

Reading With Your Baby in the NICU

Reading with your baby is one of the most important things you can do to support your baby's growth and development. When babies hear language/words, hundreds of their brain cells connect, which helps set up brain pathways for future learning. Babies and children who read with their families daily have better language abilities and read more easily by third grade. Such children are then more likely to graduate from high school and go to college. Thus, by reading with your baby every day, you are setting him/ her up for lifelong success!

Babies enjoy reading, although their reactions may be subtle

- Your baby might relax, and show that by slightly lowering his heart or breathing rate
- Some babies may coo, vocalize, or even comfortably fall asleep while you read
- A daily reading routine may help ease strengthening your connection with your baby

Other babies may become stressed or over-stimulated during reading time. Signs that your baby is having difficulty handling the stimulation of reading include:

- Fast breathing
- Crying
- Yawning
- Changes in skin color (pale or bright red)
- Alarms on monitor
- Splayed fingers
- Jerky movements or tremors
- Turning away from you
- Putting hands in front of his/her face

You and the NICU staff can help by:

- Lowering your voice to reduce stimulation
- Swaddling your baby
- Offering a pacifier (if your baby uses one)
- If your baby continues to show signs of stress, put him/her back in the incubator or crib, notify your baby's nurse, and try reading again at a different time
- Being persistent! As your baby grows, you will notice that he/she will become more engaged and eager to interact with the world around him/her.

Reading Tips

- **Start reading with your baby since birth**
 - The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends 15-20 minutes of daily reading for all babies and children. On days you are not able to come to the NICU, our staff will read and talk with your baby
- **Keep books by your baby's isolette or crib**
 - There are free books available in the parent lounge for NICU families. Feel free to pick up one or several books, and start a mini-library at your baby's bedside
 - Add to the library regularly to increase the number of different words your baby hears
- **Read anything!**
 - That is, any book or printed material that has lots of words in it. Typically, this would be children's storybooks, but some parents read other things to their babies, such as newspapers or religious books like the Bible. Choose anything you like! The goal is to create a positive experience for you and your baby
- **Create a daily reading routine**
 - Make reading a regular part of your time with your baby. By setting up a daily routine early on, you may find it easier to continue reading with your baby after going home
- **Rhyming rocks!**
 - Books with rhyming stories (ex. Dr. Seuss) are particularly good choices. Rhymes trains young brains to learn phonemes (the smallest parts of words), the building blocks for later language development
- **Reading is good for families, too**
 - Reading can strengthen the special bond you have with your baby, and may help relieve some of the stress of having a baby in the NICU. Older siblings can enjoy reading books with babies too— and it helps hone their own reading skills. Make reading a family affair!
- **Read with your baby in your preferred language**
 - Early exposure of a young child to more than one language enhances development of cognitive (thinking) abilities later on. Talk and read with your baby in your preferred language every time you see them!

