

Does reading achievement spur independent reading, or vice versa?

October 26 2011

Reading achievement at age 10 influences how much independent reading children do at age 11. However, independent reading doesn't directly improve children's achievement in reading, at least among children at the end of elementary school. In addition, individual differences in independent reading among 11-year-olds partly reflect genetic influences on reading achievement at age 10.

Those are the findings of a new [longitudinal study](#) that sought to answer the question: Does [reading achievement](#) lead to independent reading or does reading on your own boost reading achievement? Or are there relationships between the two that go in both directions?

The study appears in the journal *Child Development*. It was conducted by researchers at the Ohio State University, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Case Western Reserve University, and the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.

Educators have long emphasized the importance of independent reading for fun or leisure, assuming that getting kids to read more on their own will lead to improvements in their reading scores. However, although such independent reading is linked to reading achievement, it's been unclear whether reading for fun leads to increased reading achievement, or whether children who are better at reading simply read more.

To better understand what causes what and also to determine what role genetics play, researchers in this study looked at reading achievement

and independent reading in 436 pairs of identical and same-sex nonidentical twins at age 10 and again a year later at 11.

Reading achievement was assessed using standard measures of word recognition (recognizing single words) and reading comprehension. Independent reading was assessed by asking each twin questions about his or her motivation to read. Parents estimated how often their children read for pleasure.

The study found that children's reading achievement at age 10 predicted their independent reading at 11, regardless of how much independent reading they were doing at 10, suggesting that reading achievement influenced later independent reading.

The reverse was not true. After accounting for reading achievement at age 10, independent reading at 10 didn't predict reading achievement at 11.

The study also found that that individual differences in reading achievement at both ages were partly due to genetic factors, and that genetic influences on reading achievement at age 10 partly contributed to individual differences in independent reading at [age 11](#). This finding is consistent with the notion of genetic niche-picking: Children may actively select experiences based on their genetic predispositions or children's genetically influenced characteristics may evoke certain responses from others. For example, children with a high genetic proclivity for reading may seek out opportunities to read at home, and their parents may take them to the library on a more regular basis. Conversely, children at high genetic risk for reading difficulties may avoid reading and be less interested in visiting the library.

"Overall, our results indicate that children look for independent reading opportunities, in part, on the basis of genetic effects related to reading

achievement, at least among children at the end of elementary school," notes Nicole Harlaar, senior research associate at the University of Colorado, Boulder, who led the study when she was with the Ohio State University.

"Our findings don't diminish the importance of encouraging independent reading among children," Harlaar adds. "Other aspects of independent reading that this study didn't look at may be very important for children's reading achievement, such as volume of reading or whether or not the books that [children](#) read are sufficiently challenging."

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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