

# Oral storytelling skills impact reading differently for African American boys and girls

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A number of factors foster strong storytelling skills among young African American preschoolers, which has implications for their development as readers. Credit: Courtesy of UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.

The oral storytelling skills of African American preschoolers make a difference in how quickly their reading skills develop, according to a new study from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Researchers say the effect is much different for girls and boys.

"Knowing how to tell a clear and coherent story is an important skill for helping young children to develop strong reading skills, which, in turn, can help them to be successful across a number of different subjects in school," said FPG advanced research scientist Nicole Gardner-Neblett. "Prior research suggests that historical and cultural factors foster strong [storytelling](#) skills among African American children, which has implications for their development as readers."

Two years ago, Gardner-Neblett's own research was the first to demonstrate the connection between African American preschoolers' storytelling abilities and their early [reading skills](#) in kindergarten. That study found a link between storytelling and reading only for the African American children, from households across income levels, but not for any other demographic group.

Stark differences in reading achievement exist between Black and White elementary schoolchildren, as does a gender gap in reading outcomes, with [girls](#) outperforming boys. Because of both disparities in achievement, Gardner-Neblett and FPG advanced research scientist John Sideris wanted to better understand if and how gender plays a role in the link between African American children's storytelling skills and reading development.

"We asked preschoolers to tell a story from a wordless picture book and analyzed their skill in structuring and organizing the story," Gardner-Neblett explained. "We examined how boys' and girls' storytelling skills as preschoolers predicted their scores on a reading achievement test for

each grade, from first through sixth."

According to Sideris, the connection between children's storytelling skills and reading achievement is more complex than expected.

"We found that oral storytelling is linked to different trajectories for boys and girls," he said. "Boys' storytelling skills had an effect on how quickly their reading scores increased from first through sixth grade. The stronger the boys' storytelling skills as preschoolers, the faster their reading scores increased over time."

Gardner-Neblett explained that preschool girls told more coherent and organized stories than boys did.

"Girls' storytelling skills appeared most important for their reading achievement during the first years of school," she added. "In contrast to the boys, storytelling skills were less important over time for the girls and unrelated to how fast their [reading scores](#) increased."

According to Gardner-Neblett, a number of studies have looked at factors that account for low [reading achievement](#), but researchers have not paid as much attention to investigating competencies that are associated with successful reading outcomes among African American children. However, she said, this study suggests that educators and parents could capitalize on a cultural strength to support reading development by promoting storytelling skills among African American girls and boys.

"Expanding skills for nurturing children's reading development beyond book reading to include oral storytelling could be crucial for African American children," she said. "This could help to provide a strong foundation for success—and not only for how well boys and girls do in school, but in life."

**More information:** Nicole Gardner-Neblett et al, Different Tales: The Role of Gender in the Oral Narrative-Reading Link Among African American Children, *Child Development* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12803](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12803)

Provided by Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

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