

The Research Files Episode 19: Reading for pleasure

Jo Earp

Hello, thank you for downloading this podcast, brought to you by Teacher magazine – I'm Jo Earp and you're listening to Episode 19 of The Research Files. Today sees the release of the Kids & Family Reading Report Australia, which explores child and parent attitudes and behaviours around reading for pleasure. This study, from Scholastic, is already on its fifth edition actually in the US but this is the first time it's been carried out in Australia. Rosemary Johnston is Professor of Education and Culture at University of Technology Sydney, a former English and history high school teacher who's written several books on literacy for teachers and has a forthcoming book on Australian children's literature. She joins me now to talk about the results.

Jo Earp: Rosemary Johnston, welcome to *The Research Files*. This particular survey then was carried out in conjunction with YouGov wasn't it, at the end of 2015? Who did it involve?

Rosemary Johnston: It involved a nationally representative sample of 1748 parents and children. Of that 1748, there were 358 parents of children aged from 0-5, and 695 parents of children aged 6-17, plus, in that group, one child aged somewhere between six and 17 from the same household.

JE: So, let's delve into some of the findings then – what are some of the key findings coming out of the study?

RJ: ... The more children read, the better readers they become. And then the better readers they become, the more they enjoy reading. Now, that might seem obvious, but it's extremely important in this day and age when there is so much competition from other devices for children's time.

If you wanted to summarise the key findings – that's the key finding, but that has implications and ramifications for schools and for school practices, and for families and for family practices.

In school, the report found that children who are given time for independent reading at school are more likely to be reading currently and frequently; they're more likely also to say that reading books for fun - [for fun is] the phrase that's used quite often in the report, it's really reading books for pleasure, which is fun. So reading books for fun, for pleasure, is important and [the children who do this] are more likely to enjoy reading compared with those who aren't. In other words, it shows the significance of time for independent reading.

There used to be a program, and I'm not sure if it's still running, called DEAR (Drop Everything And Read), which was, I think, mandated at certain times in schools. Programs such as that or just teachers finding flexibility in their timetable – which I know is really hard in a time of a crowded curriculum – but to somehow give

children the time to do some independent reading if possible during every school day, [or] at least three or four times a week.

The report also found, of those children sampled, only 44 per cent of children say that they have an opportunity to read independently in school or in a class at school, and far fewer (I think it was 16 per cent) were given the chance to do this every day or almost every school day. So, that's one of the most important findings for schools and for teachers.

For families, the report found that having parents who are role models in reading - you know, they've got a stack of books by their bed and they're always reading - that's critical for older children. Younger children, the report encourages specific strategies such as limiting screen time and making reading a routine in some fun way, and that encourages reading.

It also notes the importance of 'read aloud time'. It says ... this is 'a powerful predictor that children will become frequent readers'. Nearly nine in 10 children say they 'loved' or 'liked' being read aloud to a lot; it's a special time with parents of course, but it's also a fantastic opportunity for kids to listen to how words are said, how story flows, and to get the feel of language.

... Look, there's so much material about this. The report talks about it particularly in relation to families, but it's also really important for teachers to read aloud in their classrooms - even when the children are strong, independent readers in their own right. Because, when you're reading aloud you can actually choose something which is a little bit beyond their means, perhaps, and you're making it accessible to them.

JE: Now, you've touched there on the implications for parents and also mentioned teachers. School leaders don't escape either - I'm just looking, it says 'two-thirds of children say at least a few times a year their Principal encourages reading books for fun' ... but, importantly the finding is 'Children whose Principals encourage reading books for fun are more likely than those without encouragement from their Principal to read frequently.'

You've already talked about the importance of reading frequently, so there are messages in there for school leaders as well aren't there?

RJ: Absolutely, yes and to be honest there are messages for the Department of Education as well. ... Everyone there would know the importance of reading, but perhaps they could try to work with Principals and work with schools to find ways of fitting this into the curriculum.

JE: Now, thinking about the bigger picture finally. There's been a lot of research in the area of reading, where does this particular study fit in?

RJ: Well, it's fits in extremely well. Just recently in 2014 there was a research study on the importance of reading done by the University of Edinburgh and King's College London (Ritchie, Bates & Plomin). It noted that reading not only improves education, it also improves health, socioeconomic status and creativity. And there's a whole lot of references that they've given for the improvement in health (Baker, Parker, Williams, Clark and Nurss, 1997), in education (Duncan etcetera), there's a list of references.

And the [2014] study concludes: 'Since reading is an ability that can be improved, our findings have implications for reading instruction. Early remediation of reading problems might aid not only the growth of literacy, but also more general cognitive abilities that are of critical importance across a person's lifetime.'

And that study has very impressive credentials Jo, it's funded by the Medical Research Council, the Eunice Kennedy National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and the European Research Council. So it's an impressive study.

Now, they're not talking about reading for fun and reading for pleasure – which this report of course is focusing principally on - but they're talking about reading. And so, when parents and teachers and educators and policymakers are aware of all the other benefits that reading brings, it should give added impetus to trying to do something to maximise time spent in the classroom and spent in the home [reading].

JE: Plenty there for people to have a look at and refer to down the track. It's been great speaking to you today, Professor Rosemary Johnston thanks for your time.

RJ: Thank you Jo.

That's all for this episode of The Research Files. For more information about the study mentioned in this episode and the related reading head to www.teachermagazine.com.au for the transcript of this podcast. You can also download all of our podcasts for free, just visit acer.ac/teacheritunes or head to www.soundcloud.com/teacher-acer.

To access a copy of the [Scholastic Kids & Family Reading Report Australia](#) click on the link.

References

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Related reading

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