

## Benefits of Books for Babies

As a new or expectant mother, you want only the best for your baby—and you'll do whatever it takes to provide it. In the months before your little one arrives, you'll likely be feverishly creating a registry of must-have baby essentials, such as a crib, changing table, stroller, and baby clothing. While these practical items are certainly indispensable to your newborn's comfort and your convenience, they're not particularly stimulating to your little one's cognitive development. For a well-rounded, diverse registry, why not include a library of books specially geared for babies?

### Why Register for Books?

Many new moms make the mistake of waiting to read to their baby until they've reached toddler age. It's easy to see why—after all, an infant has little awareness of what a book is, much less the ability to follow a storyline or recognize images. The truth is, there are a boon of benefits that come with reading to your newborn:

- **Your baby loves the sound of your voice.** You wouldn't wait until your baby learned the meanings of words to start talking to her—so why wait to narrate a special book? Reading aloud to your little one provides a great opportunity to expose her to the soothing cadence of your voice.
- **Speech lessons begin from day one.** The first year of your baby's life is the most important in terms of learning the basic sounds she'll need to speak her native language. Although your infant can't string words together yet, she's busy listening to everyone around her and practicing her own first noises. Reading to your baby helps to expose her to a rich variety of words and sounds, which she'll use as the basic building blocks in forming an initial vocabulary.
- **Babies need stimulation.** Obviously, a newborn's brain isn't fully developed yet. Providing a healthy level of stimulation can help to speed up cognitive growth and sensory awareness. Books stimulate an array of senses: bright colors help develop sight, varying textures and materials cater to touch, and books with special sounds help stimulate hearing. Early reading has also been linked to better memory, listening, and vocabulary skills later in life.
- **Reading leads to bonding.** No matter what your baby's age, paging through a book together creates an aura of closeness and intimacy. Your baby will enjoy the physical closeness to you, reveling in your smell, your voice, and the soothing rhythm of your

heartbeat. Reading to your baby isn't as one-sided as you might think—when you share a story, you're participating in an interactive experience in which your baby reacts to the information you present, creating a sense of partnership.

- **It creates a soothing sleep routine.** Anyone who's had a baby knows the potential struggle that comes with getting the little one to adhere to a sleep schedule. Although there will undoubtedly be an adjustment period, studies have shown that developing early routines can help to create a soothing environment that promotes more regular and more restful sleep. Babies thrive on repetition, so choosing a few favorite books and reading them over and over again before naptime or bedtime can help your little one drift into dreamland.
- **It's never too early to learn.** Although babies may not fully understand the concepts that are being presented to them, providing early exposure to basic shapes, colors, animals, and faces helps to create a solid foundation for all they'll be learning in the months to come. Plus, reading helps to foster a healthy expression of emotions and strong communication skills, both of which figure in earlier than you might think.

Not only are they beneficial for baby, books provide a refreshing alternative for friends or family members seeking an economical yet meaningful gift for the new arrival. And by choosing a title you've personally selected for your baby, they can purchase with confidence.

### Choosing Books for Different Stages

Throughout the first months of your baby's life, his perception of books will shift slightly, as will the specific advantages he'll receive from them. When selecting your baby book registry, choose a wide range to cater to the first three stages of cognitive development.

- **Newborns:** Your brand-new baby obviously won't know what the words or images in a book represent, but he will be drawn to certain graphical elements, especially the dramatic contrast of black-and-white patterns. Books with mirrors and shiny surfaces are also more likely to stimulate baby's senses. These first exposures to pictures help to lay the groundwork for the picture recognition that will occur in the coming months.
- **4-6 months:** By this stage, your baby will begin to respond more readily to rhymed verses, bright colors, and large shapes set against contrasting backgrounds. Thick, colorful board books are ideal for this age range. Your little one may begin to register excitement when you pull out a favorite, familiar book.

- **6 months and older:** Your rapidly learning baby will begin to participate more actively in your reading sessions, demonstrating a preference for favorite pages and images. He or she will begin reaching out for the book, pointing to pictures, and even making noises to simulate animals or objects on the page. As your youngster reaches certain milestones, such as crawling, finger-feeding, or sitting up in the bathtub, try to choose books that reinforce and mimic those activities.

### Tips for Reading to Your Baby

While there are no hard and fast rules for how you should read to your baby, there are certain strategies you can utilize to help keep your little one engaged and to ensure that she reaps the maximum benefit from each session.

- **Keep it brief.** Studies have shown that infants have an attention span of approximately three minutes. Rather than trying to keep your baby interested in a 10-minute story, try breaking it up into three or four separate sessions. You should strive to reach a maximum of 30 total minutes spread out over the course of one day.
- **Cuddle while you read.** Your baby will enjoy being held close to your scent, your body warmth, and the reassuring rhythm of your heartbeat.
- **Be dramatic.** Inflect the tone of your voice to include high and low intonations, sing rhyming verses, and show exaggerated reactions to what's happening on the pages. All of this will help teach your baby the joy of reading with expression.
- **Don't feel bound by the text.** It's fine to follow the storyline, but sometimes the most fun is found when you take the occasional detour. Feel free to comment on the pictures, linger over favorite pages, and improvise as you go. Above all, reading should be an exercise in imagination—yours *and* baby's!