

9 out of 10 kids are not developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy—study of 8 African countries

April 10 2024, by Pearl S. Kyei



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Children develop an enormous amount [during their early years](#)—socially, physically, emotionally and cognitively. What happens between the ages of 0 and 8 years can predict important long-term outcomes: for example, how a child [will fare at school](#); what [their health will be like](#) and their [future earning potential](#).

Children in sub-Saharan Africa have the highest risk globally of [experiencing delays in their development](#). There are several reasons for this, among them a lack of stimulation. Too many parents and caregivers are not reading to, playing with or encouraging their young children to learn, or providing learning aids such as books and toys. This may explain why the region has the lowest proportion of children who are [developmentally on track](#) when it comes [to literacy and numeracy](#).

I am a demographer with an interest in how and when children in sub-Saharan Africa develop literacy. Recently, I set out with a colleague to assess how children in eight west African and central African countries were faring in this regard. The countries were the Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Togo.

[Our findings are cause for concern](#). Only about [one in every 10 children](#) (11.9%) in our sample were developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy. We also looked at whether the children had spent any cognitively stimulating time in the previous three days with their parents or caregivers. Our focus here was on three activities that stimulate [brain development](#): reading books or looking at [picture books](#); telling stories; or naming, counting or drawing things. [Less than half](#) of the children in the sample had done so.

For all three activities, children who were developmentally on track were

more likely than other children to have interacted with a [caregiver](#).

Our findings are an important reminder of just how much children benefit from regular, cognitively stimulating interactions with their caregivers. This is true even and perhaps especially in low-income settings such as [west and central Africa](#). And it does not require a lot of money: households that cannot afford toys and books can still invest time in stimulating activities.

The data

The children in our study were three and four years old (some were just about to turn five). The sample was 35,752 children across the eight countries. The data was collected between 2017 and 2021 by the [Multiple International Cluster Surveys](#) (MICS). This global program collects nationally representative data on maternal and [child health](#) using household surveys. It collects a range of information on children including development, nutrition and caregiving practices.

The [MICS Early Childhood Development Index classifies](#) children of this age as being developmentally on track in literacy-numeracy if they can do at least two out of the following:

- identify or name at least 10 letters of the alphabet
- read at least four simple, popular words in any language
- know the name and recognize the symbol of all numbers from 1 to 10.

Early childhood literacy [influences](#) later [reading comprehension and academic achievement](#). That makes it especially important to study in a sub-region where [an estimated 89%](#) cannot read and understand a simple text by the time they are 10 years old.

Children in our study who were engaged in reading books, telling stories, naming, counting or drawing by a household member 15 years and older were far more likely than their peers to be developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy.

The major takeaway from our study is that cognitively stimulating activities with caregivers matter.

What should be done

These findings echo a large global body of [evidence](#) that [highlights](#) how important early cognitive stimulation is for children.

Caregivers must be taught how important it is to regularly engage [young children](#) in these activities. They need information and guidance.

This is particularly important for caregivers without formal education. They should be encouraged to engage the child in activities that do not require literacy and numeracy skills, such as telling stories, naming and drawing. They can also be guided on how older, school-going siblings or other relatives can be drawn into activities like reading and counting.

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