

Reading Begins At Birth

Written by [Maren Schmidt](#) on October 17th, 2014



Avoid the trap of thinking that the road to reading for your child will begin in kindergarten. Parents tell me, “Oh, I’m too busy. I’ll just let my child learn to read in first grade.” For many children important skills for reading are not developed at the time of their lives when it is the easiest, before kindergarten.

The road to reading begins at birth, not at kindergarten or first grade. Reading is being able to understand written language. Written language is based entirely on the spoken word. When I say reading begins at birth, I mean that as we hear our first word, we begin the road to reading. Some of us travel the road to reading, and arrive on time. Some of us have problems, and have to sit on the roadside waiting for help. Some have a bumpy ride, or arrive late. Our children can all have an easy trip, if we, as parents, are aware of how spoken vocabulary is the vehicle in which we travel to arrive at reading.

Our spoken vocabulary helps create two critical reading skills.

At one level, our spoken vocabulary creates our reading vocabulary. To help our children, we need to help them acquire as large a vocabulary as possible and the ability to hear the sounds within words. At another level, spoken language creates awareness that words are made of individual sounds or phonemes. Fortunately for us, children are natural language learners from birth to age six, so acquiring these two skills of a large spoken vocabulary and sound awareness can be easy.

Between birth and the age of six, your child is in a sensitive period for language development. By age three, the structure of spoken language is fully developed in your child’s brain. Your three-year-old should be able to clearly speak his native language, or in the case of multi-lingual families, whatever languages are used at home. He should be able to speak full sentences with correct syntax or sentence structure. For example, he should say “I am going to the store” and not “Me go store” or some variation.

Many children at age three cannot speak clearly, because of obstacles to language development with childhood illnesses such as ear infections, an environment that is language deprived, and unknown physical challenges with sight, hearing and muscle tone. One of my three-year-old student’s speech blossomed after she got glasses. Her doctor said she hadn’t seen well enough to see lips moving. She hadn’t known how to move her lips and mouth to form many sounds.

Around age three, obstacles blocking normal language development for your child become more obvious. At this time parents and teachers need to be observant and remove obstacles. Enrich your child’s language and learning environment with specific skill activities. After age six,

language development is more difficult for the child and becomes “therapy” instead of “fun” enrichment activities.

Ninety percent of our spoken vocabulary is in place by age six. In an over fifty year research project, participants with the largest vocabulary also rated themselves as the happiest. It seems true that people who can express themselves effectively with a large selection of words would be happy. It stands to reason, then, that any assistance you can give your children in increasing their vocabulary and spoken language skills is only going to make them happier people. Your vocabulary and happiness may benefit, too.

You can help your child in two important and simple ways.

The first help is to speak clearly and correctly, using full sentences. How many of us say “I’m gonna” instead of “I’m going to”? If we don’t say the “ing” in a word, how can we expect our child to be able to say it and eventually read it and spell it?

The second help is to use as many different precise words as you can with your child. Instead of just saying “red bird”, use the word “cardinal”. To describe a tree, be more specific and say “walnut”, “oak” or “maple”. Increase your child’s vocabulary by describing something two ways, such “I am happy. I am elated. This is little. It is miniscule.” Give your child the correct names of things, and both of your vocabularies will grow. There are wonderful visual dictionaries that give precise language of hundreds of things, like the names of the parts of an airplane. You’ll be amazed at how hungry your child is for language.

Around age two-and-a-half to three, help your child become aware that words are made up of individual sounds. This skill is called phonemic awareness. Phonemic comes from the word “phonics” which means sounds. When you help your child become aware of the individual sounds in words, you are helping them develop a very important skill for reading success. Remember, children have an innate ability for language development, and so phonemic awareness can be created in such an easy way, that you could even call it “child’s play”. No teaching required, just fun and games.

One of the activities, or games, that you can do with your child is the *I Spy Game*.

This is played very much like the game you used to play as a child where you said “I spy something green.” To help create phonemic awareness, you are going instead to say “I spy something that begins with the “b” sound”.

The challenge is to know how to make the “b” sound. Here’s how. The letter name for “b” is pronounced “bee”. The sound of “b” is more like “buh”. Try saying the word “ball” and stopping yourself after you get the “b” sound out. The “uh” part of “buh” is very, very soft and if you can say it without any “uh” sound, that is even better.

The variations of the I Spy Game are endless and you can play it on the spur of the moment. For this reason, it is a great car and restaurant game. You can play with parts of the body, clothing, names, things in a room, etc. Just remember that the object of the game is to help your child learn to hear individual sounds in words. He can’t win or lose! He can only learn phonemic awareness. To play the game, you say, “I spy something that begins with the “n” sound”. Your child says “Tree!” Instead of saying, “No, you’re wrong,” kindly say, tree starts with a “t” sound. I’m thinking of something on your face that begins with a “n”. You can even point to your nose! If your child still doesn’t say the word nose, just point to your nose and say, “I was thinking of nose.” Remember the object of the game is to create awareness of sounds in a fun way that assures success.

Play the *I Spy Game* every day. As your child progresses, make the game more challenging by doing ending sounds. "I spy something that ends with a "t". Yes, it's cat". Internal sounds are the most difficult to hear so do them last. "I spy something with a "o" sound". "Yes, I was thinking of "dog". You will be amazed how quickly your child can hear the different sounds of our language.

Your child will take this skill of phonemic awareness along with letter/sound recognition and become a successful reader.

Here is a list of words whose initial sounds will help you make the sounds of each letter.

a	apple
b	ball
c	cat
d	dog
e	egg
f	fox
g	go
h	hot
i	igloo
j	jump
k	kick
l	lick
m	mom
n	not
o	otter
p	pot
q	quilt
r	rock
s	snake
t	take
u	up
v	van
w	wagon
x	box
y	yes
z	zoo