

When Is a Child Ready for Reading?

I often find that grown-ups are so excited to start a child on the road to independent reading, they don't stop to consider if she's ready or not. And not just cognitively, but physically. Reading requires a high level of eye fitness which depends on the type and amount of activity the eyes get in the early years.

And by activity, I don't mean time spent in front of a screen. Screen play occurs on a flat, 2-D plane, which has limited value for developing 3-D eye fitness. Focusing near and far is impossible on a screen. Furthermore, small screens (especially smartphones and tablets) do not let the eyes sweep widely to strengthen the muscles and fine-tune eye tracking. In fact, these mesmerizing, confined images create conditions for ocular lock, a frozen stare with no awareness or cognition of what's being seen.¹⁸

So what happens if you start teaching a child to read, but her eyes just aren't ready? While reading, she may:

- Get red, irritated eyes
- Rub her eyes a lot
- Get watery eyes
- Blink excessively
- Turn away to rest her eyes
- Jerk her eyes across the page
- Display a flicker or jump in her eye movement when the eyes reach the middle of the page

But far worse than a temporary case of eye strain, if the experience is difficult, frustrating, or even painful, it may leave a lasting negative impression, which could become an even bigger hurdle to reading later on.

In my view, if you want a child to love reading, there are two simple, powerful things you can do:

- Develop her eye fitness through lots of fun, playful, 3-D visual stimulation each and every day.
- Spend time reading with her one-on-one. Children love the individual attention, and sharing a book up close lets you point out important images, ideas, and words along the way.

Exposure to language from television screens and audio tracks does *not* enhance a young child's ability to learn language during the critical period of development from six to eight months.