



Sharing Books with Toddlers, The Hanen Way

By Lauren Lowry

Hanen Certified Speech-Language Pathologist and Hanen Staff Member

Toddlers (aged 18 months – 2 ½ years) have figured out what books are all about, but may or may not be ready to hear a whole story. They enjoy holding a book, turning the pages, looking at the pictures and talking about what interests them. They often have their favourite books, which they want to read again and again!

When reading with a toddler, the main goals include:

1. Developing his interest in books
2. Having him interact back and forth with you
3. Learning some interesting new words
4. Having fun!

Types of books to read with a toddler:

- **Books with colourful, realistic photographs or pictures** – these types of pictures catch young children’s attention, and it’s been shown that toddlers learn more from these images than from abstract or black and white images [1].
- **Board books** – books with thick, sturdy pages that are easier for toddlers to hold and turn.
- **Repetitive books** – books with predictable, rhythmic language that repeats throughout the book. This type of language will catch your child’s interest and make it easier for him to remember key words as they are repeated often. Examples of repetitive books: “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?” by Bill Martin Jr., “Goodnight Moon” by Margaret Wise Brown, or “Hand, Hand, Fingers, Thumb” by Al Perkins.
- **Photo albums** – toddlers love to look at pictures of themselves and of the important people and events in their lives.
- **Homemade books** – which could include photos of favourite people or things, or objects or remnants from interesting places or outings. See “Make a Book” at the end of this article for more ideas.
- **Short, simple storybooks** – books with a simple storyline may interest your child. An example would be “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” by Eric Carle. If your child isn’t interested in listening to the whole story at first, simplify it, or just talk about the pictures.
- **Interactive books** – books with parts that move (flaps or tabs) or with things for your child to touch and feel may interest your child. However, there is conflicting evidence about how much children learn from these books. One study showed that typically developing children learned less from books that can be manipulated than from books with colourful, realistic pictures [2]. However, another study showed that children with language delay used more language when looking at interactive books [3]. Read more about these studies at <http://www.hanen.org/Helpful-Info/Articles/Which-Books-are-Best--How-the-Type-of-Book-Affect.aspx>

While looking at interactive books, it is important to observe your child to ensure that the moving parts don’t distract him to the point that he is not interacting with you.

Books to avoid:

- **Lengthy, complicated story books (including fairy tales)** - these types of books often involve an understanding of language that is more complex than your child may be ready for. They also require your child to pay attention for a longer period of time. The goal at the toddler stage is for your child to develop a love of books and a love of sharing books with you. Try to choose books that will work with your child's interests, attention span, and language level.

How to share books with a toddler

- **Let your child choose the book** - it's okay to make suggestions about which book to read from time to time, but allowing your child to choose the book ensures that he is truly interested.
- **Sit with your child, face to face** - while traditionally we think of sitting beside a child on a couch or in bed when reading, it is very helpful to **face your child** while reading. When you are face to face, you can read your child's cues and find out what interests him about the book. Your child will know you are interested in sharing the book with him if you are looking at him with interest.
- **Allow your child to hold the book and turn the pages** - this will ensure that your child is actively involved. Don't worry if he skips some pages – the goal is to make the book interactive and fun.
- **Let your child "read" the book in his own way** - some children will look at a few pages or flip through the book for a few moments. Others will want to look at the entire book. Let your child look at the book at his own pace and according to his interests. You don't have to finish the book at one sitting!
- **It's okay to change things up!** - you don't have to read every word on the page. You can simplify the story or just talk about the pictures and not read the words.
- **It's ok to keep things the same!** - some children love to look at the same book over and over again. There's no need to discourage this. The repetition and familiarity helps your child learn new words and develop a better understanding of the concepts in the book.
- **Wait** – for your child to do or say something. After you turn the page or read one page, wait silently. Avoid asking questions or pointing out anything particular on that page. Your goal is to give your child an opportunity to express himself and take turns with you.

Once you've found a book your child likes and you are taking turns talking about the book, you can **Add Language** that will stimulate your child's vocabulary, understanding, and thinking skills (It Takes Two to Talk® - A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays. Pepper & Weitzman, 2004).

"Adding Language" during book reading means:

- **use a variety of words** – try to avoid just naming the pictures in the book as this will result in your child being exposed to mostly nouns (names of things). While nouns are important, your child also needs to be exposed to words that describe (e.g. "wet", "hot", "tall"), action words ("go", "run", "sleep", "eat"), words for feelings ("happy", "sad", "tired"), location words ("up", "down", "under"), words about time ("now", "later", "after"), etc.
- **highlight important words** – emphasize the most important words (the ones that are key to your child understanding the information on the page) with your voice, slowing down, and showing a picture in the book which demonstrates the meaning of the word. You can also use gestures to explain concepts in the book. For example, when looking at a picture of a big elephant, you can outstretch your arms to indicate "big" while you talk about the "very big elephant".
- **expand your child's message** – when your child says something about the book, you can respond by elaborating on his message. For example, if he says "dog" while looking at a picture of a dog having a bath, you could say "The dog is having a bath". Adding on to your child's idea shows your child how to produce longer sentences.
- **build your child's understanding** – your child will gain a better understanding of his experiences and his world when you draw connections between the book and his life. For example, if you look at a book about a trip to the doctor, you can talk about a recent visit your child had to the doctor.

- **build your child's imagination** – books offer a great opportunity to add language that introduces imaginary concepts to your child. Talking about topics like castles, ghosts, or pirates that your child cannot experience in “real life” helps build your child’s language, play and thinking skills.

Make a book

A homemade book, created especially for your child, is sure to become one of his favourites. By following these guidelines, you will create a book together that will be interactive and fun to read:

- **Think about your child's favourite things and outings** – items can include photos of favourite people or things, packages or labels from favourite foods or toys (eg. part of the Rice Krispies box), or photos or small remnants from interesting places or outings (eg. a ticket stub from a show, part of the Happy Meal box from a recent trip to McDonald's, a stone collected from the playground, a photo of your child getting a haircut or swimming in the lake, etc.). If you follow your child's lead and observe his interests, you will know exactly what to include in the book.
- **Involve your child** – your child can help you select pictures or objects, help you paste the pictures into the book, and decide what to write on the page underneath the picture.
- **Less is more** – include just one picture or object per page.
- **Ensure that the “text” makes sense to your child** – when your child is the one who decides what to write on each page, it ensures that the text is from his perspective and at his level.

If you follow the guidelines above when you share books with your toddler, you will probably notice that your child:

- enjoyed sharing the book with you
- was able to sit for longer than usual
- communicated with you frequently during the book reading – so that it turned into a conversation!

Endnotes

1. Simcock, G. & DeLoache, J. (2006). Get the picture? The effects of iconicity on toddlers' reenactment from picture books. *Developmental Psychology* 42(6), 1352-1357.
2. Tare, M., Chiong, C., Ganea, P., & DeLoache, J. (2010). Less is more: How manipulative features affect children's learning from picture books. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 31(5) 395-400.
3. Kaderavek, J. & Justice, L. (2005). The effect of book genre in the repeated readings of mothers and their children with language impairment: a pilot investigation. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 21(1), 75-92.

For more than 35 years, The Hanen Centre has taken a leading role in the development of programs and resources for parents and professionals to help all preschool children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills, including those children with or at risk of language delays and those with developmental challenges such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, including Asperger Syndrome.