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# Choosing the right book: Factors that affect children's reading

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*Evidence Summary*

**Choosing the Right Book: Factors that Affect Children's Reading**

**A Review of:**

Maynard, S., Mackay, S., & Smyth, F. (2008). A survey of young people's reading in England: Borrowing and choosing books. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 40(4), 239-253.

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To analyze factors affecting book choice: reading recommendations, reasons for choosing series books, book reviews, and school libraries.

**Design** – This secondary analysis of data is based on a selection of findings from a larger 2005 survey that monitored trends in youth reading habits. The large scale 2005 study was designed as a follow up to a 1996 survey. The 2005 survey used online questionnaires and formal statistical analysis to compare gender and age groups. The data on factors affecting book choice were derived from the original questions, responses, and analyses.

**Setting** – Questionnaires were administered in 22 primary and 24 secondary schools in the UK with access to computers and internet.

**Subjects** – Almost 4,200 students from 4 to 16 years of age.

**Methods** – Study authors invited approximately 150 schools to participate in the survey. Forty-six schools (31%) responded. A total of 22 primary and 24 secondary schools participated in the original study between April and June 2005.

This study used comparative analysis to examine factors affecting book choice between gender and age groups. Statistical significance was defined as one percent. Other demographic information was collected, such

as ethnicity, language spoken at home, and religion, but was deemed insufficient for any meaningful analysis.

There were 4,182 responses to the survey, separated into three age groups: ages 4 to 7 (KS1), ages 7 to 11 (KS2), and ages 11 to 16 (KS3&4).

Students were asked to describe themselves as readers by responding to multiple choice questions, and then to provide specific information on the places or people most frequently used as book borrowing sources. Participants were considered "enthusiastic" readers if they "read a lot with pleasure" and "average" readers if they "read an ordinary amount". Participants responded to additional multiple choice questions on specific factors related to borrowing books and book choices, the process of choosing series, fiction, and nonfiction books.

**Main Results – Readers:** The number of children who described themselves as "enthusiastic" readers decreased with age, and approximately half of the children between 7 and 16 years of age described themselves as "average" readers, average rating increasing slightly through this age group. Investigators found a marked difference in gender within the 4 to 7 year olds: 49.7% percent of girls in this age group considered themselves "enthusiastic," compared to 37.3% of boys. Only 18.5% of girls considered themselves "reluctant" readers, compared to 28.1% of boys.

The longitudinal comparison to the earlier 1996 study found that although the percentage of boys from ages 7 to 16 who described themselves as reluctant readers stayed about the same, the percentage of girls who described themselves as reluctant increased. There was also a dramatic drop in the number of girls who described themselves as enthusiastic; from 51% in 1996 to 17% in 2005.

**Borrowing Books:** Libraries of all types (school, classroom and public) were the prime sources for borrowing books. Girls borrowed

more books from schools than boys, and girls also borrowed more books from non-library sources (family members and friends) than boys. Both boys and girls increasingly reported borrowing more books from friends than from libraries as they grew older.

Over half of each age group rated the school library or classroom book corner as having "enough" books. The perception of "too many books" decreased with age. The perception of quality of the classroom or school library also decreased with age. The number of students in the younger age groups who rated the quality of books in the classroom or school library as "very good" was significantly higher than students in the older age groups. The number of student who rated the quality as "okay" doubled from the lower to the higher age group.

**Choosing Books:** Children were asked six questions related to whether the physical book itself provided motivation to read, and six questions related to other factors for book recommendation. Younger readers were more likely to choose a book for its visual appeal, although this factor (interesting cover or illustrations inside) was more consistent for boys of all age groups than girls. The author's name and book blurb were stronger factors for girls in the 7 to 16 age group than for boys.

The study authors sought to explore the idea of "shared reading" and asked children in the 7 to 11 and 11 to 16 age groups how often they chose a book based on a recommendation from a friend or family member, a public or school librarian, or other adults. Friends were the strongest recommendation source (43.2% for 7 to 11 year olds and 38.4% for 11 to 16 year olds). Recommendations from school or public librarians rated only three to six percent for both age groups.

All age groups were asked about choosing series books, and the questions were simplified for the younger age group. All students reported that appealing factors were the consistency of characters, familiar storylines, and familiar writing styles. Some

students also noted that the availability of series books positively affected their choices.

Print or online book reviews were used “hardly ever or never” by over 40% of the 7 to 16 year old age groups, while television or magazine reviews or recommendations were highly rated by over 50% of respondents in the same age groups. Participants chose informational or non-fiction books because of personal interests, hobbies, or recommendations from friends, while they selected fiction or poetry for the blurb, title, or appearance and design of the cover. Celebrity recommendations and books about celebrities were popular reasons for choosing books.

When asked who helped them choose books, 53.2% in the 7 to 11 age group and 66.1% in the 11 to 16 age group stated that no one ever helps them. Of the students who had help choosing books, “family members” was the most common response. Local librarians were not used as a source for recommendations.

### **Commentary**

Secondary analysis looks more deeply at existing data and assembles additional information from longitudinal studies such as this one. The secondary analysis must match the variables in the original study with those of the secondary study (Clark & Cossette, 2000). It is unfortunate that the additional demographic data collected regarding ethnicity and language spoken at home was not available. Both of these factors could provide interesting analysis of the data on reading in libraries versus home, and on the data regarding recommendations from family members. The researchers do not mention the socioeconomic status of the study population, but poverty level has been identified as a significant factor in children’s perception of and access to reading materials (Krashen, 2004). The lack of availability of books in the home due to economic pressures could dramatically affect children’s responses to whether they borrow books from other family members. The number of single parent homes

could also affect responses to the questions of whether the participant most often looks to father or mother for book recommendations, and whether the child uses his or her mother’s recommendations.

The researchers note as “worrisome” the increasing number of those describing themselves as “reluctant readers,” with a concurrent decrease in those describing themselves as “enthusiastic” readers. While the goals of this study were not to evaluate reading instruction methods, these methods and the current emphasis on prescriptive, skills-based reading in elementary schools could affect how children see themselves as readers. Instructional methods could also contribute to the decline in enthusiasm and perception of being good readers (Cody, 2010).

The conclusions echoed existing research that indicates boys in general are more likely to consider themselves reluctant readers and be viewed by others as reluctant readers. Boys in the study were less likely to rely on book reviews or book displays for reading recommendations. The researchers noted that boys were also more likely to rate the books in their local libraries as “not very good.” The researchers suggest that school library selection policies could explain this finding. They support their hypothesis with research on boys’ reading that contradicts the opinion that “boys don’t like reading.” Boys like reading if selectors find books that appeal on a cultural and emotional level to boys’ interests (Jeffery, 2009; Love & Hamston, 2003).

One weakness in the study is that the researchers did not differentiate between school libraries and classroom book corners when asking children about books available at school. The researchers found the percentage of participants believing that there were “too many books” was surprising, and perhaps resulted from the inability to locate particular reading matter quickly and easily. This reviewer has observed that school libraries are organized in ways that promote easy access to reading materials through organized collections and online catalogues, while

classroom libraries do not. It is unclear whether students were referring to the school library or classroom book corner in many of their answers. Perhaps the answer “too many books” is not surprising if the students’ primary contact was with classroom book corners that are not organized for easy access and that do not offer enough books at each reading level to accommodate the needs of students during self-selected reading (Sewell, 2003).

The researchers note disappointing answers to questions about whether children receive help in choosing books. Participants rarely used both school and public librarians, and the researchers found that libraries themselves were considered valuable for borrowing books but children often don’t ask for professional assistance in the library. Although any number of factors could account for the lack of assistance from librarians (staffing levels, training, availability), readers are left with the dichotomous finding that although school and public libraries were the two most cited sources of books for students of all ages, the librarians were not considered important factors in book selection.

This study successfully attempted to determine some of the factors in children’s book choices, but the results pinpointed areas for further research.

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