

Policy Brief

APRIL 2017

Benefits of Repeated Readings with EYFS Children.



Executive Summary

An early interest in books and reading is directly related to a child's life chances—affecting later academic performance, employability, juvenile criminal activity and health. This brief summarises scientific evidence^{1,2,3} on how we can get the most out of reading to young children and provides information from a related community initiative that included children from 71 childcare settings. This brief will be of interest both to policymakers and EYFS keyworkers or teachers looking for feasible and cost-effective methods to improve educational outcomes as well as *anyone* who reads to a child (parents, grandparents, child-minders, librarians, etc).

Key Recommendations

- Policy makers should recommend repeated readings of storybooks for EYFS children.
- Practitioners should encourage repeated readings of stories in their settings.
- Reading before naptime should be highly encouraged in childcare settings.
- Literacy charities should promote repeated readings with young children.
- Libraries ought to consider repeating stories across story times.
- Parents should read the same stories repeatedly and as part of their bedtime routine.

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This brief is the output of both research from the University of Sussex WORD Lab and the *Again!* project, an initiative run by Durham County Council's Early Years Team, that builds directly from this

research. Both have shown a dramatic impact for EYFS children when they are read the same stories again and again, including increased vocabulary and improved interest in books and concentration levels.

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BENEFITS OF REPEATED READINGS WITH EYFS CHILDREN

BACKGROUND

Children's preliteracy skills when they begin formal schooling are directly related to their later academic success, as is children's reading for pleasure. Nevertheless, the National Literacy Trust reports that up to 3.8 million UK children do not own a single book.

This is significant because there is already a knowledge gap between middle- and low-income students when they begin formal schooling. This gap continues to widen throughout their education. Introducing children to books—and a love of reading—has the potential to combat this problem.

RESEARCH ON REPEATED READING

For our first study investigating the benefit of repeated readings we created 9 illustrated children's books.¹ The stories involved day-to-day activities that would likely be familiar to EYFS children like baking cookies and shopping. The stories also included unusual objects and target pseudo-words that were not the focus of the plot. Each word was a made-up name for an unfamiliar object (for example, a 'sprock', which looked like a hand-held food mixer).

In our first study we read to 3-year-old children in their homes over the course of one week. During each visit, half of the children heard one of the stories three times and the other children heard three different stories with the same new words. When tested after a week, those who had heard just one story repeated remembered significantly more words than the children who had heard more stories.

A follow-up study has found a similar benefit in children diagnosed with developmental language disorder (formally known as specific language impairment).² Another study also found larger vocabulary gains from reading the same story repeatedly than from reading one longer story with the same number of target word exposures.⁴



Example storybook paged used in the research studies.

This demonstrates that repeatedly reading the same stories has a greater effect on learning. The first time a child hears a story everything is new: the characters, the setting, the storyline... As books are read repeatedly some information becomes more familiar allowing the child to focus on finer details—like new vocabulary.



BENEFIT OF READING BEFORE SLEEP

Another study in local nurseries showed a striking benefit when stories were read before naptime.³ This study involved 48 children, half of whom took afternoon naps, and half of whom no longer napped. Again, children were read either the same story or three different stories, but all children were exposed to the same number of target words.

We tested children's word learning 2.5hrs later, 24hrs later and one week later. Children who heard the same story before their nap performed 19% better than those who hadn't had a sleep. Children who heard different stories and did not nap after the stories never caught up with their peers on the word-learning tasks. Significantly, children who heard different stories and then did nap performed 33% better than children who did not nap after the stories.

Overall, all of the children did very well—reading is always good, at any age and any time. But, children who were learning something particularly difficult (new words from several stories) especially benefited from hearing the stories right before sleeping. Many preschool children take an afternoon nap, yet classroom naps are increasingly being curtailed and replaced due to curriculum demands. Given the growing body of evidence that sleep consolidation has a significant effect on children's learning, such policies may be doing our children a huge disservice. We should be encouraging young children to nap and should take advantage of the period right before they nap for instruction in key academic areas such as word learning and arithmetic.

BENEFITS OF REPEATED READINGS WITH EYFS CHILDREN

COMMUNITY INTERVENTION: A CASE STUDY BY DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL'S EARLY YEARS TEAM

Building on this research, Durham County Council's Early years Team (in collaboration with Seven Stories) spearheaded the *Again!* initiative, which provides books and training to staff at local children's centres and nursery settings. Thus far, the *Again!* initiative has been run over 70 times, some settings have participated 5 times. Several settings have now made repeated readings part of their permanent approach. Staff learn about the benefits of reading the same stories repeatedly and take this knowledge back to their EYFS children.

After participating in this 8-week project, many parents report their children spend more time talking about books and are more interested in reading books—which is a key predictor of later academic achievement.

“We have noticed that since starting the *Again* project to now how the children's ability to sit and listen to stories has improved. They are also more eager to become involved in the stories and many of the parents have come into nursery saying their child has been talking about a particular book.” **Shildon Early Years**

AIMS OF THE INITIATIVE

- Children will have a set of stories with which they are really familiar to use as scaffolding to support later writing development.
- Children will associate books and stories with enjoyment and will be confident with books.
- Practitioners will be confident in, and enjoy reading, stories.
- Practitioners will be able to see new ways to use books to enrich children's experiences, to provide inspiration and to plan activities.

“Reading books repeatedly was having a greater impact on the girls than the boys than the girls. Although the girls were listening to the stories, the boys play was influenced by the stories in a way I hadn't seen before.” **Oxclose Nursery School**

“The books have sparked off many other learning opportunities and projects [...] it just shows how reading for pleasure really can have a large impact on children's development and how much fun it can be.” **Wingate Community Childcare**



“Over the 8 weeks I have noticed a huge difference in children's concentration levels, especially the younger group. At the beginning of the project many of the 2-year-olds were not interested to sit down and read stories, however after the project it is noticed a lot of the children are now very interested in the books and are often observed looking at and enjoying the books. Overall, all of the children has developed brilliant concentration and listening skills...” **Happy Times Day Care**

STAFF TRAINING

Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children's Books (Newcastle Upon Tyne), consulted on book selection and delivered training on early years storytelling techniques and structures. This empowered practitioners to maximise developmental impact through engaging children with high quality picture and storybooks.

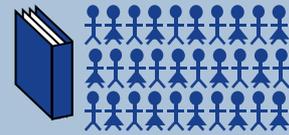
Dr Jessica Horst also visited on two different *Again!* launches to tell staff about research underlying and related to the project.

BENEFITS OF REPEATED READINGS WITH EYFS CHILDREN

Children's pre-literacy skills predict how well they will do in school and later in life. Research consistently suggests that children from lower income families are likely to have the poorest levels of literacy in the classroom. Moreover, the gap between low and high income children increases exponentially over the lifespan. Children from more affluent homes hear a much wider variety of words even in the first few years of life.

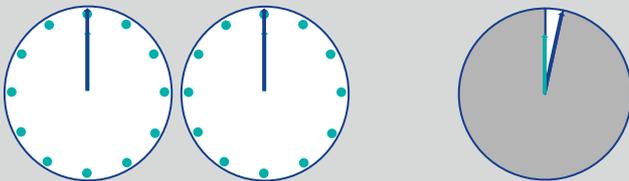
Reading storybooks to children is a valuable way to increase the breadth of vocabulary children are exposed to, yet children from low income homes typically have less access to books and are read to less frequently. So, for those with limited access to books at home reading the same books over and over at nursery or reception is a great idea.

Homes in some areas
have as few as
1 book per
300 children⁵



Research at a Glance

Time spent reading at home each month can vary from



over 2 hours to **as little as 2 minutes**⁶

150% more

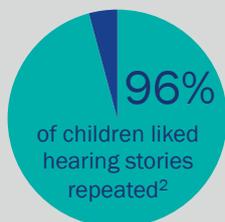
Children learn more words after hearing the same story repeated compared to different stories¹



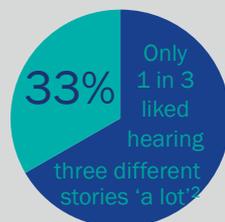
Up to **94%** of words from stories read right before naps are remembered 1 week later²



Children remember **20%** more words if they are read stories before naps²



96%
of children liked hearing stories repeated²



33%
Only 1 in 3 liked hearing three different stories 'a lot'²

FURTHER READING

¹Horst, Jessica S., Parsons, Kelly, L. & Bryan, Natasha M. (2011). Get the story straight: contextual repetition promotes word learning from storybooks. *Frontiers in Developmental Psychology*, 2(17), 1-11. <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00017/full>

²Rohlfing, Katharina J., Ceurremans, Josefa & Horst, Jessica S. (2017). Benefits of repeated book readings in children with SLI. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*. Online early. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1525740117692480>

³Williams, Sophie E. & Horst, Jessica S. (2014). Goodnight Book: Sleep Consolidation Improves Word Learning via Storybooks, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5(184), 1-12. available at: <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00184/full>

⁴McLeod, Angela N., & McDade, Hiram L. (2011). *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, 32, 256-266.

⁵Neuman, Susan B., & Celano, Donna. (2001). *Reading Research Quarterly*.

⁶Adams, Marilyn. (1990). *Beginning to Read*. MIT Press

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