

The importance of reading for children: the evidence, and a twenty-minute-a-day plan

What the research found

Finding	Study	Number
Minutes become millions of words	Anderson, Wilson and Fielding 1988	20 min/day: 1.8 million words a year; 5 min: 282,000; 1 min: 8,000
Third grade predicts graduation	Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011	Not reading well by end of grade 3: 4 times more likely to leave school without a diploma
Being read to at 4 shows at 8	Kalb and van Ours 2013, 4,000+ Australian children	Read to 6-7 days a week: about 6 months ahead in reading and numeracy by 8 to 9
Reading for pleasure beats income	OECD PISA 2009, 65 countries	Daily readers about a year and a half of schooling ahead, across income levels
Print holds the rare words	Hayes and Ahrens 1988	Children's books: about 50% more rare words per thousand than adult conversation or TV

What to do at each age

Age	What matters	Do
0 to 2	Hearing language; the bedtime book habit	Board books daily; the same book many times
3 to 5	Vocabulary; story; letters and sounds; pleasure	Read aloud 15 to 20 minutes a day; talk about the story; rhymes
5 to 7	Learning to read; keeping the pleasure	Child reads to you 10 min (easy); you read to them 15 min (harder)
7 to 9	Volume: the third-grade turning point	20 min a day self-chosen; series and non-fiction; still read aloud at bedtime
9 to 11	Stamina; knowledge; first classics	Library every fortnight; a shared book; let them choose
11 to 14	Pleasure survives or dies; secondary vocabulary	Protect the 20 minutes from screens; YA fiction, biography, science

The plan

Age	Minutes	What
Under 7	10 + 15	Child reads an easy book to you; you read a harder one to them
7 to 11	20	Self-chosen, same time daily; plus 10 minutes read aloud at bedtime when you can
11 to 14	20 to 30	Self-chosen, phone in another room; a book you both read once a term

Rules: the child chooses (comics, non-fiction, re-reads count); same time daily; a visible log; a library visit every fortnight; adults seen reading. Five-finger test: five unknown words on a page means the book is too hard. Never trade reading for screen time.

Four-week reading log

Tick the day when the twenty minutes happened; write the book. A full row of ticks matters more than any single long session.

Week	Book(s)	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Week 1								
Week 2								
Week 3								
Week 4								

Books finished this month

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

The three mistakes that make a reluctant reader

- ☐ Stopping reading aloud once the child can read (continue to 10 or 11)
- ☐ Books that are too hard (the five-finger test)
- ☐ Reading as a chore or the price of screens

If reading is slow or inaccurate

Time one minute of reading aloud on a new grade-level page; count the words read correctly. Grade 3 norms: 83 (fall), 97 (winter), 112 (spring) words a minute. Accuracy under 90%: the book is too hard; persistently random errors despite daily practice: ask the school for an evaluation.

From

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