



Learning to Read Project



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Since May 2012, the *Learning to Read Project* has been running in the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford. The project draws to a close in April 2015, and this is our final update to families and schools that were involved in the project to let you know of our findings.

Background

We know from research of school-age children that spoken language skills are important for the development of reading skills: Children with good language skills are likely to develop good reading skills; and children with poor language skills are more likely to struggle with learning to read. Language develops very early in a child's life—with most children learning to understand and use words (that is, develop their vocabulary) within the first two years of life. An interesting question is whether these infant language skills are a good indicator of reading and language outcomes later on in a child's development. If they are, infant vocabulary levels could be used early on to identify children who might later develop reading or language difficulties.

Study Design

Children who took part in the *Learning to Read* project had previously been involved in research carried out at the University of Oxford's BabyLab, when they were 1 or 2 years old. As part of this early research, each child's Mum or Dad filled in a checklist (the *Oxford Communicative Development Inventory*) to give an idea of the number of words that their child could understand and use (that is, vocabulary knowledge).



The *Learning to Read* project team got back in touch with lots of these families when their children were in school (aged between 4 and 9 years old). We then visited the children to assess their language and reading skills using the kinds of tests that educational psychologists and speech therapists might use.

- Vocabulary knowledge: We measured children's understanding and use of single words.
- Phonological awareness: We assessed how well children could tap into the speech sounds in spoken language by asking them to take away sounds from words (e.g., *bold* without *b* leaves *old*).
- Reading accuracy: We measured how accurately children could read single words.
- Reading comprehension: We assessed children's understanding of what they read by asking them to read aloud some short stories and then answer questions about them.

Participating Children

- 300 children from around 150 schools in Oxfordshire and beyond took part in this project.
- In infancy, the children were aged between 16 and 24 months (with an average of 19 months). At school-age they were aged between 4 and 9 years (average of 6½ years).
- In general, the children performed in the high-average range on the school-age measures of reading and language.

Main Findings

Our analysis of the data we collected support the following findings:

1. In general, those infants who have larger vocabularies in their second year of life will go on to achieve higher levels of reading and language when they are in primary school.
2. However, the relationship between infant skills and school-age performance is not strong enough for a parent-report measure of vocabulary knowledge to be used on its own to identify individual children who might be at risk for later reading and language difficulties. This fits with findings from other research studies which show that most (but not all) children who are late to start talking catch up by the time they start school.
3. One way to improve our prediction of which infants might go on to have reading difficulties is by also considering their family history. Children with smaller vocabularies who come from a family where there is a history of reading and language difficulties are at increased risk of developing a reading difficulty.

The scientific report of our findings will soon be available to read online in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. It is titled 'Do infant vocabulary skills predict school-age language and literacy outcomes?' and is written by Fiona Duff, Gurpreet Reen, Kim Plunkett, and Kate Nation. You will be able to find it here: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcpp.12378/abstract>

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