

Getting your child to love reading in 2024

Teaching (very) early reading: Part 2



ERIK HOEL

JUN 13, 2024 • PAID

99

36

4

Share



Art for *The Intrinsic Perspective* is by [Alexander Naughton](#)

This spring I introduced a long-term project of mine: a guide for teaching very young children to read. It's based on my own experience teaching my two-year-old (who is now three). You can see our progress here:



While it certainly doesn't make sense for everyone to do this, there are many reasons to teach a toddler to read early, from ensuring their first formal learning experience is a positive one, to sheer parental enjoyment, to worries over more standard education pipelines, to potential developmental benefits, all outlined in [Part 1](#). This is Part 2.

Why create a guide? After all, there are plenty other popular methods out there, including bestselling books like *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons*. However, even for those described as "easy," my opinion was: *holy crap, they make teaching reading complicated!* And such formal resources can run into trouble. Typically, often they are essentially written-down lectures, and therefore one-size-fits-all and inflexible, and easily exhausted (toddlers have prodigious memories and can repeat entire rote lessons without true understanding).

As I've written about previously in "[Why we stopped making Einsteins](#)," elite education used to be very different than our lecture-based system. Many famous names were instead taught via what I dubbed "[aristocratic tutoring](#)," people like

John von Neumann, Bertrand Russell, John Stuart Mill, Ada Lovelace, or Charles Darwin. In fact, universities like Cambridge **used to run** almost entirely on tutoring, not lectures. Probably because they knew what scientific research has shown: that one-on-one tutoring is the **most effective method of education**. I can see this historical change in education clearly even in how the initial steps of reading are taught: too often, the modern lecture-based education system spills into teaching outside of school. Therefore other popular methods often still mix classrooms, failing to take advantage of the flexibilities and benefits of one-on-one tutoring.

In comparison, this guide emphasizes the feedback between teacher and student.

- It is designed for very early reading (but can be done at any age).
- It provides easy-to-follow recipes for lessons, not just an inflexible set of exercises that may not work for your kid.
- I eschew steps other methods spend a lot of time on, but that just confuses the child.
- The learning curve is not steep on the parent's side, which matters greatly for time purposes.
- It speedruns to mastery of simple sentences and therefore grants confidence, enjoyment, and usefulness to the child fast.
- It provides Q&As on troubleshooting (plus you can ask me in the comments as well as links to all the low-cost supplies I used).

Since it occasionally discusses my own child as an example, the guide is for paid subscribers only. So if you want to either teach reading yourself, just curiously follow along, or simply support this sort of independent research and writing, please consider becoming a paid subscriber (\$7 a month) to *The Intrinsic Perspective*.

The guide is written from the viewpoint of a parent teaching a toddler, although most of its lessons can be applied at any age with minimal adaptation (and by

parents, of course). Perhaps most importantly, it is grounded in what I think the basis of all learning is: *loving and grokking*.

I emphasize these two because memorization is the great red herring of education. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it flirts dangerously with being useless times, since memorized facts without context will fade faster than most are comfortable admitting. There are **plenty of studies** showing this, but you can introspect and find it within yourself too. How much of those high school courses remain? College? Where did the cram sessions go? Where did the Red Bull energy worksheets and highlighters go? Where did you go, that you?

Anyway. The reason for these failures is that many courses and classes are based solely on lecture-derived memorization systems without much context, personal or otherwise. Meanwhile, actually learning something in a way that sticks, in a way that goes deep, is all about loving and grokking. Loving as in the subject is interesting, it is stimulating, it has a social context (others are interested in it), and also that the learning process itself is enjoyable in the way all mastery is. In turn, grokking means when something doesn't fade because you have uncovered the fundamental: it's when a fact or way of thinking is integrated into your existing knowledge structure (call it "world model" if you like, a cognitive scientist would). This is well-known psychologically and even **neuroscientifically**: facts or skills that have "a place to go" are far easier to retain in your cognitive map of the world.

If loving and grokking are the fundamentals of learning, then the question of "How do I get my kid to read?" breaks down into the more answerable: "How do I get my kid to love to reading and books, and then to grok that letters are sounds and that he or she can sound out those letters to make a word?"

So, back to the beginning: why does a child think that there is something worthwhile finding out in those little squiggly lines? Well, you first make them in love with books, and then (and this is critical for teaching) you create a structured formal time for learning during the day to prep the way for phonics and eventually, grokking sentences.

To have an early reader, first read to your kid every day

This is not uncommon advice—even doctors will regularly ask about it at checkups—but I’ll note a few things.

I think early on basically all books are too advanced at first. I’m talking about a stage that’s mostly pre-language, like less than a year old, but this can apply even to young toddlers. And what I mean by “too advanced” is that even things sold as very simple baby books will often try to contain a story, and in truth the ability of a less-than-one-year-old to follow an actual narrative is basically nill. Parents then dutifully try to read the story (which probably contains a lot of words the baby doesn’t know yet) and flip the pages diligently, and the kid will get bored and so the parent concludes that maybe their child is not ready for books or is not interested in them to begin with.

Instead, realize the story is the least important part of a book at very young ages. Use it as needed, but otherwise, improvise! Initially, reading books is not about the content, it’s about the *performance*. If there’s a picture of a horse, say “neigh” loudly and point, even if the text doesn’t tell you to. If there’s a picture of a pig, snort and act like a piggy. All that matters is that you are excited about what’s on the pages and clearly trying to communicate with them about it (even if they don’t understand the communication itself). For this reason, books with flaps are great for reading to babies and early toddlers, since they contain within them a physical activity (turning the flap) along with a surprise. It’s like a static version of peek-a-boo. Same with touch-and-feel books.

When being read to becomes a performance with funny voices and sounds, rather than just a dry page-flipping session, babies and young toddlers quickly learn to associate reading as *when they get entertained*. And what is entertaining to a baby? That the elements of this world can be *named*, that there is a hidden order to find out. Categories are paramount at this age: animals, vehicles, colors. These semantic categories are the bedrock of the world. As the baby becomes a toddler, actual narratives will become more interesting than mere categories, and you can then make

judgements about books based on their narrative content. I'm not saying to ignore narrative completely, just that while inculcating a love of reading it initially plays second fiddle to *performance*.

Sometimes you have to adapt to keep things interesting. One day, after many months of reading to my son Roman every night before bed, there was a sudden change. He would fight in my lap and push the book away (he was still mostly verbal). *Okay*, I thought, *maybe he's just not very interested in books anymore*. I grew concerned, for that was a big change. A few days went by where we were stuck in a loop: at night I would pull him into my lap and try to read to him, he would sit briefly but become agitated, and then squirm away. Finally, it occurred to me to spark deep in my old used adult brain—to move out of the chair and instead prop a few pillows down on the rug in his room and read there. Boom! That's what he wanted; it was not that he didn't want to be read to, it was that he didn't want to be *in my lap*, because in that position he had no autonomy. He felt too much like a baby. He was perfectly happy to sit next to me on a den of pillows and go through the pages, and when we were done with a book, well, that was the most exciting time, because he would mutter “notha boo” and dash off to the bookshelf. Making books entertaining at the beginning means it's easier to keep them important on.

In fact, try to keep books primary for as long as possible.

It's 2024 and screens are everywhere, inevitable. Yet, just as it is harder to get someone to eat healthy once they know that donuts exist, so too is it harder to keep someone's central entertainment reading once they know iPads exist. Neither is impossible, and just like donuts, a little screentime is not going to evaporate a love of books. But it's an unfortunate fact of human nature that watching is the easiest form of entertainment. Doubly-so for a toddler, since they lack the sort of metacognitive pleasures that come from reading vs. watching. For this reason I would recommend limiting screentime as much as you reasonably

if you want to teach early reading. Context is obviously key here. Are screens a reward, and books a chore? That might mean less motivation to learn later. If you want learning to read to be important to your child, books should at least rival other mediums for attention and enjoyment.

One strategy (not a necessary one, by any means) is to save screens mostly for teaching itself. For screens are *intrinsically* interesting, even if their contents are dull. When I started playing Roman simple letter sound videos, he was entranced simply because he doesn't have much regular screen access. Use the hypnotic power of the black mirror to your advantage.

Create a “learning time”—a period of formal instruction that occurs daily.

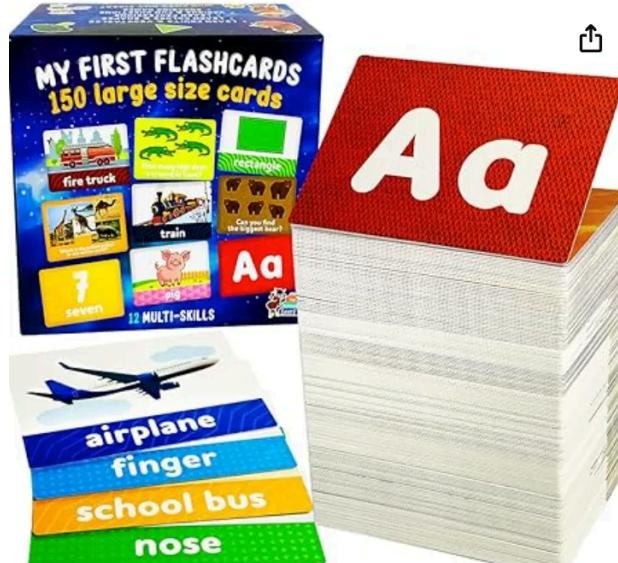
Too often, parents become excited about teaching their child something (like numeracy or literacy), but try to randomly bake that into the child's day. The lessons then fail to stick. What's necessary is a formal period for learning.

If education is about loving and grokking, then it is critically important that the formal learning time (call it whatever makes sense) is given a lot of initial hype. Don't worry too much about progress initially. Instead, think of how to best get the child used to a short formal period that's strictly for learning (but that's still fun). Later, once it becomes routine, you won't have to be so performative and energetic. For example, I started doing flashcards for 10 minutes a day with Roman prior to starting phonics, just of different fundamental categories, like animals or cars or so on. When he would get the name right, I would celebrate wildly (yes, including making the noises). For a time we would even do “throw where he would answer, then go to the end of his room and run at me and I would toss him bodily into a pile of pillows to his great delight. Now, however, we just practice sitting down on the floor in the morning or later at dinner. While I still make efforts to keep it interesting, I'm certainly not literally doing a song and dance about it anymore.

Starting with flashcards may seem simple, but its pedigree is one of the oldest education. As John Stuart Mill wrote about his **father's early efforts** in the 1800s:

My earliest recollection on the subject, is that of committing to memory what my father termed vocables, being lists of common Greek words, with their signification in English, which he wrote out for me on cards.

Well, we might not live up to Mill's standards of ancient Greek, but here are some more contemporary flashcards to start with for \$29.95, the same set I used (available [on Amazon](#)).



Each has a back side with fun little games to play. For NOSE you'll find a question like "What do you smell right now?" or for LION a question like "Which of the lions is blue?" Start by covering the name, asking what the picture is, and when they get it right celebrate (don't worry about them getting it wrong, just say "right" or "close" or "try again" and don't drag it out). Then do the activity on the back, which is usually right at their level.

Explicitly creating a time in their schedule to do flashcards gets them into the ritual, enforces the idea of teaching as based on you questioning and them answering, and therefore subtly creates the bedrock for all learning that can't happen solely through cultural osmosis.

Decide when to do formal instruction—and who should teach it.

One of the important questions: When does all this fit into your, and the child's schedule? For to be brutally honest after a long shift with a toddler many parents will not have the energy to give a performance while reading, to make flashcards fun, or possess the patience to go through letter sounds.

One way to help with a high-energy experience is if the parent who is the non-primary caregiver (if there is one) takes on the teaching role. If the teacher is instead the primary caregiver, I recommend asking when during the day you have maximal energy and patience. That might be after they nap, and you've had some downtime to yourself, or it might be in the morning when they are in a good mood and haven't thrown some exhausting tantrum yet. Whatever the time is when you have energy, that's a good time to create a "learning time" or "school time."

Treat formal learning like any other behavior.

It's a fact every parent knows that occasionally children are truculent or unwilling about things. Sometimes it's over something important (like wearing clothes to the mall instead of going nude), and you have to deploy whatever is in your toolbox of parental resources to get them to do *the thing*, like put on pants. Some kids are super compliant, others extremely stubborn. Most oscillate in-between. It would be nice to think that, when personally teaching reading, a parent should never have to deploy anything in their toolbox of parental resources. But, for many toddlers and young children, literally nothing is like that: not their behavior in social settings, not their eating habits, etc. Eventually, something crops up, and they suddenly don't want to do *the thing* they've been doing for months, just to see what will happen. And you have to act, because *the thing* is like refusing to eat literally any food except chips.

What I normally say is that, when establishing a routine of brief formal instruction, you should never do anything outside the realm of what you do to

reasonably get your kid's compliance on other everyday subjects, from ensuring they put shoes on or close the screen door to more serious things like making them share toys and don't hit their siblings, etc. If you find yourself straying outside your normal parenting patterns for other day-to-day subjects, it probably indicates a timing problem. You might want to take a break, wait a few months, and change tack. Certainly, if the goal is getting them to love learning then adding too much negative reinforcement can easily backfire.

In my experience this is all a pretty limited concern. Once something becomes routine for a kid they usually don't question it as long as you continue to make it at least marginally interesting. A child's love of routine is your ally, which is one reason I recommend the formal learning period be a regular, ideally daily, practice.

Teach the alphabet.

I'll never understand exactly why the alphabet song is so incredibly catchy. It shouldn't work, but it does. It has a claim to being the greatest earworm ever devised. Sing it with them often, play it for them over speakers at dinner, take them to classes where it's sung, etc. Its infectiousness will do a lot of work for you.

Eventually, you can transition to teaching the letters during the established formal instruction period. E.g., the previously-listed flashcard set comes with cards of just the letters themselves (and then pictures of different things on the back, like "A is for ant"). Mixing those into the other flashcards will mean they can quickly learn the difference between "big A" and "little a." Then start changing media (this is important to prevent overfitting). Draw letters out on pieces of paper and ask about them. Buy a set of capital and lower-case letters to use for this purpose. I got [this set from Amazon](#) for \$10.



[source](#)

I recommend buying two sets, since you'll need at least that many extra letters create words later.

Around the same time, start pointing out letters in the world. Do little pop qu when you see a letter you think they know (especially big ones, like on a store sign). Act very excited when they get the answer right. Basically, do everything can to link the learning they are doing during the period of formal instruction the outside world.



At the end of this pre-reading process, a child should be primed by having: (a) love of books as one of their main modes of entertainment; (b) a formal period instruction baked into their day, even if it's just 5-10 minutes long initially; (c) on-sight knowledge of the letters of the alphabet in different mediums.

The stage is set for grokking, which comes in the form of phonics: how to sou out words. In the next installment I'll cover starting with phonics, how to best

teach phonics, what you can ignore, and how to speedrun grokking simple words and sentences.



99 Likes • 4 Restacks

Discussion about this post

Comments Restacks



Write a comment...



T LI T LI 14 Jun 2024

Heart Liked by Erik Hoel

Have been waiting for this. We got a 2 yo too. Now cant wait for part 3.

Heart LIKE (6) Chat REPLY



Sam Crespi Sam's Substack 14 Jun 2024

Heart icon Liked by Erik Hoel

Just curious.... what are you doing for your child in relation to introducing him to Nature? One of the most fascinating sources for learning for a young child. Daily walks provide the opportunity to learn about nature, her connections and support system. And 'who' odes what. My daughter loves Dr. Seuss... there is something about the rhythms of the words that children love... Suess provides many fun teachable moments linked to rhythms..Children love the rhythms of his sentences and words. I was an early reader and ended up skipping grades. But I also loved listening to fables, folktales and folk tales. And was an avid listener to stories with music. I speak 4 latin languages and attribute those skills to having music in my life early on. Language is music. I was in an adult symphony at the age of ten. But, the one thing I lacked was my parents weren't hikers, or outdoor enthusiasts. Nature is one of the best teachers a child can have.. and of course, walking is great for the mind, their body and their spirit. I ventured out on my own.

I met my first totem animal at the age of five... walking alone in a wild area on a hot day, I crawled under a big rock to rest in the shade. I then 'sensed' there was something big close by. Curious, I looked up and was almost nose to nose with a mama mountain lion. We sat and stared at each other. Then she backed away and disappeared into the bushes. A medicine woman friend told me she came to give me 'courage.'

Heart icon LIKE (3) Comment icon REPLY

7 replies by Erik Hoel and others

34 more comments...