

Preschoolers' story comprehension similar for print and digital books

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The content of a children's book—not its form as a print book or a digital book—predicts how well children understand a story, finds a new study by NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

The findings, presented on May 1 at the American Educational Research Association's annual meeting in San Antonio, suggest that both digital stories and reading storybooks in person present opportunities for learning vocabulary and [comprehension](#).

Given the rich language in [books](#), reading aloud storybooks is an important activity for engaging children and developing their early literacy skills.

It has been less than clear what role digital storybooks—which have grown in popularity in recent years—play in this learning. Earlier research suggests that digitized stories and videos can provide a context for engaging children in vocabulary and comprehension learning activities, as they can bring stories to life through sound, action, and multimedia supports like defining tricky words.

"Although nothing can replace the interactivity that comes from a live read aloud experience between an adult and child, there are certain features in video that might enhance word learning, especially for children with limited vocabulary," said Susan B. Neuman, professor of childhood and literacy education at NYU Steinhardt and the study's

coauthor.

However, there has been increasing concern regarding children's ability to comprehend stories in this form. Research has found that children learn better through interactions with a live person than with video presentations. This learning difference, demonstrated in numerous studies with infants and toddlers, has been coined the "video deficit."

In the face of overwhelming evidence on the "video deficit," screen time has been discouraged among infants and toddlers. Nevertheless, children still engage with televisions, tablets, and phones. A 2013 study found that in a typical day, 83 percent of children ages six months to six years use some form of screen media.

Is the "video deficit" still present as children grow into preschoolers? The current study, funded by Amazon, examined children's [word learning](#) and comprehension from stories read aloud and in digital form. It sought to determine whether there are differences in children's vocabulary and comprehension, as well as their interest in stories, depending on the medium.

The researchers engaged 38 preschool children ages 3 to 4 years in listening to four storybooks: two in digital form and two print books read aloud. The digital stories came from Speakaboos, a digital library of interactive stories targeted to preschoolers and kindergartners. Each story had animated pages that turned, characters that moved with the action of the story, and text that lit up during the narration. The researchers carefully adapted the four digital stories into printed books that were read aloud by an adult.

The children heard all four stories, but were randomly assigned to hear and watch two on a tablet, while two were read aloud by an adult. Following each story, children completed tasks measuring their story

comprehension, vocabulary, and motivation for reading across media formats.

To measure comprehension, the children were asked to name story elements like the setting, characters, event, plot or theme, and the story's resolution. They were also asked to sequence the story by putting the events in the correct order.

The researchers found no significant differences across medium. Children comprehended equally well regardless of whether the story was read aloud or in digital form. Similarly, there were no differences in motivation to read and learn.

"What was most striking in our findings were the similarities, not the contrasts, in children's responses to the medium of instruction," said Kevin M. Wong, a doctoral student in the Department of Teaching and Learning at NYU Steinhart and the study's coauthor.

There were, however, differences in comprehension across stories, with children having more limited understanding of certain stories than others. This suggests that neither medium was able to bolster children's comprehension when the story was perceived to be difficult or not motivating, and it is the content of the book rather than its form that influenced [story](#) comprehension.

Therefore, the "video deficit"—while present with very young children - may no longer be a stumbling block to comprehension for children in the preschool years.

"It's possible that when it comes to books, we have overestimated the means of delivery and have underestimated the importance of the content conveyed in the media. Although certainly not a substitute for parent-child interactive reading, digital stories from quality media

sources may represent an important source of learning for young [children](#)," Neuman said.

Provided by New York University

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