

Children who read books daily score higher in school tests, vast new study states

February 28 2020



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What children choose to read outside school directly influences their academic performance, according to a major new study led by the University of Malaga and UCL, and published in the peer-reviewed

journal *Oxford Review of Education*.

Using longitudinal census data to look at more than 43,000 students, aged 10 to 11 and then again when they were 13 to 14, the research provides substantial evidence that pupils who enjoy reading high-quality [books](#) daily score higher in tests.

The average marks of pupils who read books rose by 0.22 points overall, which is the [equivalent](#) of 3 months' worth of additional secondary school academic growth.

The study demonstrated no similar advantage for [children](#)'s reading daily newspapers, comics or magazines, and only marginal benefits from short stories.

The findings have important implications for parents, teachers and policymakers, and the international research team is recommending that young people devote their reading time solely to books.

"Although three months' worth of progress may sound comparatively small to some people, it equates to more than 10% of the three academic secondary school years measured—from when these young people are aged 11 years old to 14, which we know is a hugely developmental period," explains co-author Professor John Jerrim, from the UCL.

"In an increasingly digital world, it's important that young people are encouraged to find time to read a good book.

"Other less complex and less engaging forms of reading are unlikely to bring the same benefits for their cognitive development, and shouldn't be counted as part of their reading time.

"This is particularly important for low-achievers, where any association

is likely to be strongest."

Lead researcher Luis Alejandro Lopez-Agudo, from the University of Malaga, added: "Reading is a fundamental skill that plays a key part in all our lives.

"Our results provide further evidence that it's not only whether [young people](#) read or not that matters—but also what they read."

The amount of time children spend reading is already understood to help develop their literacy skills. This ability increases through practice and by trying longer and more challenging texts.

Few studies though have focused on whether the type of material children choose influences their achievements at school.

This study, looking at pupils in Spain, attempted to establish whether a link exists between literacy and mathematics scores and the type of material children look at in their spare time, as well as how long they spend doing this. Comics, short stories, books, newspapers and magazines were the texts included in the research.

The researchers used data from a census carried out by the Andalusian Agency of Education Assessment. This included questionnaire responses completed during 2008 to 2009 by 10 to 11-year-olds, and from those aged 13 to 14 during 2011 and 2012.

Children's attitudes towards school were considered along with prior achievement levels. Parents were also asked about their own reading habits and how involved they were in their child's education.

The results showed the more frequently children read books, the better they performed in school tests as teenagers. The same effect was not

observed with comics, newspapers and magazines. Specifically, researchers found:

- 13 to 14-year-olds who read books every or almost every day scored 0.22 standard deviations higher (the equivalent of three months) on the literacy test than those who read books almost never.
- There is evidence of positive spill-overs into other subjects, with a difference of around 0.20 standard deviations in mathematics.
- There was some benefit from short stories for children who enjoyed them at least once a month. The researchers concluded though that increasing the frequency of this to weekly or daily was unlikely to bring any further benefits.

The study also highlighted the reading patterns across different groups of children. It showed:

- Girls seem to read short stories, books and newspapers more frequently than boys, while the opposite holds true for comics and magazines.
- Young people from advantaged backgrounds read all the text types more frequently than those from disadvantaged homes.
- High-achieving students (according to their 5th grade test scores) were more likely to read tales/short novels and books compared to low-achieving students, though with little difference in terms of reading comics, newspapers and magazines.

The findings of this study should be interpreted in the context of some limitations and the need for further research. These include the research being carried out in one particular region within Spain, and the focus upon academic progress made during the early teenage years. At this point, reading skills are already quite well-developed—there is no data for younger children.

More information: *Oxford Review of Education*,
www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131801.2020.1723516

Provided by Taylor & Francis

Citation: Children who read books daily score higher in school tests, vast new study states (2020, February 28) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-02-children-daily-score-higher-school.html>

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