

How to Create a Literate Home: Baby and Toddler



The materials you need in order to create a "literate home" at this stage are minimal, but the way that you use them with your child is important. Babies and toddlers need to explore books, letters and writing materials as they begin to figure out the special significance of these objects. What they need most, however, is for their parents to talk and listen to them. Through talking and communicating with their parents and caregivers, they build a strong language base, the ability to both understand and use language that will support their literacy development.

What You Need

- **Children's Books**

Babies and toddlers come to love books and view them as a part of their world when you provide easy access and opportunities to explore them. For young babies, vinyl or cloth books that are durable and soft enough for chewing are suitable, while toddlers will enjoy board, paperback and hardcover books. Be sure to include a variety of kinds of books in your child's collection, including nursery rhymes, ABC books, informational books and storybooks. You can look for bargain children's books at used bookstores and yard sales or purchase books at great prices through monthly book clubs offered through child care centers or schools.

- **Writing Materials for Children**

Older babies and toddlers begin to experiment with making marks on paper. Although it can be messy, it is essential for children this age to practice this process. Thick markers, paint brushes, pencils and crayons are ideal for the youngest writers since they are still developing the small muscles in their hands that help them hold tools. Likewise, large paper is best for beginners. Because older babies and young children lack control, they tend to make big scribbles. Washable paints, crayons and markers are best at this stage.

- **Reading and Writing Materials for Parents**

When children see the adults around them reading and writing in their everyday lives, they're more likely to become readers and writers themselves. Simply having a bookshelf full of books, reading the local newspaper, and using a notepad to write grocery lists and phone messages shows your child that reading and writing serve valuable everyday purposes.

- **Toys**

Simple, practical, inexpensive toys support literacy development. Alphabet blocks, foam letters for the bathtub and ABC puzzles will familiarize your baby or toddler with letters. Props such as dress-up clothes and play dishes encourage your toddler to pretend, and pretend play contributes to literacy skills. Toys need not be elaborate or expensive. Look for wooden blocks and puzzles at used children's clothing stores, yard sales, and school fairs, and make props for pretend play from materials you already have at home. Empty cereal boxes, mom's old necklaces, and an old pot and wooden spoon can be used in countless make-believe scenarios.

- **CDs**

Books and children's songs on CDs are another fun way for your child to enjoy stories

and music. Most libraries have extensive collections of audio books and children's music CDs to borrow.

- **Videos**

Videos can help older babies and toddlers learn basic concepts, such as letters and colors, and expose them to stories they'll enjoy. Videos that are short contain many short skits or songs, and encourage children's engagement by asking them to dance along or sing along are best for the very young. It is ideal to watch with your child at this age so you can sing the songs together.

What You Can Do

- **Place books on sturdy, low shelves or in plastic storage bins.** Babies and toddlers are more likely to explore books if they can get them easily.
- **Keep your older baby or toddler's writing materials in one place.** You can decorate a cardboard box or buy an inexpensive plastic container for his writing materials. This way, he will have easy access to them when he wants to write and he knows that they are special things.
- **Establish a daily read-aloud routine.** You can do this by reading aloud to your baby or toddler at the same time and in the same place each day. Remember that children this young cannot focus for long periods of time, however, and will be more interested in the pictures than in the story.
- **Recite nursery rhymes and sing songs to your baby.** Even though your baby will not understand them, hearing these will help her learn the patterns and rhythms of language.
- **Talk together about things that interest your child.** Talk about things you do, see, and hear as you go about your day. Talking to your child often helps her learn vocabulary and grammar.
- **Get your child involved when you read aloud to him.** Older babies will be able to turn the pages of chunky board books, point to pictures when you ask and say the sounds that go with pictures of animals or trucks.
- **Incorporate literacy into outings.** Visit your local library, bookmobile, or bookstore to find new read-aloud ideas for your child. Many libraries feature free song and story hours that older babies and toddlers may enjoy.
- **Be a reader and writer yourself.** One of the most effective ways to help children become readers and writers is to show them through your own example that you value literacy and that reading and writing have useful purposes. Make sure that you have a variety of printed and writing materials in your house, that you use them on a regular basis, and that you talk to your child about what you are doing when you read and write.