in math, science, history, and every other subject. College is all about reading and comprehending large quantities of information. And those people with the most money and power in society (businesspeople, lawyers, doctors, politicians) are generally the people who read and understand what they read better than everyone else.

But how do children become good readers? And how do they learn to love reading? These are important questions, and as a new mother I thought you might like to hear the perspectives of other parents of young children. I recently e-mailed a bunch of my friends and asked them to write about how they read with their children. Though my friends' backgrounds are different—they are black, white, and Hispanic; they are male and female; they range in age from mid-20s to late-30s; and they are graduate students, teachers, scientists, and stay-at-home moms—they are similar in that all are highly educated. Everyone who you'll hear from on the following pages has a master's degree, and most have or are working on their doctorates. I hope their words prove helpful as you take on the awesome responsibility of being Crystal's first teacher.

As you provide Crystal with the benefits of reading, it is important to keep in mind the negative effects of television. Following is an excerpt from the [University of Michigan Health System's Web site on parenting](#):

*The American Academy of Pediatrics takes a "better-safe-than-sorry" stance on TV for young children:*

It may be tempting to put your infant or toddler in front of the television, especially to watch shows created just for children under age two. But the American Academy of Pediatrics says: **Don't do it!**

These early years are crucial in a child's development. The Academy is concerned about the impact of television programming intended for children younger than age two and how it could affect your child's development....

Any positive effect of television on infants and toddlers is still open to question, but the benefits of parent-child interactions are proven. Under age two, talking, singing, reading, listening to music or playing are far more important to a child's development than any TV show.

*In addition, TV can discourage and replace reading. Reading requires much more thinking than television, and we know that reading fosters young people's healthy brain development. Kids growing up in families in which the TV is on always or most of the time spend less time reading and being read to, and are less likely to be able to read."*

I hope the information above and below is useful to you!



Friend #1: TIM

When children are very young, the biggest benefit of reading to them is the fact that they are being exposed to language. They need to hear as many words as possible. When kids are very young (i.e., before they know what a book is), you can read them anything you want—a newspaper, a book you are reading yourself, a children's book, etc. After children begin to know what a book is, the benefits of reading are the continued language exposure and their becoming familiar with how a book works—that it has letters and words in it, etc. When kids are of preschool age (3 or 4), the most beneficial aspect of reading to them is in the interaction. For example, the parent says, "What is this letter? What sound does it make? Can you point to the picture of the cat?"

I would also emphasize the importance of new parents reading books about parenting. There are many issues that come up that are very difficult to deal with. Here are some books that my wife and I have found helpful:

*Secrets of the Baby Whisperer*  
*What to Expect When You're Expecting*  
*The Girlfriends' Guide to Surviving the First Year of Motherhood*  
*Breastfeeding for Dummies*  
*Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child*



Friend #2: KAREN

We have read to Thomas every since we adopted him from Guatemala (he was 6 months old). He has more books than toys. Here are some observations. When kids are young they will just want to explore the book—put in mouth, thumb through pages, look at pictures. Don't get discouraged if they won't sit still. Make the reading fun by changing your voice, pointing and identifying pictures, asking questions, making sounds. Make the book come alive and you and the kids will love reading. When the children are very young, make reading part of the bedtime procedure. It's a great way to settle down for the night after a bath and before the crib. It is also helpful to read the same book as the last book before bed—*Goodnight Moon, Time for Bed* is the one we use each night. This signals the child that it is time for bed and the reading is finished. Use books that have texture for kids under 1, and use books that pop up when kids are 1-2.

And don't worry about reading ALL the words. Some parents get frustrated because the book is too long. Just select some words and summarize so the child hears language and can help turn the pages. Books should be interactive. If there is a public library around, most have storytime and that is also good to attend.



Friend #3: MICHELE

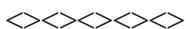
I will preface my remarks by saying...when I was a freshman in college my daughter was one. I gave birth to my daughter the summer I graduated from high school. Then I worked full-time for a year and I have been in school ever since. I earned a bachelor's and master's, and now I am working on my doctorate. I did this as a teenage single parent. I share this as a form of encouragement—you can accomplish whatever you want if you are dedicated and focused. Raising a child is a lot of work, but it also brings great rewards which can complement any situation.

I started reading short books to Vicky as an infant. Additionally, her childcare provider read to her during the day. On average, she was probably read to about 20 minutes a day between ages 0 and 4. We read any children's book we could get a hold of, such as Dr. Seuss, Blue's Clues, and Sesame Street. Some of them we owned and some we borrowed from libraries. From age 0-1, I read to Vicky without pointing. Then I switched and wanted to help her recognize letters and sounds. This is where more of the pointing came in. As she got older, I pointed to entire words to foster her reading skills. Now, Vicky is 8 and we take turns reading to each other. She is an excellent reader.



Friend #4: JAMELLE

I began reading to my children while I was pregnant, around the 6th month or so. I also sang to them daily. Once each of my sons was born, I continued to sing to them and I rarely talked to them using "baby talk." In terms of reading when they were infants, I would read whatever was near me when I sat to nurse or cuddle with them. If it was a children's book, I'd read that. If it was the newspaper that was handy, I'd read that. If it was something I had to read for work, it would be that. As the children got older, I began reading books with rhyming, sing-song like rhythms. I would also find books with subjects that were of interest to the boys. I'd even ask questions about what they heard me read and about the pictures (which is referred to as "picture walk"). Even now that my oldest son is nearly 8 and can read on his own, I read to him when he asks. My reading to him models fluent reading that he can emulate in his own reading.



Friend #5: JENNIFER

I started reading to my son the week he was born. I thought it was important to get him into the habit early and it also gave me something to do with him when I was a clueless new mom! I really don't think it matters much what you read to your baby early on. For example, my husband used to read some of his *Business Week* magazine to the baby so that both of them could be entertained! Now that my son is 7 months old, I read to him before every nap and before bedtime—*Curious George*, Dr. Suess, and books of nursery rhymes are some examples. My husband and I read the same book to him every night before bed. He can now reach and grab, so sometimes he holds the book himself. I do point to different objects and describe what is going on in addition to just reading the words in the book. When he was first born I read to him for only a few minutes a day, now I read to him for several minutes at a time, 3-4 times a day.



Friend #6: SERGIO

Kate will be four months old next week, so I will share my limited experience. I talk to Kate (not at her or around her) all the time—while she is eating, playing, and especially when I am changing her diaper. Research supports the notion that all verbal interaction, not just reading to the child, is beneficial. Kate has many books, and I choose ones with bright, big pictures to read to her now. Sometimes she will focus on the pictures that I point out to her, but mostly she is interested in grabbing at the pages as I turn them. More important than the content or the pictures is the routine of story time that we are developing.

When she gets a bit older, my wife and I will start taking her to story time at the library or Barnes & Noble (these are usually held in the mornings). The library is a great resource. I will sometimes check out 10-15 books at a time so Kate gets some variety in what I read to her. Here are some books we've purchased for Kate:

*Ten Little Ladybugs*  
*Happy Baby ABC*  
*More Spaghetti, I Say!*



Friend #7: STEPHANIE

We adopted Carlos from a Spanish speaking family when he was 10 1/2 months old, so I don't know for sure what I would have done with a younger little one who was exposed to English from birth. But here goes:

We started reading to Carlos right away when we got him. We read books for about 15 minutes after each naptime as well as before bed. One of the most important things for kids is a routine. We found that books with large bright pictures that weren't overly cluttered on a page worked best, such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*. We pointed at the picture and just named it. He didn't want to look at one book for longer than a minute or two. Over the next few weeks, he was able to make it through a whole book, still with us just naming the pictures and pointing. Sometimes we'd add what the animal said. With *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* in particular, we then started adding adjectives: brown bear, red bird, yellow duck, etc. A week or two later we read the left side of the page: brown bear, brown bear what do you see? Red bird, red bird what do you see? We've been doing this for quite a while now. He's 15 months old and we are just now able to read the entire book, word for word: brown bear, brown bear, what do you see? I see a red bird looking at me. Red bird, red bird what do you see? I see a yellow duck looking at me. Etc.

The key for us has been choosing books that have short rhythmic sounds, or books that we can sing. For example, there is a series of extended nursery rhyme books by Iza Trapani that Carlos loves. The words of the book can be sung to the tune of the familiar nursery rhyme: The Itsy Bitsy Spider and I'm a Little Teapot are his favorites. He also likes the book *Skip to My Lou* by Nadine Westcott. He has also enjoyed since he was about a

year old a regular nursery rhyme book that we have. Nursery rhymes are short, rhythmic, and can be sung! He loves them! (Baa, Baa Black Sheep is his favorite.) We also sing quite a bit even when we're not reading. For example, instead of yelling at him to help clean up his toys, my husband or I will take his hand and sing the 'clean up song,' put toys in his hand and lead him to put them away.

We can now read books to Carlos for up to half an hour. I think another key is to take your child's lead in what he or she is interested in. Carlos loves animals, so we read a lot of animal books. He loves airplanes, so we're looking for airplane books. He loves music, so like I said above, we sing books whenever we can. He also likes when we can do motions with books such as *Mrs. Wishy Washy* and *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*.

We really like "board books" right now that he's still young, so that he can hold them and handle them too without ripping the pages. Board books are usually small square books that just have way thicker pages.

We have a "stop-drop-and-read" policy in the house. If Carlos ever wants me or my husband to read him a book, we stop what we're doing and read to him (within reason).