

LEARNING TO READ WITH A BIG BOX

If you or one of your neighbors has been lucky enough to buy a large appliance lately, ***be sure not to throw away that big packing box it came in!*** Chances are, you remember the fun of playing with big boxes yourself, when you were small. Your own child might like to play with one now. A great big cardboard box can be a dream toy. Just put it in the backyard and see what happens.

One day the box may become a space ship; the next day a house; the day after that, a boat. ***Pretend play like this is great exercise for your child's brain.*** It encourages creativity and language skills—skills she'll use later when she's learning to read. If you'll get involved in your child's make-believe, you can help her develop her ability to talk. ***Just ask open-ended questions.*** Those are questions for which there is no right or wrong answer and that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." ***This kind of question, and the talking together that follows, can help your child's vocabulary grow. And children who know more words when they enter preschool and kindergarten tend to have more success later when they learn to read.***

You might have seen your child struggle to fit the lawn chairs into his "space ship." You might see him moving his toy trucks around in the "garage" he's made out of the box. ***All this is good practice in solving problems—a skill he'll use later when he's learning how letters are formed and how they are arranged to make words.*** Even later, he'll arrange words in different ways to form different sentences and move sentences around to make different paragraphs. Right now, he's practicing the skills he'll need—just by playing with his big box!

You might enrich your child's play by offering props for the play. Did she make an airplane out of her box? Do you have a face mask and some plastic tubing scraps to make the oxygen mask that flight attendants show us how to use when we fly? What about an old belt for the seat belt? And, of course! Peanuts for the in-flight snack!

You can also enrich the play by adding a good book to the fun. If the box is an airplane, choose a book to read about airplanes; if it's a cave, look for a book about bears. ***Don't stop what your child is doing to read to him.*** But if you notice a break in his play, when he's not busy with his big box, that might be the time when he'd like to look at the book with you and hear you read it.

Just think: the whole world's an open box for your child's imagination to play with. And when she does, she'll be getting ready to read!