



# The Journey to Reading Starts at Home

Small moments. Big learning.



## Acknowledgments

**This project was made possible by the generous support of the Demain Foundation.**

Libraries Without Borders US (LWB) would like to thank the families, community partners, and early childhood practitioners who contributed their time, insights, and feedback to the development of this Family Literacy Toolkit. This resource was informed through community interviews, feedback from families, and collaboration with library staff and stakeholders across our partner communities. Their lived experiences and expertise were essential in shaping a culturally responsive, accessible, and practical toolkit for adults caring for young children.

LIFT is the U.S. adaptation of Bibliothèques Sans Frontières' Ma première bibliothèque program.

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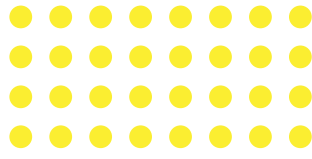
Spanish translation by TM Design, Inc., with review by Andrés Claudio, Libraries Without Borders US.

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This toolkit is for

**YOU**



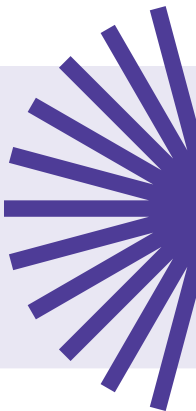
This toolkit is for every adult raising a child: parents, grandparents, foster parents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, kinship caregivers, and guardians. However your family is formed, whatever your role is called, if you're caring for a child, this toolkit is for you.

Throughout this booklet, we use words such as “parent,” “caregiver,” and “family”—these words mean YOU, whatever your relationship to the child in your care.

### **Content:**

- You know your child best.
- You're already teaching them every day through ordinary moments.
- This toolkit celebrates what you're already doing and offers simple ideas to try.
- You do not need any special materials—just you and your child.
- Learning happens everywhere: at home, on the bus, at the park, during meals.
- Your language is your child's first language—speak, sing, and read in whatever language feels natural.
- Small moments together matter more than perfect activities.

You don't need to buy anything. Things don't have to be perfect. It's about connection. When you talk, read, sing, write, and play with your child you are helping their brain to grow. No activity or interaction is too small. You are doing more than you realize.



# Getting Started

## Every Child Is Different— and Grows at Their Own Pace.

As you work through this guide, remember that every child is different. Some of these activities may feel easy for them and others may take time and patience. Go at the pace that works best for you and your child.

This guide is broken into five sections. To get started, you will find a few ideas of the types of activities your child may be expected to do at different ages. As you work through the guide, remember, these are general guides—not rules.



### 0-12 MONTHS

- Babies learn through their senses (touch, taste, sound, sight)
- Talk to them about everything you're doing, such as changing their diaper or putting them in a stroller
- Respond when they babble—this is conversation practice
- Read simple books, sing songs, play peek-a-boo



### 1-2 YEARS

- Toddlers are starting to say words (10-50 words by age 2)
- Can follow simple directions, such as stand up or sit down when asked
- Love to copy what you do
- Begin to play pretend
- Enjoy simple books with pictures



### 2-3 YEARS

- Children are talking in short, two- to three-word sentences
- Ask lots of “why” questions
- Can identify colors and shapes
- Love repetition—will ask for same book or song over and over
- Can hold crayons and scribble. This may look like marks and not correctly formed letters, but it is still writing!

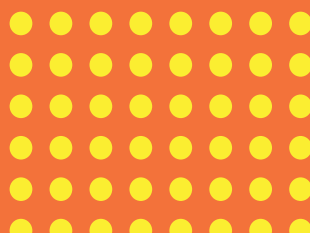


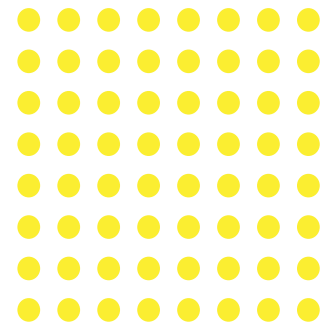
### 3-5 YEARS

- Children are talking in longer sentences
- Can tell simple stories
- Recognize some letters and numbers
- Can play with other children
- Draw recognizable shapes and pictures
- Begin to write their name

### ALL AGES:

Your child is always learning. Trust yourself—you know your child best.





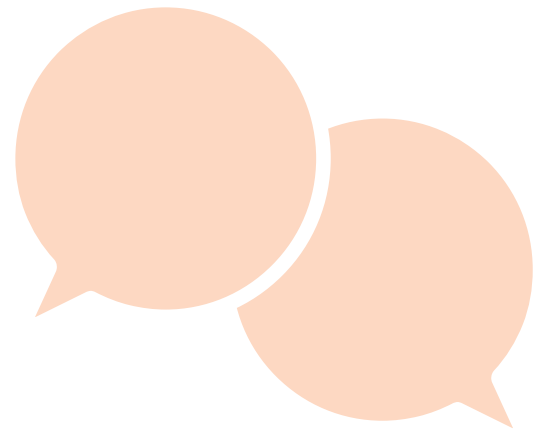
# The 5 Practices

Talk. Read. Sing. Write. Play.



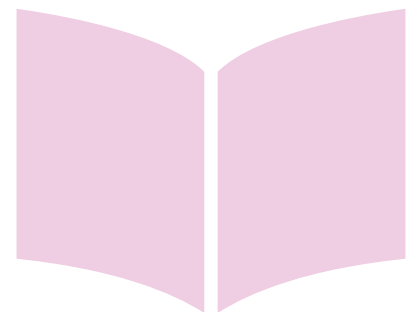
## Talk

Use words to describe your world together



## Read

Tell stories and look at text: books and words in your community





# Sing

Use music and rhythm to hear and create sounds



# Write

Draw, scribble, and make marks: lines, letters, shapes, and pictures



# Play

Explore, imagine, and move together



# Talk

## What You Say Matters.

### Why It Matters

Every word your child hears helps their brain grow. When you describe what you're doing, answer their questions, and have conversations, you're teaching them language.

### Simple Ideas—No Materials Needed

#### Things YOU can say when:

- **Getting dressed:** Say: "Let's put your shirt on. Arms up! Now your legs go in your pants."
- **Cooking/eating:** Say: "These beans are hot. Blow on them to cool them down."
- **Walking:** Say: "I see a red car. Do you see it? What else is red?"
- **Bath time:** Say: "The water is warm. Can you splash? That made bubbles!"

#### More ways you can talk TOGETHER:

- **Ask questions:** "What do you think will happen next?"
- **Wait for responses** (even if it's babbling or sounds) and encourage them to continue by saying things like, "I can tell you have something to say," or "I bet you have a really good idea to share."
- **Add new words:** "Yes, that's a dog! It's barking loudly."
- **Talk about feelings:** "You look sad. Do you need a hug?"

## Making It Work “On the Go”

At home, count stairs, doors, and windows; count vehicles from the bus or while riding in the car; at the store, name the items in the shopping cart; at the park, describe the things you see.



**Remember:** Your child learns first by listening. What you say matters, even the smallest conversations.

## Making it Work For ALL Children:

- Use simple, short sentences
- Give extra time for responses (count to 10 in your head)
- Accept non-verbal communication (pointing, gestures, sounds)
- Narrate what they’re doing: “You’re stacking blocks!”
- Use visual aids—point to objects and pictures
- Learn some simple sign language (many libraries teach this free)

## TALK Builds Self-Esteem By:

- **Listening to your child** shows their thoughts and words matter
- **Responding to their questions** tells them curiosity is good
- **Using their name often** affirms their identity and importance
- **Describing what they do well**—“You stacked those blocks so high!”—builds pride

### Confidence Tip

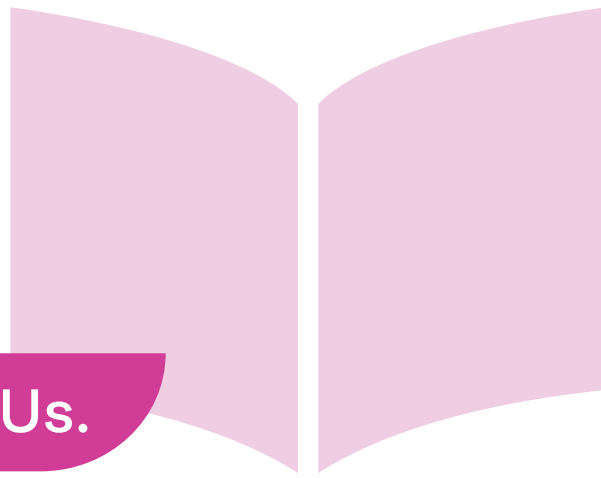


Instead of just saying “good job,” describe what you see: “You worked so hard on that puzzle!” or “You were so patient waiting your turn!” This helps children understand their strengths.



# Read

Words Are All Around Us.



## Why It Matters

Reading together isn't just about books. When you tell stories, look at pictures, or read words around you, your child learns that words have meaning and that reading is important.

## Simple Ideas—With or Without Books

### Things YOU Can Do With Books:

- **Read favorite books** again and again
- **Point to pictures and ask** “What’s that?” or “What is happening on this page?”
- **Make silly voices** for different characters
- **Let your child** turn the pages
- **Read in any language**—your language is perfect

### More Ways You Can Share Words TOGETHER (Without Books):

- **Tell stories** about your family, your childhood, your day
- **Look at pictures** on food boxes, signs, or your phone
- **Make up stories** about people you see
- **Read words everywhere:** street signs, store names, bus numbers
- **Draw pictures together** and tell stories about them

### At the Library

You can get a library card even if you're moving frequently or don't have a permanent address. Ask a librarian—they want to help. Some libraries also offer special programs for kinship caregivers and foster families.



**Remember:** Words are all around us, in books and outside of books.  
Words are everywhere.

## Making it Work For ALL Children:

- Choose books with textures, flaps, or interactive elements
- Keep sessions very short (even two minutes counts!)
- Let them hold the book and turn pages however they want
- Don't worry about reading every word—just talk about the pictures
- Audiobooks count as reading
- Some children focus better with movement, so read while swinging or walking

## Making It Work “On the Go”

At home, read product labels out loud; on the bus or in a car, tell stories about where you're going; at the store, read aisle signs and make predictions about what foods you will find; at the park, read signs and name the letters you find on playground equipment.

## READ Builds Self-Esteem By:

- **Giving your child your full attention** communicates “you're worth my time”
- **Letting them choose books** respects their preferences and interests
- **Celebrating when they recognize a letter or word** builds academic confidence
- **Reading stories about children like them** validates their identity and experiences

## Confidence Tip



Let your child see you reading too (even if it's a text message or a sign). Say: “Reading helps me learn new things, just like it helps you!”



# Sing

Learn Through Music,  
Sounds, and Rhythm.



## Why It Matters

When we sing, words slow down and children can hear the smaller sounds that make up words. Songs help children feel safe, loved, and connected.

## Simple Ideas—No Materials Needed

### Things YOU Can Do to Explore Sounds:

- **Sing while getting ready:** “This is the way we brush our teeth, brush our teeth, brush our teeth ...”
- **Sing to calm down:** Hum softly or sing a lullaby
- **Sing to pass time:** In the car, on the bus, waiting in line
- **Make up silly songs** about what you’re doing

### Songs to Sing TOGETHER:

- Twinkle Twinkle Little Star (or any song from your childhood)
- Alphabet Song
- If You’re Happy and You Know It (clap, stomp, shout “hooray!”)
- The Wheels on the Bus



**Remember:** Your cultural songs or songs familiar to you are important. Sing songs from your culture, your childhood, or your family. These are precious gifts to your child. Even if you’re not the best singer, your child doesn’t care! They just want to hear you sing, chant, and clap.

## Making it Work For ALL Children:

- Music is powerful for ALL types of learners
- Singing slows down language and adds rhythm
- Songs with movements help physical coordination
- Singing together reduces stress and builds connection
- Make up songs about daily routines
- Your child doesn't need to sing back—listening matters

## Making It Work “On the Go”

Dance to music or songs you create; on the bus or in a car, sing familiar songs; count and name foods to the tune of familiar songs (for example, spell out food to the tune of Bingo); at the park, make and compare different sounds (for example, listen to the sound the slide makes or the sound your feet make in the wood chips).

## SING Builds Self-Esteem By:

- **Creating joyful moments together** creates secure attachments
- **Showing no right or wrong way** because everyone can participate successfully
- **Building rhythm and coordination** shows “my body can do this!”
- **Celebrating their voice** affirms every voice is valuable

### Confidence Tip



Let your child lead the singing sometimes. Follow their tempo and volume. This gives them a sense of control and leadership.

# Write

Scribbling Is Writing.



## Why It Matters

When children scribble, draw, and make marks, they're learning that what they create has meaning. This is how writing begins.

## Simple Ideas—Free or Low-Cost Materials

### Things YOU Can Use:

- Crayons, pencils, pens, chalk (anything that makes marks)
- Paper, cardboard, envelopes (paper from anywhere works)
- Sidewalk chalk on concrete
- Sticks in dirt or sand
- Fingers in spilled flour or sugar

### Easy Writing Activities to Do TOGETHER:

- **Free scribbling:** Let them make any marks they want
- **Draw together:** Ask, “Can you draw our family? Can you draw us at your favorite place?”
- **Trace hands:** Trace around their hand and yours, then compare sizes
- **Practice their name:** Write their name and let them copy
- **Make cards:** Draw pictures for family members
- **Grocery lists:** Let them “write” the list (scribbles count!)



**Remember:** Don't worry about it being "right." Scribbles, squiggles, and random marks are all part of learning to write.

## Making it Work For ALL Children:

- Use thick crayons or markers (easier to grip)
- Try different tools: chalk, paintbrushes, finger paint
- Tape paper down so it doesn't move
- Let them use their whole arm, not just fingers
- Drawing IS writing at this age
- Vertical surfaces (easels, walls) are sometimes easier than tables
- Celebrate any marks they make

## Making It Work "On the Go"

Create handwritten labels for household items; write down road signs that you see; at the store, create a grocery list using handwritten words or pictures; at the park, practice making lines in natural materials such as sand or dirt.

## WRITE Builds Self-Esteem By:

- **Celebrating all marks as meaningful** tells them effort matters more than perfection
- **Showing progress**—"Look how much you've learned!"—encourages effort
- **Creating something** builds their pride of creation
- **Displaying their work** shows you value what they create

## Confidence Tip

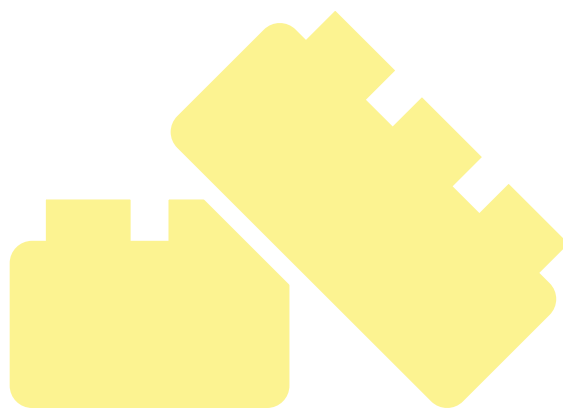


Keep some of your child's drawings or writing in a special place. When they feel discouraged, look back together: "Remember when you first started drawing? Look how much you've learned!"



# Play

Learn by Playing.



## Why It Matters

Children learn by doing. This may look like touching, exploring, and imagining. Play builds creativity, problem-solving, and social skills. Play is how they learn.

## Simple Ideas—Use What You Have

### Household Items YOU Can Use for Play:

- **Boxes:** Pretend they are a car, house, or boat
- **Pots and spoons:** Make music, pretend to cook
- **Blankets:** Build a fort or tent
- **Recycled containers:** Stack them, fill them, sort them
- **Plastic bottles:** Roll them, kick them, make noise with rice inside

### Ways to Play TOGETHER:

#### Play Outside:

- **Run, jump, hop:** “Can you hop on one foot? Jump over this crack?”
- **Find nature:** Collect leaves, rocks, sticks
- **Puddle jumping:** (If you have a change of clothes)
- **Shadow play:** Watch your shadows move
- **Pretend:** “You’re a lion! I’m a bird! Let’s fly/roar!”

#### Pretend Play:

- Pretend to cook, clean, go to work
- Act out stories or daily routines
- Use anything as a toy (a sock becomes a puppet!)

## Making It Work “On the Go”

Pretend to act like your favorite book or movie character; play “I-spy”; at the store; let your child help you scan or sort items; at the park run, jump, and climb using your whole body.



**Remember:** Kids don’t need expensive toys. They need time, space, and your presence. They know how to play. Just follow their lead.

## Making it Work For ALL Children:

- Modify games to match your child’s abilities
- Sensory play: water, sand, rice, play-dough (supervise closely)
- If your child seeks or avoids certain textures, follow their lead
- Play can be side by side, not always interactive
- Some children need more structured play, others need more freedom
- Observe what your child gravitates toward

## PLAY Builds Self-Esteem By:

- **Following their lead** affirms their ideas are valuable
- **Celebrating problem-solving**—“You figured that out!”—affirms their solutions
- **Allowing safe risk-taking** builds courage
- **Learning through doing** encourages confidence

### Confidence Tip



When your child struggles with something during play, resist the urge to fix it immediately. Ask: “What could you try?” Let them problem-solve. Then celebrate: “You didn’t give up!”





# Building Your Child's Confidence & Self-Esteem

**Strong Self-Esteem = Ready to Learn.**

## Why It Matters

Children who feel good about themselves are more confident learners. When children believe “I can do it” and “I am valued,” they’re ready to take on new challenges, such as kindergarten. Self-esteem isn’t about being perfect—it’s about feeling loved, capable, and brave enough to try.

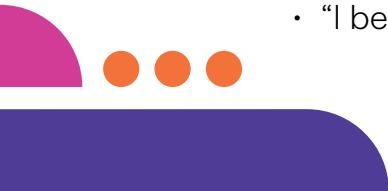
## KINDERGARTEN READINESS: Building Confidence For School

### What Children Need to Feel Ready

Kindergarten is a big step! It will come with lots of new experiences and challenges, and your child will have the opportunity to flex so many of the skills they learned from you. They need to believe in themselves as learners—and not just with academic skills. Here are a few things you can do to help.

### Messages That Build School Confidence:

- “You’re a great question-asker. Teachers love questions!”
- “You’re learning more every day. You’re going to love school!”
- “It’s okay not to know everything. That’s why we go to school—to learn!”
- “Everyone makes mistakes. That’s how we learn.”
- “You’re brave. You can try new things.”
- “I believe in you.”





### Practice “School Situations” to Build Confidence:

- **Following directions:** “First get your shoes, then your coat.” Celebrate when they remember!
- **Waiting their turn:** Practice with games. “Waiting is hard, but you can do it!”
- **Asking for help:** “If you need help, it’s okay to ask. That’s being smart!”
- **Trying even when something is hard:** “You can say, ‘I can’t do this YET, but I’ll keep trying!’ ”
- **Being proud of their work:** “Tell me about what you made!”

### Address Kindergarten Fears:

- Read books about starting kindergarten
- Visit the school or playground if possible
- Talk about what will be the same (you’ll still pick them up, they’ll still have snacks)
- Normalize nerves: “It’s okay to feel nervous about new things. You’re going to do great!”
- Focus on the fun: new friends, playground, learning new things



## THE FOUNDATION OF EVERYTHING: Unconditional Love

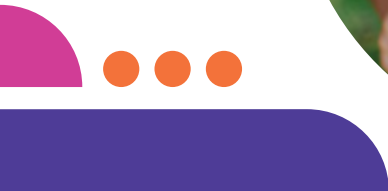
We've reviewed five key areas you can focus on for early literacy success: talk, read, sing, write, play. But remember, the most important thing is you! Your child's self-esteem begins with knowing they are loved and they can be themselves.

### Show Unconditional Love By:

- Loving them even when they make mistakes
- Staying calm when they struggle (not always easy, but try)
- Spending time together doing nothing special
- Showing physical affection: hugs, cuddles, holding hands
- Saying "I love you" every day—and meaning it

### Your Child Will Be Ready:

When your child knows they are loved, when they believe in themselves, when they see you believe in them—they will walk into kindergarten ready to learn.







# Every Child Learns Differently

## Supporting Children with Different Abilities

All children develop at their own pace, and some children learn differently than others. This is not something to hide or feel ashamed about. When children get the support they need early, they can thrive.

### You Know Your Child Best

Trust your instincts. If something feels different about how your child is developing, it's okay to ask questions and seek support from doctors, teachers, or other professionals in your community.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR (Not to Worry, But to Notice)

These are signs to discuss with your child's doctor. They don't mean something is "wrong," but they may mean your child could benefit from extra support.

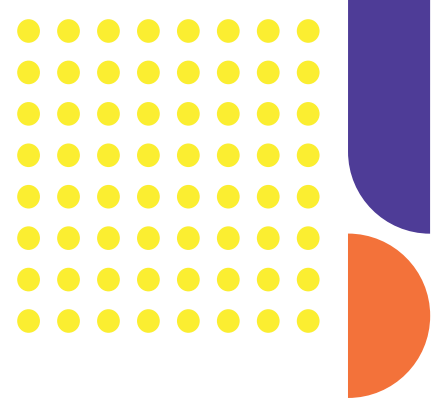
#### Speech & Communication:

- Not babbling by 12 months
- Not saying single words by 18 months
- Not putting two words together by age 2
- Hard to understand by age 3
- Loses skills they used to have

#### Social & Emotional:

- Doesn't make eye contact or respond to their name
- Doesn't play pretend by age 2
- Prefers to play alone consistently
- Has intense reactions to sounds, textures, or lights
- Difficult to comfort when upset





## Movement & Coordination:

- Not walking by 18 months
- Very clumsy or falls often
- Can't hold crayons or utensils by age 3
- One side of body seems stronger than the other

## Learning & Thinking:

- Doesn't seem to understand simple directions by age 2
- Can't identify familiar objects by age 2
- Difficulty with puzzles or matching games
- Short attention span for all activities



**Remember:** Every child is unique. These are guidelines, not rules. When in doubt, ask your child's doctor.





# Resources, Definitions, & Closing

## You've Got This—and We've Got You!

Here are a few additional resources to help you navigate early literacy success and beyond.

### Types Of Learning Differences

Trust your instincts. If something feels different about how your child is developing, it's okay to ask questions and seek support from doctors, teachers, or other professionals in your community.

**Developmental Delays:** When a child takes longer to reach milestones but is steadily progressing. With support, many children catch up.

**Speech & Language Disorders:** Difficulty understanding words, expressing themselves, or making speech sounds clearly. Speech therapy can make huge differences.

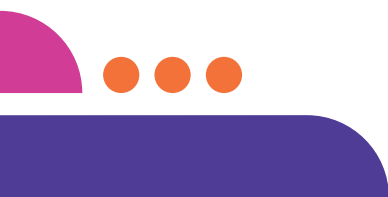
**Autism Spectrum:** Children may have different ways of communicating, playing, and experiencing the world. Early support helps children build on their strengths.

**Hearing or Vision Problems:** Sometimes children seem delayed when actually they can't hear or see well. These often can be addressed with hearing aids or glasses.

**ADHD (Attention Differences):** Difficulty focusing, sitting still, or controlling impulses. Children can learn strategies to succeed.

**Learning Disabilities:** Challenges with reading, math, or writing that aren't related to intelligence. With the right teaching methods, children can learn.

**Physical Disabilities:** Challenges with movement, coordination, or using their bodies. Accommodations and support help children participate fully.





**Remember:** Your child is more than a diagnosis. A diagnosis is a tool to get help—it's not who your child is. Your child has strengths, interests, personality, and potential.

## No Shame, No Hiding

### Important Truths:

- Having a disability or learning difference is NOT caused by bad parenting or caregiving
- Your child deserves support and accommodations—this is their right
- Early help makes a big difference—don't wait and hope it goes away

### Your Feelings Are Valid:

You might feel scared, sad, angry, or overwhelmed when you first realize your child learns differently. These feelings are normal. You're not alone.

## Getting Help & Support

### Where to Start:

- Your Child's Doctor: First stop for concerns, as they can refer you to specialists
- Early Intervention (Birth-Age 3): Free evaluations and services in most states, with no insurance needed
- Special Education (Ages 3-5): Free through your school district—call and ask for "Child Find"
- WIC: Can connect you to resources and support
- Libraries: Often have sensory-friendly story times and accessibility resources

### Important: Services Are FREE for Young Children.

Under federal law, all children birth to age 5 with developmental delays or disabilities are entitled to free evaluations and services. You do NOT need insurance. Your documentation status does NOT matter for these services.





## What to Say:

“I’m concerned about my child’s development. I’d like to request an evaluation for early intervention services.” You don’t need a diagnosis first—just your concern is enough.

## Bring an Advocate:

You can bring a friend, family member, or advocate to appointments and meetings. You don’t have to navigate this alone.


## Your Rights:

- You have the right to services in your home language
- You can disagree with evaluations and request second opinions
- You can ask for explanations in plain language
- Your child has the right to services in the “least restrictive environment”

## Where to Find Free Books & Activities:

- **Your Local Library:** \_\_\_\_\_
- **Little Free Libraries:** Small book boxes in neighborhoods—take a book, leave a book
- **WIC Offices:** Often have books and activities
- **Community Centers:** Check for free programs
- **Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library:** May be available in your area
- **LIFT Program:** Visit a participating site.

## Additional Support Resources:

- **Early Intervention Services:** Call your state’s early intervention program (birth-age 3)
  - **Child Find:** Contact your local school district for developmental screenings (ages 3-5)
  - **Parent/Caregiver Support Groups:** Ask your pediatrician or library about local groups
  - **Disability Rights Organizations:** Free advocacy and support in every state
- 

## Resources for Different Caregiving Situations:

- **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren:** Search for support groups in your area—many communities have programs specifically for grandfamilies
- **Foster Parents:** Contact your local foster care agency for resources and support groups
- **Kinship Caregivers:** Ask about kinship navigator programs that help relatives raising children
- **Guardians:** Legal aid organizations can help with custody and guardianship questions
- **Teen Parents:** Many communities offer young parent programs with childcare and education support



## You are your child's first and most important teacher.

Every word you speak, every song you sing, every moment you play—these are building your child's future.

Some days will be hard. You might be tired, stressed, or overwhelmed. That's real life. Do what you can with what you have.

Your child doesn't need perfection. They need YOU. Whether you're a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, foster parent, or guardian—whether your child is developing typically or has different learning needs—you are the expert. Trust your instincts. Seek help when you need it. Celebrate every small victory.

Keep talking, reading, singing, writing, and playing. You're changing your child's life, one moment at a time.

### Questions?

Visit a participating site.

[info@librarieswithoutborders.us](mailto:info@librarieswithoutborders.us)

