

Don't judge a book by its cover, researchers urge parents

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(Medical Xpress)—Parents who read picture books to their two-year-olds could improve their children's language skills, regardless of whether the book contains long sentences or just one or two words, according to new research.

Dr Thea Cameron-Faulkner and Dr Claire Noble from The University of Manchester say simple books with just one or two words per page, like Jez Alborough's *Hug*, are as beneficial as more traditional storybooks, such as *Kipper* by Mick Inkpen.

And the key to success, they find, is as much about talking about the books with [children](#) as the text itself.

The child [language](#) researchers' study of 23 parents reading both books with their children is good news for mums and dads who struggle with reading themselves.

Parent less likely to read books to their children themselves because of poor literacy skills, they say, will still help their children even if they use books which are easier to read.

When the researchers looked at the language in the books in combination with the language the parents used when discussing the books, both simple and more traditional storybooks were equally valuable sources of linguistic input.

Kipper's more complex dialogue was stimulating, so less discussion was needed, whereas the more simpler text of Hug stimulated more complex discussion.

Both books generated more complex language than a free play situation in which the parent and child played with a toy kitchen, they also found.

Dr Cameron-Faulkner, who is based at the University's School of Arts, Languages and cultures, said: "It's pretty well established that sharing books with young children improves their vocabulary and [literacy development](#), and that language skills are linked to academic attainment generally – including maths.

"Recent studies indicate that one of the key predictors in children's mathematical skill is early language experience, and so the rich linguistic experience associated with shared [book reading](#) may have benefits above and beyond language development.

"But what hasn't really been understood is how it impacts on children's ability to learn grammar – a hugely important part of their language

development.

"Our research shows quite clearly that books are a valuable source of language input: the language used when sharing books contains more complex, structurally rich constructions than everyday child directed speech.

"And because a simpler book is just as valuable as a more complex one, this is good news for parents who may struggle with their reading."

A previous study by the team of twenty picture books best selling on Amazon, aimed at 2-year-old children, also revealed the types of utterances found in children's books

It compared the books to utterances used in everyday speech to children, and is just published in the journal *First Language*.

The books contained many more utterances important in the development of children's grammar than everyday speech to children, showing the value of reading books to young children.

Dr Noble, who is based at the University's Max Planck Child Study Centre said: "The overarching message of our study is that reading to kids is a good thing to do – and gives children a rich language experience which may not be found in other situations

"Young children's [books](#) often consist of a predictable story, with illustrations acting as cues to aid understanding of the language in the text.

"There's a strong debate in child language research between those who believe language development is innate and those who think it is learned.

"Our view is that language isn't innate, which is why reading to children is such a crucial way to develop their language.

"But children have a range of cognitive skills which in combination with exposure to their native language helps them to learn grammar. This research provide strong evidence for the value of book reading in language development."

More information: The article is titled "A comparison of book text and Child Directed Speech."

Provided by University of Manchester

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