

Free Book, More Reading?

Assessing the Impact of a Free Book Collaboration

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A growing body of research points to the positive impact parents can have on their children when they read to them on a regular basis. This includes improved future academic performance as well as the promotion of important social and emotional development skills.¹

The Salt Lake County (UT) Library wanted to better understand the impact a free book program can have on reading frequency. Staff at the county library's Byington Reading Room put together a thirteen-question survey in both English and Spanish for parents of children receiving a free book. The survey was distributed over a four-week period in the winter of 2018, and 183 surveys were completed by parents visiting the reading room.

The Byington Reading Room, located in the South Main Public Health Center, is a partnership among Salt Lake County Library Services, Salt Lake County Health Department, and the University of Utah Hospital and Clinics, serving a population in excess of 150,000 and pulling from a number of nearby cities and neighborhoods. Each child who comes to the South Main Public Health Center can take and keep one book. The 500-square-foot reading room is located in

the same building as two health clinics. University of Utah Health operates a sliding-scale health center on one side, and the Salt Lake County Health Department runs a low-income clinic for women, infants, and children on the other side.

In a typical year, the reading room gives away more than fifteen thousand books. The books come from a combination of discards from the other eighteen county libraries, community donations, and a small book budget funded by the county library.

The two librarians at the reading room also do offsite programming for school-age children and teenagers at area refugee and low-income housing complexes, as well as at a nearby youth services housing center. Those offsite programs serve more than thirteen hundred youth each year.

The Survey

The anonymous survey consisted of thirteen questions and a comment section. The survey had four "yes or no" questions



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and nine multiple choice questions. The queries included the following:

Do you use your neighborhood library?

If not, why? Too far away, Fines, Don't know where it is, Don't have a library card

How many times have you been to the Byington Reading Room?

Once, 2–5 times, 6–10 times, 11–20 times, 20+ times

How many books do you have at home?

1–10, 11–40, 41–70, 71–100, 100+

How often do you read to your child each week?

0, 1–2 times, 3–4 times, 5–7 times

Because both health clinics serve a large refugee community, one of the questions asked what language the families spoke at home and to list that language. Respondents listed seventeen different languages, including Farsi, Nepali, Somali, Arabic, Afaan Oromoo, Swahili, Tongan, Vietnamese, and Thai. Spanish-language speakers comprised 45 percent of the completed surveys.

After an analysis of the survey results, several important patterns emerged. First, the number of books a family owned appeared to be a good indication of the frequency at which parents read to their children. The analysis showed that the more books a family owned, the more frequently the parents read to their children each week. This is illustrated in figure 1.² For families with only one to ten books, which represented one-third of respondents, 45 percent read to their children only one to two times per week. But as the number of books a family owns increases, so does the reading frequency.

Other researchers have found a similar correlation between books at home and reading frequency. Mol and Bus did a meta-analysis of print exposure research in 2011, and the authors found that “home literacy activities from an early age contribute substantially to young children’s language and reading comprehension. . . . Children who have had storybooks read to them frequently—and who have parents who read themselves and own many books—enter school with larger vocabularies and more advanced comprehension skills than their peers who grow up in poorer home literacy environments.”³

In addition to the number of books at home, library use was another good indicator of parental reading frequency. Of the parents surveyed, 60 percent used their local library, and of those who used the library, 81 percent read to their children three or more times per week. In contrast, 40 percent of the

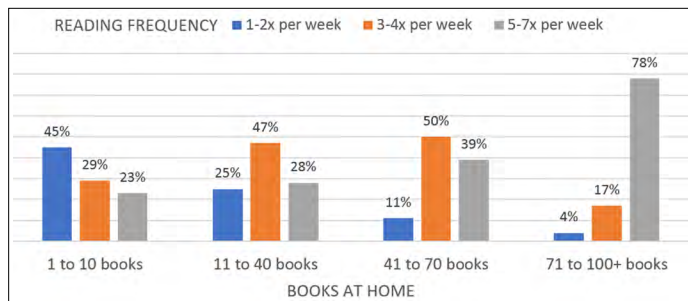


Figure 1. Number of books at home vs. reading frequency

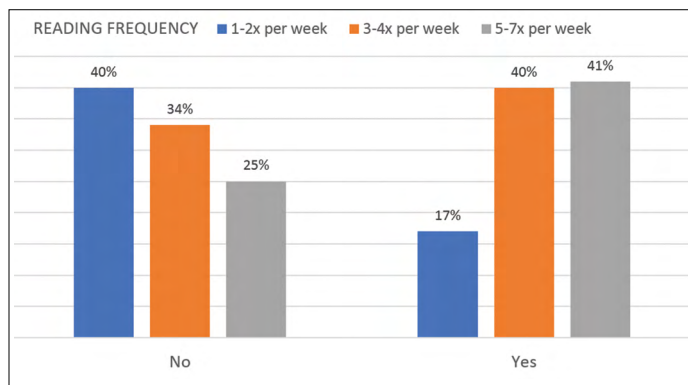


Figure 2. Do you use your neighborhood library?

parents who did not use their local library only read to their children once or twice a week, as shown in figure 2.

The survey results also pointed to the important role the reading room’s free book program had in growing a family’s home library. For those families on their first visit, 52 percent had only one to ten books at home. Compare that to families who have visited the reading room six to ten times, and the number of families with one to ten books at home drops to 17 percent, which is illustrated in figure 3.

The number of visits a family has made to the reading room also appears to positively impact parental reading frequency. As shown in figure 4, 44 percent of first-time visitors read to their children only one to two times a week. Reading frequency gradually increases with the number of visits a family has made to the clinic’s reading room.

Research has consistently shown the important connection among parental reading frequency, school readiness, and academic performance. Gottfried et al. found that “reading to children during the opening years of their development has long-term educational benefits that extend throughout the academic lifespan.”⁴

The recent study by Mendelsohn et al. looked beyond academic performance and concluded parenting activities such as “reading aloud and play . . . promote social-emotional development as reflected through reductions in disruptive behaviors.”⁵

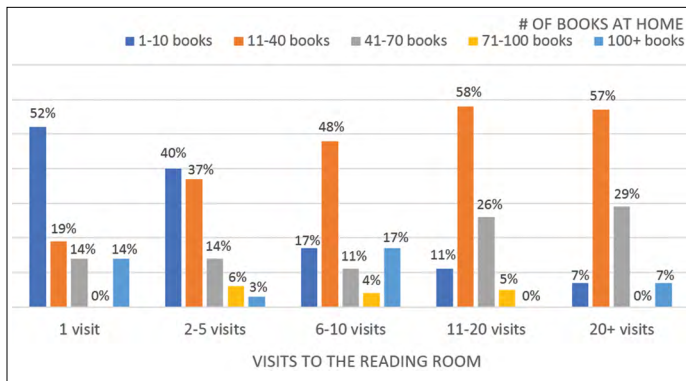


Figure 3. Number of books at home vs. number of visits to the Reading Room

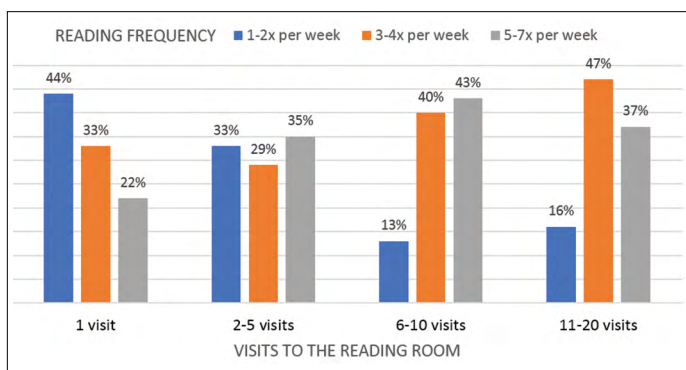


Figure 4. Reading frequency vs. number of visits to the Reading Room

The reading room's fairly limited survey illustrates the important interplay between a family's access to books and how frequently parents read to their children. These results reinforce the findings from other similarly focused research.

References

1. Suzanne Mol and Adriana G. Bus, "To Read or Not to Read: A Meta-Analysis of Print Exposure from Infancy to Early Adulthood." *Psychological Bulletin* 137, no. 2 (March 2011): 267–96, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021890>; Alan L. Mendelsohn et al., "Reading Aloud, Play, and Social-Emotional Development," *Pediatrics* 141, no. 5 (April 18, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-3393>.
2. Figures 1–4 do not add up to 100 percent because of rounding. For figure 1, three people responded that they do not read to their children at all each week, and those responses are not included in the figure. For figure 3, three people responded that they did not have any books at home, and those responses were not included in the figure.
3. Mol and Bus, "To Read or Not to Read."
4. Allen W. Gottfried et al., "Parental Provision of Early Literacy Environment as Related to Reading and Educational Outcomes Across the Academic Lifespan," *Parenting* 15, no. 1 (2015): 24–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2015.992736>.
5. Mendelsohn et al., "Reading Aloud, Play, and Social-Emotional Development."
6. Jennifer Buckingham, Robyn Beaman, and Kevin Wheldall, "Why Poor Children Are More Likely to Become Poor Readers: The Early Years," *Educational Review* 663, no. 4 (2014): 438–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.795129>.
7. Selamawit Tadesse and Patsy Washington, "Book Ownership and Young Children's Learning," *Childhood Education* 89, no. 3 (2013): 165–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2013.792688>.

A free book program is particularly important in low-income and refugee communities where the opportunity to access books can be limited. Poverty has been shown to be a risk factor in a number of child development areas. For example, research by Buckingham, Beaman, and Wheldall reported children in economically disadvantaged households are far more likely to start school with low emergent literacy skills, and that literacy gap continues to grow as those students move into higher grades. The developmental stage where family income plays the greatest role is early childhood.⁶

Another important, and often overlooked, aspect of the free book program is the child. For most children, merely receiving a random free book isn't enough. It is just as important for the child to find a book they are excited about.

The power of a child approaching a parent and asking to be read to should not be underestimated. While the survey did not ask this question directly, it is clear from discussions with parents that the children are as responsible for instigating storytime as the parents. Services such as reader's advisories at an early age can accelerate a child's association between reading and enjoyment.

Research by Tadesse and Washington suggests a similar interplay between the child-parent interaction where the children "beseech their parents to read the book to them." Their research also showed how a modest investment in a free book program made "an appreciable difference in young children's education and their relationship with family members."⁷ &