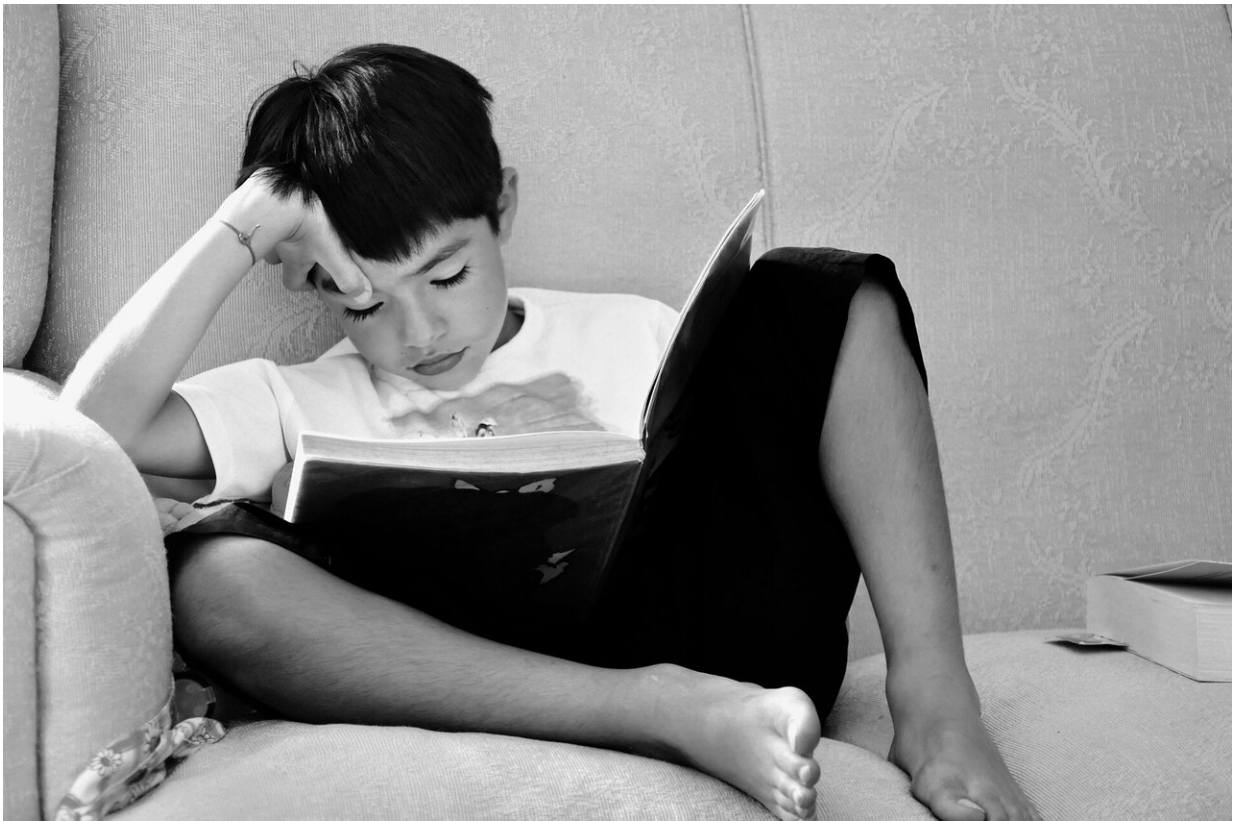


Young children and infants read to by parents have stronger vocabulary skills

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Shared reading between parents and very young children, including infants, is associated with stronger vocabulary skills for nearly all children by age three, say physicians at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson

Medical School. According to research published in *The Journal of Pediatrics*, this is true also for children who genetically may be vulnerable to barriers in learning, attention and behavior development.

"In a supportive environment, [children](#) who may be genetically at-risk, do just as well as their peers," said Manuel Jimenez, a developmental pediatrician and assistant professor of pediatrics and [family medicine](#) and community health at the medical school, who is lead author of the study.

The children in the study were tested as part of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study which examined the development of children born to unmarried families who were at greater risk of living in poverty

Jimenez explained that the study looked at how children respond differently to shared reading based on genetic characteristics. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which has followed the development of nearly 5,000 children in large U.S. cities born between 1998 and 2000, the team assessed the difference in vocabulary skill development based on genetic differences in two neurotransmitter systems that have implications in learning development, memory and impulse control.

The study found that shared reading with children at one year old was associated with higher vocabulary scores on a standardized assessment at age three, in line with previous published studies. Children with genetic variations that put them at-risk fared just as well as their peers on the assessment when shared reading was conducted at age one. However, at-risk children who were not exposed to shared reading did poorly on the same vocabulary assessment.

According to Jimenez, scientists are just starting to understand how genes influence complex behaviors and how science can be applied to

improving lives through patient care. The research underscores the importance of a positive environment with close parental contact and its direct correlation to favorable child development, even when a child may be at-risk for learning and behavioral challenges.

Daniel Notterman, a pediatrician, professor of molecular biology and co-investigator of the Fragile Families study at Princeton University, clinical professor of pediatrics at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and co-author of the study, concurs. "Biological measures give us another way to identify children for which interventions, in this case reading, may have the greatest benefit," he said. "Although there is already evidence of the positive effects of shared reading, this study provides additional verification and a more quantitative picture of the link between a child's environment, biological makeup, and development."

Both researchers emphasized that parents need to spend time reading with their children every day, as findings from the study provide support for literacy promotion at an early age.

"The bottom line is that children respond positively to shared reading at an early age and doing so is one way to improve language skills for all children," said Jimenez.

Provided by Rutgers University

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