

reading

Tall. Stories

Does reading to our children make them brainier?

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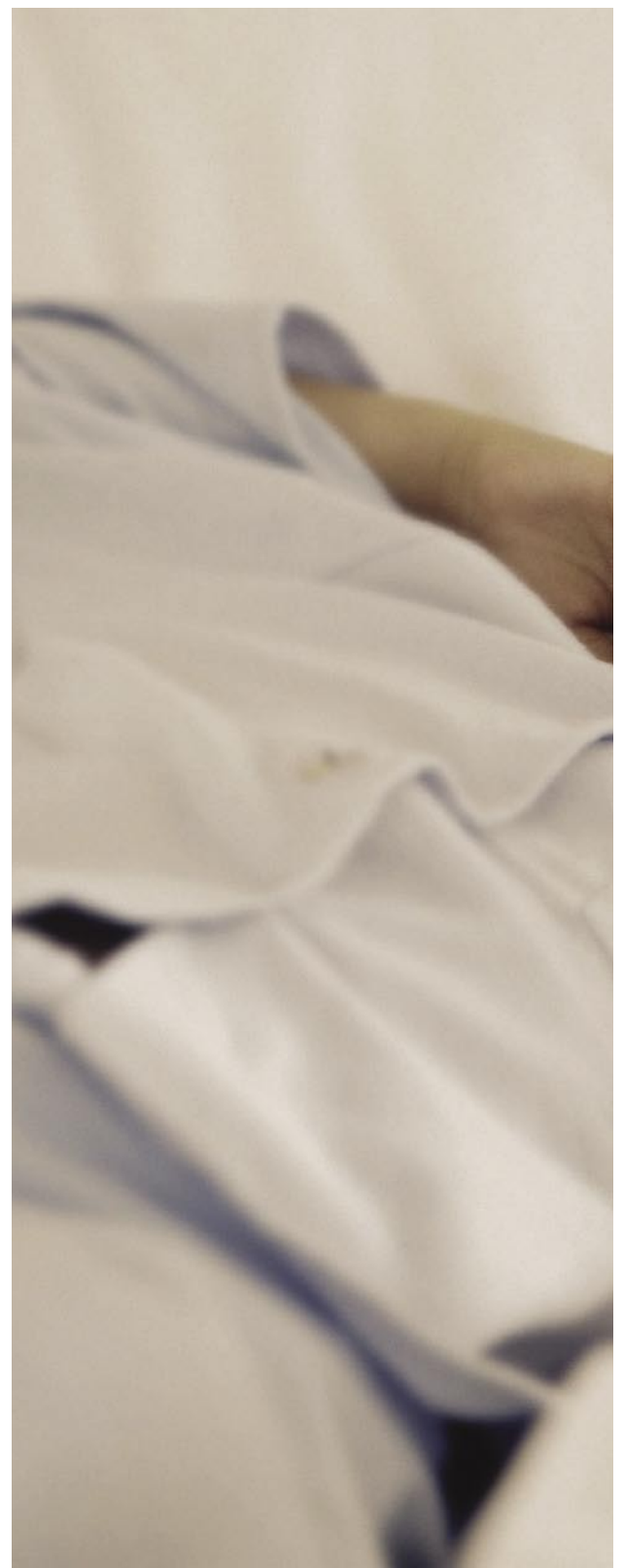
Apparently so! It's not just an old wives' tale, because recent research in the US looking at the benefits of reading aloud to children found that children who are read out loud to are more likely to develop a love of reading, which they explained was even more important than the head start it gives children in literacy and language.

Using books as a tool for chatting, as well as just reading the story can improve children's social skills and their understanding of the world. This means describing the pictures, explaining the meaning of words and the story, and encouraging the child to talk about it. This is backed up by the evidence that middle class parents tend to use a more interactive style, making connections to the child's own experiences, whereas working-class parents tend to focus on labelling and describing pictures and these differences can impact on the child's development of language and literacy based skills.

Maybe because I'm a bookworm, I read to both my daughters from birth. Daisy now has a bigger book collection than me! And Poppy will always bring me a book when she wants a cuddle. Every morning they clamber into our bed for a

couple of books before the business of the day begins. It is also the last thing we do together at night. Learning begins at birth, and the experts are fairly unanimous in their encouragement of reading to babies. Even though they can't grasp the story, the effort of focussing on the pictures helps develop eye muscles. And of course, every time your baby hears a particular word it imprints a little more on their brain. We learn by doing, so every time your young bookworm sees, hears or feels anything, brain connections form. Seeing, hearing and touching pictures in books will help develop their understanding of you, their world and their language. Nursery rhymes and songs are also really important.

As the baby grows into a toddler it is really important that time is set aside each day for reading – but it should be fun, for you as well as them. My daughter takes a particular fancy to one book for maybe a month, and EVERY time we cuddle up for some literary loving I have to read the same book, over and over again. But children are comforted by and learn best from repetition, so resist the urge to hide it under the pillow – the time will pass and a new book will become their favourite (and your nightmare!). I never thought I'd want to read *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* EVER



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again, but now as Snow White is shoved under my lacklustre nose for the 5185th time I look nostalgically towards our weary tiger book. Remember to cuddle up, laugh and be silly, giving different voices for the characters and generally being a bit of a child yourself! And it doesn't matter if you don't feel you are a good reader. Reading slowly is better for the child so she hears and understands the words. It's also a great opportunity to praise your toddler when they point to the right pictures or guess who's hiding behind the flap.

Books are also a great way to develop learning about something that interests

a child (in my case princesses and elephants), but can be crucial in helping a child adapt to a new situation or skill in their life such as potty training, playschool or school, the arrival of a new sibling, or an impending stay in hospital. There are now books on most subjects a child may face, and reading about their favourite characters (in our case, Dora the Explorer for potty training, and Maisy for preparing for playschool) made those transitions easier and much more enjoyable.

Reading doesn't have to be expensive either. Most local libraries have great children's sections and a weekly or

monthly trip to the library can become part of your routine. I regularly have book swaps with my friends to freshen up the repertoire a bit, and of course there are many bargains to be found in second hand book stores and book fairs. As they get older, it's also part of the fun to let your child choose their own books.

But best of all, reading is not just about brightening brains and stimulating senses. Reading time is all about getting close (it's impossible to read to a baby or toddler without cuddling), a time to dedicate to each other, a time to be silly and laugh, and a time to bond and just be. *