
***READY for SCHOOL* Tips for Teachers:
What about READY for SCHOOL for Babies?
Part I**

How early is too early to start thinking about getting children READY for SCHOOL? Should we be thinking about school readiness even with the youngest children? We should – but probably not in the way you might typically think. Here are a few tips:

- A well-functioning brain is an organized network. The network is made up of brain cells (neurons) and the connections between neurons (synapses). Synapses link up to form neural pathways. During the first three years of life, most of the synapses are formed. Synapses that are activated frequently (as a baby or toddler is talked to, touched, interacted with) tend to become permanent. Those that aren't used, or are used infrequently, tend to be “pruned out.” Interaction with caring adults in the first three years of life is critical for brain development and ultimately, for success in school. As learning to read grows from competency in language skills, and language skills start in infancy, the very beginnings of learning to read also start in infancy.
- Talking to children frequently is crucial. Research has shown that children of talkative mothers have larger vocabularies than children of less talkative mothers. But it is not just talking to children, but talking *responsively* which is important – a child coos or babbles, and you coo or babble back as if you were having a conversation. The “give and take” of language is almost as important for babies to learn as the words themselves.
- Learning language is facilitated by the universal way in which adults tend to speak to babies across cultures, sometimes called “Parentese.” This type of speech, characterized by higher pitch, shorter phrases, slower speech, and repetition, assists children in learning language. This is different from what is commonly known as “baby talk.” When adults use “parentese,” they naturally adjust the quality of their speech to what babies are attuned to hear. Babies as young as three months also begin to attune themselves to the emotional intonations of the speech they hear.
- Reading to children, even infants and toddlers, is the most important factor in children having later success as readers. Nursery rhymes and songs also help children remember words and learn the pattern and rhythm of language.
- Television and computer programs, while they can offer a form of language stimulation, do not offer the skill of the caregiver in adapting his/her verbal interaction to the situation. Nothing replaces the personal interactions between the baby and caregiver in learning language.

To read more: Wolfe, P & Nevills, P. (2004). *Building the Reading Brain*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.