

Fun, sun and good books: Experts say summer reading keeps skills strong

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To children, the summer slide means water, garden hoses and slippery plastic sheets. To teachers, the "summer slide" is the noted decrease in reading skills after a vacation without books.

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, faculty members Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen have completed a three-year study showing a significantly higher level of reading achievement in students who received books for summer reading at home. Allington and McGill-Franzen are both professors of education; McGill-Franzen is also director of the Reading Center in the College of Education, Health and Human Sciences.

Allington compares the slide in [reading ability](#) to an athlete's fitness. "Just like hockey players lose some of their skills if they stay off their skates and off the ice for three months, children who do not read in the summer lose two to three months of reading development," Allington said.

According to the professors' research, the summer reading setback is the primary reason for the reading [achievement gap](#) between children who have access to reading materials at home and those who do not. Students who do not have books at home miss out on opportunities to read. Those missed opportunities can really add up.

"What we know is that children who do not read in the summer lose two to three months of reading development while kids who do read tend to

gain a month of reading proficiency," Allington said. "This creates a three to four month gap every year. Every two or three years the kids who don't read in the summer fall a year behind the kids who do."

In designing their study, Allington and McGill-Franzen set up three important differences from previous studies on the summer slide. First, while other experiments lasted one year, their study ran three years from 2001 to 2004. McGill-Franzen said their study was designed to cover three summers because previous researchers had demonstrated that a single summer school session did not boost achievement.

Second, earlier studies had given the students pre-determined books, but in the Allington and McGill-Franzen study, students chose their books. Pop-culture books were the favorites, featuring musicians, athletes and television and movie characters.

"Research has demonstrated that choice makes a very important contribution to achievement," said McGill-Franzen.

The third difference was the grade levels. McGill-Franzen and Allington targeted younger students, who were in first and second grades at the beginning of the study. Previous studies were done on students completing third through sixth grades. The researchers randomly selected 852 children to receive books and 478 students to be in the control group.

The researchers' study found that summer reading is just as effective, if not more so, as summer school. McGill-Franzen and Allington compared their outcomes with studies on the impacts and costs of summer school attendance and found the summer reading program effect equal or even greater.

"We found our intervention was less expensive and less extensive than

either providing summer school or engaging in comprehensive school reform," Allington said. "The effect was equal to the effect of summer school. Spending roughly \$40 to \$50 a year on free books for each child began to alleviate the achievement gap that occurs in the summer."

To get books into the hands of all children for summer reading, Allington and McGill-Franzen suggest keeping school libraries open during the [summer](#) break, sending books home with the [students](#); and building on children's prior knowledge by providing books on pop culture and local animals and habitats.

The researchers' study will be published in the fall issue of *Reading Psychology*.

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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