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# Introduction

You are your child's first and best reading teacher. What you do during these toddler and preschool days makes all the difference in whether your child learns to read easily or has a difficult time, starts further back than his readiness level or comes to more formal education at just the right place.

You have an important role to play. But you may wonder,

“How should I get started?”

“Will what I do help, not hinder, my child's reading readiness?”

“What if my child isn't reading when he enters kindergarten?”

“Doesn't my child just need to play?”

The first thing you need to do is RELAX! What this book will do is help you talk, listen, and read with your child in a way that actively promotes reading readiness without stress—and without pushing your child. It won't take much effort and the results will amaze you. If you are excited about something, your child is likely to be excited, too. Formal reading “instruction” will come later.

You know your child best, and you realize that these pre-kindergarten years are extraordinary. You begin to prepare a child to read by regularly engaging in three core activities you already do with your toddler or preschool child. These are the simple, big reading readiness ideas in this book: you engage in great conversations, you engage him in read-alouds, and you build his ability to listen and hear sounds.

Right now, your preschooler needs a lot of background experience to get ready to read. You'll provide that experience through easy-to-do games and activities, talking together, and reading. You'll understand that reading readiness is a lot like taking a journey: everyone gets to the end, but at a different time. There's no need to “rush to read.” Instead of pushing your child, you respect where your child is on the road to reading. This book will help you learn to choose just-right activities that match to your child's reading readiness level. With this approach, by

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the time he gets to preschool or kindergarten, he will be well on the way to being a strong reader.

## **How This Book Can Help**

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Consider this *your* handbook, one that will grow right along with your child. It's packed with information made especially for busy families, and it includes many easy, fun activities to do at home or on the go with your child.

You can begin to use this book when your child is still a toddler, and, if that is the case, use the simplest activities. Access it more frequently when your child is three or four. And refer to the activities in the last chapter during the year before your child goes to kindergarten.

Take your time and explore it early. You can begin to play with a few ideas like reading aloud to your child and having rich, relationship-building conversations. Later, as your child shows a readiness for more, expand the games to begin teaching sound and word patterns—the final legs of the reading-readiness journey.

Chapter 1 will help you figure out where your child is along the reading readiness road. Chapter 2 gives your tips for creating a home that encourages reading readiness. Chapters 3-5 discuss the three big ideas for reading readiness, with activities that encourage listening skills and word play in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 7 supplies more advanced word/sound activities for the child who is almost ready to read.

All the activities are fun, and that increases their value for a preschooler. All have all been tested with real children in real homes and/or childcare centers or preschools. Many have their roots as ideas from real moms, dads, aunts and uncles, grandmas and grandpas. And they are bolstered with the support of some of the best reading researchers in the world.

Authors of *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*, Kathy Jirsh-Pasek and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, say that “the most important thing you can do for your child is to make reading fun—not work.”

Best of all, the games and activities fit well into almost anyone's everyday routine. You'll find the only “requirements” for success with them are enjoy each other and your language play, do the activities in different situations, and add your own twists to keep the games fresh.

You can, of course, skip right to the activities. But, if you do, come back and read the first chapters when you can. You'll find lots of good

information that will enrich your experiences with the games and activities and provide you with valuable background knowledge that will help you when your child enters school.

## A Few Big Facts about Your Preschooler

**Preschoolers learn best through play.** Learning happens everywhere in your child’s life, and play is the optimum learning environment for a preschooler. Learning at this age should not look or feel “academic.” No isolated drills or mindless repetition, please! I know that’s a relief for many of you to hear. The truth is that conversation and an interactive approach are best—and the most natural.

There’s a big difference in a child learning within the framework of his world and that same child being forced to learn in a very strict, controlled, “schoolhouse” way. It all goes back to the preschool brain. Early education researchers such as Dr. Sue Grossman of Eastern Michigan University, explain it this way: “Children at this stage use concrete rather than abstract symbols to represent objects and ideas. Learning through play offers children opportunities to develop the ability to think abstractly by experiencing real objects using their senses.”

Taking this child-centered approach turns you into the expert on your own child. Your preschooler who learns through play learns concepts rather than just facts. The schoolhouse-taught preschooler may learn to copy you, but will not enjoy a “sit down and study” approach or internalize the reasons behind them. That can frustrate both child and parent. It may even create a negative feeling about reading, and learning in general.

The need for play-centered learning also holds true in childcare or preschool programs you may select for your child as well. After all, you want the time your child has away from you to complement what you do at home. Dr. Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek, a Temple University researcher and author, speaks to the downside of accelerated, overly structured preschool academic programs. Comparing skills for students who participated in the accelerated preschool programs with those of children who did not attend the programs, Hirsh-Pasek found that “although children who had been in enriched program knew their numbers and letters better than did the others by the time they entered kindergarten, there was no difference between the groups in the cognitive skills that underlie academic success, tests showed.”

“Everyday conversation is the basic activity in the world for three-to-five-year-olds.... For young children, it’s through the talk that learning goes on.”

—Dr. Catherine Snow,  
author and reading  
researcher

“What children observe most closely, explore most obsessively and imagine most vividly are the people around them. There are no perfect toys; there is no magic formula. Parents and other caregivers teach young children by paying attention and interacting with them naturally and, most of all, by just allowing them to play.”

—Alison Gopnik, psychology professor at Berkeley and author of *The Philosophical Baby*

In fact, overly structured enrichment programs, seemed to have a negative emotional effect. Children were more anxious, less creative, and less positive toward school, compared with those who went to play-oriented preschools. You don’t want that for your son or daughter. Choosing a preschool that emphasizes learning through play—one that provides a balance of reading and math readiness, plus physical, emotional, and creative development—is the best fit for every child.

At home, avoid flashcard drills or boring worksheets. Keep an activity going for the length of your child’s attention span (one to three minutes per year of age)—and no longer. If language and thinking (recognizing, interpreting, judging, and reasoning) are developed through activities that fit your child’s age, he will quickly pick up what he should do if presented with worksheets or flashcards in kindergarten and first grade.

Remember that play is the preschooler’s primary way to learn. Routine, consistence, repetition, and positive fun experiences are most important.

**Your child’s brain is primed to learn language now.** The brains of children at this age are especially geared for acquiring language. Researchers who study how children learn have found that the preschooler’s developing brain creates strong connections whenever someone plays and interacts with him using language. That happens particularly when that child hears descriptive, varied vocabulary words like those found in good picture books, along, of course, with the language of day-to-day living.

The connections are a little like electrical bridges between one part of the brain and another. They get stronger the more they are repeated. When the bridges are strong, that’s the point at which your child says, “I get it! Now it’s easy!” If the bridges are weak, the connections may even get “pruned away” by the body’s amazingly efficient processes that perceive the information as unnecessary. That means those connections may have to be rebuilt at a later time, with much more difficulty.

That’s why it’s important to build strong bridges now. The connections are a big part of how preschoolers learn language, and how facts and ideas are held in long-term memory. Be patient. The world and how it works is all new to your child so it will take a little while to reach that level. As researcher Dr. Michael French, Director of the Reading Center at Bowling Green University says, “Simple activities like naming colors or objects when pointed to (and counting numbers or reciting the

alphabet) quickly show how easily a child's brain sorts and pulls what is needed. Practice makes that sorting happen faster and with less effort so that her brain can think at a higher, more complex level."

**Oral language foundations make the difference.** Oral language heard in stories, conversation, or in listening creates a strong foundation for later reading. Talking gives your child a first taste of what reading is. They learn in a very special way what the essence of reading is without having to worry about "how to do it."

According to researchers at the UCLA School of Public Health, "Adult-child conversations are robustly associated with healthy language development. Parents should be encouraged not merely to provide language input to their children through reading or storytelling, but also to engage their children in two-sided conversations." In fact, basic conversations can be up to six times more effective than reading alone.

Children surrounded by daily, rich oral literacy experiences very often come to "reading" with more background knowledge and vocabulary, as well as a broader understanding of the world. When we read aloud to a child and talk about what's going on in *our* brain while *we* read (and about what we will *do* as a result of reading) those squiggles on the page, we make that connection clear.

By the time they reach school, they have had many positive experiences with books and with someone who loves them. They are much more likely to learn to read easily when the time is right than children who do not have that solid foundation.

A strong oral language foundation influences your child's attitude about reading, too. Varied oral language experiences build a positive attitude about reading, which is just as important as the act of reading itself. Before he can read a single word, a child with a strong oral foundation is motivated to read. The aim of everyone who picks up a book to read to a child must be to foster a positive feeling about books and reading. Nurture children's natural curiosity, and make reading such a positive experience that they feel they must come back for more.

You may not have had that experience with reading yourself. Don't let that keep you from sharing what can easily be one of the most important gifts you give your child:

**Your child will learn best at his own pace.** We know every child will not learn to dress him or herself at the same time. So why be concerned that our children all *read* at the same age? Reading specialists like Dr.

"What we teach  
our children to  
love and desire  
will always  
outweigh what  
we teach them  
to do."

—Jim Trelease, author

“So many of the dreams and goals we have for children, and that they have for themselves, can be advanced through the use of children’s literature.”

—Esmé Raji Codell,  
author of *How to Get  
Your Child to Love  
Reading*

Joanne Rossi, dean of Notre Dame De Namur’s school of education ask “Where are we going in such a hurry?” That’s a great question.

In more than thirty years of research and practice, Dr. Rossi and others have arrived at one simple conclusion: kids will learn to read *when they are ready*, and not before. For example, perhaps you’ve noticed your child paying attention to rhyming words. Once he “gets” the idea of rhyming, he’ll be ready to hear the beginning and ending sounds in words and whether they are the same or different. He may become interested in letters. Automatic mastery is key.

If your child is still thinking hard or hesitates before answering during an activity or game, he’s using a lot of brainpower, and he just needs more time. On the other hand, if he responds quickly, or without your hints or prompts, he may be ready for something more challenging. Take your clues from your child, and match the pace of learning to his readiness level.

Children learn to read when they are ready and not before. Relax! Enjoy where your child is now.

### **Capture This Special Time**

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Your child grows so fast; every day brings something new so I hope you’ll visit this book often in the coming weeks and months, return to the activities your child liked the most, or try a few that at first seemed too difficult. Your child may be ready for a new challenge the next time around and be able to master a concept she was unable to understand only a few months earlier.

The experiences you share around books and language will help you know your child even better than you do now. They will help you honor his own distinct strengths and challenges while you have him close. Playing, talking, and reading with your child is bigger than the playing, reading and talking. It builds bonds between you that will last a lifetime. And, believe it or not, it will also help you celebrate those strengths and challenges when she goes off into the big world of kindergarten (and beyond).