

Home reading environment is crucial for children's reading skills

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Children that are seldom read to and whose parents read very little are at a disadvantage when they start school.

There is a strong connection between a [child's](#) reading environment at home from the time they are very young and the progress a child makes in being able to read once they start [school](#). This was the finding of a study undertaken in connection with the [On Track research project](#) at the Norwegian Reading Centre at the University of Stavanger (UoS).

"There are big differences among six-year-olds. While many new first grade [pupils](#) can already read on their own, others are not even at the point where they understand that letters represent sounds. We know from the research that it is important that [children](#) are well prepared for reading when they start school and will be embarking on formal literacy. This study shows that the [parents'](#) attitudes to reading, the number of children's [books](#) in the home, the age at which parents start reading aloud to children and how often they read to them all determine how well prepared children are to learn to read when starting school", says Vibeke Bergersen.

Bergersen has written the master's thesis "Can you read for me? A study of pupils' reading skills when starting school viewed in the context of the reading environment at home."

Better vocabulary

The On Track research project is investigating ways of preventing reading and writing difficulties. They studied 1171 first grade pupils and their parents from 19 schools in Rogaland county, Norway. The pupils were tested in various reading and writing skills when they started school in autumn 2014. The parents were asked how often they themselves read, how many children's books they had at home, how often the child was read to and the age of the child when they started reading to the child. The results of this study clearly showed that the greater significance books have in children's lives from the time they are young, the better prepared they are to learn to read when starting school.

"This is because reading early and often to children influences the child's vocabulary and phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is about being aware of different sounds in language and is important in learning the first letters. Children that are often read to encounter linguistic games or rhymes and jingles in children's books. In this way, they become more aware of the connection between letters and sounds. By sitting with an adult who is reading books, children become aware of letters and words, and it will be easier for them to read", Bergersen explains.

Reading more means a better vocabulary

Reading aloud to a child before the child can speak positively influences the number of words the child learns.

"Between the ages of 18 months and about three years of age is the most influential time with regard to language learning. It is therefore important to read to children often from an early age. When starting school, children who have a lot of children's books at home and who have been read to before reaching two years of age have a vocabulary that is almost twice that of children who have few children's books at home and who have only been read to aloud after the age of four years.

Children with a large vocabulary understand more of what is going on at school and are better able to keep up with what is being taught. Children with poorer vocabularies understand less, and this can negatively impact their education. During the school years, the pupils must read as part of learning different subjects. This means that it is very important to have good basic reading skills and a good understanding of written material. A child's vocabulary can be enhanced by providing a good reading environment at [home](#)", says Bergersen.

She was surprised at the extent to which the parents' own motivation to read influenced children's skills.

"Over one million Norwegians have poor [reading skills](#). Even if parents do not like to read, children should nevertheless be given access to books in other ways. Perhaps parents can ask the nursery school staff to devote more time to stimulating the child to read. Parents can also sit with their child when the child is listening to audio books with text and images on a tablet", she says.

Big variations

Bergersen's study shows that 80% of the parents have taught their children letters before they start school and that as many as 20% of new first grade pupils can read already.

"This means that in a class of 30, six pupils will already have started reading by the time they start school. These pupils must be given suitable reading material and teaching should be planned so that pupils who can read and those who have not yet discovered that letters represent sounds are both given challenges suitable for their abilities.

Kjersti Lundetræ, associate professor at the Norwegian Reading Centre, UoS, believes that these findings should have an impact on early reading

and writing education in school.

"When pupils have such different skills when starting school, this should influence the amount of group education that is devoted to learning letters, for example. Many pupils know all the letters when starting school and can write quite a bit, but do not necessarily know how the letters are formed. To help the pupils avoid learning awkward spelling methods and to smooth out differences, it may be a good idea to progress faster through the learning of letters than has been the norm. We must also facilitate reading and writing activities that allow for different levels of ability. Pupils who can already read well and pupils who are learning to write need different challenges, and they also need access to different types of reading material. All pupils need to experience achievement and challenges; otherwise, we know that the pupils become demotivated and also become accustomed to accomplishing very little in learning situations.

Lundetræ also highlights the importance of having an overview of individual pupils' skills when they begin first grade.

"When children start school, teachers should take time to get to know each individual pupil and undertake and document a short, individual skills' assessment."

Provided by University of Stavanger

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