Books and Babies

by Hannah Nuba

One of the most satisfying forms of verbal communication between child and adult is that magical moment of “being read to.” “Read me a story” is the preschooler’s frequent refrain, and even the youngest toddler will manage self and book into the cozy lap of a willing adult.

Although bedtime stories and storytelling have always been a universal tradition, adults rarely realize the profound impact this interaction has on the child’s total development, especially in the area of communication skills. In fact, reading a story to a child is one of the most valuable and satisfying activities a child and adult can share. For the child, being read to in a warm and loving setting is a deeply fulfilling experience, bringing about a feeling of trust and security that spans a lifetime.

Indeed, in such an atmosphere, the seeds for early literacy and love for literature are planted.

As part of my work in The New York Public Library Early Childhood Resource and Information Center, I am often asked by expectant or new parents about the best time for introducing books to young children. My answer is always: “Right now.”

I suggest that when considering the newborn’s furniture needs, a bookshelf, no matter how simple, be included. As “starter” books, there should be some sturdy, colorful board books awaiting the baby’s arrival home from the hospital. Included should also be some “best-loved” classics for (to quote Professor Bernice Cullinan) “handing down the magic.”

I also suggest that parents play the “conversation game” with baby from day one. Gentle, relaxed conversation (albeit one-sided at first) provides a rich learning environment for the infant from the beginning, while tending to have a soothing effect on the interacting parent as well.

This is also the ideal time for acquainting baby with nursery rhymes, poetry, songs, and stories.
If reading to infants right from the start were only done for the sheer pleasure-giving, pleasure-receiving experience of it all, it would still be a most valuable interaction between parent and child. Research, however, shows that the benefits of this activity soar beyond the immediately observable results.

Findings indicate that early exposure to books leads very early on to the infant's use of books in "reading-like ways," as Don Holdaway expresses it in The Foundations of Literacy. This "play-reading," along with "pretend-reading," "learned-by-heart reading," and other "reading-like-behavior" signals a giant step toward later, independent reading. As a special bonus, alongside this "emergent reading," there is (in Holdaway's words) "an equally spontaneous involvement in writing-like behavior."

Dorothy Butler, in her book, Babies Need Books, firmly states that there is nothing "magic" going on in the way early experiences with books produce early, eager readers. "A baby is learning about the way language arises from the page each time a parent opens a book."

Bernice Cullinan, in her essay in Resources for Early Childhood, stresses the connection between reading and pleasure and the wealth of wonderful literature available for sharing with children. "When daily reading-aloud sessions become a time for pleasure, children build a love of story from their earliest days."

Children's librarians have long believed in the value of reading to children. Distinguished librarian and storyteller Naomi Noyes (in Resources for Childhood) shares the thought that "reading aloud is a real pleasure throughout life since it fosters intimacy and sharing in addition to giving added dimension to the printed page."

Under the direction of Barbara Rollock, noted librarian, educator, and Coordinator of Children's Services, The New York Public Library, infant and toddler programs are offered in many children's libraries, with finger games and simple crafts added to the reading of age-appropriate books. Due to Mrs. Rollock's innovative leadership, a new dimension has been added to library service through the establishment of The New York Public Library Early Childhood Resource and Information Center in New York City's Greenwich Village. In addition to offering an extensive collection of books (for borrowing) on child development, early education, and special needs, there are books and puzzles to borrow for children. Focus is on materials that promote the child's development in a variety of ways, especially in language development and preliteracy skills.

The Center's Family Room provides a child-center, developmental environment that fosters the concept of the parent as the child's first teacher and encourages the interaction between parent and child. It has a block area, housekeeping and play space, picture-book nook, as well as rocking horses, rocking chairs, sliding gym, playpens, and infant/toddler learning tools. Leading educators offer workshops and seminars that cover a wide variety of topics related to childhood. For infants and toddlers, "Toddler-Story" programs are presented regularly.

While lap stories are best for infants, the age of two is ideal for introducing books to children in a library group setting. By age two, children have developed a strong command of language. They love picture books about familiar experiences, with lilt- ing repetitions and colorful, recognizable illustrations.

Two-year-olds are very concrete in their thinking and not ready to deal with subtle plot lines, abstractions, or fine distinctions. Book experiences for the toddler have until now been mainly on the lap of a caring adult. In the library setting, children still need to see the book close up, page by page, with the librarian occasionally tracing a finger under the text (as parents should do at home) to show the lettersound-meaning connection.

As the children take their cues from the sounds, the printed symbols on the page, the meaning and enjoyment of the story, the illustrations, and repeated listening experiences, a lifelong link between reading and delight will have been forged.