



**University
Hospitals Sussex**
NHS Foundation Trust



Story time with your baby

Trevor Mann Baby Unit

Patient information

Should I read to my baby on the neonatal unit?

Yes! Your baby will already know your voice and will find it soothing to listen to you. From as early as 25 weeks gestation babies can recognise your voice.

So while your baby is here in the nursery, it's a great time to start reading together. Some studies show that this helps your baby's brain development and can improve language and attention skills later in life. While your baby is very young (under 32 weeks) quiet singing and talking softly to your baby is felt to be calming and reassuring for your baby. As they grow (from 32-35 weeks) they will become more ready to interact with you and start to show you that they are listening to your voice.

'Reading aloud meant we brought the world to our child with our voices whilst they were being held safe in the incubator'

What can I read to my baby?

You can read anything to your baby. From children's books, picture books, books you enjoy or even newspapers. What you read isn't important: it's the changes in your voice and tone and your interaction with your baby.

Don't worry if you don't feel you are very good at reading. Your baby will love hearing your voice. You can describe the pictures in the books and make up your own story. Speaking in your first language or the language you feel most comfortable with will also help.

We have a library of books available on the unit: please feel free to borrow them.

Will reading with my baby help me too?

Yes. It is normal to feel a range of emotions while you are caring for your baby in hospital. Reading to your baby can help you feel that you are bonding with your baby, you are comforting them, and that you are giving them (and you) some normality.

'We started to develop a routine and focused on ways we could bond. Every evening we would read books - It was a special time of bonding with our baby.'

We have collected together some stories from other parents whose babies spent time in the nursery:

Carly, Rich and Dougie

Just after Christmas in 2021, my baby boy Dougie unexpectedly made his arrival at 30 weeks. At first, we had to come to terms with the situation: but after a few days we started to develop a routine and focused on ways we could bond with Dougie.

While I wanted to do everything for him, I didn't particularly enjoy the more medical tasks and really looked for ways to find moments of normality. I just wanted to be his mum. We discovered the bookshelf at Princess Royal Hospital and every evening we would read books to Dougie.



We had been speaking to him during my pregnancy and knew he could hear and recognise our voices, so we loved being able to continue this communication. You could see his eyes moving



when we started to read. It was also a special moment for my husband, Dougie, and I to have together before we went home every evening.

Now, Dougie absolutely loves books and I often think back to our first story times together at the hospital.

Chris, Debi and Elsie

Elsie was born at 23 weeks and five days in May 2022. She was in hospital for eight months, four months of it in TMBU.

The first two weeks were a blur, but I remember asking what we could do and being told that Elsie would benefit from us talking and reading to her.

We were still under Covid restrictions so no one could meet Elsie, and lots of our friends and family were unsure how to react: whether they should congratulate us, buy a gift or send condolences.

We asked our loved ones to send Elsie a book with a special handwritten message in for her. When we read a book to Elsie each night, we sent pictures to the people who sent it to her.



This gave Chris and I something to look forward to, a way to be parents, and gave a way that our loved ones could bond with Elsie.

Elsie now has a wonderful loved filled library and gets so excited about books that we can't read them right before bed!



Kate, Kittie and Jothi.

Jothi arrived at 32 weeks in June 2020 during the first lockdown and we spent three months in TMBU and another three months in the Alex. He had a grade four bleed on the brain. We were given a terrible prognosis for his future, and we just crumbled.

My wife and I were not even allowed to visit him together because of lockdown restrictions so we shared a journal and wrote about our experiences as we waited for each other outside the unit.

Reading to Jothi was the last thing on my mind and all I thought about was how we would survive. I brought in books about how to cope with a brain damaged child, and read self-help books for going through a crisis, but I did not read aloud to him through the incubator.

The moment it changed was when going through yet another blood test, Jothi went from screaming to being soothed by hearing my voice. It made me realise that, despite all his challenges, he recognised me. I started to read whatever I was reading aloud to him.

Another mother whose child was born the day after mine was so touched by our situation she brought my child a book 'The boy, the mole, the fox and the horse'. I was so moved by this gesture and tears filled my eyes as I tried to read it to him. It was the perfect book for comforting us all. Some of the phrases from that book were so inspirational you could just whisper them to him as we did kangaroo care.

As we approached our first Christmas in hospital alone, Jothi's outlook got worse as he was diagnosed with seizures and a visual impairment. None of our families could visit us but I asked them to record audio stories for him and they sent them as gifts. We felt so isolated in the ward on our own but hearing familiar voices helped and they brought the world to Jothi as they told stories of autumn walks and boat rides.

They still send them now and we listen to them every single night before bed as our ritual.

This leaflet is intended for patients receiving care in Brighton & Hove or Haywards Heath

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