

Preschoolers' reading skills benefit from one modest change by teachers

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A small change in how teachers and parents read aloud to preschoolers may provide a big boost to their reading skills later on, a new study found.

That small change involves making specific references to print in books while reading to children – such as pointing out letters and words on the pages, showing capital letters, and showing how you read from left to right and top to bottom on the page.

Preschool children whose [teachers](#) used print references during storybook reading showed more advanced reading skills one and even two years later when compared to children whose teachers did not use such references. This is the first study to show causal links between referencing print and later literacy achievement.

"Using print references during reading was just a slight tweak to what teachers were already doing in the classroom, but it led to a sizeable improvement in reading for kids," said Shayne Piasta, co-author of the study and assistant professor of teaching and learning at Ohio State University.

"This would be a very manageable change for most preschool teachers, who already are doing storybook reading in class."

Piasta conducted the study with lead investigator Laura Justice, professor of teaching and learning at Ohio State, as well as co-investigators Anita

McGinty of the University of Virginia and Joan Kaderavek of the University of Toledo. Their results appear in the April 2012 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The study is part of Project STAR (Sit Together And Read), a randomized clinical trial based at Ohio State to test the short- and long-term impacts associated with reading regularly to preschool children in the classroom.

The study involved more than 300 children in 85 classrooms who participated in a 30-week shared reading program. As a group, the children came from low-income homes, started with below-average language skills and were at substantial risk for later reading difficulties.

The children were separated into three groups: high-dose STAR (four reading sessions per week), low-dose STAR (two reading sessions per week) and a third comparison group who also had four reading sessions per week. All teachers in the three groups read the same 30 books to their students.

Teachers in the two STAR groups were trained to make specific print references while reading the books. Teachers in the comparison group were told to read as they normally would, and were not prompted to make print references.

Results showed that both one and even two years later, preschoolers in the high-dose STAR classrooms had higher word reading, spelling and comprehension skills than did children in the comparison group. The benefits were not as clear for those in the low-dose STAR classrooms, although they did seem to have slightly better skills than those children in the comparison classrooms.

Piasta said it was particularly notable that students in the high-dose

STAR classrooms scored higher on tests of reading comprehension.

"If you're getting kids to pay attention to letters and words, it makes sense that they will do better at word recognition and spelling," she said.

"But the fact that they also did better at understanding the passages they read is really exciting. That suggests this intervention may help them become better readers."

How do print references help preschoolers become better readers? Piasta said research suggests it helps children learn the code of letters and how they relate to words and to meaning.

"By showing them what a letter is and what a letter means, and what a word is and what a word means, we're helping them to crack the code of language and understand how to read," she said.

While this study shows the value of using print references with preschoolers, research suggests very few teachers and parents do this systematically, according to Piasta.

An earlier study by Justice and her colleagues showed that untrained teachers reference print about 8.5 times per reading session – compared to up to 36 times for those who were trained.

Parents are even less likely to make print references while reading to their [children](#). One study suggests that [parents](#) use such references only about once during a typical 10-minute reading session.

"One of the best things about the power of print referencing is how easy it would be to implement during shared reading in the classroom," Piasta said.

"Compared to a lot of interventions, this only requires a small adjustment to teachers' typical reading style. But it pays large dividends in [reading skills](#)."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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