What Kids Really Want to Read
Know your child

Thousands of new children’s books—long and short, poetry and prose, fantastical and realistic—are published every year. With this great variety, how can a parent or caregiver select just the right book to capture a child’s interest?

Even if you are not familiar with children’s books, you know more about your child than anyone else does. You have the best possible chance to find a good fit.

A boy who dislikes reading may become engrossed in a book about his favorite athlete. A girl who rarely finishes books may discover a series that makes her feel as if she’s found new friends. Knowing your child’s interests helps you to tell when a book is “just right.”

Don’t worry if you can’t find the perfect book right away. Make a list of your child’s interests and then go to the library. If possible, select books you’re also interested in, because enthusiasm is contagious, says Dr. Deborah Wooten of the University of Tennessee.

If you and your child aren’t enjoying a book you’ve selected, don’t be afraid to try something else.

Babies and toddlers

At this age, the experience of reading together matters as much as the actual book. Babies enjoy simple picture books without lots of clutter on the page. Those that offer bright colors, sounds, and textures work very well.
As your child shows more interest and patience, move on to short, simple stories. Toddlers enjoy rhyming and repetition, as well as stories based on familiar songs (“Old MacDonald”) or set in familiar places (the grocery store, the park).

Preschoolers

Preschoolers are beginning to understand that other people live differently than they do. As your child asks questions and exhibits curiosity, turn to books to help him or her make sense of the world.

For example, a child who lives in the city can enjoy a book about life on a farm or on board a ship. Books are a way to go new places, and preschoolers are ready to set out.

Preschoolers also like
- Stories about kids their own age
- Nonfiction books
- Stories about animals
- Repetition of sounds, words, or phrases in a story
- Stories with funny-sounding words
- Books with pictures that tell the story, even without the words

Early graders

Some children learn to read very young. Even if your child can read alone, Wooten advises that you spend some time each day reading aloud to him or her. As you’re reading, ask questions about the story. Talk about what might happen next, and draw connections to your child’s life.

Children in early grades learn from picture books, but they can handle more text. For the books you read together, look for complex stories and advanced character development.
If your child isn’t reading independently yet or needs help, speak with his or her teacher, who may have ideas about how to deal with the situation. Browse the easy reader section at your local library. You’ll find books with simple vocabulary that build confidence, designed for children struggling to read.

Don’t worry if your child insists on reading books labeled for lower grades, Wooten recommends. Once your child gains confidence, he or she will gradually move on to more challenging books.

**Older children**

Third or fourth graders usually develop personal preferences. Unfortunately, some may be developing a preference *not* to read.

Resistant readers think books are boring, but you can often find books that spark their deeper interests. “If your child likes basketball, help him pick a great basketball book,” Wooten says. “Always offer several choices to give your child some control.”

Consider graphic novels (comics), topical magazines, funny books, mysteries, and stories about weird events or strange people. Don’t worry whether a particular book is “appropriate” reading material. The important thing is that your child is reading something he or she wants to read.
Good readers need help branching out. Learn who your child’s favorite author is. Librarians, websites, and bookstore staff can recommend similar books by the same author or others.

Tell your child to ask friends and teachers for recommendations. Remind him or her that it doesn’t hurt to try something new.

Getting some guidance

The International Reading Association provides annual lists of favorite children’s books chosen by children (Children’s Choices), young adults (Young Adults’ Choices), and teachers (Teachers’ Choices). You can download them free at the Association’s website, www.reading.org.

Other great Web resources include

- Association for Library Service to Children: www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscresources/booklists/booklists.cfm
- National Council for the Social Studies: www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable/
- National Council of Teachers of English: www.ncte.org/cte/awards/orbis pictus
- National Education Association: www.nnea.org/readacross/resources/catalist.html
- Parents’ Choice Foundation: www.parentschoice.com
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Supporting Your Beginning Reader
Beyond the classroom

Learning how to read and write isn't just for the classroom. Parents and caregivers play an important role in supporting beginning readers. You can provide many opportunities for your child to read, write, speak, and listen that will support his or her classroom learning.

Any activity that spurs your child's imagination can become a great opportunity for literacy learning. Family discussions, trips to museums and historic sites, word games, and collaborative family projects such as family scrapbooking or storytelling are all great ways to supplement your child's growing literacy skills.

Reading aloud

Reading aloud together is another great way to build literacy. It provides an intimate, loving, and safe way for your child to practice his or her developing literacy skills. If you already have a time set aside for reading together each day, keep it up!

Here are some ideas to keep in mind:

- Read aloud to your child every day, and continue after your child learns to read.
- Answer your child's questions, even if they interrupt the story.
- Talk as you read. Ask questions like "What do you think is going to happen next?" "Why did that character do that?" and "What would you do?"
- Don't use books that are not interesting to your child.
Encourage your child to write after reading. For example, ask your child to describe his or her favorite part or to imagine a different ending for the book.

Have your child retell the story in his or her own words.

After finishing the book, talk with your child about what you read, and invite him or her to reread parts of the story with you.

Same old stories

Sometimes parents get frustrated when children want to read the same stories over and over again. However, this is a normal and important step in your child's literacy journey. Hearing a story many times helps children memorize the words and hastens the day when they will be able to read on their own.

Here are some other tips for encouraging your child's early interest in reading:

- Learning to read is challenging! Encourage all of your child's efforts and praise his or her accomplishments.

- Explore the sounds that letters make. Ask questions like "What sounds do you hear in the word library?" and "What letter starts the word green?"

- When your child gets stuck on a word, resist the urge to provide the answer immediately. Instead, encourage your child to look at the picture to get clues or to read the rest of the sentence and then try to fill in a word that makes sense.

- Cheer your child on as he or she attempts to read new words and unfamiliar stories. Each word your child reads is one step further on the journey of literacy.
Venturing into new territories

“Choosing the correct book matters a lot,” says Dr. Lesley Morrow of Rutgers University and a past president of the International Reading Association. Here are some suggestions for selecting good books for your preschooler:

- Get books that rhyme and books with clear, attractive illustrations and strong texts.
- Pick books on subjects your child is interested in. If he or she takes a trip to an aquarium, borrow a book on sharks or dolphins.
- Ask other parents, friends, and teachers to share favorite book titles with you.
- Check online for lists of award-winning books for children. The International Reading Association website (www.reading.org) features Children's Choices, a downloadable annual list of books chosen by young readers.
- Explore different genres with your child: storybooks, picture books, informational books, fairy tales, poetry, magazines, diaries, newspapers, and more.
Libraries and beyond

• The best place to journey through the world of words is your local library. Take advantage of your library’s reading programs, parent-child book groups, story hours, and resource materials.

• Get your child a library card at the earliest opportunity. This gives your child a feeling of ownership and responsibility. Help your child find books on subjects of interest.

• Never force a book, recommends Dr. Deborah Wooten of the University of Tennessee. Instead, give your child a choice among several books, especially titles that a quick check of the bookshelves may have missed.

• In addition to using your library, check book sales, yard sales, thrift stores, and bookstores for stories to add to your family’s collection. Children love having their own books. Give books as gifts for birthdays, holidays, rewards, and special occasions.

Finding more resources

Guiding a new reader doesn’t need to be overwhelming. The Web offers some great resources to help your child’s literacy learning. Check out the International Reading Association’s website at www.reading.org, or visit these links:

• ReadWriteThink.org

“Learning Beyond the Classroom”: www.readwritethink.org/beyondtheclassroom/

• Reading Is Fundamental: www.rif.org/parents/

• Reading Rockets: www.readingrockets.org

Teachers, school administrators, and children’s librarians are also terrific sources of advice.
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Reading, Writing, and Technology
New media, new literacies

When you hear the word literacy, do you picture a book? A magazine? A newspaper? Today, literacy means all these things—and more.

Our conception of literacy is rapidly changing. Advances in technology have provided us with word processors, e-mail, interactive websites, video games, podcasts, and DVDs.

These "new media" give us new ways to convey information. They also expand the definition of literate to include competence with devices and ways of communicating that did not exist a few years ago.

Children today certainly need to know how to read books and write with pen and paper. But they also must learn how to navigate and master new technologies. Many jobs now require workers to send and receive e-mail and use word-processing or information-gathering software.

As a parent or caregiver, you can help your child prepare for the literacy demands of tomorrow by seeking opportunities for him or her to become a proficient user of the Internet and related technologies.

The Internet and critical thinking

Surfing the Internet is fun for kids. It also strengthens important literacy skills.

Children reading online rely on critical thinking and research strategies to find the information they need. For example, a simple Web search requires students
to assess a list of suggested sites and then analyze Web content for relevance to the question at hand.

"The Internet it here to stay, so starting to develop these skills early gives children a good grounding in the skills that they'll need their whole lives," says Dr. Laurie Henry of the University of Kentucky.

**Benefits of Internet reading**

Unlike a paper book, the Internet offers dynamic texts with videos, audio, and links to different sites. There are many benefits to online reading:

- Interactive sites can match your child's learning style: visual, hands-on, auditory.
- Websites offer context clues and organizing structures such as subheads, diagrams, and clickable definitions of unfamiliar terms, which help emerging readers develop stronger comprehension skills.
- Exploring websites makes children predict what they will read next. According to Dr. Julie Coiro of the University of Rhode Island, the very nature of hypertext, with information hidden underneath, compels kids to make many more forward inferences while reading than they ever make in paper books.

**Interactive learning**

As your child browses online—for fun or research—he or she is practicing critical skills. With help, your young reader can learn the strategies needed to tackle even more complex and difficult online tasks.

- *Correspondence*—Encourage your child to express his or her thoughts in e-mail to friends and family members. This provides excellent reading and writing practice in an informal, low-stress setting.
• **Author study**—Help your child learn more about a favorite author. Look up titles of other books by that author, and help your child send a letter or e-mail to the author or publisher asking about plans for future publications.

• **Critical thinking**—Do a Web search to gather information on a topic of interest to your child, such as a sport or hobby, a place your family has visited, or a historical figure. Review the search results with your child, talking about which sites may be reliable and interesting and which ones might not be as useful.

• **Precautions**—Teach your child to tell an adult immediately if he or she comes across something scary or inappropriate on the Internet. Caution against sharing personal information on the Web. Learn what parental controls are available through your Internet provider or additional software, and use them wisely.

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**A few great websites for parents**

• ReadWriteThink.org offers free reading and language arts activities collected by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English: [www.readwritethink.org/beyondtheclassroom/](http://www.readwritethink.org/beyondtheclassroom/)

• NoodleTools offers step-by-step tips for researching information online: [www.noodletools.com](http://www.noodletools.com)

• KidSites.com lists kid-safe sites by topic: [www.kidsites.com](http://www.kidsites.com)
Tuned in to reading

Television and movies have been around longer than the internet and probably have a worse reputation as time-wasters. However, better family viewing habits can help improve literacy.

- Join your child when he or she is watching TV. Share predictions about what will happen on the show, discuss the show during commercials, and talk about the show after it's over. These are basic strategies for developing comprehension.

- Find something in a show or movie that can serve as a springboard for reading. Borrow library books on the subject or do research online together to learn more.

- Ask your child to make up a story for a good TV show. Help your child write it down and have him or her draw the pictures. Or ask an older child to write it down and then read it—or act it out—for the family.

- Encourage older children to read books that have been adapted as movies, then watch the film and compare the two versions.

- Keep an atlas and dictionary close to the TV to look up unfamiliar words or places mentioned.

New opportunities to read and write

Reading doesn’t just happen when your child holds a book. Used creatively with traditional reading materials, TV, the Internet, and other media can be assets in your child’s quest for information and in boosting his or her reading and writing skills.
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Making the Most of Reading Tests
Reading
tests and
your child

Your child’s teachers measure literacy skills by classroom observation, as well as by evaluating class work and homework. They will meet with you and your child to review progress, and they will also administer formal and informal reading tests.

In many countries, governments make schools accountable for student performance on standardized tests. These so-called “high-stakes” tests are used to determine how much progress a student, teacher, or school has made, with direct—and sometimes serious—consequences for failing short of expectations.

These tests can be valuable tools, but sometimes too much importance is placed on the results. Dr. Peter Afflerbach of the University of Maryland, the author of *Understanding and Using Reading Assessment, K–12*, says that many people don’t realize the severe limitations of using any single test to tell the whole story of a child’s reading ability.

As a parent or caregiver, you need to learn all you can about the testing your child undergoes, as well as how to help him or her prepare for all kinds of tests.

Multiple measures of achievement

*Standardized tests* score student performance on a specific task or a limited range of tasks. That score can then be compared to those of other individuals or groups who have taken the same test.
Classroom-based tests measure a range of skills and understandings across a group of students. The results are used to identify areas in which additional instruction would help the class as a whole, or individual students.

Neither of these tests provides a detailed picture of an individual’s overall reading skill or an “objective” measure of a particular reading skill against a broader standard of performance.

To get around the “blind spots” in any single type of test, many reading teachers favor an approach called multiple measures of achievement. They use a number of different tools (including standardized test results) to assess student progress, including:

- Sitting one-on-one with a child who reads aloud from a book and responds to questions about the text
- Observing a child read silently on his or her own and then evaluating the child’s written response to a series of questions
- Grading written class work or homework
- Having the child do “cloze tasks,” which require filling in the blanks in a text by using context clues to determine missing words
- Reading aloud to the class and having children form written or oral responses (this tests a child’s listening comprehension, as opposed to reading comprehension; both are important)
- Testing a child’s ability to hear different phonemes (parts of words broken down into individual sounds), such as the difference between thin and fin or her and hear

Teachers use information gained from these sorts of informal reading tests to shape daily instruction in a way that addresses each child’s specific weaknesses and strengths.
"While standardized tests measure accountability, it is the other regular daily association that helps us achieve accountability," says Afflerbach. "A teacher who asks good questions and closely monitors student progress is working every day in the classroom to make teaching as excellent as it can be."

**Preparing for reading tests**

Reading tests are a part of your child’s educational experience, and there are a number of ways you can help him or her prepare to do well:

- **Talk to your child about the upcoming test.** Encourage him or her to prepare, but explain that a set score isn’t as important as doing one’s best.

- **Make sure your child’s sleeping and waking schedule is regular in the days leading up to the test.** A well-rested child will be better able to follow directions, focus on required tasks; and feel more confident.

- **Be positive when asking your child how the test went.** If you act worried, your anxiety will be noticed. Treat the test as just one component of your child’s educational achievements.
Talking to your child’s teacher

Your child’s teacher is familiar with each student’s literacy level, as well as with the tests required by your school district. Talking to the teacher will help you learn more about test content and methods and gain a better understanding of your child’s score.

Before your child takes a standardized test, ask the teacher or a school administrator:

- Which tests will be administered during the school year and for what purposes?
- How will the teacher or the school use the results of the test?
- What other tools will the teacher or the school use to measure your child’s performance?
- Are there ways you can help your child work on reading and writing skills?

After your child has taken a standardized test, ask the teacher:

- What do your child’s reading test results reveal about his or her skills and abilities?
- Are the test results consistent with your child’s performance in the classroom?
- Will your child’s test score change the way he or she is taught in the classroom?
- Are there things that you can do at home to help your child strengthen particular skills?
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