



## Can Your Baby Really Learn to Read?

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I'll never forget the first television advertisement I saw of a 9 month old reading words printed on "educational" flashcards. It was quite fascinating to see a young baby doing such an advanced task. But was this baby really reading?

If you search the internet for information on this topic, you can find as many claims that babies can be taught to read as articles refuting this claim. Proponents of teaching babies to read claim that through repeated exposure to printed words on flashcards and DVDs, infants eventually learn to "read" these words.

In a report on NBC TODAY, a variety of developmental and reading experts from around the US were interviewed about teaching babies to read. They reported: "From coast to coast, TODAY found 10 experts who were all of the same basic opinion: "Young children can be made to recognize or memorize words, but the brains of infants and toddlers are just not developed enough to actually learn to read at the level the way the enticing television ads claim they can"[1].

### Reading...not just memorizing

And that's because reading is a complex skill which involves much more than just memorizing. To be ready to read, young children need to develop:

- an awareness of print, including its purpose and rules
- an awareness that words can be broken down into smaller units (sounds and syllables)
- an awareness that letters correspond to sounds

- a large vocabulary
- story comprehension
- good language skills, including abstract language skills for thinking and analyzing

When babies learn to memorize words on flashcards or DVDs, you could argue that they are developing an awareness of print. However, the awareness of print they acquire from flashcards does not necessarily reflect the function of print in books or everyday life. What's more, because the babies are simply memorizing these words, they will not be able to apply this skill in different situations and learn to read new words on their own. To do this, children need to acquire *phonological awareness*, an understanding that words can be broken down into smaller parts such as sounds and syllables, and that these parts can be combined and manipulated. Phonological awareness is the strongest predictor of children's later reading and spelling abilities [2].

Other important skills that children cannot learn from flashcards include:

- understanding the words they read
- talking about the story
- using their imagination
- thinking beyond the pages of the book to relate the story to their own experiences

The truth is that parents don't need special products, DVDs, or books to encourage their young child's literacy skills. In fact, the ability of young children to learn from "educational" media is questionable at best. A recent study at the University of Virginia revealed that 12-18 month olds who viewed a DVD aimed at teaching vocabulary did not learn any more of the words from the DVD than children who had not viewed the DVD. The children who learned the most words in this study were in a "no video" group, in which parents tried to teach their children target vocabulary during everyday activities [3,4]. This study points to the advantages of using naturally occurring routines and play activities to encourage young children's language and literacy skills.

## So, what can you do to help your baby or young child learn to read?

Well, have you ever...

- talked to your baby?
- sung to your baby?
- played with your baby?
- played a people game with your baby? (e.g. a game without toys, like tickles or peek-a-boo)

- recited a nursery rhyme with your baby?
- looked at a picture book with your baby?

If you answered “yes” to some of the above, then you are on your way to promoting your baby’s reading skills. Reading starts with good language skills, including having a large vocabulary. Studies have shown that vocabulary is a good predictor of a child’s reading comprehension abilities at the end of grades two and three [2]. Building your child’s language skills during everyday interactions puts your baby on the best path to reading readiness.

## How to Read with Your Young Child

Here are some tips to make sharing a book with your young child a time of connection and conversation:

- Try to be **face-to-face** with your child when you look at the book together. When your child can see your facial expressions and gestures, he will learn more from you and from the book.
- Let your child choose the book
- Let your child hold and explore the book
- Feel free to read the book over and over again if that’s what your baby wants – the repetition will help him learn and remember new words
- Think of the book as a “conversation starter”. Besides reading the words on the page, you can talk about the pictures and help your child connect the book to his everyday experiences.
- Most of all – have fun! Be animated, use gestures, and **follow your child’s lead** by focusing on and talking about what he is interested in. This will nurture his early love of books.

Spending quality, one-to-one time with your child looking at books based on your child’s interests will spark your child’s love of reading, and set him on the road to reading readiness.

## References

1. NBC TODAY: “‘Your Baby Can Read’ claims overblown, experts say. It’s memorization, not real reading, child development specialists agree”, broadcast Nov 2, 2010, <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/39953918/ns/today-money/>.
2. Weitzman, E. & Greenberg, J. (2010). *ABC and Beyond™: Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings*. Toronto: The Hanen Centre.
3. DeLoache, J., Chiong, C., Sherman, K., Islam, N., Vanderborght, M., Troseth, G., Strouse, G., O’Doherty, K. (2010). Do Babies Learn From Baby Media? *Psychological Science*, vol. 21, (11): 1570-1574.
4. Holt, C. (2010, Nov 2). Can babies really read? Retrieved from: <http://community.advanceweb.com/blogs/nurses3/archive/2010/11/02/can-babies-really-read.aspx>.

### About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

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