

# Reading at Every Stage of Life

*What science says about literature and development from 0 to 12 years*

por [Fernanda Lucio](#) | Pitanga Kids

## The science behind reading

Reading is much more than decoding words. It is a social act (Bakhtin, 2007), a cognitive development tool (Piaget, 1973) and a space for building meaning through interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1991). According to UNICEF, up to age six the brain is at its peak of activity and plasticity — making the first years the most powerful time to create a love of reading.

Freud reminded us that early childhood experiences leave deep marks on the formation of the individual. When reading is associated with being held, a nurturing voice and emotional safety, it becomes a positive emotional experience that children seek to repeat forever.

### 0 to 2 years — Sensorimotor Stage (Piaget)

For Piaget, from 0 to 2 years the child lives in the sensorimotor stage: learning through senses and movement. The baby doesn't yet understand words, but absorbs the melody of the voice, the rhythm of sentences and the safety of being held — creating the first positive associations with language.

Vygotsky highlighted that language development begins long before speech — and the caregiver's voice is the first "text" the baby processes. Cloth books with textures, contrasting colors and soft sounds are ideal. Repeat the same book as many times as requested: repetition is how the infant brain consolidates neural connections.

Research published in the *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* confirms that sensory and linguistic stimulation in the first months determines cognitive development effectiveness throughout life.

### 2 to 4 years — Pre-Operational Stage and "Make-Believe"

From 2 to 7 years, Piaget identifies the pre-operational stage: reality representation emerges, along with imaginative play. The child begins to understand narratives with characters, beginning, middle and end — this is when children's literature comes into full force.

Vygotsky argued that the Zone of Proximal Development — the space between what a child does alone and what they do with support — is the most fertile place for learning. When an adult reads together, asks questions and expands the story, they are operating in exactly this zone.

Books with large images, rhythmic repetitions and characters living real emotions — like Nico and Stella — are ideal for this age group.

### 4 to 6 years — Imagination, Emotions and Pre-Literacy

At this stage, the child is in full imaginative expansion and begins to perceive that letters have meaning. Shared reading remains essential: research shows children who regularly hear stories arrive at literacy with vocabulary up to 3 times larger.

Freud teaches us this is an intense phase of ego formation and emotional exploration. Stories showing characters feeling fear, jealousy, joy and conflict resolution offer the child a safe space to recognize and process their own emotions — a fundamental

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function of children's literature.

Let the child "read" the pictures, invent what will happen, create alternative endings. Active participation in the story is the first step to becoming an independent reader.

### 6 to 9 years — Concrete Operations and Independent Reading

Piaget calls this the concrete operations stage: the child develops logical thinking, begins to understand cause and effect and to put themselves in another's place. This is exactly when independent reading begins to consolidate.

Vygotsky emphasized language as a tool for thinking. When a child reads alone, they are internalizing voices and perspectives that broaden their worldview. Stories with adventures, friendships and small moral challenges are most appropriate.

The adult's role changes: from reader to conversation partner. Discussing what the child read, asking open questions and showing genuine interest keeps the love of reading alive.

### 9 to 12 years — Abstract Thinking and Identity

From 9 to 12, Piaget describes the beginning of formal operations: the child starts to understand abstract situations and develops hypothetical thinking. It is an intense phase of identity construction.

Freud situated the development of the superego in this phase — the internalization of values. Literature plays a fundamental role: encountering characters navigating moral dilemmas and exploring identity helps children safely process their own value formation.

Books dealing with friendship, belonging, difference and intense emotions are most relevant. Respect the child's preferred genres — the most important thing is that they keep reading.

### What Piaget, Vygotsky and Freud tell us together

Although each theorist has their approach, there is a common thread: all recognize childhood as a period of intense transformation where lived experiences leave deep and lasting marks (SFB, 2025).

Piaget gives us the cognitive map. Vygotsky reminds us that learning is always social — and the adult who reads together is one of the most powerful developmental resources. Freud reminds us that emotions are the foundation: a nurturing reading experience leaves a mark that no screen can replace.

The conclusion is simple: reading together, consistently and with love, is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child. The book matters less than the voice that reads it and the arms that hold.

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