



SIGNPOST

Baptism by words

Introduce your child to the world of reading and reap rich benefits, says Dr Sitara Vikram



Young children need to read and be read to regularly. Reading at home forms a crucial part of a child's learning. Gone are the days when children knew about and loved great books. The likes of Enid Blyton, the classics such as Tom Sawyer, Oliver Twist, etc. are unheard of in many households. Instead, children are now more likely to know more about the latest movies or video games.

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This is a cause for concern as the more children read, the better the outcomes in reading, writing and speaking skills at a later age. Second, reading is a fun way to learn about good habits and manners and to prepare for the environment. When Bruno, a cuddly bear character in a children's book goes to the dentist and gets his teeth examined without making a fuss, the story prepares the child for the dentist and provides an explanation of why it is important to look after one's teeth. One reading of the book is more powerful typically than a thousand exhortations to "brush your teeth please". Reading books is also a powerful way for children to learn about morality, values and about our culture. We can teach children to share, the value of honesty, etc. through tales and fables. Third, when a parent sits and reads to his child, a bond is established. Very often parents wonder what to do with their children constructively – reading is one of the best activities for bonding and getting



to know your child. Finally, reading to children at a young age establishes a lifelong love for books and a thirst for learning.

The answer is as early as possible. The key point to bear in mind is the age appropriateness of the book selected. For children of 18 months, large picture books with multiple textures are good. From two years onwards, simple stories that talk about the immediate environment are appropriate. From year 4 onwards, imaginative books like fables and mythology are excellent. From years 6 or 7, the child should ideally be regularly reading simple books on her own, moving on to chapter books and novels at her own pace.

How to start reading books to the child? Start by establishing a reading routine. Reading every night before the child sleeps is often an ideal time. Reading should be fun - the atmosphere needs to be relaxed and comfortable. Talk about the story and ask questions as you read – do you like the character, why, etc.? Children like repetition of stories and rereading books is a positive thing. As children begin to read on their own, give them time to recognize words and correct themselves. Encourage children to write about the books read. Children are also often motivated by seeing adults read. The more books there are in a house, the more likely that children will become avid readers. Reading can also be informal - road signs, posters, labels - opportunities to read are everywhere.

An OECD study showed that early parental involvement in reading overrode other social disadvantages. Parents did not have to be particularly well educated for this impact to be achieved. The crucial part is that every parent must set aside time to read to their child. Most importantly, give lots of praise and encouragement to the child as she reads and make reading fun. You are giving your child a valuable skill for life.

The writer is a trained Psychiatrist, experienced in Child and Family therapy, with over 10 years working experience in London. She is the Executive Director of the CS Academy Schools at Coimbatore and Erode, Tamil Nadu.

