

Reading to Young Children

Indicators of Child
and Youth Well-Being



Young children who are read to regularly by family members experience multiple benefits. These include boosts in their literacy development,¹ as well as social-emotional gains,² and increased likelihood of later overall school success.³

Importance

Children develop literacy skills and an awareness of language long before they are able to read.⁴ Since language development is fundamental to all areas of learning, skills developed early in life can help set the stage for later school success. By reading aloud to their young children, parents help them acquire the skills they will need to be ready for school.^{5,6}

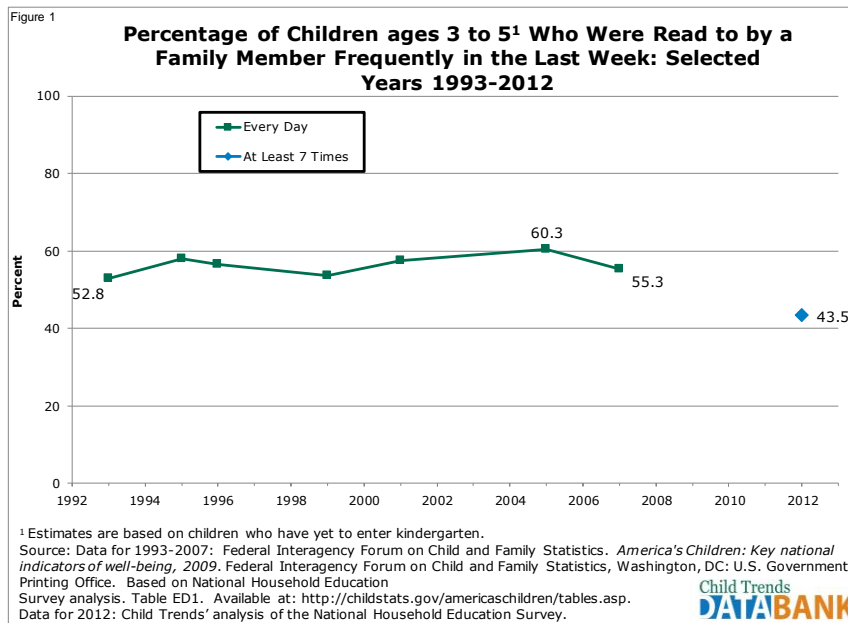
Children who lack a strong foundation of language awareness and literacy skills early in life are more likely to fall behind in school,⁷ and are more likely to drop out.⁸ Shared parent-child book reading during children's preschool years leads to higher reading achievement in elementary school,⁹ as well as greater enthusiasm for reading and learning.¹⁰ In an international study involving 15-year-olds from 14 developed countries, students whose parents read books with them regularly during the first year of primary school scored an average of 14 points higher on a comprehensive reading assessment.¹¹

Young children who are regularly read to have a larger vocabulary, higher levels of phonological, letter name, and sound awareness, and better success at decoding words.¹² The number of words in a child's vocabulary can be an important indicator of later academic success. Children's vocabulary use at age three is a strong predictor of language skill and reading comprehension at age 9-10.¹³ Further, vocabulary use in first grade can predict more than 30 percent of 11th-grade reading comprehension.^{14,15}



Trends

The percentage of young children who are read aloud to by a family member every day changed little between 1993 and 2007. In 2007, 55 percent of three- to five-year-old children (who had not yet entered kindergarten) were read to every day, compared with 53 percent in 1993. (Figure 1) In 2012, 44 percent of young children were read to at least seven times in the past week. (Figure 2) Because of changes to the survey, 2012 data are not strictly comparable to those of previous years.



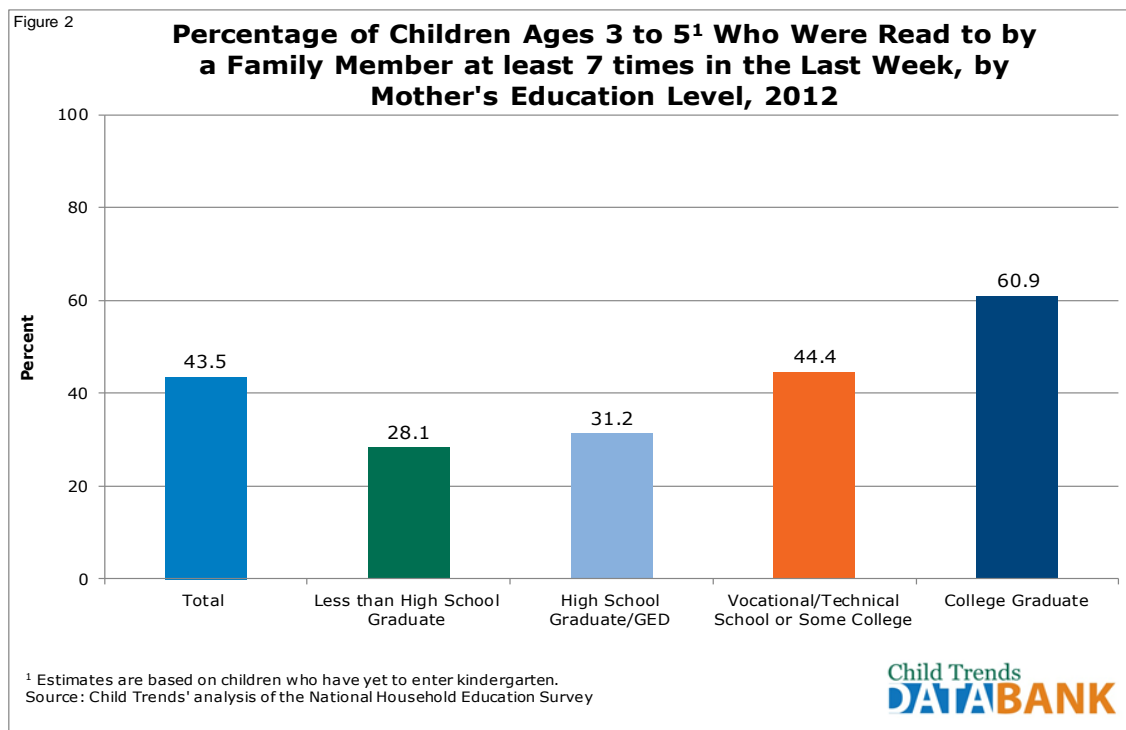
Differences by Race/Hispanic Origin¹⁶

Young children who are white are more likely to be frequently read to than children who are either Hispanic or black. In 2012, 56 percent of white three- to five-year-olds were read to by a family member at least seven times in

the past week, compared with 34 percent of black children, and 25 percent of Hispanic children. Asian and Pacific Islander children were in-between white and Hispanic children, at 38 percent. (Appendix 1)

Differences by Mother's Education Level¹⁷

Young children are more likely to be read to frequently if their mothers have completed higher levels of education. In 2012, 61 percent of young children whose mothers had graduated from college were read to frequently by a family member. In contrast, 44 percent of children whose mothers had some college education were read to frequently, and 31 and 29 percent, respectively, whose mothers had only finished high school, or whose mothers had not finished high school. (Figure 2)

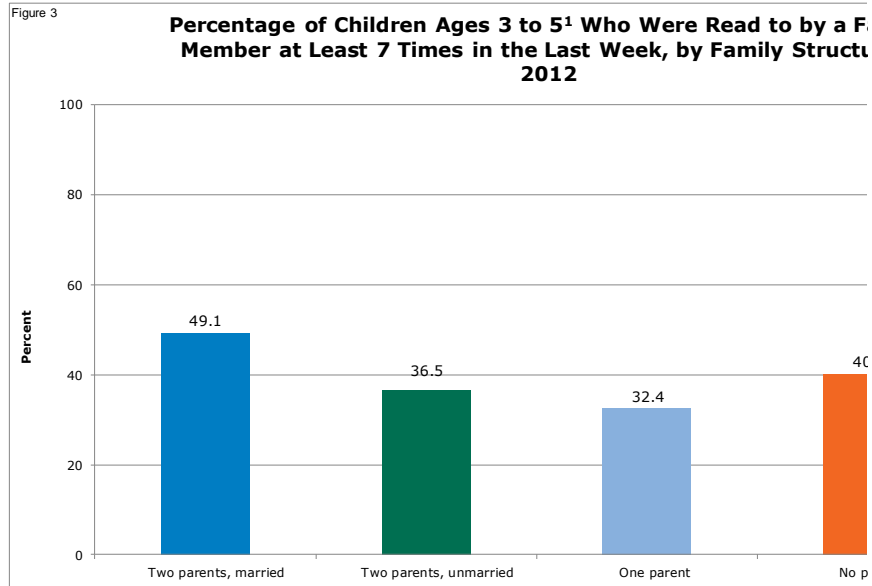


Differences by Poverty Status

Young children living in poverty are less likely to be read to by a family member every day than are children living at or above the poverty line. In 2007 (the latest data available), 40 percent of poor 3- to 5-year-olds were read to every day, compared with 50 percent of children in families at 100-199% of poverty, and 64 percent of children in families at 200% of poverty and above. (Appendix 1)

Differences by Family Type

Children living with two married parents are more likely to be read to every day than are children with one or two unmarried parents. In 2012, 49 percent of children with two married parents were read to everyday, compared with 32 and 37 percent, respectively, of children with one parent, and with two unmarried parents. (Figure 3)



Differences by Mother's Employment Status¹⁸

Children with mothers working part-time (less than 35 hours a week) or not in the labor force are more likely than other children to be read to frequently. In 2012, 50

percent of children with mothers working part-time, and 47 percent of children with mothers not in the labor force, were read to frequently, compared with 42 percent of children with mothers who worked full-time, and 34 percent with mothers looking for work. (Appendix 1)



State and Local Estimates

State estimates for 2011/12 are available for ages 0-5 through the *National Survey of Children's Health* at the [Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health](#).

International Estimates

None available.

National Goals

The federal government has set a national goal through its *Healthy People 2020* initiative to increase the proportion of children who are read to by a parent every day, from 47.8 percent in 2007 to 52.6 percent in 2020. There is also a related goal to increase the proportion of children who are ready for school in all five domains of healthy development.

More information is available at: <http://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/early-and-middle-childhood/objectives>

(Goals EMC 1 and 2.3)

What Works to Make Progress on This Indicator

See Child Trends' LINKS database ("Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully"), for reviews of many rigorously evaluated programs, including the following which have been shown to be effective at increasing the frequency or benefit of parental reading to children:

- Reach Out and Read: www.childtrends.org/?programs=reach-out-and-read-ror
- Hear and Say Reading with Toddlers: www.childtrends.org/?programs=hear-and-say-reading-with-toddlers
- Parents as Teachers (PAT): www.childtrends.org/?programs=parents-as-teachers
- Even Start: www.childtrends.org/?programs=even-start



Related Indicators

- Early School Readiness: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=early-school-readiness
- Reading Proficiency: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=reading-proficiency
- Dual Language Learners: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=dual-language-learners
- Parental Warmth and Affection (archived): www.childtrends.org/?indicators=parental-warmth-and-affection

Definition

Through 2007, this indicator measured the percentage of pre-kindergarten children ages three to five who were read to by a family member every day in the week prior to the interview, as reported by an adult in the household. Other choices included “not at all,” “once or twice,” and “3 or more times.”

In 2012, to reflect new response options in the survey, the criterion for this indicator was changed to children who had a family member read to them at least seven times in the past week.

Data Source

- Data for 2012: Child Trends’ analysis of the National Household Education Survey.
- Data for 1993-2007: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. *America’s Children: Key national indicators of well-being, 2009*. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Based on National Household Education Survey analysis. Table ED1. Available at: <http://childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>

Raw Data Source

National Household Education Survey

<http://nces.ed.gov/nhes/>



Appendix 1 - Percentage of Children, Ages 3 to 5,¹ Who Were Read to by a Family Member Frequently² in the Past Week: Selected Years, 1993-2012

	1993	1995	1996	1999	2001	2005	2007	2012
Total	52.8	58.0	56.5	53.5	57.5	60.3	55.3	43.5
Gender								
Male	51.3	57.0	55.6	52.3	54.5	58.7	53.8	42.6
Female	54.4	59.0	57.4	54.8	60.5	62.1	56.9	44.3
Race and Hispanic origin								
White, non-Hispanic	59.1	65.4	64.3	61.3	64.2	67.7	67.4	56.4
Black, non-Hispanic	38.7	42.5	43.7	41.2	47.3	49.7	34.6	33.7
Hispanic³	37.3	38.3	39.1	33.0	41.8	44.7	37.3	24.8
Asian/Pacific Islander	45.7	37.3	62.2	53.8	51.4	65.6	60.4	38.3
Poverty Status⁴								
Below federal poverty level (FPL)	43.6	46.6	46.8	38.7	48.3	50.0	39.7	-
100-199% of FPL	49.1	55.7	52.0	51.4	51.8	59.5	49.6	-
200% of FPL and above	60.9	65.2	65.5	61.8	64.1	65.0	63.9	-
Family Type								
Two parents⁵	55.3	61.2	60.7	57.8	60.7	62.2	58.9	47.3
Two parents, married	—	—	—	—	61.1	63.3	61.9	49.1
Two parents, unmarried	—	—	—	—	56.8	49.8	24.4	36.5
One parent	46.0	49.2	45.6	42.4	47.2	53.0	42.7	32.4
No parents	45.9	51.6	47.9	50.6	52.8	64.2	38.0	40.1

	1993	1995	1996	1999	2001	2005	2007	2012
Mother's level of education⁶								
Less than high school	36.9	39.9	37.4	38.7	41.2	41.3	30.8	28.1
High school graduate/GED	47.7	48.0	49.0	45.2	49.2	55.2	39.4	31.2
Vocational/technical/some college	56.5	63.6	61.8	53.0	59.8	59.8	54.6	44.4
College graduate	70.7	75.7	76.5	70.8	72.8	72.4	73.7	60.9
Mother's employment status⁶								
Worked 35 hours or more per week	51.5	55.3	54.3	48.9	55.1	56.6	51.1	41.9
Worked less than 35 hours per week	55.9	63.1	58.7	55.6	62.6	60.6	63.0	49.5
Looking for Work	43.7	46.3	53.0	46.5	53.8	62.7	40.2	34.2
Not in labor force	54.8	59.8	59.4	59.7	58.2	64.5	57.9	47.3

¹ Estimates are based on children who have yet to enter kindergarten.

² Through 2007, frequently means "every day." For 2012, frequently means "at least seven times." Thus, across these years, the data are not strictly comparable.

³ Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

⁴ Poverty estimates for 1993 are not comparable to later years because respondents were not asked exact household income.

⁵ Refers to adults' relationship to child, and does not indicate marital status. Same-sex parents were included in 2007 and 2012.

⁶ Children without mothers in the home are not included in estimates including mothers' education or employment status. In 2012, in cases where the child had two mothers, the status is based on the first one mentioned.

Sources: Data for 1993-2007: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. *America's Children: Key national indicators of well-being, 2009*. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Based on National Household Education Survey analysis. Table ED1. Available at: <http://childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>. Data for 2012: Child Trends' analysis of the National Household Education Survey.



Endnotes

- ¹ Armbruster, B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2002). Teaching our youngest: A guide for preschool teachers and child care and family providers. Early Childhood Task Force. US Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at: <http://www.ed.gov/teachers/how/early/teachingouryoungest/index.html>
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- ⁴ Burns, M.S., Griffin, P., & Snow, C. (Eds.) (1999). *Starting off right: A guide to promoting children's reading success*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
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- ⁶ Bus, A. G., van IJzendoorn, M. H., & Pellegrini, A. D. (1995). Joint book reading makes for success in learning to read: A meta-analysis on intergenerational transmission of literacy. *Review of Education Research*, 65(1), 1-21.
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- ⁸ Missal, K., Reschley, A., Betts, J., McConnell, S., Heistad, D., Pickart, M., Sheran, C., Marston, D. (2007). Examination of the predictive validity of preschool early literacy skills. *School Psychology Review*, 36(3), 433-452.
- ⁹ Kuo, A.A., Franke, T.M., Regalado, M., and Halfon, N. (2004). Op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Armbruster, B., Lehr, F., and Osborn, J. (2002). [Op. cit.](#)
- ¹¹ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). (2011). What can parents do to help their children succeed in school? *PISA In Focus*, No. 10. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/49012097.pdf>
- ¹² Burgess, S. R., Hecht, S. A. , & Lonigan, C. J. (2002). Relations of the home literacy environment (HLE) to the development of reading-related abilities: A one-year longitudinal study. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37(4), 408-426.
- ¹³ Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

¹⁴ Biemiller, A. (2001). Teaching vocabulary: Early, direct, and sequential. *The American Educator*, 25(1), 24-28.

¹⁵ Biemiller, A. (2006). Vocabulary development and instruction: A prerequisite for school learning. In S.B. Neuman, and D.K. Dickinson, (Eds.). *The Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (vol. 2). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

¹⁶ Hispanics may be any race. Estimates in this report for whites, blacks, and Asians or Pacific Islanders do not include Hispanics.

¹⁷ For children with two mothers, education level is for the first one listed.

¹⁸ For children with two mothers, employment status is for the first one listed.