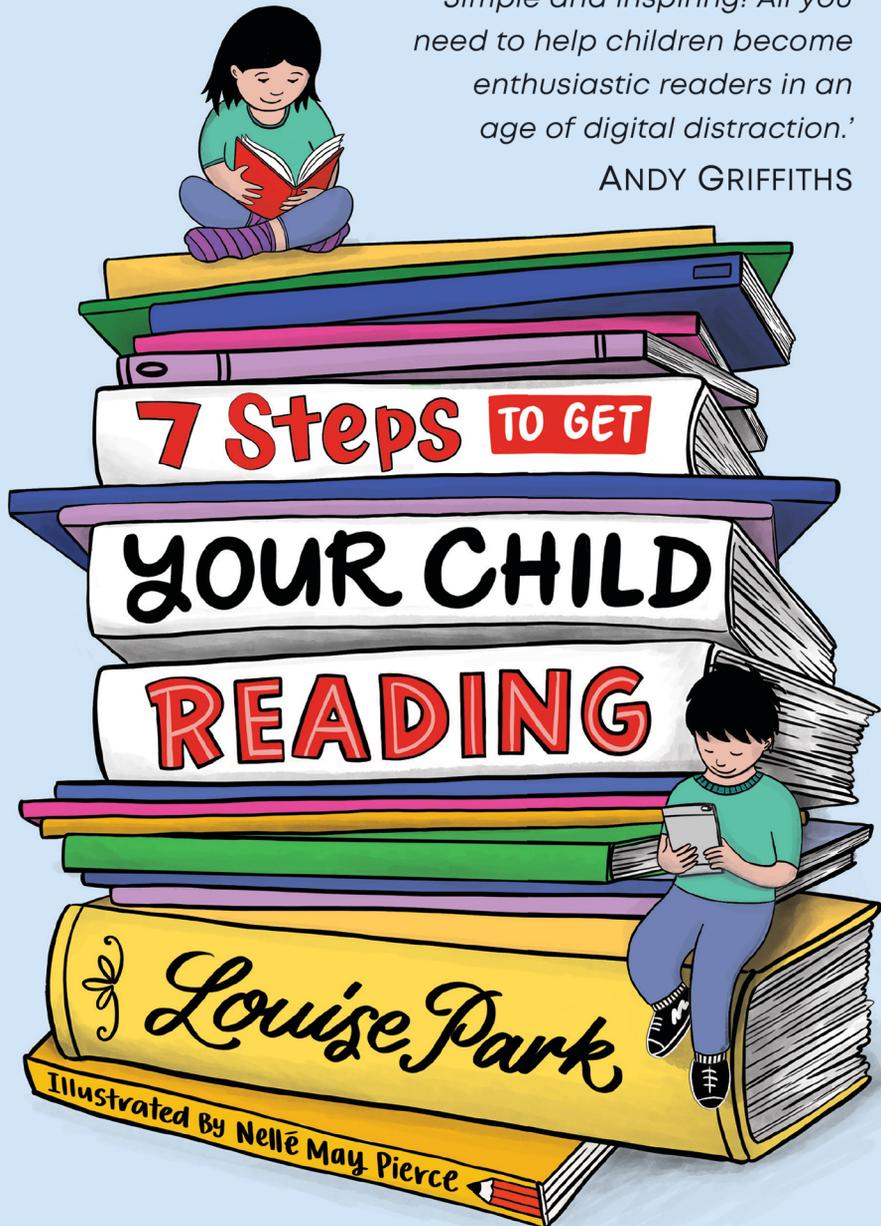


'Simple and inspiring! All you need to help children become enthusiastic readers in an age of digital distraction.'

ANDY GRIFFITHS



**PRACTICAL TIPS FOR TIME-POOR PARENTS
FROM AN AUSTRALIAN LITERACY EXPERT**

OUT NOW

Step 1:

Talking their way to literacy



It is mid-winter and I'm sitting in a crowded surgery waiting room. It smells of wet woollen jumpers and feels overheated. I can almost see the germs multiplying in the stuffiness. I'm here to see the GP for a referral, and apart from one other man and his child, I'm the only one without a cold. As I rub some antibacterial sanitiser into my hands, I scan the room to see how many people might be ahead of me. What I see is a room filled with adults engrossed with their smartphones or devices.

I don't have a problem with this. I may even join them.

But just then, a toddler places a well-loved toy car in her carer's lap and babbles away with a big smile. I watch as the carer places the toy on the floor and pushes it along, his eyes never leaving his device and never a word escaping his lips. The child, unfazed, pushes the car under a chair and heads back to

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the toy basket. I watch her, amused as she selects and disregards items according to criteria known only to her. In no time, toys are strewn about the floor.

Just when I think she will find nothing of interest, she pulls out a strange-looking rabbit-robot. She turns, holds the toy up to show her carer, and says, 'De-da-owww,' finishing with a high-pitched squeal that makes me laugh out loud. Weirdly, I am the one who is rewarded with a reaction from her carer; a half smile, a slight shrug, and then it's back to his device.

I swallow the urge to say to this person, 'Your child is talking to you.' I swallow the urge to ask how he would have felt if I'd ignored him when he gave me that half-smile-shrug. I swallow the urge to point out that it takes two to talk. Of course, he could just be having a bad day or dealing with a serious situation on his device. Who am I to know or judge? But I struggle to squash the thought that this child's speech deserves a response.



Can talking really make a reader?

Oral language is one of the strongest foundations for learning to read. From birth to five years, talking and interacting is the most critical thing parents and carers can do to prepare children for learning to read at school. In 2002, a National Early Literacy Panel was formed in the USA to review the global scientific research on the development of early literacy skills in children aged zero to five. It took the panel six years to collate, examine and publish their findings. On oral language's role in learning to read, this was their finding:

 **FACT**

A child's oral language and vocabulary are key early predictors of learning-to-read success. In turn, the less experience a child has with language and literacy, the more likely it is that he or she will have difficulty learning to read.

Tuning in rather than out in the early years

There has been much published about devices and screen-dependent children, but the research on screen-distracted parents and carers is just as compelling, and it's very real. The term 'continuous partial attention' was coined by technology expert Linda Stone more than twenty years ago and it's very different from multi-tasking.

Stone says that when we multi-task, our motivation is to be more efficient, more productive. When we multi-task, we usually combine several autopilot things at once that don't require much brain power: sort and fold the washing, talk on the phone and eat lunch. Continuous partial attention means exactly that: the scanning across several social media platforms, 'always on' and 'live' on the network at all times, and rarely fully present in anything. It consumes our brain power much more than multi-tasking because we are not on autopilot when we do it.

As adults, we have choices about how we manage our attention. We can choose to turn off technology in order to give full attention to others. And when it comes to children, like in most things, balance is the key. The occasional parental lapse in attention is normal and isn't going to damage a child who lives in a loving and responsive environment.

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In fact, some developmental scientists suggest that some lapses in attention may even teach children patience and resilience.

However, research confirms that children suffer when they have to compete for their parents' full attention too much of the time, and their language acquisition often takes a big hit. This is because they're missing out on the quality face-to-face interaction they need. Inattention has always been around; constant online access has not, and Gen A are the first generation to compete with devices for their parents' or carers' attention.

I found it both heartening and heart-wrenching to learn recently that maternal and child health nurses now include instruction on the importance of talking to your child (and being fully present when you do so) in the arsenal of information that they send home with new parents. Who would've thought we'd have to remind humans of this seemingly fundamental thing? And it's not because the nurses think parents don't value talking; it's to make sure they are aware of the critical connection that talking to their baby plays in the development of oral language and, in turn, learning to read.

 **FACT**

The more parents and carers speak with and to their babies and toddlers, the better these children will be at understanding speech and learning words.

Baby brains, babble and language-learning



So yes, that baby babble is important, and even more so is that we talk back to babies in what I like to call ‘bubbalese’.

Science tells us¹ that babies and toddlers respond and absorb much more from this style of speaking. When we use ‘bubbalese’, we shorten our sentences, we tend to speak a little more clearly and slowly, and our voices may go up in pitch a tad, all of which makes it easier for a baby to access and begin the process of learning to speak.

And the good news is that babies’ brains are hardwired for learning language. It’s instinctive and inbuilt from the get-go, which is why children make language learning look so easy to us adults. Too bad it isn’t the same for learning to read and write!

For our part, all we have to do is talk with them, sing with them and read aloud to them. In fact, scientific research tells us that at least ten days before the birth, a child begins recognising the sounds of its mother’s language and, once they are born, they will recognise a song or lullaby that was sung to them while in the womb. Oral language development really does start this early.

The science of how babies learn to speak

Advances in neuroscience and brain imaging have meant that our understanding of how the brain works has also advanced, and revealed that a baby’s brain is pretty amazing!

- * Babies are born with billions of brain cells.
- * They come complete with almost all the brain cells they will ever have.
- * Babies form more than one million brain connections every second in response to experiences, and the quality of those experiences really matters.

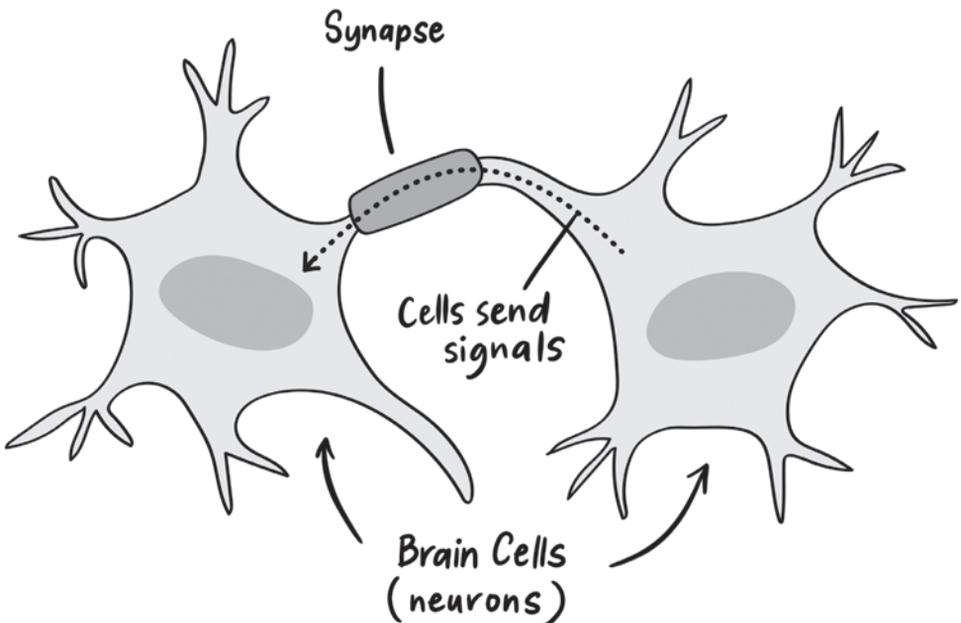
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- * It's the quality of a baby's relationships that has a major influence on how brain connections take place and on how strong those connections are.
- * The early years are the most active period for establishing brain connections.

So, what exactly are brain connections and how do they form?

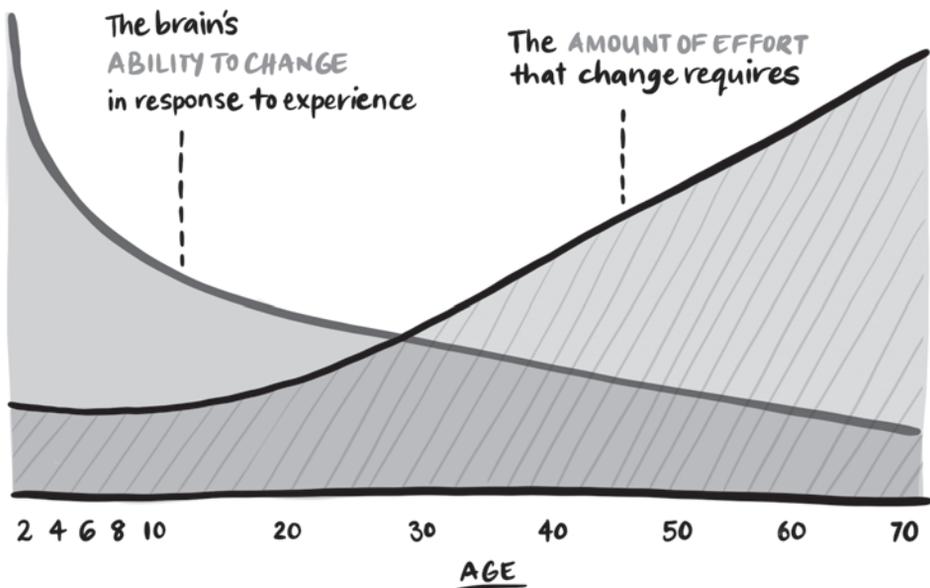
Brain cells make connections with other brain cells. That point of connection is called a synapse. Hardwiring in the brain occurs when these connections are stimulated with repeated use. Brain-imaging technology confirms that this repeated stimulation or activation allows signals to be transmitted quickly, and it is this that creates efficient, accurate and permanent neural pathways.

The bad news is that brain imaging also confirms that it's a use-it-or-lose it arrangement. Unused connections that don't get stimulated repeatedly, degenerate and atrophy in a process called pruning.



STEP 1: TALKING THEIR WAY TO LITERACY

Given that the early years are the most active for forming brain connections, and that babies' brains are hardwired for learning oral language, parents and carers need to maximise this time. They do this by engaging their children in what developmental researchers call 'contingent reciprocity' and immersing them in a language-rich environment. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University's work on brain architecture, represented in this diagram, shows that the brain is quicker at forming connections at a younger age.



Contingent recip– what?

Contingent reciprocity is a big name for a straightforward concept. Put simply, it is a back-and-forth appropriate engagement with a baby.

When babies babble, cry or use facial expressions or gestures, we respond to them with appropriate responses – we use eye contact, words, facial expressions, hugs. When we do this again and again, connections are made and strengthened in the area of a child's brain responsible

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for communication and social skills. Healthy brain connections are built on appropriate responses. If the adult's responses aren't the right match for the stimulus – an angry response when the baby is seeking a smile or reassurance, or simply no response at all – healthy brain wiring will suffer.

Parents and carers can use the following 'TALK' activity over and over as children grow.

- T** Tune in to the child's facial expressions and body movement. Are they pointing or looking at something?
- A** Acknowledge their communication with sounds, words, facial expressions or a hug. Let them know you are focusing on the same thing. Imitate their babble back to them.
- L** Label what they give you or what they see, feel, hear or do. Giving a name to what they're focusing on will help them begin to make those important language connections in their brains.
- K** Keep the back and forth going. Take turns speaking and waiting for them to respond. These are the foundations of dialogue and conversation!

FACT

Gaps in children's language and vocabulary first appear between eighteen months to two years. Children whose parents speak to them more often know many more words by the age of two; by the age of three, some children have vocabularies two to three times larger than others. Those with much smaller vocabularies arrive at school significantly behind their peers and will struggle or be slower to learn to read.²

Other books by Louise Park

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Harriet Clare series

Boy vs Beast series (with Susannah McFarlane, as Mac Park)

Bella Dancerella series (as Poppy Rose)

Star Girl series

Zac Power Spy Recruit series (as H I Larry)

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Synthetic Phonics kits, stages 1, 2 & 3

Ancient & Medieval People, 1–6

Snappy Sounds series

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