Time for a story

Want to spend time with your youngster, build her reading skills, and help her learn to love books? You can do all three when you read aloud. Here are suggestions.

Read regularly

Try to read to your child every day. You might aim for 10–15 minutes of bedtime reading for a peaceful end to the day. Bring along a book, and read to her during a sibling’s sports practice. Or curl up together with a book when you get home from work.

Take turns choosing books

Your youngster may want to hear old favorites again and again. Use your turn for new titles and variety, such as nonfiction or poetry.

Let her participate

Ask your child to turn the pages while you read. Also, she can finish sentences that rhyme or fill in words she knows. Go slowly so she has time to understand the story and look at the illustrations. She’ll enjoy read-aloud time more if she plays an active role.

Be playful

You can use different voices for different characters (a high, squeaky voice for a mouse or a deep, booming voice for a horse). Or substitute your youngster’s name for the main character’s name, and use family members’ names for other characters.

Note: You don’t have to be an expert reader—your child will love it when you read aloud because it’s you.

Writing that makes sense

As your child first learns to write, his stories may not always make sense to others. Help his writing flow logically with these two ideas.

1. Even if your youngster isn’t writing sentences yet, he can tell you stories. As he describes the new class pet or something funny that happened at lunch, you can jot down his tale. He’ll practice relating events in a logical order, and that can help when he puts his thoughts and ideas down on paper himself.

2. Let your child read his stories to you. Ask questions to encourage him to add information (“What did you do with your friends at recess?”) or to clear up a confusing part (“Who said, ‘Let’s go home’—you or your brother?”).
Spot the details

What is an archaeologist? What do bears eat? Nonfiction books have the answers—and if your child reads carefully, he will find them. The following suggestions can help him read for details and boost his comprehension.

Read around the text. The pages of many nonfiction books are covered with "extras" that stories don't have (headings, photo captions, an index, a glossary). Point out these features. Then, ask your youngster what questions he has about the topic that the book might answer. Say he's reading Archaeologists Dig for Clues by Kate Duke. He might think, "What tools do archaeologists use?" or "What are fossils?" Help him read the book, and see how many answers he can find.

Pair fiction with nonfiction. Together, read a story like Goldilocks and the Three Bears (James Marshall) followed by a nonfiction book such as Bears (Deborah Hodge). As you read the second book, encourage your child to look for ways that real bears are different from the fictional ones. For example, he might say that real bears eat things like grass, berries, fish, and insects, while the three bears eat porridge.

Vocabulary boosters

A large vocabulary can turn your child into a better reader and writer. Try these everyday ways to help her learn new words.

Keep your ears open

When you and your youngster go places, point out words that people use. Maybe a waiter describes an entree or the dentist talks about molars. Encourage your child to figure out what the words mean by the way they're used.

Go beyond nouns

Help your youngster add adjectives and verbs to her vocabulary. Sports and games offer opportunities to use action words. Let your child hear you comment on the softball that soars or the runner who sprints. When she sends thank-you notes or greeting cards, suggest descriptive words (a polka-dotted shirt, a fantastic birthday).

Parent to Parent

My grandson Keith saw me writing in my journal and asked what I was doing. I explained that my grandfather got me started writing in a journal when I was a little boy. Keith said he wanted to start a journal, too, so I gave him a notebook.

He asked me what he should write about. I told him that I use my journal mostly to store memories, but he can do whatever he wants—even draw pictures. He decided to sketch the two of us writing together in our journals, and he had me help him write a sentence about his picture.

Keith has stuck with his journal for a couple of weeks already. Now when he comes to my house, he can't wait to share what he has written and drawn.