



# The Benefits of Fathers Reading to Their Children: Tips for Fatherhood Programs and Dads

## Introduction

Reading is an essential activity that is linked to children’s cognitive development, academic skills, and future employment opportunities. Children often become interested in reading by watching and mimicking their parents or participating in child-parent reading routines. Although mothers have a big role to play, research shows that fathers are particularly influential for children’s language and literacy development, which means they are a promising point of intervention for



efforts to improve children’s language and literacy. Reading together and engaging in other literacy activities, such as telling stories, are things that fatherhood programs can promote to help fathers model positive parenting and improve children’s developmental outcomes.

Fathers’ positive involvement with their children is not just good for children; fathers benefit too. Fathers who engage more often in activities like play and book reading with their children, and fathers who are warm and nurturing with their children, report improvement in their own literacy skills and better outcomes than fathers who are less frequently or not positively involved.

This brief summarizes what we know about how fathers positively contribute to their children’s language and literacy development, offers tips for how programs can encourage father-child reading, and provides a handout with tips for fathers.

## What Does the Research Tell Us?

Fathers’ positive involvement can be beneficial for children of all ages across many areas of development.

- When fathers positively engage with their toddlers by reading to them or by being warm, nurturing, supportive, and cognitively stimulating during play, their children read better, have more advanced vocabularies and communication skills, and are more prepared to begin school than children with fathers who are less positively involved.<sup>i, ii, iii, iv</sup>
  - Children who read at young ages are likely to continue to read as they get older; older children who read more frequently than their peers tend to do better in school and have better employment opportunities in adulthood.<sup>v</sup>
- One reason father-child reading benefits young children’s language development is because it’s in-person and interactive. While older children can interact effectively with screens via skype or video, infants and toddlers do not learn language from screen-based interactions the way they do with in-person interactions. Fathers (and other adults) can hold young children’s attention through gaze and gestures (like pointing to a book’s pictures) better in-person, which facilitates learning.<sup>vi</sup>
- Fathers often engage with their children through play.<sup>vii</sup> This is significant because children’s cognitive abilities – especially young children’s – develop through new experiences and exploration, which are key components of play.<sup>viii</sup>
- Language and pre-literacy skills develop as children hear language; hearing more and varied words during play or other activities, like book reading, improves their vocabularies.<sup>ix</sup>

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- Research has shown that fathers and mothers are likely to engage in literacy activities more frequently with daughters than with sons.<sup>x</sup>
- When parents are interested in reading themselves, they are more likely to read to their children; therefore, encouraging fathers to improve their own literacy skills may also benefit children’s language and literacy development.<sup>xi</sup>
- An evaluation of the Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED) program found that fathers who participated in the 4-week reading program for fathers and children were more involved in their children’s education, felt like better parents, and reported a better relationship with their child than before they participated in the program.<sup>xii</sup>
- Targeting fathers’ literacy skills may also improve their employability. Among adults, those with higher literacy are more likely to work, their job is more likely to be full-time than adults with low literacy, and they are likely to earn more.<sup>xiii, xiv</sup>

### What Can Programs Do?

Here are some things that programs can do to encourage fathers to read with their children:

1. Talk about the benefits of reading with children.
2. Don’t forget the boys! Encourage dads to start reading with their daughters *and* sons from an early age.
  - Although some parents may think that babies are too young to understand or sit through the reading of a book, research shows that reading is more effective when it is part of a routine starting when children are as young as 4 to 6 months old.
3. Encourage dads to make a game of reading to their infants and toddlers.
  - For instance, they could act out what a character is doing or ask their child to point to certain things in picture books.
4. Introduce fathers to good books for young children. Bring in samples of age-appropriate children’s books and encourage dads to choose one they like. Then have a group activity where everyone reads at least part of their story to the group.
  - See the activities section of [NRFC’s Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit](#) for the activity *Reading with your Child* from Parents as Teachers.
  - If possible, provide comfortable chairs and a quiet spot to read.
  - Show dads effective ways to read with their child, like gesturing during reading, using funny voices, and drawing attention to certain pictures.
  - Some dads may feel uncomfortable with this activity, particularly if they need help with their own reading skills. Include some picture books without words and encourage dads to tell their own story based on the pictures. In an established group, you may also find that dads will help each other with words they may not fully understand.
5. Be prepared to help dads who need help with their own literacy skills. Fathers may be more likely to work on their own literacy within the context of father-child engagement or improving their children’s lives.
  - If you can’t address fathers’ literacy within your existing program, consider partnering with or providing referrals to community organizations that offer adult education or other literacy-promoting activities.
6. Talk with dads about ways to make reading fun and instructive



- Share general tips or create tip sheets for specific books. For example, the Dads and Kids Book Club in Minnesota created a [tip sheet](#) that dads could refer to before reading the book *Night Driving* with their children.
  - Tip sheets can help fathers focus on four important goals related to early literacy: enjoying reading, following the story sequence of events, understanding the story, and learning new words through reading (*Palm, NRFC Blog - [Five tips to help fathers enjoy reading with their children](#)*).
7. Create opportunities for fathers to bring their children with them to program activities and engage them in activities where children *and* fathers can practice their reading skills and enjoy shared reading in a fun and stimulating environment.



- Partner with early childhood programs or schools to create activity nights or other opportunities for fathers to interact with their children. For example, programs such as [Strong Fathers Strong Families](#) and [Reel Fathers](#) work with Head Start programs and elementary schools to offer after-school activities where fathers and children can spend time together.
  - Provide books for fathers and children to share. Make it fun! Make the room colorful and have some mats or pillows so fathers can sit privately and comfortably with their children as they read. Children will get excited if the room is welcoming and child-friendly, and dads will feel their children’s energy!
  - Provide suggested reading lists with age-appropriate recommendations to encourage further reading at home. For examples of reading lists see the [FRED](#) program or [A Book List for Reading With Dad](#) from the Minnesota Humanities Center.
8. Use innovative strategies to connect incarcerated fathers to their children through book reading. Several programs (e.g., [Hope House Father to Child Reading Program](#), [Read to Me Daddy](#), [Daddy Read for Me](#), [Daddy & Me](#), and [Words Travel Family Connections](#)) help dads choose a book and practice reading it aloud for their children. The final readings can be recorded on audio or video tape so dads can send these to their school age children. In other programs, dads have created story books to send to their younger children.
- Consider using similar strategies to help nonresident dads who do not have regular in-person time with their children.
9. Share the following “What can dads do?” tips with fathers.

## What Can Dads Do?

When you read and tell stories to your young children, it helps their language development and later academic skills. It can also lead to better employment opportunities in adulthood. Here are a few ideas to help you spend time reading with your son or daughter.

1. Read every day. It doesn’t matter what you read (books, magazines, comics, blogs), but make an effort to read, preferably something you enjoy, every single day. Your children will see you reading and they will become more interested in reading alone and with you. Hopefully you will enjoy it, too!
2. Read words aloud to your children. For example, when you’re out and about together, sound out the name of your street and point to the sign; when you’re eating breakfast, do the same with words on the cereal box. This can help children learn new words, connect words with how they’re written, and understand spelling concepts.

3. Reading with, talking with, and telling stories to your young children are great ways to bond with them. You can start talking to them during their first weeks of life. As you read to them, ask questions about the story (e.g., “Why did Jack do that?” “How many birds do you see in that picture?”).
  - Young children love hearing the same story over and over again. Even before they learn to read they’ll start learning the story and will be able to tell you what’s happening on each page.
4. If you’d rather tell stories than read, do that! Make it interactive by having your children help you develop a make-believe story, or recite back a story you have told them before, recite nursery rhymes or jingles, tell stories about when you were young, or check out books of photographs and talk about the pictures.
5. Use “[Mad Libs](#)” (activities where children make up a story by adding words in the blanks without knowing the story beforehand) with school aged children. The result is a funny, silly story that fathers and children can enjoy reading after the story is “written.”
6. Let children pick books that are interesting to them.
7. Know that the quality of the time you spend with your children matters more than the quantity. You might not have as much time as you’d like with your children because of work, living arrangements, or other difficulties. Don’t stress about that – think about ways you can have fun and help them learn while you’re together through playing, reading, and storytelling. Reading time, especially bedtime reading routines, provides important, non-physical bonding opportunities for you and your children. It gives your children a chance to reflect on their day and share stories and ideas with you.
8. Read with your school aged children even if you do not share a residence with them. You can read to your child over the phone, through FaceTime, or Skype. Or, get a copy of their favorite or school-assigned book and read along with them.
9. When you talk with your children, go with your instincts – introduce new words; ask them to explain what the words mean; and encourage them to enunciate a word more clearly. This type of interaction helps them learn how to communicate more effectively and makes you special in their eyes!
10. If you have a smartphone or tablet, there are apps you can use to build your child’s literacy skills. See the NRFC blog [8 Apps to Build Kid’s Literacy Skills](#).





## Resources for Dads

[Bedtime stories for young brains](#), a New York Times article detailing the benefits of reading to children from a young age.

[Dad's Playbook: Coaching Kids to Read](#), from the National Institute for Literacy, includes word games to play with your kids and stories from 20 dads about how they read with their kids.

[Fathers Reading Every Day \(FRED\)](#) is a family literacy program designed by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. The program provides a list of the [Top 100 Children's Books](#), based on an online survey of teachers conducted by the National Education Association.

[Reading Tips](#) from PBS Parents provides ideas and activities to help parents and kids have fun with literacy.

The Department of Education provides [Reading Resources](#) for parents.

[Guys Read](#) is a web-based literacy program for boys with the goal of helping boys become self-motivated, lifelong readers. Similarly, the mission of [Boys Read](#) is to transform boys into lifelong readers. Both of these websites provide lists of books that boys like to read.

The [Reading Rockets](#) website provides printable guides and videos from the public television series [Launching Young Readers](#) for parents and teachers.

Scholastic.com has a [Resource Center](#) with resources broken down by age and reading level of child.

The [Reading is Fundamental](#) website provides booklists, articles, and activities to help parents and their young children have fun with reading.

Dolly Parton's [Imagination Library](#) is a program to provide children with a selected book each month. The website provides information on which communities have a program and how to start a program in additional communities.

[13 Things Babies Learn When We Read with Them](#) is a resource from the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

[Top 10 dads in picture books](#), an online list of picture books featuring dads, was written by Sean Taylor and posted to [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) on Fathers' Day 2016.

## Resources for Practitioners

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse:

- Webinar: [Strengthening literacy and father-child relationships through reading](#)
- DadTalk Blogs: [8 Apps To Build Kid's Literacy Skills](#) and [Five tips to help fathers enjoy reading with their children](#)

[Bedtime stories for young brains](#), a New York Times article detailing the benefits of reading to children from a young age.

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[Fathers Reading Every Day \(FRED\)](#) is a family literacy program designed by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. The program provides a list of the [Top 100 Children's Books](#), based on an online survey of teachers conducted by the National Education Association.

[Reading Tips](#) from PBS Parents provides ideas and activities to help parents and kids have fun with literacy.

[Focus on Fathering](#), a curriculum from Parents as Teachers, includes the activity *Reading with your Children* (free download).

[Dads & Kids Book Clubs Manual](#) from Minnesota Humanities Center includes plans for Book Club activities and a [Reading with Dad Booklist](#).

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