

How to teach your two-year-old to read

Teaching (very) early reading: Part 1



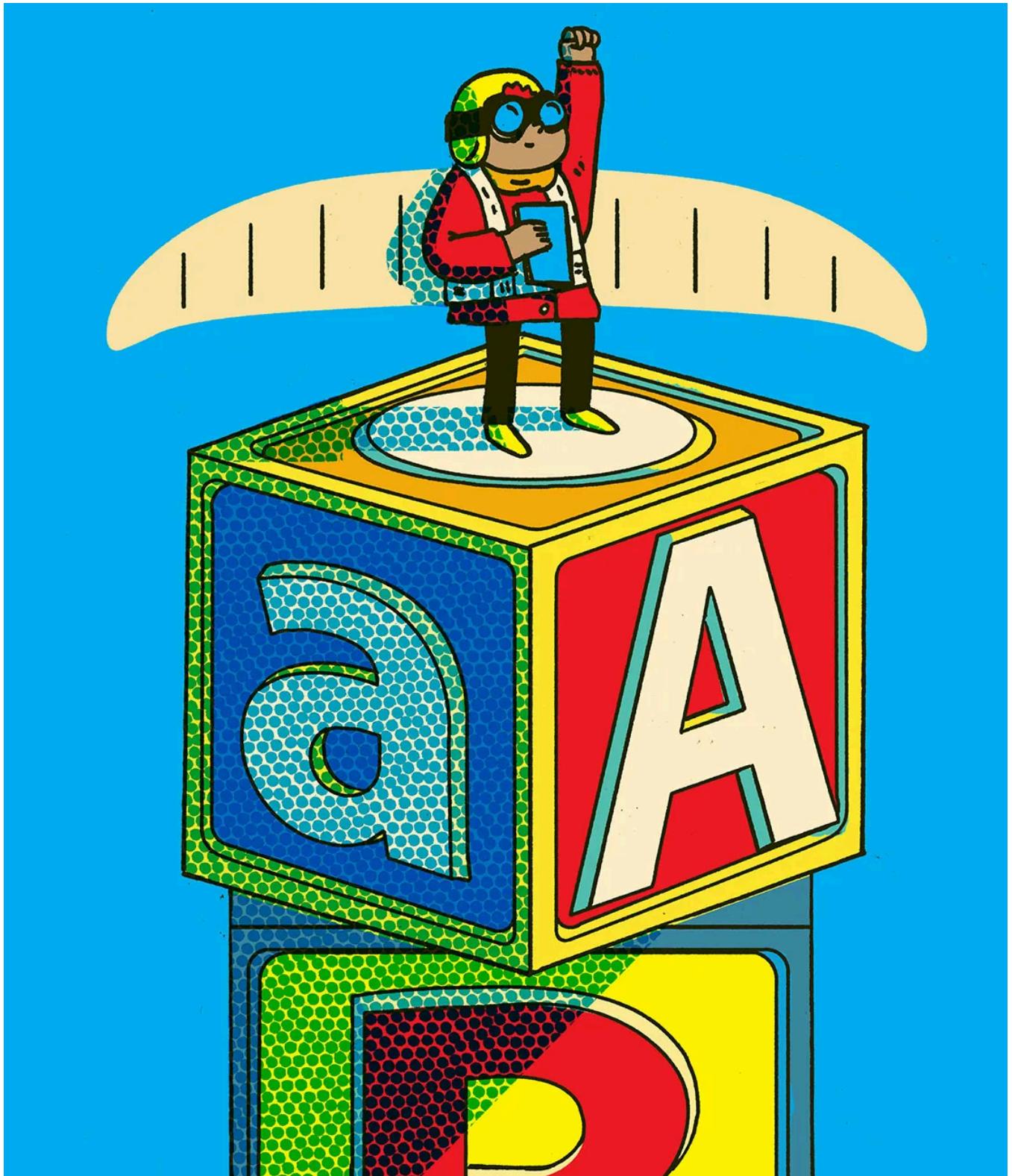
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Art for *The Intrinsic Perspective* is by [Alexander Naughton](#)

All children find themselves living in a new world papered with strange hieroglyphics. Most of the time, they must wait to be enrolled in an institution slowly learn how to read the signs of civilization. According to experts, most children in America should have learned to sound out simple words in 1st grade.

(six years of age) and should be able to read novel but short sentences in 2nd grade (seven years of age)—standards many schools now don't reach.

Yet, if a child is instead taught to read by their parents, or an early caregiver, it is quite possible for toddlers to read at the age of two. I know this because my two-year-old son can now read, after just a few months of tutoring (see the video or below for results). Reading is, of course, a spectrum that begins at D-O-G and hopefully ends at cracking books as complex as *Ulysses*, so to clarify, by “reading” here what I mean is roughly the first to second grade standard of “the ability to work out simple sentences never seen before.”

Please note: teaching your child to read, and especially to read early, is not for everyone. In fact, it doesn't make sense for a ton of families' situations and isn't the right move for all children. I want to be really clear about that. However, I'm writing this because I believe there is a significant untapped pool of parents who could teach their child to read, and also who would want to, and that this outcome would be best—for their situation, for their relationship with their child, for the child itself—yet these parents don't do it because *none of them even know it's an option*.

While teaching reading is definitely taking on a challenge, it requires less effort than one might think. Because the truth is that a parent and child can radically outperform any school, public or private, in about 10 minutes a day of tutoring ages far younger than normally thought possible.

Below is a video showing this process. At the beginning, in January, I'd only previously taught the most common letter sounds to my son, Roman, and we were just putting very simple words together. Yet by video's end, filmed in April, he was reading full sentences, and understanding their gestalt. This is despite me, his teacher, starting with zero experience and zero background knowledge (other than, you know, being able to read myself).



Why do I think there are other parents who should consider doing this?

First, let's take a dryly analytic perspective: tutoring reading is probably one of the most maximally-helpful things you can do as a parent when it comes to cognitive development (another candidate: modeling imaginary play). Educational researchers refer to early-age reading as “a head-start” and consistently find it positively correlated with future educational achievement, and practices like **language-centric bedtime routines** (the specific place where I first recommended reading practice) are found to causally improve cognitive outcomes. In longitudinal studies, early readers have an advantage compared to later reader categories like “general information,” and this is true even **when accounting for** reading ability at the start of the study, or if IQs are **initially matched** between groups. Positive cognitive effects from reading even show up in **twin studies**. Reading is not just a skill, it helps create a more mature, creative, and analytic mind.

The technical term for reading at a very early age is *hyperlexia*. But there's no evidence it has anything other than benefits in otherwise normal children. John Stuart Mill began to learn his first written language, Greek, at the age of three while Samuel Johnson edged him out at two. One reason why so many famous intellectuals started reading early is that small advantages compound in development (the technical term is the “**Matthew effect**”), which is why birth month is so good at predicting academic performance. It's not genetics—kids born in September are simply older than their peers, and the minor advantage of being a bit ahead developmentally **compounds significantly academically** (e.g., Nobel laureates from the UK are **twice as likely** to be born in September-November than June-August).

Unfortunately, in the United States reading scores nationwide have been declining consistently **since 2012** and are now **back at 1980 levels** according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Having lost 40 years of progress, it's easy to find shocking statistics, like how in Illinois alone there are 30 schools where **not one student** was reading at grade level during the 2021-2022 school year. At the recent State of the Union President Biden made a shocking admission: that many children in the US education system do not learn to read *by the age of eight*.

The pandemic bears some responsibility, but it only accelerated a previous decline. TikTok is full of schoolteachers getting students who are 13 years old and saying literally that “**these kids can't read**”—not just individuals, but entire classes. Here's a college professor in *Slate* bemoaning the loss of literacy in Gen Z.

I have been teaching in small liberal arts colleges for over 15 years now, and in the past five years, it's as though someone flipped a switch... Now students are intimidated by anything over 10 pages and seem to walk away from reading as little as 20 pages with no real understanding... Considerable class time is taken up simply establishing what happened in a story or the basic steps of argument—skills I used to be able to take for granted.

One can find similar articles in places like *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or *New York Times*, all saying the same thing. Personally, I know some college professors—heck, I was one. Those on the inside say it too. Something horrific has been quietly happening in education for the past decade, maybe even worse than the decline in test scores show.

With all that said, I want to stress that “Schools are failing!” or “Early reading correlates to X, Y, and Z” or “It’s worth [blah blah] dollars in salary when they’re 35” or “I’m adding my kid to the rank of child geniuses!” are bad reasons to do that. The real reason to teach your toddler to read is for their immediate experience of their quality of life. As much as we bemoan the dangers of screens for young children, we also deny them the literacy that would provide other options than for when parents need to send an email or cook dinner. And sparking a love of books is much easier if the child is interested in language itself.

Philosophically, being able to read puts a child in communication with the logic of the world around them. It gives them a mastery over events by making the mechanisms of society legible, and this in turn gives them confidence. Labels are not mysteries to a literate child, nor displays, nor directions. Signs denote their signifiers. At STOP, cars stop. In all ways, the flow of this world obeys language, which is a civilizing force for a child’s personality, for to be literate means to be living in the post-Mesopotamia age. It is possible that other animals, like whales or chimpanzees, have language and could be said, under some definitions, to talk. But animal reads.

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In the process of learning to read, a child is also learning to learn; indeed, the ability to conscientiously interact with future teachers is, by itself, worth its weight in gold. It also means their first big learning experience takes place not in the context of grades, or scores, or worksheets, but just learning for the sake of learning, the way education should be in the best of all possible worlds. Other adults will respond positively to a child with hyperlexia (some are even openly

astonished), and it's important for children to get positive feedback from non-parental adults—it helps them feel they are not an annoyance and approach social interactions with enthusiasm and bravery.

For the parent, the process is great too. How can I express the joy of running around celebrating when Roman got a difficult word correct, then tickling him down in congratulations? Or how blown away I was when he started to make puns, seeing him realize that language qua language can be played with and enjoyed? Those were priceless experiences beyond any reptilian calculation of “advantage” or icky “parental ambitions.” Toddlers *like* spending time with their parents, and teaching literacy lends a longterm project to do together. It was fascinating for me intellectually too, as I got to witness things usually ascribed only to artificial neural networks, like overfitting, catastrophic forgetting, and grokking.

It's true that, like with everything involving a toddler, from getting their coat on to not having exactly what they want for dinner (regular nuggets not good—it might be *dino nuggettssss*) there is occasional friction. But the vast majority of the time Roman was happy and willing to learn because there was a lot of play mixed in and the practice just became part of his schedule. In fact, a lot of the time he learned to read while happily stuffing his face, since our practice shifted to distract him as basically just a secretly beneficial distraction (he previously got bored while eating).

It's considered completely normal for parents to teach their kids to ride a bike, swim or play a favorite sport quite early on, all of which face the same challenge of attention and repetition and require the same deployment of parental techniques and resources. What I found is that teaching a toddler to read requires no greater coercion in comparison to the many other skills parents teach. It's a longer process. You're still throwing the ball back and forth, but with language instead.



How does teaching your toddler to read actually work in practice? The best method is via **phonics**—teaching the child how to sound out words. Specifically think the most efficient way to teach this young is to use phonics to create a lower-dimensional rendering of the English language, one the toddler can learn thoroughly first until they are reading sentences and even simple stories. Such dimension reduction is still correct, even highly applicable, but shorn of complexities (they can't just pick up an encyclopedia and start reading, since they'll run into words like, well, "encyclopedia"). But after an understanding of sentences is established, it's straightforward to expand to more complex rules and words.

Children all develop abilities at different speeds, and while many might not be ready for reading at two (e.g., being so bursting with energy they can't attend for long enough), I believe many actually are, and also that a larger number are ready at three or four. That's still years before they enter kindergarten, and teaching them is still worth it for the same reasons (again, depending on the circumstances).

So I'll be adding occasional installments about how to trigger hyperlexia here. *The Intrinsic Perspective* (it won't interfere with the other subjects I write about) will overview the method and philosophy of my approach, but also actionable information about the flash cards I used, the tips and tricks, and other resources. I hope, as it unfolds, it'll become clear that teaching your child to read is a synecdoche of the entire parental process, distilling its trials and triumphs and joys (I guess I'm joining the ranks of daddy bloggers now).

Because it draws on my own life, and the above video is the limit of what I'm willing to post of my kid publicly, further installments will be for **paid subscribers only**.



One last pitch for why parents should consider tutoring their child to read. There's an old adage that working with your hands, actually creating something physical, makes you feel psychologically more fulfilled, happier, than just moving icons around on a computer screen. Well, it turns out the same goes for *really* teaching someone something. Especially teaching a thing so fundamental they use every day. I feel like I built an addition to his cognitive architecture with my own hands. As an accomplishment it is ontologically solid, visceral, real in a way difficult to access in this day and age. For the rest of my life, I'll be proud I taught my son to read. Part of me will be with him, always, at every word.

Part 2 of the series, which sets the stage for teaching early reading, can [now be found here](#)

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Ragged Clown 24 Apr 2024

I think the desires and wishes of the child matter much more than what the parents want.

I have two kids. The first could read at two and was reading chapter books at four and adult (e.g. To Kill a Mockingbird) at eight. By nine-years-old he was completely off reading and hasn't read a book since.

The second didn't read until six and until she was about ten or eleven she still preferred to have read to her. She just got her Master's but the other day she said she wishes I would still read to her. She loves stories but just doesn't enjoy reading. I think having two children is the cure for that parents can determine how their children develop.

They can both read just fine. They just don't enjoy it. I'm a book-addict and am always in a kind of Different strokes etc.

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Andrew Rose 24 Apr 2024

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I'm so so excited to read this series, Erik. I suspect it will be my favorite of yours, perhaps tying your series on Aristocratic tutoring.

I'm expecting my first child any day now (expected due date April 26), and I need as many influences like this in my life as I can get! Thanks for writing about it, and I look forward to your future posts :)

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