

# Ages and Stages of Young Readers

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D. Family Science Specialist NDSU Extension Service

*“Learning to read is an intellectual milestone. Parents fret over it, teachers focus on it and children learn to see it as a mark of competence. As with other aspects of a child’s development, language development and reading skills emerge step by step through time with young children.” - Sean Brotherson*

## Young Children and Learning to Read

Many parents want their children to learn the alphabet and begin reading at very young ages. Such encouragement is important. However, as with many skills, learning language and literacy is something that children develop as they become ready. Pushing children to read too early is not likely to improve their abilities. Parents and caregivers should provide opportunities, encouragement and instruction, but also should be patient and have reasonable expectations.

Most children are ready to really start learning the basics of reading (letter recognition, sounding out words, etc.) around ages 4 or 5. The foundations for reading begin much earlier, though, with listening to stories, making sounds, commenting on books and talking with adults. Reasonable expectations for engaging young children in reading activities are:

### Newborn to 3 Months

- A new baby likes the sound of a familiar voice, a book or newspaper read aloud, or soft singing. Content is not as important as the comforting, caring sound of a parent’s voice.
- Be aware of your baby’s cues that they have had enough – turning his or her head, fussing, hiccups, etc.
- Sing and dance with your baby; gentle rocking is soothing.
- Contentment with reading to your baby will depend highly on the

child’s mood and interest, and may be very brief.

- Hold books close enough for child to touch and see – this helps develop depth perception.
- Supporting a baby’s head and neck while holding a book may be challenging at times. Put the book at the side of the crib or flat on the floor for the baby.
- Use cardboard or cloth books with brightly colored pictures. Touching and grabbing the book is important at this stage.

### 4 to 6 Months

- Chewy books – vinyl or washable –are appropriate.
- More touching is important now, so have books that babies can handle within easy reach.
- Treat books like toys at this age.
- Sing songs during routine times, such as diaper changing time, nap time or bath time.

### 7 to 9 Months

- Newly developed hand skills now allow young children to turn chubby pages, board books, etc.
- Paper is appealing for its sound and texture (be careful of choking hazards).
- Point to things in picture books and name them, make sounds, etc.
- At this age, having pictures upside down, and opening and closing the book frequently, is normal.
- Follow the child’s lead when he or she is done with reading.

### 9 to 12 Months

- A book’s content, pictures and colors capture attention now. Let children at this stage linger over pictures or colors.
- Children still need chubby pages or cardboard books.
- Enjoy books about family or familiar items, such as foods, toys or animals.
- Paper pages still cannot survive this toddler!
- Large, clear, realistic pictures are important.
- Have a basket, shelf or other place for books to teach children the value of books.

### 12 to 18 Months

- A child is beginning to blossom in language skills at this age.
- Children like verse, rhythm and repetitive words.
- They relate to thematic books that become interesting (farm animals, pets, colors, etc.).
- Children like action with nursery rhymes.
- Give lots of attention to the three R’s – rhythm, rhyme and repetition.
- Have more than one “book and snuggle time” a day – don’t just save books for bedtime.
- Children enjoy the same book over and over and over and over again!
- Books at bedtime make a good transition between active and restful times, and help establish a clear bedtime routine.

## 1 1/2 to 3 Years

- Children enjoy books about the main events in their life, such as potty, mom and dad, siblings, eating, toys, animals, etc.
- Rhyme lets the toddler participate verbally in reading by repeating a phrase.
- Children can begin to predict what will happen in logical sequence.
- Children like pop-up books, bathtub books and flip-up page books.
- Children can repeat nursery rhymes.

## 3 to 5 Years

- Children recognize books by the cover.
- They understand that books are read from front to back.
- They understand that printed words and pictures tell the story.
- Children begin to recognize letters within words, especially those in their own name.
- Children play with language, using sing-song and nonsense sounds, and simple poems.
- They may play out roles of characters in favorite stories.
- Encourage the young child to join you in reading familiar parts or filling in the blank.
- Read together every day. Spend time talking about stories, pictures and words. Ask many open-ended questions and take time to answer.
- Children may not always sit still for a story (depends on mood and personality), but they will listen

while drawing or playing.

- Be a reader and writer yourself. Children learn habits from the people around them and may pretend to read a book themselves, modeling after adults who read.
- Visit the library often – story time, computers and other exciting activities await.
- Share conversations with your child during mealtimes and at other times you are together – kids learn words more easily when they are heard often.
- Children will enjoy concept books, such as A-B-C books, and will begin learning letters of the alphabet and pointing them out.
- Children will make efforts to draw letters, their own name, familiar words, etc.
- Begin spelling out names or objects and help children learn the names of letters.

## Websites & Organizations

**The America Reads Challenge** was a four-year grass-roots initiative designed to promote reading across the United States. Information and resources can be accessed at: [www.ed.gov/inits.americareads/](http://www.ed.gov/inits.americareads/)

**The International Reading Association** is an organization that promotes literacy and is a well-developed resource base for parents and professionals interested in reading. It publishes a number of brochures for parents and single copies are available free. For titles and ordering information, please visit: [www.reading.org/](http://www.reading.org/)

**The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)**. This organization is perhaps the foremost resource for outstanding research and practical ideas on learning and education of young children. NAEYC has dozens of resources (pamphlets, books, videos, etc.) available on the topic. Visit: [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)

**The National Education Association** has a website that includes a variety of valuable and interesting resources, including reading news, home and classroom activities, and reading resources for parents. To access the parent resources visit: [www.nea.org/parents/index.html](http://www.nea.org/parents/index.html)

**Reading is Fundamental Inc.** is a national nonprofit organization associated with the Smithsonian Institution that works to stimulate reading and learning with children. For further information or to access its excellent resources, visit: [www.rif.org](http://www.rif.org)

**Read to Me International** is an organization that works to help parents bring the joys and benefits of reading to their children. It has information on good children's books, parent resources and other topics related to reading at home. Visit: [www.readtomeintl.org/index.cfm](http://www.readtomeintl.org/index.cfm)

**The Association for Library Services (ALSC)** is the world's largest organization dedicated to the support and enhancement of library service to children. Visit: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/>

This publication is based on "Ages and Stages of Young Readers" (FS-672, Bright Beginnings #17) from the NDSU extension service.

**For more information on this and other topics, see: [www.ag.ndsu.edu](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu)**

This publication may be copied for noncommercial, educational purposes in its entirety with no changes.

Requests to use any portion of the document (including text, graphics or photos) should be sent to [NDSU.permission@ndsu.edu](mailto:NDSU.permission@ndsu.edu).

Include exactly what is requested for use and how it will be used.