

Age: 6-9 months



Roots of Reading:

Natural Early Literacy for Infants



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Preface

Before words, there is rhythm.
Before letters, there is listening.
And before reading begins, there is relationship.

This guide is for those first quiet months — when your baby is just starting to track your voice, reach for a page, or babble back with early sound. It's not about milestones or rushing into academics. It's about noticing, responding, and creating an environment where language can take root gently, in its own time.

The information here is based in developmental science, but it's filtered through a naturalistic, respectful lens. I've written it for parents, caregivers, and anyone supporting little ones between 6 and 9 months — with the hope that it feels less like a program and more like a conversation. A reminder that you don't need special materials or advanced training. What your baby needs most is you: warm, present, and attuned.

At Meadowsteps, we understand literacy not as a checklist of skills, but as a living system — one that grows from movement, sound, gesture, play, and shared attention. The roots begin early, and they grow best in safe, loving soil.

This isn't a how-to manual. It's a quiet invitation to notice what's already unfolding — and to meet it with care.

— Meadowsteps

Connect

About this program

Preliteracy for learners between 6-9 months old hinges on mutual enjoyment and exposure to language. Unscrupulous vendors peddle flashcards for babies but looking at a word is not reading. Further, decoding text is not understanding, and understanding is not interest. The activities in this program support the most elemental aspect of reading: connection.

Activities

Assuming your child tolerates eye contact (and most do), engage them in an “affectively rich” exchange, meaning an interaction during which you provide lots of expression.

- Games like Peek-Boo, Patty-Cake, and the Itsy Bitsy Spider provide the right opportunities, but there doesn't need to be any structure.
- Slightly older children might enjoy some physical play like reclining on a blanket and being pulled across the floor, or playing “Jump” where you help them jump by lifting them.

Activities, Continued

When your child connects with you by making eye contact, watching your gestures, or reaching out to you to resume, encourage them by reciprocating.

Reciprocating might mean...

- Adding emphasis or energy to your overture by heightening your expression, using more dramatic gestures in that instant, getting closer to them for a moment, or making your voice more interesting by varying pitch and volume.
- Offering tickles or “blowing bubbles” on their belly.
- If your little one is reclining on a blanket as described above, now is when you would pull on the blanket and say “Puuuuulll....”.
- And of course, if you’ve paused the activity and they want you to continue, resume it immediately.

Tip— If you need to move on from this activity and your child keeps “asking” you to continue, wrap-up by taking them to a new location (fading your enthusiasm as you go, if necessary) and drawing their attention to something else. It could be a cereal box on the kitchen floor. All it needs to do is prevent your child from making unreciprocated bids for connection.

About this activity

- These exchanges will be brief, probably under a minute but only as long as your itty-bitty sustains interest.
- Because one-to-one interaction most resembles the didactic instruction with which parents are familiar, they might overemphasize these opportunities at the cost of opportunities for observational learning. Each is meaningful, which is why I’ve included activities for both to intersperse throughout your day.

Why are we doing this?

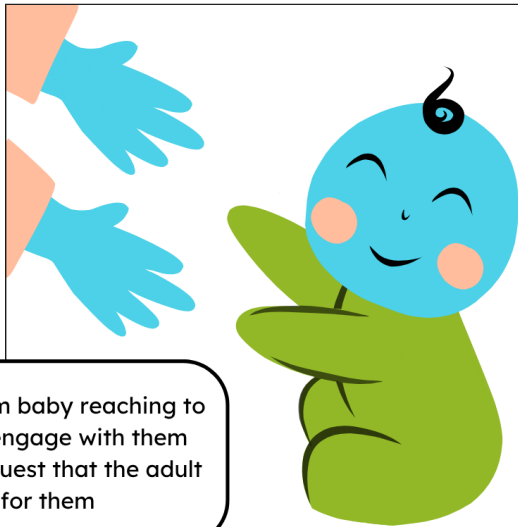
Before a child can learn to read, they need to learn to listen. This activity strengthens your child’s interest in an adult voice relative to children’s voices, the sound effects of their toys, and background noise. They will employ this interest while listening to you tell stories and later read from a book. In a classroom setting, practiced attention to an adult’s voice will give your child an advantage. As crucially, when we respond to our child reaching out to us, we lay the foundation for the skills in our Reach to Request program.

Reach to Request

About this program

Babies between 6-9 months won't likely make requests by pointing yet but they should be progressing toward this milestone. This kind of pointing is done with an open hand rather than an index finger because dexterity is still developing at this age and because the communicative gesture of pointing extends from the natural gesture of reaching. The baby reaches toward a desired item and if it were within reach would grasp it, but some of the time it's too far away.

Enough of the time, an adult sees this and delivers the item. Soon, the baby learns both what constitutes "within reach" and that if they reach for something outside of it, somebody might come along and get it for them.



Note the shift from baby reaching to request an adult engage with them to reaching to request that the adult engage an object for them

About this program (continued)

Eventually the baby persists in reaching across the distance, looks around for their parent in anticipation, and finally observes that their parent needs to see both them reaching and their desired item for their reach to "work" as a request. Because the gesture began with the intent to grasp an item, this kind of pointing will still look like a reach, even when requesting things from across the room (and that's a good thing).

Activities

Having read about the skill, take some time to decide where your child might be along this progression. If they are already reaching to request and cued into where your attention is directed, that's great! If not, this next activity "Sooo close" is for you.



Activity: Sooo close....

1. Gather a few items that will interest your child. This activity is most easily done with sets of items like blocks, but follow your child's lead. For example, if they currently enjoy dumping things out of containers, have an empty box or bucket and a small number of things to go into it.
2. Situate yourself and your child so you are facing each other and close but they can't quite reach you. They might be seated in their high chair or reclining on a cushion in front of you as you sit on the floor.
3. Get your child interested in the item then offer it to them by extending the item out to them. If offering a "dumping out" activity, model "putting in" a few objects then let your child dump the items out.

Tips—

- Variations on the "dumping out" activity: stacking blocks and knocking them over, pouring water from a cup into the bath during bath time, or putting pieces into an inset puzzle.
- Babies at the younger end of the age range engage in sensory play more than motor play. With considerations for safety, offer items that appeal to all senses: rattles, shiny trinkets, soft fabrics, and gently scented items like an herbal teabag.

Activity: Sooo close....

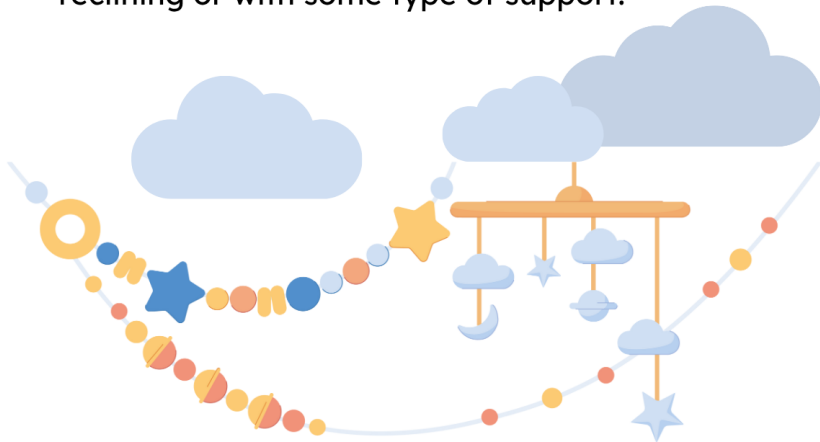
4. This might take a few opportunities but soon your baby will reach for the object in anticipation. Deliver the item to encourage the reach and get them to "the fun part" without delay.
5. Collect the items back and put the box within your child's reach and give them the items one by one to put in and dump out. After several successful exchanges of the item in response to their reach, hold the item just out of range for a beat before moving it into their hand.
6. Without rushing, offer the item a little farther out of baby's reach, slightly to the side, or with a slightly longer delay. Try one of these at a time and only combine them when baby has been successful at each challenge individually.

Tips—

- Change up where you hold the item in relation to baby to keep things naturalistic.
- The delay to baby gaining the item should never exceed a few seconds, and the activity as a whole should never exceed a few exchanges.
- This activity is a little more technical than the other activities but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be enjoyable. Take your time, keep things playful.

Developmental Considerations

- At first, baby will only look in the direction they are reaching. They will not progress from this stage until they've developed the motor skills and hand-eye coordination to do so. These embedded skills have their own learning curve so be generous in your time here because with their mastery come far-reaching gains.
- Because vision is still developing between 6-9 months, you and the items should stay within a few feet of the babies at the younger end of the age range. Extend the item toward them slowly enough that they can track it with their eyes, and once extended, move the item around a little in your hand to help baby discriminate the item from the background.
- If baby is still working on sitting up independently, do this activity with them reclining or with some type of support.



About this activity

- This activity begins by strengthening visual perception, a foundational early literacy skill widely neglected in less holistic programs.
 - The endpoint for this activity is an item held no more than a few feet from the baby but to the side, with you seated across from them.
 - Baby looks at the offered item and reaches for it then looks back to you and makes eye contact.
- You, baby and the item make a little triangle.
-
- ```
graph TD; Baby((Baby)) -.- Item((Item)); Item -.- You((You)); You -.- Baby;
```
- The timeline for progressing through all the steps will be measured in weeks and months rather than days. Expect to reach our endpoint at around 9 months with consistent and meaningful practice.
  - This activity sets up the Reach to Request activity for children ages 10-14 months and addresses joint attention skills. (Read more about joint attention in “Why are we doing this?”)
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## Why are we doing this?

This program addresses joint attention, the crucial skill of joining another person in their attention to something else. Joint attention is a learning-to-learn skill that allows babies to both hear a word and know what an adult is applying it to. In this way, joint attention supports reading in babies by supporting their language. The “Silly Sounds” program supports this connection as well, by pairing items and activities with language.

Our next booklet will explain more about joint attention’s role in reading, but that’s enough for now.



## Silly Sounds

### About this program

Before 6 months, babies don’t babble as much as they engage in vocal play. Sometime between 6-9 months (the target age range for this resource), they will start combining speech sounds from the languages to which they’ve been exposed. You’ll recognize these speech sounds in emergent babbling in strings of repeated syllables like “dadada” and “buhbuhbu”. Children in this stage benefit from hearing new, fun vocal sounds that recombine or extend the sounds they’ve picked up.

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### Activities

- Offer animal noises while using a stuffed animal as a prop during the “Connect” program. It’s probably better if you get the sound right but even if your child gets the impression that a zebra says moo, nothing terrible will happen.
- Give an everyday routine sound effects like “scrub, scrub, scrub” or “splish, splash” during bath time.
- Echo their babbling during interactions like those in Connection, but make it a point to offer the sounds p/m/h/n/w/b. This provides a model for the English speech sounds they’re most prepared to begin using.

## Activities (continued)

- Make up nonsense rhymes and long alliterative sentences. Be as preposterous as possible. Do tongue twisters or vocal warm ups if you need some ideas (“mee, meee meeeee”).

Tip—

Don’t feel like you need to get baby to echo these new sounds, they’ll try them out themselves when they’re ready.

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## Why are we doing this?

Spoken English is imprecisely coded into text (consider the word “heart”, which is not said “heert”) but English has fundamentally a phonetic writing system. For this reason, reading English requires phonological awareness, meaning the early reader must appreciate the different sounds represented on the page.

Phonemic play as described here practices the child’s ear at picking out features like consonants, vowels, and blends, all of which supports reading as the child later decodes written words made up of those features.

## Why are we doing this? (continued)

Decoding a phonetic writing system requires the reader to have some sense of how their language puts words together. For example, English words have a vowel in almost every syllable. When sounding out an unfamiliar word, a child familiar with this constraint will correctly anticipate a vowel after identifying a consonant. They will also be able to combine those sounds back into syllables and better supply the appropriate emphasis for the word length.

Put more simply, the sooner your baby picks up the sounds in a word the sooner they will be able to “sound it out” on a page.



# Melody and Meaning

## About this program

Nobody knows how or why singing and dancing are related to language but we do know that they are, and not just in people. The animals that can move to a beat are also some of the few animals that can imitate vocally, which is relevant here. Research on this is still emerging but the evidence suggests that we can encourage your baby's progress toward vocal imitation by offering sensory experiences that combine movement, music, and language.

## Activities

- Sing to or around your baby, along to children's songs or your own favorite music. The changes in pitch and tempo reflect these elements in speech.
- Gently clap baby's hands or feet along to music or to the meter of a nursery rhyme
- Hum or whistle a familiar song instead of singing it
- Dance with your baby to music while holding them in your arms or wearing them close to your body.

## Activities (continued)

- Hold or wear baby in a wrap and pair one of the early-occurring speech sounds with its own movement. For example, rock back and forth while saying "mmm," do a little hop for "huh," and stomp for "duh."
- Make a maraca out of a clear container with some beans or pebbles and show your baby how to use it. (Glue or tape the lid on for safety.)

Note— I don't prefer to offer toys with digital sound effects, like playing a tune when engaged.

- They can be overstimulating for everyone
- Unlike shaking a maraca, their sound is disconnected from the child's movement. The child can neither manipulate the sound effect's tempo nor turn it off once it starts.
- Their sounds lack context beyond the object that makes them. (The car beeps, but why?)
- Their sounds cannot be recombined in any novel way, and language is recombination
- The sounds are exactly the same each time they are played and can be played repetitively. This encourages sustained engagement with an object without encouraging learning



## Why are we doing this?

Even beyond the vocal imitation point above, experience discerning the features of music supports baby's future ability to respond to those features in language.

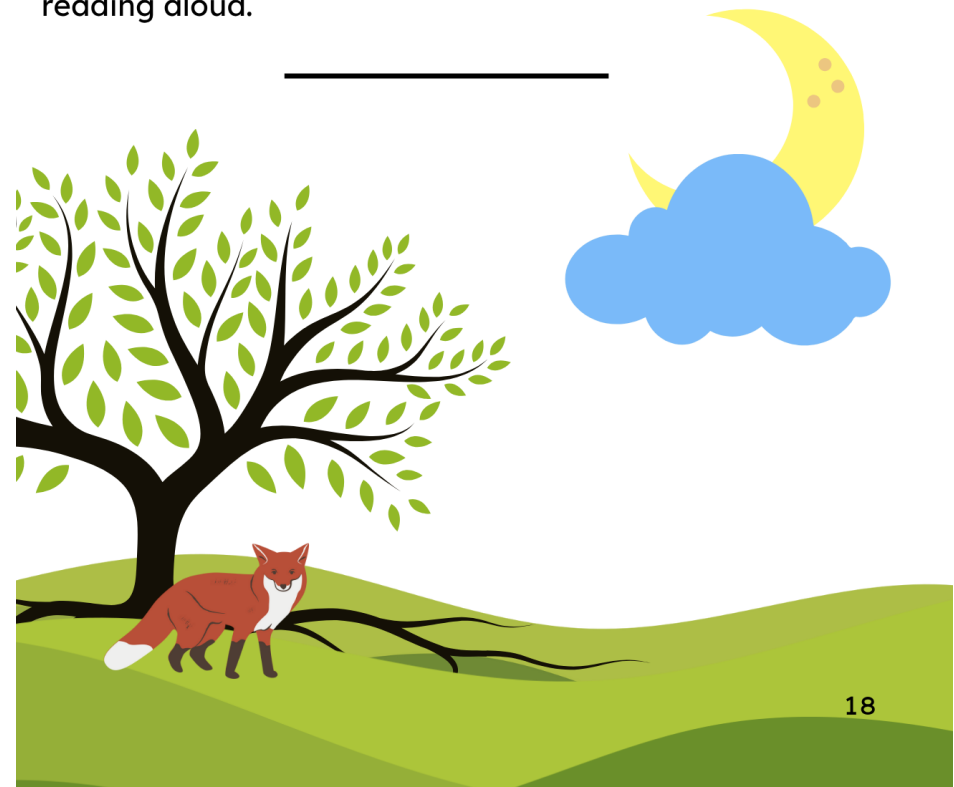


English is not a tonal language like Mandarin but tone carries much of its meaning nonetheless. Infants use an adult's tone-of-voice to gather spatial information about the object of the adult's interest. With this information they are better able to join their attention to that of the adult and form meaningful associations between the language heard and the scene observed.

Tone, along with other qualitative changes in speech, carries social-emotional information. Children learn to interpret this information gathered from a context with other affective cues like changes in facial expression and body language. The ability to synthesize all this information during an interaction drives social competence, which profoundly impacts later quality of life, in addition to supporting reading comprehension by providing necessary context to written passages.

## Why are we doing this? (Continued)

When held close during dance, baby can share your enjoyment not just of the music, but also share the experience of moving in coordination with sound. This exposure supports baby's later mastery of English's prosody, which we might call its rhythm. Moving to a beat also predicts phonological awareness and nobody knows why (again), but the pattern identification inherent to the task might prepare infants and toddlers to distinguish one syllable from another. As it applies to reading, following a beat prepares readers to appreciate the meter of poetry and use timing when reading aloud.



# Books and Blankies

## About this program

Human history suggests babies are well prepared to learn through experience (they've been hitting milestones this whole time with the skills they pick up in the course of being a baby). Formal instruction has its place but we would be wise to follow Mother Nature's cue and embed holistic pre-literacy learning into baby's everyday life.



## Activities

- Start a bedtime reading routine, if you haven't already. You can read pretty much anything to a 6-month-old so if the day has been full of nursery rhymes you can certainly read them the newspaper as you rock them. It's important to provide babies with different kinds of language and the less stimulating delivery might help baby wind down.
- Offer soft-sided activity books as playthings during the sensory exploration stage, or activity booklets with interactive pieces for children who are moving out of the sensory stage. This developmentally-appropriate introduction to books supports baby's book handling skills, though they won't be able to turn the pages yet.

## Activities (Continued)

- Challenge is on the horizon. Encourage positive associations about books and reading starting now to sustain your child through more demanding instruction.
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## Why are we doing this?

Enjoying activity books as an infant will not directly impact your child's attitude toward their grade school workbooks, but it is part of a learning path that does. The activity book becomes teaching material for joint attention activities, which then apply to picture books and baby pointing out parts of the illustration, and so on. Previous experiences demonstrably impact learning. Skills build on previously acquired skills and associations build on previously forged associations.

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## Resources

### Early Childhood Development and Education

- CDC's Important Milestones: [Your Baby By Six Months](#) and [Your Baby by Nine Months](#)
- [16 Gestures by 16 Months](#), from the First Words Project
- [Learn & Grow](#), activities by age and domain from PBS
- [The Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model: Early Literacy in Context](#). Rohde, L. (2015). Sage Open, 5(1).
- The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) [consumer report for infant and toddler reading curricula](#)

### Further Reading

- Salo VC, Rowe ML, Reeb-Sutherland B. Exploring Infant Gesture and Joint Attention as Related Constructs and as Predictors of Later Language. *Infancy*. 2018 May-Jun;23(3):432-452. doi: 10.1111/infa.12229. Epub 2018 Feb 6. PMID: 29725273; PMCID: PMC5927593.
- Politimou N, Dalla Bella S, Farrugia N, Franco F. Born to Speak and Sing: Musical Predictors of Language Development in Pre-schoolers. *Front Psychol*. 2019 May 24;10:948. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00948. PMID: 31231260; PMCID: PMC6558368.

## About the Author

Megan Casey, M.S., is a seasoned behavior scientist and developmentalist with over 15 years of experience in early childhood care, education, and family support. Drawing from developmental science, ecological psychology, and naturalistic approaches to learning, she helps families navigate the earliest years with clarity and confidence.

Through her private practice, Meadowsteps, Megan offers individualized support for parents of children ages 0–6. Her work is holistic, neurodiversity-affirming, and rooted in daily life — combining proven strategies with a grounded, values-based approach that honors the child, the family, and the environment they grow in.

Families turn to Megan when they're ready for meaningful and multi-leveled change. Her support is practical, intuitive, and built to last.

To learn more about her current offerings, visit [www.meadowsteps.com](http://www.meadowsteps.com).



Age: 6-9 months



## Roots of Reading:

### Natural Early Literacy for Infants

- Child-centered instruction that is parent-led, backed by research, and relationship-based
- Developmentally appropriate programs to meet your infant where they are
- Multisensory lesson plans that work across skill domains for holistic learning experiences
- Bulleted lists of actionable items and activities, with accompanying context and rationale
- Sensory-friendly and highly personalizable strategies
- An emphasis on fostering both social-emotional skills and intellectual autonomy
- Active learning in context - no flashcards needed, no batteries included