

Kids who read for pleasure grow into better-adjusted teens: study

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Young children may be fascinated by electronic devices, but a new study

suggests that old-fashioned reading may help them grow into better adjusted middle schoolers.

The study, of more than 10,000 U.S. "tweens," found that those who'd begun reading for fun early in childhood tended to be faring better in several ways: They scored higher on tests of skills like memory and speech development; had fewer behavioral problems and depression symptoms, and showed an edge in certain measures of brain structure.

The findings, published June 28 in the journal [Psychological Medicine](#), cannot prove that early reading deserves all the credit.

It's difficult to disentangle the effects of kids' reading from the other things going on in their lives—including their relationship with their parents and their [school environment](#), said Caitlin Canfield, a developmental psychologist at NYU Grossman School of Medicine in New York City.

"But this does at least show an association," said Canfield, who was not involved in the study. And since it's certainly good to encourage kids to read, she added, the findings may offer more reason to do that.

There's also reason to believe that reading for pleasure can, in fact, bring the benefits seen in the study.

Other research, Canfield said, has shown that children's reading is related not only to [higher test scores](#), but also less obvious benefits—like less loneliness and higher self-esteem.

And old-school print materials may be even better than e-books, she noted: There's evidence that children "transfer more knowledge" when they read [print books](#), and simply enjoy reading more.

Research shows that parents often prefer old-fashioned books, too—saying the experience of reading with their kids is better that way, Canfield said.

An interesting part of the new study, she said, is that the researchers not only had test results and parents' reports, but brain imaging data. And they found that differences in kids' brain structure seemed to explain part of the link between early reading and better test scores and mental well-being.

The findings are based on more than 10,000 U.S. kids, ages 9 to 13, who were part of a long-term study of brain development and [child health](#). Parents were asked about their child's daily activities, including reading for pleasure—estimating the age at which they started, and how many hours they currently devoted to it.

Just over half of the kids were considered "early" readers: They'd been reading for pleasure for anywhere from three to 10 years. The rest—48%—either did not read for fun, or had only begun in the past couple years.

Overall, the study found, early readers scored higher on standard tests of memory, speech and the ability to process verbal information. They also had fewer behavioral problems, like aggression, and fewer signs of depression, based on parents' reports.

When the researchers looked at the kids' MRI brain scans, they saw some signs that tied everything together: Generally, early readers showed more tissue volume in brain areas involved in reading-related processes, as well as attention and behavior. And those differences seemed to partly explain the benefits linked to kids' early reading.

It all suggests that while children may find reading fun, it's more than

that, according to study co-author Barbara Sahakian, a professor at the University of Cambridge in the U.K.

"Reading isn't just a pleasurable experience—it's widely accepted that it inspires thinking and creativity, increases empathy and reduces stress," Sahakian said in a university news release. "But on top of this, we found significant evidence that it's linked to important developmental factors in children, improving their cognition, mental health and brain structure, which are cornerstones for future learning and well-being."

Early readers in the study did show other important patterns: They spent less time staring at screens, including TVs, tablets and phones, and they got more sleep than their peers.

Those habits may also help explain the kids' higher test scores and better mental well-being, according to Canfield.

But, she said, "I do think there's something special about reading."

And in a world filled with devices, Canfield said that parents can still inspire [young children](#) to read.

"I always encourage parents to let their children lead the way—choosing the books, letting them turn the pages," she said.

And as kids grow older, Canfield said, it's OK to let them read comic books or graphic novels.

"It doesn't have to be great literature," she said. "It can be any reading that sparks their interest."

More information: Yun-Jun Sun et al, Early-initiated childhood reading for pleasure: associations with better cognitive performance,

mental well-being and brain structure in young adolescence,
Psychological Medicine (2023). [DOI: 10.1017/S0033291723001381](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291723001381)

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