

How to Make Summer Reading Effective

Summer's always been a great time to kick back with a book. But a strong body of research shows that, without practice, students lose reading skills over the summer months and children from low-income families lose the most. With the prevalence of television, computers and other electronic distractions, how can parents, educators and librarians encourage kids to immerse their minds and imaginations in books over the summer months?

James Kim, assistant professor of education at Harvard University, looked at different approaches to summer reading and found that voluntary summer reading programs can work—but they work best when adults and teachers get involved by helping students to choose appropriate books and employ simple techniques to improve skill and understanding.

Providing books with no guidance may not help much at all. But when children get help choosing skill-appropriate books and read those books over the summer break, both independently and with guidance from family members, reading achievement scores can improve significantly.

We spoke with Kim about what we can learn from summer reading studies and how we can use that information to help young people retain or improve reading skills.

You've done several studies on children and reading over the summertime. What have you learned?

We've learned that if you're trying to improve children's reading abilities, you have to provide books that match the child's reading level and interest and you have to know how to monitor comprehension.

So it's not enough to just give a child a book and expect him or her to read it?

Access to reading materials is crucial, of course, but according to our research, that's not enough, especially in the early elementary school years.

Many people are aware that children lose reading skills over the summer and that low-income children fall behind, compared to their more advantaged classmates. We also know that kids who read a lot over the summertime sustain reading comprehension and vocabulary. Consequently, some people conclude that, in order to increase reading skills, we need to increase access to books—but the research indicates it's not that simple.

In fact, in one study, when we gave books to kids but did nothing else, they did no better than the kids who did nothing over the summer. There was no difference.

But doesn't it make sense that if reading over the summertime is a good thing, and we want children to read, we need to give them books?

Our research indicates that it's about more than access, especially with younger kids who are still learning to read. Reading is



most effective when parents or family members can provide reading guidance and make sure that kids understand what they're reading. Reading can be both a solitary activity and a social activity that fosters learning and recreation.

How can a parent, teacher, or other older adult figure out whether a child understands what he or she is reading?

There are different methods, but some of the most effective are relatively simple: Ask questions about the story and allow the child to ask questions; summarize or ask the child to summarize; and reread hard-to-understand passages. Essentially, make reading more of an interactive process in order to boost fluency and comprehension.

All good readers use those techniques, but fourth graders, for example, don't know how to do that on their own. Teachers and adults need to be explicit.

The ABCs of Improved Reading

Access to books. It's critical that kids have access to a wide variety of books over the summer months, but we know that access alone doesn't make a strong impact.

Books that match readers' ability levels and interests. For young people's reading skills to improve, they need to read books that align with their own reading levels. Reading books that are too easy or too hard won't help!

Comprehension, as monitored and guided by an adult, teacher or parent. The most important piece to making summer reading effective is the help of an adult who can ask questions and guide kids to better understand what they are reading.

With these three ingredients, your summer reading program will soar!

How did you arrive at your conclusions?

In our first study, we surveyed 2,000 kids in fourth and sixth grade and asked what they read over the summer. We found that the kids who read the most over the summer did better in the fall—but that didn't tell us why. Do books lead to comprehension or do good readers just have more books?

So we followed up that study with larger, more comprehensive studies that looked at different approaches to see what worked best.

Just providing books without guidance made no difference for younger children and only a slight difference for older children. Even having teachers encourage kids to read appeared to have no impact on comprehension. But we saw a significant difference when we provided books and adults were involved to guide reading skills and understanding.

Why do you think that just reading without intervention from adults worked, at least slightly, for older children but not for younger children?

To benefit from picking up a book, you have to decode the words accurately and quickly enough so that the mind can focus on the meaning of the text. In psychology, we call that “fluency.” Older children probably benefit more from access to books because they have greater fluency, while younger children have to expend more effort simply to understand the words.

That's why it's so important to make sure the text you're giving a child is at an appropriate level. And in order to do that, you have to know something about the child's comprehension ability and the difficulty level of the text, and match it to the child's reading level.

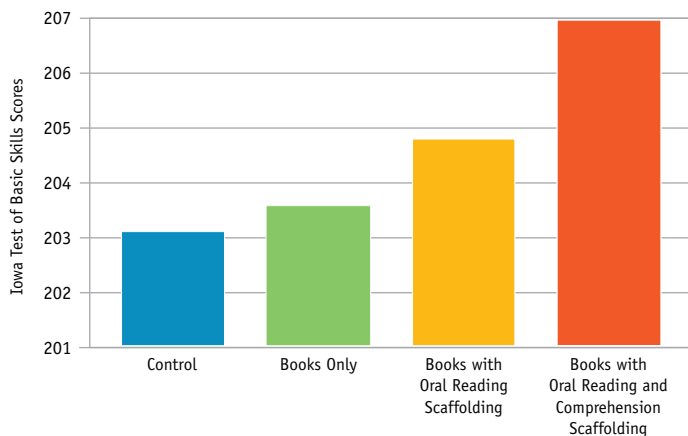
That sounds like it can be a daunting task, particularly for a parent or other adult who doesn't have teacher training. Is there any quick way to assess whether a book is at the appropriate level, for example, if you want to help a child choose a book at the library?

There's something called the five-finger rule. Ask a child to read 100 words from a book and teach the child to raise one finger for each word that is too difficult to figure out. If the child has more than five fingers up, the book is probably too hard. It's a very easy tool for kids to learn. You could also use school test results or commercial resources that provide the reading levels for various books.¹

Children should choose books that interest them, but the goal is also to find that “sweet spot” where the reading level is challenging but not frustrating. Then, get involved and work with young people over the summertime to help them exercise the simple but effective skills that will make them good readers.

1. For example, Lexile Framework provides readability levels for books. You can find them online at: www.lexile.com

School Year Cumulative Gains



This graph shows participants' adjusted post-test means score of Total Reading on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Participants were children in grades 3-5. Each child was randomly assigned to one of four groups:

1. The “Control” group students received ordinary reading instruction at the end of the school year.
2. The “Books Only” group students received ordinary reading instruction at the end of the school year and received books through the mail over the summer. Parents received a letter simply asking them to encourage children to read the book.
3. The “Books with Oral Reading Scaffolding” group students received books through the mail along with specialized teacher-directed lessons on oral reading at the end of the school year. Parents received a letter requesting they have the child read the book aloud and give the child feedback on how well they read.
4. The “Books with Oral Reading and Comprehension Scaffolding” group students received books through the mail along with specialized teacher-directed lessons on both oral reading and comprehension strategies at the end of the school year. Parents received a letter requesting they have the child read aloud and give the child feedback on how well they read. The child was also asked to explain what strategies they used to better understand the book.

Children were first tested in the second week of June. At that time, children's test scores across all of the intervention groups were not statistically different.

In mid-September, children were tested again. This graph shows those scores. The difference between the scores of the control group and those who received books with oral reading and comprehension scaffolding was found to be statistically significant.

Although the effect of this reading intervention may appear to be small, it is large enough to help young people avoid summer learning losses in reading.

Note: The data in the table above is from “Scaffolding Voluntary Summer Reading for Children in Grades 3 to 5: An Experimental Study,” by J.S. Kim, and T.G. White, 2008, *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 12, p.15. Copyright 2008 by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. Adapted with permission.



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