

Children's Book Collection

A curated selection for early literacy development

A free reading guide from Why Play Learning

How to Use This Guide

Books are at the heart of early literacy — and the right book at the right moment can spark a lifelong love of reading. This collection has been put together with home-educating families in mind, organised by the stage of reading development rather than strict age ranges.

Every child is different. Some will be ready for longer picture books at three; others will still adore simple rhyming stories at six or seven — and that's completely fine. Use this guide as a starting point, not a checklist. The suggested age ranges are gentle guides only.

■ **The best book is always the one your child wants to read again and again. Rereading favourites builds fluency, confidence, and a deep love of stories.**

Stage 1 — Sharing Stories Together (Ages 0–4)

At this stage, reading is all about warmth, rhythm, and repetition. Books with simple text, rich illustrations, and patterns children can join in with lay the very foundation of literacy.

■ Rhyme, Rhythm and Repetition

■ **The Very Hungry Caterpillar**

Ages 2–5

Eric Carle

A timeless classic with simple repetition, counting, and a satisfying story arc. Brilliant for sequencing conversations and early number awareness.

■ **Each Peach Pear Plum**

Ages 2–4

Janet and Allan Ahlberg

A gentle 'I spy' rhyming book that introduces nursery rhyme characters. Wonderful for looking carefully at illustrations and joining in with the rhyme.

■ **Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy**

Ages 2–5

Lynley Dodd

Irresistible rhyming text with a cumulative structure children love to anticipate. Fantastic for rhythm, prediction, and sheer joy.

■ **We're Going on a Bear Hunt**

Ages 2–5

Michael Rosen & Helen Oxenbury

A participatory classic — children join in with the refrains naturally. Brilliant for language play, sequencing, and acting out.

Rich Illustration and Language

Owl Babies

Ages 2–5

Martin Waddell & Patrick Benson

A beautifully tender story about separation anxiety — deeply reassuring for young children. Rich vocabulary and a satisfying, warm resolution.

The Tiger Who Came to Tea

Ages 2–5

Judith Kerr

A wonderfully absurd story with warm, detailed illustrations. Excellent for talk — what would you do if a tiger came to your tea?

Elmer

Ages 2–6

David McKee

A joyful story about being different and belonging. Vivid illustrations and a simple but powerful message make this a much-revisited favourite.

Stage 2 — Becoming a Reader (Ages 4–7)

As children begin to decode words and develop stamina, they benefit from books with slightly more complex stories, richer vocabulary, and characters they can really connect with.

Imagination and Story

The Gruffalo

Ages 3–7

Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler

A masterclass in story structure — repetition, suspense, and a clever twist. Perfect for prediction, retelling, and discussing how the mouse solves his problem.

Where the Wild Things Are

Ages 4–8

Maurice Sendak

A beautifully strange story about emotion, imagination, and the comfort of home. Superb for discussing feelings and the power of the imagination.

The Snail and the Whale

Ages 4–7

Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler

A sweeping adventure in gorgeous rhyming text. Introduces wonderful vocabulary and concepts of scale, geography, and friendship.

Dogger

Ages 3–7

Shirley Hughes

A quietly powerful story about loss and love, set in a warm, recognisable world. Wonderful for empathy conversations and rich, observational illustrations.

Wider Worlds and Big Ideas

■ **Mog the Forgetful Cat**

Ages 3–7

Judith Kerr

A warm, funny family story — brilliant for character empathy and discussion about being kind to those who are different or forgetful.

■ **The Day the Crayons Quit**

Ages 4–8

Drew Daywalt & Oliver Jeffers

A brilliantly original concept — crayons writing letters of complaint! Great for discussion, persuasive writing inspiration, and humour.

■ **Paddington Bear**

Ages 5–8

Michael Bond

Gentle, warm, and quietly funny — Paddington introduces children to longer chapter-style stories and themes of belonging, kindness, and adventure.

Stage 3 — Growing Readers (Ages 7–10)

At this stage children can sustain longer stories and benefit enormously from books read aloud together even as their own reading grows. These titles offer rich vocabulary, memorable characters, and plenty to discuss.

■ **Chapter Books and Longer Stories**

■ **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**

Ages 6–10

Roald Dahl

A wildly imaginative story full of memorable characters, moral questions, and Dahl's uniquely playful language. Brilliant read-aloud material.

■ **The BFG**

Ages 6–10

Roald Dahl

The BFG's invented language is a masterclass in playful vocabulary — children love it and it inspires wonderful word invention of their own.

■ **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**

Ages 7–11

C.S. Lewis

A timeless portal fantasy with rich imagery, moral depth, and characters children care about deeply. Wonderful for discussion and creative writing.

■ **Charlotte's Web**

Ages 7–10

E.B. White

A genuinely moving story about friendship, loyalty, and loss — told with beautiful, precise language. One of the finest read-alouds in children's literature.

■ **Varjak Paw**

Ages 7–11

SF Said & Dave McKean

A gripping adventure story with stunning illustrations — brilliant for reluctant readers and those who love action, mystery, and beautiful visual storytelling.

■ **Don't forget non-fiction! Children who love facts, animals, history or science will thrive with well-illustrated non-fiction books alongside stories. Reading widely across genres builds the richest vocabulary of all.**

There is no right order, no perfect list, and no book your child has to have read. The only thing that matters is finding the stories that make their eyes light up — and then reading them together, as often as you can. ■