



U.S.

Study Finds Reading to Children of All Ages Grooms Them to Read More on Their Own

By MOTOKO RICH JAN. 8, 2015

Cue the hand-wringing about digital distraction: Fewer children are reading books frequently for fun, according to a new report released Thursday by Scholastic, the children's book publisher.

In a 2014 survey of just over 1,000 children ages 6 to 17, only 31 percent said they read a book for fun almost daily, down from 37 percent four years ago.

There were some consistent patterns among the heavier readers: For the younger children — ages 6 to 11 — being read aloud to regularly and having restricted online time were correlated with frequent reading; for the older children — ages 12 to 17 — one of the largest predictors was whether they had time to read on their own during the school day.

The finding about reading aloud to children long after toddlerhood may come as a surprise to some parents who read books to children at bedtime when they were very young but then tapered off. Last summer, the American Academy of Pediatrics announced a new policy recommending that all parents read to their children from birth.

“A lot of parents assume that once kids begin to read independently, that now that is the best thing for them to do,” said Maggie McGuire, the vice president for a website for parents operated by Scholastic.

But reading aloud through elementary school seemed to be connected to a love of reading generally. According to the report, 41 percent of frequent readers ages 6 to 10 were read aloud to at home, while only 13 percent of infrequent readers were being read to.

Scholastic, which operates book fairs in schools and publishes popular children's books including the Harry Potter and Captain Underpants series, has been

commissioning the “Kids and Family Reading Report” since 2006. For the first time this year, the report, conducted by YouGov, a market research firm, looked at predictors that children of different ages would be frequent readers, defined as children who read books for fun five or more days a week.

Kristen Harmeling, a partner at YouGov who worked on the report, said that children in the survey frequently cited reading aloud as a special bonding time with their parents. As children age, “I don’t think that parents know how important that time and the role that it plays in children’s lives,” she said.

Of course, children who love to read are generally immersed in households with lots of books and parents who like to read. So while parents who read to their children later in elementary school may encourage those children to become frequent readers on their own, such behavior can also result from “a whole constellation of other things that goes on in those families,” said Timothy Shanahan, professor emeritus of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a past president of the International Reading Association.

There is not yet strong research that connects reading aloud at older ages to improved reading comprehension. But some literacy experts said that when parents or teachers read aloud to children even after they can read themselves, the children can hear more complex words or stories than they might tackle themselves.

“It’s this idea of marinating children in higher-level vocabulary,” said Pam Allyn, founder of LitWorld.Org, a nonprofit group that works to increase literacy among young people. “The read-aloud can really lift the child.”

Other literacy experts say the real value of reading to children is helping to develop background knowledge in all kinds of topics as well as exposure to sophisticated language.

“It wouldn’t have to be reading” to accomplish that, said Catherine Snow, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “A two-minute conversation about something on television or something in a magazine or something that you’re reading yourself can also have some of the same positive effects as reading aloud.”

Although the Scholastic report found that teenagers were more likely to read frequently for fun if they had dedicated independent reading time in school, only 17 percent of all children surveyed reported having time to read a book of their choice at school daily. Just 10 percent of 12- to 14-year-olds and 4 percent of 15- to 17-year-olds reported having that time in class. Such reading time at school may be

particularly important for low-income children, who reported that they were more likely to read for fun at school than at home.

While previous studies have shown little connection between independent reading time at school and better reading habits or comprehension, some large school districts, including Boston and Chicago, encourage teachers to include time in the day for students to pick books and read.

Parents also see a connection. Emily Skelding, a mother of four in New Orleans and a former middle school teacher, said that her eldest son, Sumner, 15, used to devour books as a child. But now that he has no time at school to read on his own — or perhaps more significant, to choose the books he wants to read — “he stopped reading for pleasure,” Ms. Skelding said.

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