

Especially for practitioners working with young children! 

First Word Books

Print Awareness and Reading

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but understanding how one picture and one word go together is how reading begins. This practice guide includes ideas for how to use word books with infants and their parents to help young children get on a path to reading.



What is the practice?

Picture books with a single word for each picture introduce an infant to printed text. Showing a child pictures of fun and interesting things while naming and talking about the pictures is how book reading becomes an enjoyable and anticipated activity. This kind of book reading is how infants begin to understand that sounds and words correspond to the things they see and hear.

What does the practice look like?

A baby's first word book includes pictures of familiar and interesting people, things, and objects. They have only one picture and one word on each page. Read the words to the child while pointing at the picture and printed text. This will encourage him to point to or touch the picture. Any time the child points or touches the picture or word before being asked, say, "Yes, that is a (name of the picture)."

How do you do the practice?

The following are some ideas that you can use to build the child's interest in word books.

- The best books are ones that include pictures of things that are both familiar to the child and that catch his interest. Faces, toys, and other objects that the child regularly sees generally work best. The books should have one picture and one word on each page.
- You can make a word book out of a small photo album by inserting pictures and writing the names of the people or objects on the pictures. The best photo albums are ones that have plastic sleeves for holding photographs.
- Find any comfortable position where the book can be held directly in front of the child. Show the child one of the pages and name the picture while pointing to the printed word. Ask questions like, "Do you see the ___?" Any time the child reaches, touches, or points to the picture or printed word, repeat the word. As the child becomes more involved in this kind of book reading, add more information in response to the child's interest in the pictures (e.g., "Yes, the kitty is smiling at you").
- You do not need to go through the entire book. It is best to stop before the child loses interest.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does the child more frequently touch or point to the pictures in a book?
- Does the child sometimes make sounds or say part of the words after hearing them?
- Does the child want you to go through the book over again after finishing?

Take a look at more first word books

All About Me!

Nine-month-old Ethan loves to look at himself in a mirror. His teacher in day care uses this interest to make a word book of pictures of Ethan. The book includes eight pictures of Ethan with each picture having one word describing his expressions (happy, sad, joyful, crying, etc.). With Ethan nestled in his teacher's arms, she shows him one of his pictures, which gets him excited. She points to the picture while saying "Yes, that is Ethan. You are a happy baby." Ethan becomes engrossed in looking at the pictures and having his teacher talk about him.



Sharing Reading

Anytime 11-month-old Antonio sees an animal, he gets excited. His home visitor, Esperanza, suggests that Antonio's mom use books about animals to introduce him to shared reading. She seats him comfortably in her lap and shows him the book of familiar animals (cats, dogs, birds, etc.). Esperanza holds the book out in front of Antonio, who reaches and touches one of the pages. Esperanza says, "Do you see the cat? You do!" She shows him each page one at a time and follows his lead by saying the name of each animal he touches and describing what the animal is doing. When Esperanza and Antonio's mom notice he is losing interest, they tell him that all the animals are going to sleep and put the book away.

Touch-Pad Toys Book

Nico's early interventionist, Sally, has found a special way to introduce him to word books that really keeps 10-month-old Nico's attention and encourages him to interact with books. With the help of his mom, Sally has put together a collection of digital photos of Nico's favorite toys on a computer and has inserted the words for each toy on the photos. She has even added speech to the photos, which is activated when Nico pushes a touch-sensitive pad. Nico's mother holds him on her lap in front of the computer and shows Nico how to make each of the pictures "talk." The combination of pictures, words, and speech keeps Nico's attention for what seems like a very long time. Mom helps him "turn the pages" by putting his hand on the touch pad.

