

# Early Literacy for Toddlers with Hearing Loss

One of my earliest memories is of sitting next to my dad, my older sister on his other side, listening with rapt attention as he brought a story to life. More than once I have wondered what my father would have done during bedtime reading if one of his five children had been born with a hearing loss.

For families of birth-to-three year olds who are deaf or hard of hearing, "book time" is a recurring concern. Typical questions and comments include:

- How can I read to my son when he doesn't hear the words?
- I can't cuddle my daughter on my lap like I did with my other children when we read, because then she can't see my face!
- How can I sign about the pictures, hold the book, and have eye contact with my son all at the same time?
- I try to read to my daughter, but she just won't hold still long enough.

There are many strategies parents can use for dealing with these challenges, and a variety of resources to help them learn new ways to instill a love of reading in their infants and toddlers with hearing loss. For young children with enough residual hearing, bookreading puts the parent's voice at an ideal distance from the child's ear to maximize opportunities to hear the spoken words. Sitting so that the toddler can switch attention from the pictures to parent's face provides additional information about the meaning and visual features of the language contained in the story.

Parents who are using a form of signed language within their families can pick up tips by observing how deaf parents read to their deaf children. Dave Schleper, a reading specialist at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., lists fifteen "Principles for Reading to Deaf Children" that he gleaned from research on reading by deaf adults. Many of these can be adapted for any communication approach that a family is using, whether it involves American Sign Language, a form of signed English, or an oral-aural method. Some of these principles are just good, basic reading principles for any child — deaf or hearing!

Deaf readers (i.e., parents or other adults):

- keep signing and written English visible.
- are not constrained by the text.
- reread stories on a "storytelling" to "story reading" continuum.
- follow the child's lead.



- adjust signing style to fit the story.
- connect concepts in the story to the real world.
- use eye gaze to elicit participation.
- provide a positive and reinforcing environment.

The most important principle of all is: *Deaf readers expect the child to become literate.*

Specialized early intervention programs for young children with hearing loss can help with specific strategies and guidance for promoting pre-literacy and emerging literacy of birth-to-three year olds who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Also, Washington Sensory Disabilities Services (WSDS) hosts the Shared Reading Video Outreach Project, a live interactive videoconferencing program that helps parents and educators learn how to sign/read children's books to young children with hearing loss ([www.srvop.org](http://www.srvop.org)). To find out if one of SRVOP's 23 sites is located near you, or for information on infants & toddlers with hearing loss, vision impairment, or deaf-blindness, contact WSDS at: 800/572-7000 or (206) 439-6925 (King and Pierce Counties).

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