

Why stories are important

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Many people look back with pleasure on their favourite stories from childhood. Story time with your children can be a special time they remember all their lives. Whether you tell stories or read from books, stories are one of the ways children learn to enjoy reading. The books and people they read about can become like friends.

Reading aloud to babies and children is important in their early years and has an impact on their development and future learning. Stories can help children cope with many feelings and problems and they learn things about the world just by enjoying the story.

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Why read with children?

Reading and story time can be a special time for parents and children to spend together. If it's relaxed and happy it builds your relationship and helps children build their sense of security and self-esteem.

- Language helps us understand ourselves and make sense of the world. Books and stories help children develop language and thinking.
- Children who enjoy reading are likely to become confident learners. It can become a favourite hobby they go on to enjoy all their lives.
- Stories can help children deal with the problems and fears they face in everyday life.

If you don't enjoy reading or find it a struggle, you still need to show children that reading is important. You could tell stories, have books around the house and tell children you wish you had the chance to learn to like reading.

How books and stories help children

- Young children can learn about the world from books. Showing simple pictures and naming what they are helps young children learn what things are called.
 - Children can learn about people and their lives and things such as size, colour, shape and what things look like. From 'The Three Bears' children learn about numbers and space - that there were three bears, one father, one mother and one baby bear. They learn about big and little and inside and outside.
 - Stories help children develop their imagination.
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A love of reading is one of the best and most lasting gifts you can give your children.

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Stories help children cope with feelings

- When you read or tell a story which contains feelings it helps your child accept their feelings and understand how others feel. They learn they are not alone and others may feel the same as they do. This helps them know their feelings are OK.
- You can also learn how your child feels when you see them respond to feelings in the story. If they really like a book it may be because it has special meaning for them and is helping them with their feelings.
- When you read a story to your child it can show you understand how they feel. If you are reading about another child (or animal) who is frightened of the dark, it helps your child know you understand it is easy to be frightened of the dark when you are young.
- Hearing or reading the story many times can help children manage their feelings or fears.

Stories help develop confidence

- Part of building self-esteem and confidence is knowing where you fit in the world. Stories told by parents and grandparents about family history, e.g. 'when Mummy was a little girl', help your child develop this sense of belonging. This is even more important if you have come from another place or your family has split up.
- Special stories at bedtime can help your child look forward to going to bed, to enjoy being close to you and relax, ready for sleep.
- Books can help your child escape for a while from the stresses and pressures of their world. The story takes their imagination to other wonderful places.
- Reading and telling stories can become a special sharing time. It helps children learn to love books and develop a sense of being a lovable person.

Many children remember their story times for the rest of their lives. Most importantly they will thrive on spending time with you.

Tips for storytellers

Whether you read or tell stories to your children you will be helping them in many ways. It's best if you can do some of both. Do what works best for you and your child. It is enjoying the reading and stories that counts.

- Be guided by what your child likes but try a range of books or stories so they have a choice.
- Follow your child's lead when you are reading or telling stories so they can be a partner in the reading time – read the bits they really like over and over again. Stop when they want to stop, skip the bits they want to skip.
- When using picture books that don't have any words, make up the story about the pictures for your child.
- Visit your school or local council library. Ask the librarian to help you find things your child might enjoy.

- Borrow a number of books each time you go. If your child really likes one and wants it over and over again, this is the one to buy and own.
- Browse through second-hand bookshops or garage sales. Often really good books can be bought cheaply. This is a good way to help children have some books of their own.
- Take children to see plays where stories are acted out – go just for the fun.

Books make great presents – give them for birthdays, Christmas or just a special treat.

Babies

- Babies can start to learn to enjoy books from birth. Show them brightly coloured pictures and name the objects or sing a rhyme about the picture.
- They will enjoy the warmth of your company and the sound and rhythm of your voice long before they can understand the words. They learn that books mean happy times with you.
- Sharing books brings together the things babies need most to grow and develop - closeness, safety, touch, seeing, hearing, and learning about sounds and gradually learning what they mean.

Toddlers

- Make story time part of your child's bedtime routine.
- Stories need to be simple and short because toddlers have a short attention span.
- Toddlers enjoy books with colourful pictures, simple rhymes and stories about things they know.
- Very young children often want their favourite stories over and over again. This can be important to them as they grow and learn.
- Two year olds will often enjoy saying some of the words as they get to know their loved stories. They may even correct you if you leave out a word.

Preschoolers

- Let your child choose books or stories.
- Stories should not be too long – find books you can start and finish in one go.
- Stories can be acted out by you and your child.
- Children can make pictures or models of stories.
- Ask your child to tell you a story – and listen to them. Show you are interested.
- Take your child to the library and let them choose books from the section for their age. They may not like them all, but they will probably like some. They are learning to use a library and that books are something they can choose for themselves. Ask the librarian about borrowing recordings of spoken stories.
- Don't worry if your child likes comics as they get older – it is all part of reading. Once they are confident readers they are likely to want to move on to reading different things.
- Many children and adults like to return to old favourites from time to time, even when they can read much more difficult stories. This can also happen if children are unwell or unhappy because familiar loved stories can help them to regain a sense of security and wellbeing.

School beginners

- Don't make story time a reading lesson – it is a time for sharing, relaxing and fun.
- Beginners need books with simple words for success and enjoyment. Books that are too hard can put them off.
- Don't expect too much too soon when your child is learning to read. It takes a long time before they read well enough to really enjoy stories. They will need you to read to them long after they can read for themselves. There is something special about having stories read to you at any age.
- Allow your child to choose books they like to read, even if they are not your choice.
- Help them find books about their interests, e.g. if they love dogs, cars or dinosaurs, look for books on these topics.
- All children are different. One child might not enjoy the same books or be at the same reading level as another child, or as an older brother or sister at the same age.
- books which vary the important roles – some where the prince saves the princess and some where the princess saves the prince
- books which don't assume that people will act in a certain way, e.g. the man does not always have to be washing the car. The woman does not have to be in the kitchen. People in authority do not have to be the 'bad guys'
- books where what happens in the story fits with the ending. Children often enjoy the ending they have been looking forward to more than surprise endings
- a bit of trickery, humour, jumbled words, people getting into trouble - children enjoy a sense of fear and mischief
- interesting words and rhymes – as they get to preschool age children enjoy words and will like stories with some interesting or 'big' words to have fun with
- books with details to notice, e.g. the time on the clock, toothpaste on the toothbrush
- stories about children's own hopes and wishes or things they know about, e.g. about a child starting school or having a birthday
- books that explore the unhappy and angry feelings as well as good feelings, e.g. books about moving house should talk about the child being a bit unsure and worried as well as being excited about the new adventure

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Story time builds good relationships and should not be withdrawn as a 'punishment'.

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What should you look for?

Look for:

- books which vary the important roles – some where the prince saves the princess and some where the princess saves the prince
- books which don't assume that people will act in a certain way, e.g. the man does not always have to be washing the car. The woman does not have to be in the kitchen. People in authority do not have to be the 'bad guys'
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- books for young children with happy endings
- fairy stories and folk tales – they have been around for so long because they are important for children. They are usually not too scary because they are about ‘long ago and far away’. They deal with some important life problems, e.g. moving away from home and family, people dying, feeling unsure of yourself. After a scary bit in a story, stop and let your child talk about it. Don’t read stories that your child doesn’t like. Follow your child’s lead about the stories they want.

Children who can read by themselves will want to read more if you let them choose what they enjoy reading, even if it is not ‘good literature’. They can always have some good literature through the stories you read them.

Children who learn to love stories and reading usually want to read different kinds of books as they grow older.

What parents can do

- Make time to read to your baby or child every day even for a few minutes.
- If you have more than one child read or tell stories they all like, e.g. family favourites or stories about your own childhood.
- Encourage grandparents to tell stories about when they were young.
- Make a life story book for each child to show where they have been, what they have achieved and important milestones. Have things like photographs of special events, a lock from the first haircut, the first word, the first day at school.
- Let children see you reading lots of different things such as books, magazines, letters, cards, recipes and newsletters. Have lots of books around the house. Talk to children about what you read so they can see reading is important for you.
- Take children to your local library for story-telling sessions.
- Find toys or puppets that are like the people in your child’s favourite story to encourage them to remember and play out the story.
- Let your children know you are proud they are reading.

Want more information?

Little Big Book Club Phone 8362 6066
Provides free reading packs for babies and toddlers through libraries and the Child and Family Health Service
www.littlebigbookclub.com.au

Parent Helpline
Phone 1300 364 100
For advice on child health and parenting

Dad’s Read
Information for dads about reading with children www.dadsread.org.au

Let’s Read
Supports families to share words, rhymes, songs, books and stories with children
www.letsread.com.au

Parent Helpline
Phone 1300 364 100
For advice on child health and parenting
Child & Family Health Service
Child and Family Health Centre: Tel 02 6625 0111 9am–4:30pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment.

www.raisingchildren.net.au
For information on raising children, including information for grandparents raising grandchildren.

www.families.nsw.gov.au
Various resources to help parents at any stage in life.

www.fsn.org.au
Family Workers can offer you practical and emotional support to enhance & strengthen your parenting & family relationships.

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Read aloud! Turn off the TV while you read.

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