As the parent of a preschooler, you are the single most important influence on your child and how they will develop. Stories, songs and rhymes are essential for your child’s development—and it’s never too early to start.

Language and listening skills, cognitive development, social skills, early reading and problem-solving skills can all be enriched by reading to your child. Sharing a picture book, a nursery rhyme or telling a story also enhances the bond between parent and child, in a way that is fun for both adult and child.

*Read To Me* is a thought-provoking, practical guide to assist parents, carers and students in their selection of books for young children, including those who have special needs. It provides a comprehensive list of titles to begin reading to your child, to give you hours of special times and open your child’s eyes to the wonders of books and reading.

**About the Author**

Gloria Rolton was a primary-school teacher and teacher-librarian with an interest in special and gifted education. She later became a lecturer in Children’s Literature within the South Australian Higher Education system, presenting to students of child care and related courses, and at teacher in-service programs. Since retiring, Gloria Rolton has continued to combine her love of young children and literature by giving weekly story sessions at a local child care centre near her home in Brighton, South Australia.
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Introduction

I hope this book helps you to experience the delight that can come from sharing books with your pre-schoolers. It is the result of my experiences in bringing children and books together over more than thirty years. I began sharing books with primary school children but in recent years have worked with three and four-year-olds through a weekly storybook session.

As a teacher in the late 1960s, I read to my class regularly. I knew they enjoyed it as we laughed together over such books as Muddle-headed Wombat or cried together over Storm Boy. I believed that this shared reading helped children to have a better understanding of how language worked. And it allowed me to introduce good books to developing readers who were not yet able to read them
the opportunity to extend my ideas about reading to a younger audience. I began to put into practice the ideas that I had read about in Dorothy Butler’s Babies Need Books. To see these little ones enjoying picture books and demanding their favourite stories even before they had fluent language was wonderful. From infancy they had access to good picture books and adults to share the wonder of books with them. My son-in-law was sceptical at first but was soon converted, especially when he saw his tiny daughter responding to an Anthony Browne book. Although he did comment once that if he had to read Mr Magnolia yet again, the book might come to grief!

My youngest grandchild, Kane, is just two-and-a-half years old. Recently we videotaped him with Hairy Maclary from Donaldson’s Dairy. He loves this and has learned the text of the whole book. He sits and turns the pages and ‘reads’ it. Already he understands that the story has a beginning and an end and that it flows from page to page. From the illustrations he knows the different doggy characters and relishes the climax where ‘Scarface Claw, the toughest tom in town’ scares all the dogs and has them running off home. Like his brother and his older cousins, he will have no fear of learning to
for themselves. Some twenty years later when I read of research in the United States that showed how children who were read to on a daily basis made great gains in a number of reading areas, I felt like cheering.

In the 1980s, the reading programs in South Australian schools moved from using the old style readers and reading laboratories to using real storybooks and novels. Reading to children was an important component of this approach. At my school I often spoke to groups of parents about their role in reading to their school-age children. As part of this talk, I read the parents a story. I usually chose Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. The parents loved it and there was usually a number who asked to borrow the book. I pointed out that just as they enjoyed hearing a good story, so did their children, especially if it meant having Dad or Mum’s total attention. Many of those parents came back to tell me they were reading to their children and how much they were enjoying it. I believed then as I do now that parents reading to children is vital. Most kids eventually learn to read but not all turn to reading for pleasure. It is parents who can change this so that those who can read become those who do read.

It was the arrival of my grandchildren that gave me
read when he begins school. It is possible that like his cousin Taylor he will be reading before he starts school.

But helping with early reading is just one of the advantages that reading to toddlers brings. In this book I have outlined a number of advantages. However, the most important reason for sharing books with your baby, toddler or pre-schooler should always be pleasure. If you and your child enjoy sharing a book then the other benefits will follow.

Gloria Rolton
The Value of Books
for Babies to Preschoolers

As the parent of a preschooler you are the single most important influence on your child and how they will develop. At no other time in their life will you have such a pivotal role. In these few years your child will learn to walk, talk and do all the physical things that humans are programmed to do. But through you they will learn the things that are not preprogrammed. This learning can happen as you play, tell stories and share books with your child.

Reading books and stories to children is fun for both adult and child. The time of closeness with a small child, sharing a picture book, a nursery rhyme book or telling a story builds a bond between parent and child.

Finding time to read can be a problem. Despite all the
gadgetry in modern homes, parents today are as busy as those of forty or fifty years ago. Many parents make a set time to read, such as at bedtime. Others use ‘waiting’ time — time spent waiting for an older child to finish music/ballet/sport/school. Dorothy Butler in Babies Need Books suggests a mid-morning break for shared reading. This may seem impossible for young mothers surrounded by the morning’s clutter. But those of us with older children know these early years fly. Once they’ve passed for your child, they cannot be recaptured. And this time of sharing is vitally important for the preschool child to develop:

- language skills
- listening skills
- social skills
- cognitive skills (thinking, remembering and associating skills)
- problem-solving skills
- early reading skills.

**LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT**

The basis for language begins in the first hours and days of your baby’s life. As you talk to your child, baby begins to recognise your voice. From their first days your infant is hearing the rhythm of the parents’ language. During the
first year it will move from cooing to babbling. At this
time children begin to imitate the sounds of the language
about them and fit these to the rhythms that have become
familiar. By singing songs, sharing rhymes and telling stor-
ies to your child you are providing the groundwork for
language to develop.

The vocabulary of toddlers grows rapidly. Books and
stories can help by providing a model. For example,
before she was three Brittany was read Rosie’s Walk by Pat
Hutchins many times, but she had never seen a haystack
such as the one that saves Rosie from the fox. However,
when she saw a huge stack of drying garden cuttings
she pointed to them and exclaimed, ‘Look! A haystack!’
She was experimenting with a word she had met only in
a picture book. Children who experience good books will
be exposed to more complex language. In Peter Rabbit
children learn that Peter is caught by his jacket in
Mr McGregor’s garden and then ‘his sobs were overheard
by some friendly sparrows, who flew to him in great
excitement and implored him to exert himself’.

Listening skills
In their early years much of what children learn comes
through listening. They need to develop the ability to listen,
as distinct from hearing. If this seems odd, think of a recent news broadcast you sat through. You probably heard the voice droning on but were not really listening unless something caught your attention.

Many young children have learnt to ‘turn off’ sounds around them. This may be because television has become background noise in the home or because the child is ‘talked at’ rather than ‘talked with’. I recently observed a family of mother, grandmother and three children eating out. The youngest child of about four wandered around; he would not sit and eat his meal. His mother kept up a continuous commentary aimed at him. His sister who sat and ate quietly was ignored. The disobedient one ignored his mother. He let her voice wash over him completely – it had become part of the background noise. The mother may have changed his listening behaviour if she had rewarded the sister for behaving so well. The four-year-old may have changed from ‘hearing’ to ‘listening’.

Sharing story books is a fun way to help develop your toddler’s listening skills. After reading a book, encourage the child to discuss the story. This may simply mean going back over the book and inviting them to comment on the illustrations. Often the toddler demands, ‘Read it again’.

Encouraging your four-year-old to listen for longer
periods will help in their early days at school, when most information is given verbally. Listening to television is no substitute for a story from a real live adult who can read and hold a toddler on their lap at the same time. During story-reading most children assume an amazing amount of control, as they interrupt to comment or ask questions. Sometimes the questions that arise while reading a picture book may force parents to check with a reference book. Remember the craze to know the names of all the different dinosaurs? This is an excellent opportunity for the preschooler to see that there are books for finding answers and that adults use them. If your family regularly
uses a library, borrow a few factual books as well as story books. These may be on subjects that your child already enjoys or may introduce new wonders to them.

**Social Skills**

The family is every child’s first social group. Later this will expand as they move to creche, kindergarten or school. As infants hear nursery rhymes, songs and stories from a parent or grandparent they are developing the sense that their place in the family social group is valued.

When they are read to they learn to make and maintain eye contact with the adult, which is an important feature of communication in our society. There is often an exchange of smiles, which is an introduction to the whole complicated business of human expressions and what they mean. By the time they are in their first years of school, children can judge facial expressions. Very quickly they are able to distinguish between a smile that is a real smile and one that is merely polite. They can soon judge the feelings of those in their social group by their facial expressions.

**Cognitive Development**

The development of thinking, remembering and understanding is basic to learning. From the first year of a baby’s
life we play games such as ‘This little piggy’ and even the youngest child soon learns that the game ends in tickling. They are developing understanding by associating the rhyme and the accompanying actions.

Young children who are read to, soon have favourite books. Remembering the story, the book from which it came and favourite illustrations show that the child’s cognitive skills are developing. These skills develop further with stories that show cause and effect.

When Jackson was two and a half he particularly liked Watch Me by Pamela Allen. This wordless book shows a small boy undertaking increasingly daring exploits on his three-wheeled bike then coming to grief. Although Jackson had ‘read’ it dozens of times, he gave a commentary each time: ‘Naughty boy, not holding on, naughty boy! His knee bleeding’. When he wanted the book he always asked for the ‘Naughty boy book’. His enjoyment of this small book reflected the development of his thinking skills, remembering skills and understanding of cause and effect.

Problem-solving skills
Very young children have inquiring minds. You will have noticed that they seem to be continually asking ‘Why?’.
Encouraging children to ask questions and find answers can help develop problem-solving skills, particularly if they can look at more than one possible solution to a problem.

We can encourage this through sharing picture books. When I read Alexander's Outing by Pamela Allen to Thomas, aged four and a half, I was surprised at his ability to understand the solution to Alexander’s difficulty. The story shows a mother duck taking her brood of ducklings for a walk and one, Alexander, falls into a deep narrow hole. Several attempts are made to get Alexander out of the hole before someone begins to pour water into it. I asked Thomas why they were doing this and he explained it was so Alexander could swim to the top.

Especially good for allowing young readers to suggest a solution is Shirley Hughes’ Alfie Gets in First. When Alfie slams the door he is locked inside the house with the shopping and Mum’s keys; Mum is locked out. As several neighbours, the milkman and the window-cleaner offer advice Alfie solves the problem. Most young readers, when asked to suggest what Alfie should do, arrive at the same answer as Alfie. Allowing children to predict possible solutions to the problem faced by a character in a picture book helps develop problem-solving skills.
Older children may think of several solutions and select the best. This is valuable training for school, where several curriculum areas are based on children discovering answers to their problems.

**Early reading**

Children who are surrounded with books from babyhood, told stories and read to are greatly advantaged when they begin the task of learning to read. They expect that books will be enjoyable and they understand that the marks on the page can tell a story.

They are aware of how books work. They know that books read from front to back, from top to bottom and from left to right. These concepts are learnt unconsciously through sharing books. In homes where reading is a normal, everyday activity and shared with even the youngest there will be little or no fear of learning to read. It is seen as something that will happen as a matter of course because everyone at home does it.

Jim Trelease, in *The New Read Aloud Handbook*, cites a study of children who learnt to read earlier than their peers. It showed that all the early readers had been read to on a regular basis. Trelease claims that reading to preschool children “stimulates their imagination, stretches
their attention span and improves their listening comprehension’. Such children enter their first year of school greatly advantaged.
At some time we have all held a newborn baby and looked in wonder at this new being. There is an immense sense of responsibility for the vulnerability of this small person. But as the months pass we cannot help but be impressed by the changes that take place as the child shows an ability to adapt and to learn. This development occurs in the physical control that the baby gains over its body and in the understanding and development of language.

From the time they are a few hours old babies are smiled at, spoken and sung to. No one believes that the child can understand this early communication but that does not stop parents, other family members and carers from continuing the one-way conversation. Within only