

Engaging reads

For young children, books are the first step to understanding language and communicating effectively. But how do we engage babies, who have no knowledge of words and a short attention span? And how do we know that they're actually connecting with the story and getting something from the session?

The key is to use every tool available. Make every tale you tell as interactive as possible to hold children's interest, and think about how you present it. It's up to you to get that story across in the best possible way, so that you connect with your audience and they get the most out of it.

Reading tools

Repetition is key, so make the most of chants, poems, rhymes and phrases that you can repeat together or in groups. Use your voice to repeat them in different ways: you might whisper, then shout, or start off at a really slow pace and then speed things up. Encourage young children to make lots of noise and join in with you. By doing this they'll discover the shape and sound of words, which will help them communicate their needs more effectively, as well as providing a good starting point for reading and writing. Remember, the ears are an important tool in communication. How words sound, and how they flow together, can make all the difference when you're trying to engage children. Get creative and perform the phrases by including music, song, dance steps, and actions.

There are simple yet effective ways to help your youngest children make the most of story time, says **Alison Davies...**

Use your voice to tell the story. Its tone and pitch will help children make sense of what's going on. Adopt different voices for different characters, and pause, allowing space after each sentence and before you turn the page.

Choose an interesting word that appears more than once in the book. Talk about what it means, and encourage little ones to repeat it with you until they feel confident with the way it sounds. Tell them that it's a

magic word, and that every time it appears in the story, they must shout it out three times and clap their hands. By doing this you're adding interest to the story and making it interactive. The children will pay attention because they're listening for the word. The beauty of this technique, is that you can do it with any book, and you can repeat it more than once with the same story, by choosing a different word. It's also a fun way to build vocabulary!



about the author

Alison Davies is a creative practitioner and the author of

Reading to your baby, published by Carroll & Brown, and *Read me a story*, published by Bloomsbury.



If it's a one-to-one session, include the child's name somewhere in the story. You could make it the main character, or pick another character and give it their name. Babies won't fully understand what the word means, but they'll be getting used to how it sounds and it will trigger their interest.

Signs of awareness

It can be hard to tell if under-twos are engaged and aware of what's going on, but there are tell tale signs that show they're paying attention and enjoying themselves:

■ **Gaze:** Watch where they're looking. If they're gazing at the pictures or you, they're trying to connect with what you're saying and the contents of the book. They may not understand the words, but they can hear your voice and see the images, and they're engaged.

■ **Coos and gurgles:** Babies often make sounds during reading sessions; these gurgles and coos will eventually develop into words as their understanding of language

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grows. It might seem like they're distracted, but these noises show that they want to join in and be a part of the reading process.

■ **Gestures:** Babies will try to touch things that they're interested in. This is their way of saying, "Hey, look at this – it's fun!" Look out for movements and gestures, particularly those aimed towards you or the book.

The mechanics of books

As babies become more accustomed to using books, they make attempts to pick them up and turn the pages, often sharing the experience with other younger children. They turn them around, make shapes with them and play with the pages. These are all obvious signs that they're engaging with the pictures and stories, and learning what books are all about. Encourage them in this process by sitting them in groups and giving them a pile of books to explore together.

Take a step back and see what happens. Let them take the lead, and get used to playing with books; this will stop any fear of reading from taking hold at a later stage.

Taking the lead

Babies will let you know when they've had enough. They'll become easily distracted and may even make attempts to move away or reach for something else. You could try to draw their attention back to the book by pointing to something on the page, perhaps using their finger to trace a pattern or word. Ultimately, though, it's best to let them show you when they've had enough. Reading is essential for literacy and understanding, but forcing children to do it for longer than they want will only breed feelings of resentment as they get older.

Baby story round

If you have a group of babies or toddlers, you can create a baby story round by sitting

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them in a circle. This is a great way of introducing a new book to a group reading session. Start by going around the circle and saying, "One day, five (six, seven, etc.) little babies sat in a magical story circle together. There was Tom – hello, Tom." At this point wave and see if Tom will wave back, and then continue around the circle introducing everyone. Encourage them to make noises and actions, by going around the circle again and saying, for example, "Tom started to clap his hands", and then get the group to do the same. Give each baby an action and encourage everyone to join in. Finish by saying, "They'd had such fun in their circle, but now it was time to listen to a story/go to sleep, etc."

NEW STORIES

Although small children rarely tire of the same book being read to them, you might want to broaden their experience and have a go at coming up with different stories. Use the book as a springboard, and include the same characters. Or start a new story where the old one ended. Ask the question, "What happened next?" Or take the main character and put them in an everyday situation that the children can identify with.

Look to your surroundings for inspiration. You might have a box filled with soft toys, so you could use this in a story about a teddy who finds himself in a new toy box and has to make friends. It doesn't have to be complicated. Think in terms of three boxes: a beginning, middle and end. Give the story a point of crisis: something that happens that

causes the main character to come up with a solution. Then work out how you'd like the story to end. If you have a specific message you'd like to get across, sum it up in a word. So, for example, if the story is about a teddy who needs to make new friends but is very shy, your word might be 'courage' or 'friendship'.

It's also a good idea to think about everyday activities that you'd do with the children and use them as inspiration for mini tales. For example, 'washing hands' could become a story about the way that water moves and feels, and how, as if by magic, it disappears.

By making everyday items and activities the basis for some off-the-cuff storytelling, you're showing children how we communicate, and make sense of the world.