Never too early for stories

Baby's won’t recognise the words or even what the pictures are – but don’t worry, they soon will. **BY JENNA PRICE**

Meghan Markle has been reading to Archie since he was born, if experts in children’s literacy are any judge.

So that puts paid to this lot of Markle’s critics. There she was last week, sparky Archie sitting on mum’s lap to celebrate his first birthday. While Harry videoed, Meghan read their son *Duck! Rabbit!* – check out Wittgenstein to see what this is really about – to promote Save The Children’s ‘Save With Stories’ campaign, which supports children during the pandemic.

Some described Meghan as attention-seeking and unmaternal and the whole reading-to-Archie event as phoney. But experts in literacy say it’s never too soon to start reading to babies. Babies won’t recognise the words or even what the pictures are – but they soon will.

University of Sydney Professor Emerita Robyn Ewing specialises in early language and literacy and says we should start reading to newborns even though they won’t understand what we say.

“It starts right from birth. It’s about creating a language-rich environment which includes all sorts of talking, language play, sharing stories, reading stories, having conversations,” she says.

“Babies recognise parents’ voices even in utero.” And the quality of the books matter, says Ewing, who for 40 years has researched in this area. Read babies books that make sense and are enjoyable to read.

“It’s important that there’s joy in it for you,” she says. “We have so many absolutely fantastic picture books these days.”

When parents ask Gleebooks bookseller David Gaunt what books they should buy for their babies or grandbabies, he has the answers.

This year, it’s Bronwyn Bancroft’s *An Australian 123 of Animals* published in 2007 and already a classic. Anything by Alison Lester (*Clive Eats Alligators, Rosie Sips Spiders, Magic Beach*), Peepo or *The Baby’s Catalogue* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg; and Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

He begs new parents to go for board books first because any loved book will end up chewed at the corners.

Ewing encouraged her first husband to love reading and that set an example to their children.

She’s still at it. During isolation, she’s reading to her five-year-old grandson every day, by Zoom.

That technology wasn’t necessary when businesswoman and non-executive director Marina Go read to her two sons.

“I found that it relaxed them and they seemed to be listening. Eventually that passive listening became active listening and then actively suggesting stories. My sons liked me to read their favourite books over and over again,” says Go.

Australian Children’s Laureate for the next two years and legendary children’s author Ursula Dubosarsky is thrilled Meghan Markle is reading to Archie.

“Meghan’s a fabulous example. Everyone should be reading to babies,” Dubosarsky says.

“You may not read every word and the baby may not pay attention all the time. But it’s the parent or the grandparent with the baby, slowly exploring, turning the pages. It’s a long process of accumulation.”
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The Duchess of Sussex reading *Duck! Rabbit!* to son Archie. Photo: AP