

DADS WHO READ TO THEIR CHILDREN GIVE THEM AN EARLY START

Dads who read, draw, do puzzles and other activities are not only helping their children develop motor skills, they may also be shaping their learning ability.

A recent study involving 800 children in New South Wales, led by Dr Elisabeth Duursma from the University of Wollongong's (UOW) [Early Start Research Institute](#) (ESRI), found poor language skills among children could be a result of less time in stimulating home experiences such as book reading, drawing and making puzzles, which require fine motor and language skills.

“We collected data from children aged three to five on vocabulary, language, cognitive development, fine motor and gross motor skills,” Dr Duursma said. “Many of these children aren't doing so well in languages and we also found they are not doing so well in fine motor skills but were doing pretty well in gross motor skills.

“Although there is little research in this area, the results certainly suggest that fine motor and language skills are related and children with poor language skills could be less exposed to stimulating home experiences such as book reading, drawing and doing puzzles.

“These activities require fine motor skills and that goes hand-in-hand with language because you need instructions in how to do things.”

The recent discovery of a connection between fine motor skills and language development builds on Dr Duursma's previous work, conducted in the US, that showed dads on low incomes who read to their children at age three had a major impact on their child's language development, when measured one year later.

Further research has indicated that when mothers read it did not have this significant impact on child development, highlighting the vital role dads play while reading to their children.

“Fathers are often praised for engaging their children in rough and tumble play and this type of play is indeed beneficial to children. However, with many children these days, in particular boys, struggling with reading, it is important to have more fathers reading to their children.”

Delving deeper into the research, Dr Duursma found major differences in the style of language used when dads share story time with children.

“We found that fathers used more abstract and complex language. When sharing a book with their child, they would often link events in the book to a child's own experience.

“For example, when a ladder was discussed in the book, many fathers mentioned the last time they had used a ladder to climb up on the roof or use it for their work. Mothers focused more on the details in the book and often asked children to label or count objects or identify colours.”

Father of two Andrew Sutton said he reads to his children every night and it was valuable in developing their language skills.

“They would demand it if I tried to put them to bed without having read them a book,” he said. “I think it’s important because reading obviously develops their language skills and opens their minds to new worlds and ideas.

“The impact I’ve seen from reading to them is how they use ideas and situations from the books we’ve read to create their own little stories, so it seems to have helped them creatively as well. Generally, I think it’s increased their curiosity about letters and words.”

Dr Duursma said they have solid evidence that more fathers, particularly those from low-income families, should be encouraged to read to their children.

“Bring out the play dough, puzzles, crayons and scissors to enjoy some quality time with your child while also building important skills for later,” she said.

The research will be presented at the inaugural Early Start conference, to be held from 28 to 30 September, in what will be the most significant conference of its kind ever held in Australia.

A total of 11 countries will be represented, with 102 presentations and about 630 delegates in attendance. The conference will explore the theme, ‘Improving Children’s Lives: Translating Research for Practice, Policy and Community’.

Early Start is a \$44 million transformational infrastructure investment together with a continuing commitment from UOW and its partners focused on creating educational programs, experiences and networks that enrich the way we understand and interact with children, families and communities.

<http://media.uow.edu.au/releases/UOW202693.html>