

Little scientists: Children prefer storybooks that explain why and how things happen

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Children have an insatiable appetite to understand why things are the way they are, leading to their apt description as "little scientists". While researchers have been aware of children's interest in causal information,

they didn't know whether it influenced children's preferences during real-world activities, such as reading.

A new study in *Frontiers in Psychology* finds that [children](#) prefer storybooks containing more causal [information](#). The results could help parents and teachers to choose the most engaging [books](#) to increase children's interest in reading, which is important in improving early literacy and language skills.

Children have a burning urge to understand the mechanics of the world around them, and frequently bombard parents and teachers with questions about how and why things work the way they do (sometimes with embarrassing consequences). Researchers have been aware of children's appetite for causal information for some time. However, no one had previously linked this phenomenon to real-world activities such as reading or learning.

"There has been a lot of research on children's interest in causality, but these studies almost always take place in a research lab using highly contrived procedures and activities," explains Margaret Shavlik of Vanderbilt University, Tennessee.

"We wanted to explore how this early interest in causal information might affect everyday activities with young children—such as joint book reading."

Finding the factors that motivate children to read books is important. Encouraging young children to read more improves their early literacy and language skills and could get them off to a running start with their education. Reading books in the company of a parent or teacher is a great way for children to start reading, and simply choosing the types of book that children most prefer could be an effective way to keep them interested and motivated.

Shavlik and her colleagues hypothesized that children prefer books with more causal information. They set out to investigate whether this was true by conducting a study involving 48 children aged 3-4 years from Austin, Texas. Their study involved an adult volunteer who read two different but carefully matched storybooks to the children, and then asked them about their preferences afterwards.

"We read children two books: one rich with causal information, in this case, about why animals behave and look the way they do, and another one that was minimally causal, instead just describing animals' features and behaviors," said Shavlik.

The children appeared to be equally as interested and enthusiastic while reading either type of book. However, when asked which book they preferred they tended to choose the book loaded with causal information, suggesting that the children were influenced by this key difference. "We believe this result may be due to children's natural desire to learn about how the world works," explains Shavlik.

So, how could this help parents and teachers in their quest to get children reading? "If children do indeed prefer storybooks with causal explanations, adults might seek out more causally rich books to read with children—which might in turn increase the child's motivation to read together, making it easier to foster early literacy," said Shavlik.

The study gives the first indicator that causality could be a key to engaging young minds during routine learning activities. Future studies could investigate if causally-rich content can enhance specific learning outcomes, including literacy, [language skills](#) and beyond. After all, learning should be about understanding the world around us, not just memorizing information.

More information: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2020). [DOI:](#)

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