

The beauty of reading for pleasure



Reading for pleasure (RfP) is not only an engaging and joyful experience but also boosts cognition, creativity, resilience and mental wellbeing. As the plasticity of the human brain peaks at a young age, any learning activities that are beneficial for cognition and mental health during this critical period are particularly impactful.

In a new study, Yun-Jun Sun, Barbara Sahakian et al. examined the relationship between childhood RfP and brain structure, cognition and mental wellbeing in adolescence. Using a sample of more than 10,000 young adolescents from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) cohort, the researchers assessed brain scans, cognitive test scores, academic performance, anxiety, stress, depression scores, and psychopathological behavior, including aggression and rule-breaking. They divided the adolescents into two groups: one with a RfP duration of 3–10 years and the other with 0–2.5 years. “Adolescence is the transition between being a child to becoming an adult and so interventions in childhood that are beneficial for cognition, school academic attainment and

mental health are extremely important. Many mental health disorders begin in childhood or adolescence, so improving mental health during these developmental periods is crucial,” explains Sahakian, a joint first author of the paper.

The researchers found that RfP with a duration of 3–10 years in childhood positively correlated with cognitive performance scores, speech development and academic achievement in adolescents. It negatively correlated with mental health problems and psychopathological scores and with the total screen time spent on electronic devices. In addition, this group of adolescents had increased brain cortical regions, including areas related to language, cognition and the visual system. A subsequent mediation analysis showed that the mean cortical area of the identified brain regions partially mediated the associations between early RfP and increased cognition, as well as decreased psychopathological scores. “We were very pleased to see that such a relatively low-cost intervention as RfP could have positive effects in such a broad range of important areas measured, including cognition, school attainment and mental health,” adds Sahakian.

Supporting the concept of prevention being better than cure, these findings are a call to action for caregivers, parents, teachers and policymakers. RfP in childhood can be a low-cost interventional strategy with long-lasting benefits that can be implemented in families with different income levels.

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