

A Simple, Pressure-Free Literacy Activity Starter Kit

You picked up a reading program once. Maybe two. One felt too structured. The other assumed you had twenty minutes every evening in a quiet house.

You're not a teacher. You know that. And some nights, you're not sure if what you're doing is helping or just adding more to the pile.

Here's the thing: you don't need to be a teacher. You just need a moment - and something to do with it. That's already enough to matter.

These are eight activities you can start tonight. No preparation. No equipment. Just you, your child, and five minutes.

1

The Funny Wrong Word

Read aloud from anything - their book, a cereal box, a sign on the wall. Swap one word for something obviously wrong. Wait.

Try:

"The dog sat on the... refrigerator."

"Once upon a time, there was a small purple... washing machine."

The moment they catch it and correct you - that's the game.

What it builds:

- Active listening
- Predicting what word comes next (holding the expected word against what they actually heard)
- Reading for meaning as a live move, not a test question

Why it works:

A wrong word creates a gap between what your child expected and what they heard. Closing that gap is reading for meaning in its most basic form - not answering a question about a story after the fact, but noticing a break while it happens.

Make it harder:

After they catch it, ask them to explain why the word doesn't fit. The correction is easy. The explanation is harder.

2

The Letter Hunt

Hand your child a menu, cereal box, catalogue, or any printed material. Give them a letter - any letter. They find and circle as many as they can in two minutes.

Try:

Capital and lowercase, or just one form. Change the letter each round.
This is not a worksheet. It is hunting.

What it builds:

- Recognising letters by shape
- Spotting a shape inside a busy visual field
- Understanding that print is made of separate, repeating pieces

Why it works:

Scanning quickly for letters builds the link between a letter's shape and its sound - faster than tracing or colouring ever does. The hunting frame takes the pressure off getting it right, which means children are more likely to keep going.

Make it harder:

Add a second letter and ask which one appears more often. Counting requires them to track two searches at once.

3

The 3-Word Summary

After anything - a book, a show, a school day, an outing - your child has to sum it up in exactly three words. No more. You can model the first one.

Try:

"Scary but fun."
"Lost dog found."
"He should have."

The limit is the whole point.

What it builds:

- Finding the main idea
- Choosing the right word
- Deciding what matters most (when you can only keep three things)

Why it works:

When children retell, they include everything in the order it happened. Three words forces them to hold the whole thing in mind and pick out the core of it. That process is the foundation of written summaries.

Make it harder:

Ask them to defend their three words. Why those ones and not different ones? The defence is often harder than the summary itself.

4

The Caption Game

Find a photo together - in a book, a magazine, on your phone. Ask your child to make up a caption for it. Then you try. Then compare.

Say:

"If this photo was in a newspaper, what would the words underneath it say?"

A caption is just one decision: what matters most about this image. That's writing.

What it builds:

- Understanding that words and pictures work together
- Choosing words carefully for impact
- Editing instinct (comparing two captions shows what each one said - and didn't)

Why it works:

Caption-writing is one of the tightest forms of writing there is. Every word has to earn its place. Children who struggle to write long pieces often find they can write one clear, precise sentence - which is actually the harder skill.

Make it harder:

Find a photo that's unclear or a little strange. The more open to interpretation the image, the more interesting the comparison.

5

The Story Rewind

After any book, episode, or story you've told, ask your child to replay it from inside a different character's head. Not what happened - what the story felt like from someone else's point of view.

Say:

"What do you think [character] was thinking when [specific moment]?"

Not what happened, that's retelling. This is something else.

What it builds:

- Seeing things from another person's point of view
- Reading between the lines (figuring out what a character feels but doesn't say)
- Holding another person's inner world alongside the plot

Why it works:

Children who can retell a story accurately can narrate. Children who can figure out what a character was thinking, when the text doesn't tell them, can truly understand it. Those are different skills. These questions move a child from one to the other.

Make it harder:

Ask about a minor character - the one who barely appears. Less is given, so they have to work out more.

6

The Question Swap

After reading together, you ask your child one question about the story. Then they ask you one. The rule is it has to be something you genuinely don't know the answer to - no testing questions.

Say:

"You ask me something you're actually wondering about."

A question they already know the answer to is a quiz. A question they don't know is reading.

What it builds:

- Reading between the lines
- Spotting what's left unresolved or unclear in a text
- Coming up with a real question (which means finding something they genuinely don't know)

Why it works:

Most reading questions run one way - adult asks, child answers. The child learns to perform understanding for the adult. When the child has to come up with the question, they have to find something they truly don't know. That's a more advanced move than answering correctly.

Make it harder:

Both write your questions down before swapping. No changing once you've read theirs.

7

The Add-On Story

You start a sentence. Your child finishes it. Then they start one. You finish it. Keep going until the story ends - which could be three sentences or thirty.

Say:

"Once there was a..." (then stop and point to them).

The direction is always unknown. That's what makes it hard.

What it builds:

- How stories are built (they move forward)
- Cause and effect (each sentence has to make sense of the one before)
- Flexibility (adapting when someone else changes the plan)

Why it works:

Children who write alone often freeze because they have to hold both the idea and the doing at once. The add-on structure splits those two things. On their turn, their only job is to move the story one step - not plan an ending, not manage the whole thing.

Make it harder:

Before you start, agree on a destination - a specific place or moment the story must reach. Now both of you have to keep that in mind while you make it up as you go.

The Slow Read

When your child reads to you, stop them occasionally with one word: "Slow." They re-read the last sentence at half speed. Not because they made an error. Just because.

Say:

"Go back to that line and read it slow for me."

Speed is the enemy of understanding.

What it builds:

- Pacing and expression
- Checking their own reading speed
- Taking in meaning (slowing down creates space for meaning to land)

Why it works:

Many children read quickly to show they can get through the words. Slowing them down removes that goal and puts meaning back in the centre. Children often notice things they missed the first time.

Make it harder:

After the slow read, ask what changed. Did they notice something different? That question is much harder than the re-read itself.

You don't need to do all eight.

Pick one. Try it for five minutes. Stop while they're still enjoying it.

A short game that ends well is worth more than a long session that ends in resistance.

These activities aren't a program. They're moments of attention - small ones, in ordinary places.

What they build over time is a child who is used to thinking about what words do.

That is what reading is.

From the team at Tricky Brains

Helping children build confident, curious minds.