

# Deepen your empathy by reading more and reading more often, linguist says

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Reading stories regularly strengthens social-cognitive skills—such as empathy—in both children and adults. And this, in turn, ensures that we can empathize with characters more effectively and more quickly when

we are reading. This is the subject of linguist Lynn Eekhof's Ph.D., which she will receive at Radboud University on 15 January. "I think we need to capitalize more on the wonder of what stories do, rather than merely seeing reading as a practical skill."

Whether you are having a conversation with someone or reading a book or a report in the newspaper: In all of these cases, you will need to be able to empathize with the other person in order to understand what they are thinking and feeling. The skills that we use when empathizing with others are called social-cognitive skills, and these include empathy and "reading" other people's thoughts. "Although stories tend to involve people who are not real or whom you cannot see, we assume that people use the same skills to understand these people," says linguist Eekhof.

For the purpose of investigating the connection between reading stories and social-cognitive skills, Eekhof had hundreds of subjects read a variety of stories to see how they read these stories and how this correlated with their social-cognitive skills. During her investigation, she also used an eye-movement camera, "This showed that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between [social cognition](#) and stories. Because we use our social-cognitive skills to understand stories, these skills get better and better with regular reading. And this, in turn, ensures that we're able to empathize with characters more effectively and more quickly when we're reading."

But according to an earlier finding that circulated in the media for some time but now seems to have been disproved, reading just one [story](#) is not the solution to a lack of empathy. Eekhof's results even showed that reading just one story may actually have a slightly debilitating effect on our social-cognitive abilities. This seems contradictory, but Eekhof compares this to [strength training](#).

"In the same way that doing ten push-ups temporarily fatigues our arm

muscles, reading one story temporarily exhausts our social-cognitive 'muscles.' In the long term, however, doing a set of push-ups on a daily or weekly basis will have a positive effect on our muscles. In much the same way, extensive and regular reading of stories also has a reinforcing effect on social cognition."

The impact of reading is likely to be the greatest in children, because they still have the most scope for developing their social-cognitive skills. A sustained and regular reading habit is therefore vital, says Eekhof. "My research consequently emphasizes once again how important it is to get children to read." She is referring here to the recent news that reading [skills](#) in Dutch youngsters have declined even further, and that in 2022 they even dropped below the international average.

Eekhof says, "I think we need to capitalize more on the wonder of what stories do, rather than merely seeing reading as a practical skill on which you are tested. It is SO important to develop a love of reading. And this can be done, for example, by taking pleasure in the access that reading gives you to other people's lives and thoughts, whether it's through a Donald Duck comic or through well-known literature."

Provided by Radboud University

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