

Reading aloud to your kids might make them smarter

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Reading to little ones builds bonds with their caregivers and boosts their

language and literacy skills, but story time also benefits older kids, a new study reports.

Reading to 6- to 12-year-olds for an hour a day in school can boost their intelligence, Italian researchers report.

"Does it work? Yes, we found some compelling evidence that it does," said researcher Emanuele Castano during a recent news briefing about the new findings. He's a professor of psychology and [cognitive science](#) at the University of Trento.

The experiment was conducted in 32 Italian elementary schools, where children typically have about six hours of lessons in an eight-hour school day, Castano said.

In the interventional group, the teacher read age-appropriate fiction aloud to students for an hour a day. The control group continued their regular activities. In all, the study included 626 children.

At the outset and again after four months, kids' were tested with two standard measures: The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV) and the Cognitive Assessment System Scale (CAS2).

WISC-IV measures what kids know—vocabulary, comprehension, similarities, information and word reasoning. CAS2 tests "thinking skills," such as attention and processing.

While the [control group](#) did show gains on both tests, that would be expected in [normal development](#), Castano said. In comparison, the kids who were read to an hour a day showed a "markedly stronger increase on measures of intelligence, tapping both knowing things and thinking skills," according to the study.

"The improvement emerges on every single subscale on both measures," Castano said.

The trial builds on a decade-long effort by a University of Perugia research group, according to the study. That work has also investigated the effects of reading aloud to elderly people and to children up to age 12.

The studies have prompted officials in Tuscany, one of Italy's 20 administrative regions, to adopt an hour a day of reading aloud in public schools, the researchers said.

Castano called the program transformative.

"Once you train teachers, you can have a long-term impact. You can have a long-term impact on the children, on the school. It is easily scalable," he said. "As previous research has shown, reading fiction—and particularly high-quality literary fiction—can have other benefits for children, such as the development of their social emotional skills."

An overview of the study was presented Friday at a virtual news briefing held as part of an Association for Psychological Science meeting. Findings presented at meetings are considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, an American Academy of Pediatrics spokesman, reacted to the preliminary findings.

"There is overwhelming evidence that reading to your child, with your child, every day for even a short period of time is incredibly beneficial to them, and probably also to the grown-up in different ways," said Navsaria. He is an associate professor of pediatrics, human development

and [family studies](#) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Because the full study was not yet available, Navsaria could not speak to the reported intelligence boost. But he pointed to [many other benefits children receive when someone reads to them](#).

Their vocabularies tend to be larger. They are more familiar with books and how books work. They also have broader knowledge about the world around them, he said.

"The key driver is actually not so much just the book itself, so no one should think, well, we just need to throw more books at children. The key driver is actually the parent or caregiver interaction," Navsaria said.

When an adult shares a book with a toddler, for example, [the experience](#) has to be more interactive to hold their interest, he pointed out.

"You find that there's all these opportunities for interaction with that adult, that back and forth dance almost, the conversation, the pointing at things, the listening, talking about stories, all those things that the book helps scaffold that is actually the key driver of development," Navsaria said.

Some kids who are old enough to read do also struggle with decoding text, even if they've been read to from an earlier age, he noted. Decoding is the process of translating printed words into speech. Those kids may shy away from reading because it is so much work, Navsaria said.

"Reading aloud, much like audiobooks in some ways, takes away the work of the visual decoding of text and allows them to still enjoy the language, the narrative, the vocabulary, all the elements of things, wonderful things that books bring us, but they do it while taking away that decoding part that, again, for some children is hard," he explained.

Reading to [children](#) can benefit them at all ages, according to [Reach Out and Read](#), a group that Navsaria is involved with. Some families may feel that once their child reads fluently, about third grade, they no longer need to be read to aloud.

"Remember that, again, even for a fluent reader, decoding text takes brain power and the joy of sitting and being [read](#) aloud to even if you're a fluent reader can be notable," Navsaria said.

More information: The American Academy of Pediatrics has [tips on helping your child enjoy reading aloud](#).

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