INTRODUCTION

Understanding of and appreciation for literature begin at birth. Newborns listen and respond to the sights and sounds associated with the language of their culture (Sawyer & Comer, 1996). Adults in the culture optimize children’s language learning by exposing infants and toddlers to developmentally appropriate literature. Such exposure creates an environment that promotes oral language development. This is the first step toward literacy (Tomlinson & Brown, 1996).

INFANT AND TODDLER TREASURES

Sharing books with very young children presents exciting and unique challenges. Infants and toddlers learn best by acting on their environment. This means that some of their first books should be very durable: touchable, bendable, and even lickable! Such books are made of nontoxic, heavy laminated cardboard, vinyl, or cloth. First books may also be traditionally bound and formatted. These may be read to children by a supervising adult who models proper treatment of and respect for books by handling them well and controlling how they are used by children. The message to children becomes: “This is a very special book to me and I want to share it with you.” In this way, children experience fundamental lessons not only about how to treat books well, but also about how to respond to their content with anticipation and joy. Children develop a passion for literature from adults who are passionate about the stories they share. Thus, some of the first books shared with young children should be those that contain the stories best loved by adults. Such stories can be abbreviated, down-sized, or even reduced to two minute experiences. If an adult loves a story, children will know. Conversely, if an adult cannot wait until a reading time is over, children will also sense this.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Effective infant and toddler books are simply designed and brightly illustrated. They are often concept books with plain, uncomplicated backgrounds and brief, simple (or no) plots. Such books provide opportunities for rich, interactive dialogues between adults and children by encouraging identification (e.g., see the baby, what is that?), participation (e.g., clapping, moving), manipulation (e.g., touching, opening and closing), and repetition (e.g., exaggerated sound or word patterns, natural rhythms of nursery rhymes) (Tomlinson & Brown, 1996). It is not unusual for young children to become enchanted by a single illustration, phrase, or section of a book. They may ask to return to that special place over and over again. One tiny reader referred to Winnie the Pooh stories as Donkey No Tail; another called a book about farm animals, Piggy in the Box.

What kinds of books appeal to infants? Raines and Isbell (1994) suggest that infants respond best to literature that focuses on everyday happenings and significant people. From birth, infants react attentively to books that have pictures with high contrast. At 6 months, they enjoy reading books about objects. By 8 months, babies treasure stories that encourage them to imitate the sounds things make—even before they can accurately name the object (e.g., they may say moo when reading a simple concept book about animals long before they use the word cow) (Sawyer & Comer, 1996). Babies also respond to stories that provide opportunities to experience tactile stimuli and encourage interactive play with sounds, words, and significant adults.

What do toddlers like to read? Running, roaring, exploring toddlers also like stories about basic terms and everyday objects and experiences, especially when there is a humorous twist to be found. Toddler favorites are often filled with mischievous antics, illogical characters, and comical illustrations. One toddler reader was overheard saying while sharing a book about farm animals: “It’s coming, it’s coming….the silly pig is coming!”
Older toddlers enjoy books with labels, concept words, and stories that include movements, rhythms, and rhymes (Raines & Isbell, 1994). They value literature experiences that foster autonomy and independent action.

Sharing literature with very young children is the beginning of a lifelong gift. Take a few minutes each day to read to infants and toddlers. And don’t forget to share your favorite story, even if it must be cut to a 2-minute version! Below are some books for babies. When these are part of a series, the companion titles are also listed.

EVERYDAY HAPPENINGS AND SPECIAL PEOPLE


Eating, playing, putting things away, Clare Vulliamy’s bedtime book is a perfect end to baby’s busy day. The cheerful illustrations and simple story line in this board book help babies understand what happens next in a bedtime routine. The rhythmic text is a lullaby in itself.

*Wide Awake!* is the companion book in this series.


Generations of adults have taught young children the magic word: please. This time-honored tradition is effectively portrayed in *Say Please* as a dog, duck, cat, pig, and little boy say “please” and “thank you” in their own unique ways. Large, uncluttered illustrations and a tender ending make this story a hit with young readers and their adults.


Blue eyes, black hair,  
Brown eyes, brown hair.  
Look at all the colors everywhere.  
Lots of different children  
Lots of different families  
Living in a world we share.

Baby bodies from tip to toe fill the pages of this book. Youngest children are satisfied to look and point at the photographs of babies and their world. Seasoned toddler readers enjoy exploring the second half of the book to discover things that make noise, things babies do, and things babies eat. The matching game on the final two pages extends the book’s appeal to children in the preschool years.


The 2" x 2" size and the enchanting colored close-up of babies make this sturdy folding cube a treasure for infants and toddlers. Youngest readers can manage and read independently as they flip, smile, and talk about and to the photographs. Be prepared to relinquish this book for a long time.