

Certain books can increase infant learning during shared reading, study shows

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Credit: University of Florida

Parents and pediatricians know that reading to infants is a good thing, but new research shows reading books that clearly name and label people and objects is even better.

That's because doing so helps infants retain information and attend better.

"When [parents label](#) people or characters with names, infants learn quite a bit," said Lisa Scott, a University of Florida psychology professor and co-author of the study published Dec. 8 in the journal *Child Development*. "Books with individual-level names may lead parents to talk to infants more, which is particularly important for the first year of life."

Scott and colleagues from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst studied infants in Scott's Brain, Cognition, and Development Lab. Babies came into the lab twice: once at 6 months old and again at age 9 months. While in the lab, eye-tracking and electroencephalogram, or EEG, methods were used to measure attention and learning at both ages.

In between visits, parents were asked to read with their infants at home according to a schedule that included 10 minutes of parent-infant shared book reading every day for the first two weeks, every other day for the second two weeks and then continued to decrease until infants returned at 9 months. Twenty-three families were randomly assigned storybooks. One set contained individual-level names, and the other contained category-level labels. Both sets of [books](#) were identical except for the labeling. Each of the training books' eight pages presented an individual image and a two-sentence story.

The individual-level books clearly identified and labeled all eight individuals, with names such as "Jamar," "Boris," "Anice," and "Fiona." The category-level books included two made-up labels ("hitchel," "wadgen") for all images. The control group included 11 additional 9-month-old infants who did not receive books.

The infants whose parents read the individual-level names spent more time focusing and attending the images, and their brain activity clearly differentiated the individual characters after book reading. This was not found at 6 months (before [book reading](#)), for the [control group](#), or for the group of infants who were given books with category-level labels.

Scott has been studying how the specificity of labels affects infant learning and brain development since 2006. This longitudinal study is the third in a series. The eye tracking and EEG results are consistent with her other studies showing that name specificity improves cognition in infants.

"There are lots of recommendations about reading books to babies, but our work provides a scientific basis for these recommendations and suggests that the type of book is also important," she said. "Shared reading is a good way to support development in the first year of life," "It creates an enjoyable and comforting environment for both the parents and the infant and encourages parents to talk to their [infants](#)."

Provided by University of Florida

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