

Raising a Reader

without pulling your hair out

Birth to Phonics



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Introduction

I'm Frances Wong, and I've been a teacher since 2005. In that time, I've had the joy of helping thousands of children discover the magic of reading, including my own two!

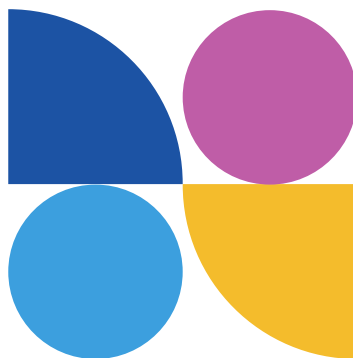
I'm also the author of a number of children's books, which means I get to see reading not just from the classroom, but through the wonder of stories themselves.



One thing I do know, reading is so much more than a skill. It's an adventure you and your child can share. Schools will teach children to read, of course, but it's those moments at home, curled up with a story, laughing over rhymes, exploring new words, that spark the joy and love of reading that lasts a lifetime.

In this guide, we're going to look closely at the reading journey from birth to phonics, the earliest stage, when books and stories start mean snuggles and soft words.

You'll find practical tips, bite-sized ideas, and simple ways to make reading part of everyday life, even before your child begins formal phonics.



Frances Wong

Children's Author
Teacher with over 20
years experience

Reading from Birth?

I'm not going to suggest that your newborn starts recognising letters. Instead, what really matters in these early years is creating a **language-rich environment**. Every rhyme you sing, every story you share, and every conversation you have lays the foundation for your child's future reading journey. These early experiences don't just prepare children to recognise letters later on, they help nurture a lifelong love of reading.



Your Newborn

Let's be honest, having a newborn is a lot of work. Your (or your partner's) body is healing, you're exhausted, and sleep feels like a distant memory. The last thing I want is for you to feel guilty about not "teaching" your tiny baby to read. (Remember, I'm a mum too!)

Instead, when you feel ready, you can begin to create a **language-rich environment** for your baby.

That means simply talking, singing, and responding to your little one. Pretend they're answering back when you speak. It may feel a bit silly at first, but it's powerful.

These moments aren't just helping your baby learn to talk and hear the patterns of speech. They're also soaking up words like a sponge.

The more language they hear, the more connections their brain makes, laying the groundwork for both communication and future reading.

A Language Rich Environment

A language-rich environment simply means surrounding your child with words in everyday life. It's about filling their world with talking, listening, and sharing language in natural, enjoyable ways.

10 Simple Ways to Build a Language-Rich Environment at Home

- **Talk through routines.** Describe what you're doing as you cook, fold laundry, or get ready.
- **Name things you see.** Point out everyday objects ("This is your cup. Here's the spoon.").
- **Sing little and often.** Anything! Nursery rhymes, silly songs, or even the radio in the car.
- **Use mealtimes for chatter.** Ask simple questions and share what happened in your day.
- **Narrate the world outside.** Talk about the bus going past, the rain, the dog barking.
- **Play pretend.** Give toys voices, act out little conversations with them.

The Tip Top Best Tip



Read to Your Child, and Read Often

- Children who don't read at home typically start school with a vocabulary of around 4,000 words.
- Children who read 2–3 times a week start school with about 169,520 words.
- Children who are read to up to 5 books a day begin school knowing a staggering 1.4 million words.

That's why the "million-word children" consistently do better academically than any other group, regardless of background or ability.

High Contrast Books

High-contrast pictures, books, and mobiles are more than just pretty decorations for a baby's nursery. They are powerful tools for early learning. In the first few months, babies' eyesight is still developing, so they are most drawn to bold patterns in black, white, and red.



Building Connections in the Brain

Looking at high contrast shapes helps their eyes focus, builds visual attention, and strengthens the connections between what they see and how their brain processes information.

This early visual stimulation is a first step towards recognising shapes and patterns, which later supports letter recognition and, eventually, learning to read.

High-contrast books are wonderful because they combine this visual stimulation with the comfort of shared reading.

When you hold a book close and let your baby look at its strong shapes and patterns, you are not only bonding with them, you are helping your child's eyes and brain practise working together.

This early practice with recognising shapes and differences is a foundation for the skills they'll later need to recognise letters and words.

Even though your baby won't "read" these books in the way older children do, the time you spend looking at them together is a vital first step on their reading journey.



10 Practical Ways to Use High-Contrast Books

- **Start early.** Place a fabric book in your newborn's crib or pram for short bursts of looking time, even before they can hold it.
- **Use it as conversation.** Pretend the baby is "telling" you what they see; respond back to encourage early turn-taking in speech.
- **Make tummy time engaging.** Prop up a high-contrast book in front of your baby to encourage them to lift their head and focus.
- **Keep books handy.** Leave a cloth book in the nappy bag or car so your child can explore it during everyday routines.
- **Read face-to-face.** Hold a board book close to your face as you talk, so your baby connects the patterns with your voice and expressions.
- **Add texture and sound.** Many fabric books crinkle or have flaps; explore these together to build curiosity and attention.

Top Tip



Follow your child's lead.

If your baby stares longer at one page, pause there; they're practising focus and visual tracking.

Let your explore the shapes, patterns, and contrasts at their own pace, even if it means spending several minutes on the same page.

This repetition lays the foundation for recognising shapes, letters, and eventually words as they grow.



My Favourite High Contrast Board Books

Now That You're Here by Loryn Brantz

But really, any book by Loryn Brantz is wonderful! I especially love this one. It has the same warm, celebratory feel as *On the Night You Were Born*, and the bold, colourful illustrations are full of little details to explore with your child. I highly recommend these books!



Look Look! by Peter Linenthal

I read this book with my own children and I just loved it. They were captivated by the high contrast images, pointing at all the pictures. There isn't a lot of text in this book so I read it as 'Can you see the...' and 'Where is the...' But it was a favourite the children chose time after time.

Touch Your Nose! by Lizzy Doyle

I love *Touch Your Nose!* because it gives parents a bit more of a clue of how to use this book with their babies. It's full of simple prompts and playful actions that encourage babies to interact, imitate, and explore body parts, helping develop language, awareness, and early motor skills while making storytime fun and engaging.



Nursery Rhymes

The impact of nursery rhymes on children is vastly underestimated. Singing and reciting rhymes helps little ones hear the rhythm, rhyme, and patterns of language, which are crucial for developing phonological awareness (the ability to notice and play with sounds in words).



QUICK TIPS

Nursery rhymes also build memory, listening skills, and attention, while giving children a sense of joy and predictability.

When you share these rhymes, your child is not only having fun but also laying the groundwork for learning to read, recognizing sounds, and understanding how words fit together long before they ever see a book.

I've included tips and the lyrics from some popular nursery rhymes to get you started.

- **Use your hands and body.** Clap, tap, or sway to the rhythm to engage your baby.
- **Repeat favourites.** Children love hearing the same rhyme again and again; repetition builds memory and confidence.
- **Act it out.** Use toys or gestures to illustrate the rhyme. It brings words to life.
- **Change the pace or tone.** Slow down, speed up, or whisper lines to help your child notice patterns and sounds.

Nursery Rhymes

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

Twinkl, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky



When the blazing sun is gone,
When he nothing shines upon,
Then you show your little light,
Twinkle, twinkle, all the night.
Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are.

Incy Wincy Spider

Incy wincy spider climbed up the
waterspout,
Down came the rain and washed the
spider out,
Out came the sun and dried up all the
rain,
So Incy wincy spider climbed up the
spout again.



Incy Wincy Spider climbed up the
tree.
Down came the snow and made poor
Incy freeze. Brrr!
Out came the sunshine and melted all
the snow.
So Incy Wincy Spider had another go!

Humpty Dumpty



Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the
king's men couldn't put Humpty
together again.

Humpty Dumpty sat on the ground,
Humpty Dumpty looked all around,
Gone were the chimneys and gone
were the roofs,
All he could see was horses and
hooves.

Baa, Baa, Black Sheep

Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any
wool?
Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.
One for the master, one for the
dame,
And one for the little boy who lives
down the lane.

Thank you, thank you
Thank you for the wool.
One bag, two bags, three bags full.
One to mend the jerseys,
One to mend the frocks.
One to mend the holes in [name's]
socks.



Reading Routines



A regular reading routine nurtures more than just literacy. By sharing books daily, children develop attention, memory, and listening skills, while building a sense of security and connection. Over time, these routines foster curiosity, imagination, and a lifelong love of stories.

How to Make Reading Part of Your Routine

Making reading a consistent, joyful part of everyday life shows children that books are fun, rewarding, and worth returning to again and again.

Practical Tips for Parents

- **Pick short, consistent times.** Even 5–10 minutes before bed, mealtime, or in the car counts.
- **Create a cozy spot.** A comfortable chair, soft lighting, or a little reading corner helps make it inviting.
- **Follow your child's interests.** Let them choose the book sometimes; engagement matters more than length.

- **Keep it relaxed and fun.** Laugh, point at pictures, or use silly voices; enjoyment is more important than perfection.
- **Use everyday moments.** Read signs, labels, or menus together to reinforce that reading happens everywhere.
- **Be consistent.** The more predictable your routine, the more children look forward to it and build a habit.

Daily reading routines give children confidence with language, strengthen early literacy skills, and make books a natural, joyful part of life.

Sensory and Fine Motor Development Through Books



Books can be more than something to look at. They're a way for babies to explore their world through touch and movement.

Handling board books, turning pages, feeling different textures, or interacting with fabric or puppet books helps develop fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, and sensory awareness.

These early experiences not only prepare little hands for writing later but also make reading a playful, interactive experience.

Tips for a Sensory Experience

- **Use fabric or board books with textures.** Let babies touch crinkly pages, soft patches, or raised patterns.
- **Add puppets or finger puppets.** Bring stories to life and encourage babies to manipulate small objects.
- **Encourage page turning.** Even if they need help, letting babies practice turning pages strengthens coordination.
- **Point, trace, and press.** Guide their fingers over shapes, letters, or pictures to explore tactilely.

Wordless Books



Wordless books are a wonderful way to encourage children to explore stories, use their imagination, and develop early literacy skills without relying on text. By looking at the pictures, children learn to sequence events, make predictions, and tell stories in their own words.

How to Use Wordless Books

Sharing a wordless book lets your baby or toddler participate actively, pointing, babbling, and “telling” the story alongside you.

How to Read Wordless Books with Your Baby

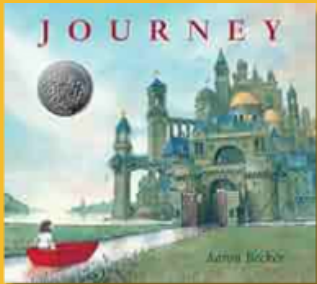
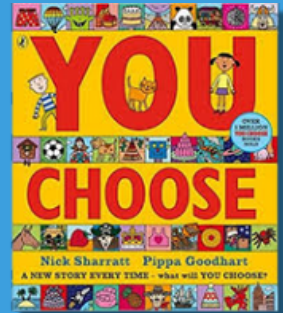
- **Start with short, simple books.** Bold illustrations or clear sequences are easiest for little eyes.
- **Point and describe.** Talk about what’s happening in each picture, naming objects, actions, and emotions.
- **Let them lead.** Follow your baby’s attention and pace; if they linger on a page, explore it fully.
- **Encourage interaction.** Let your baby point, touch, or babble about what they see; respond as if they’re telling the story.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** “What do you think will happen next?” or “How is the character feeling?” to encourage observation and imagination.
- **Make it playful.** Add voices, gestures, or sound effects to bring the story to life.
- **Repeat favourites.** Children love revisiting the same pictures, which strengthens memory and language skills.

My Favourite Wordless Books

You Choose by Nick Sharratt

Technically not a wordless book, but this book is full of conversation starters and suggestions for ideas.

Its playful illustrations and open-ended prompts make it perfect for encouraging children to talk about choices, describe what they see, and create their own stories.



Journey by Aaron Becker

Journey is a gorgeous wordless book that takes children on a magical adventure. As they follow the girl through colourful, detailed scenes, you can encourage them to talk about what's happening, guess what might happen next, and make up their own story.

The Snowman by Raymond Briggs

We have all grown up watching The Snowman at Christmas with the iconic song, and the book is just as magical. Its gentle, wordless story encourages children to explore the illustrations, talk about the characters' adventures, and use their imagination to create their own version of the story.



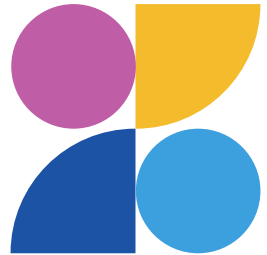
Print Carries Meaning

Even before children can read, it's important for them to understand that written words represent ideas and information. Seeing labels, signs, books, or notes shows that text communicates something, just like spoken language.

Pointing out words as you read together, describing what they say, or showing how stories have a beginning, middle, and end helps children connect symbols on a page with meaning in the world.

This understanding is a crucial early step toward reading, comprehension, and recognising that words are powerful tools for learning, sharing, and storytelling.

These small, everyday interactions help children connect symbols on a page with meaning in the world, building the foundation for reading, comprehension, and storytelling skills.



Useful Links



[BBC Nursery Rhymes](#)

[The Book Trust](#)

[The National Literacy Trust](#)

[Reading Fairy](#)

[My Website](#)

Don't forget to check back to my website for more resources, tips, and book recommendations to support your child's reading journey.

If you have any questions, want to share your experiences, or need a little extra guidance, feel free to reach out on Threads, Instagram, or through the contact form on the site. I love hearing from parents and carers, and I'm here to help make reading a fun, joyful part of everyday life for you and your child.