

How I taught my 3-year-old to read like a 9-year-old

Tripling reading level through tutoring



ERIK HOEL

MAY 28, 2025

311

68

30

SI



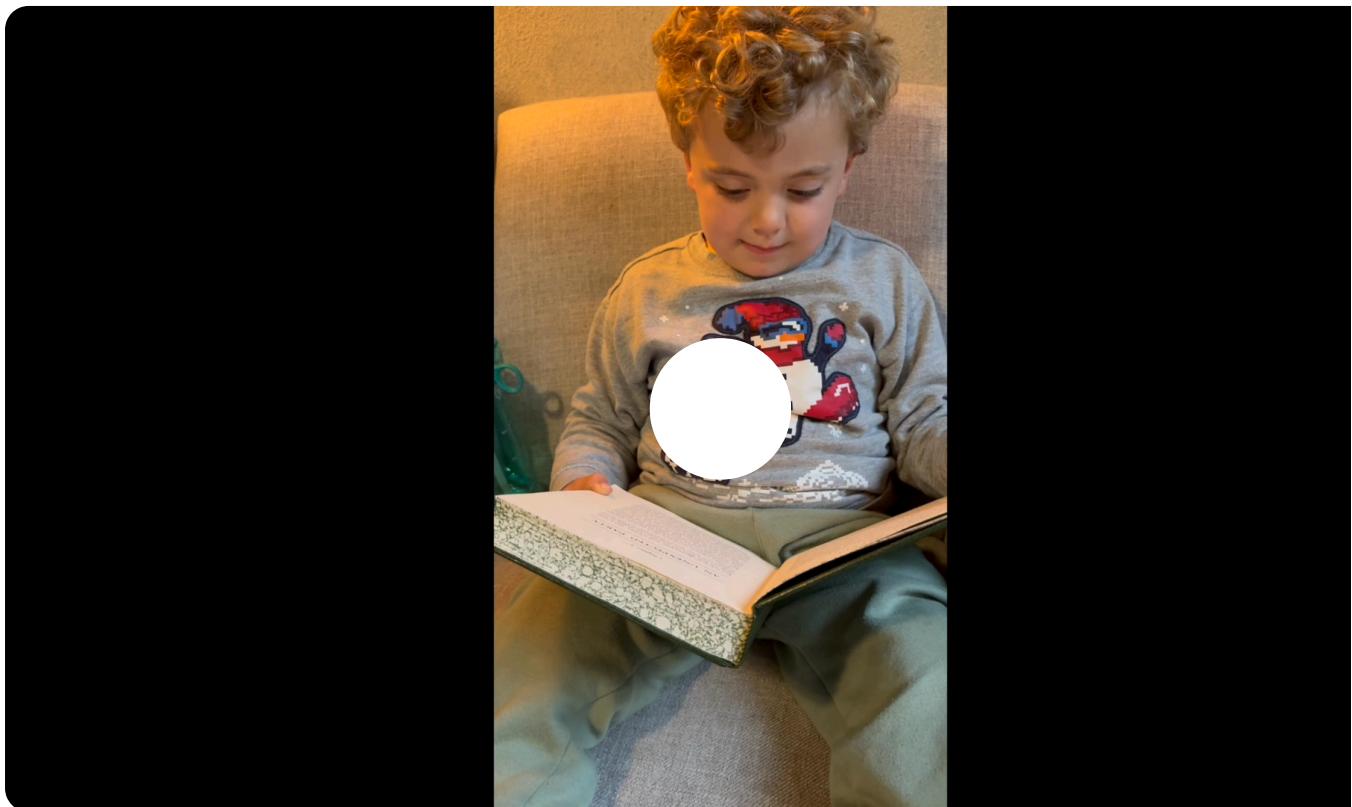
Art for *The Intrinsic Perspective* is by [Alexander Naughton](#)

Over a year has passed since I began teaching my toddler—then two years old how to read (a process [chronicled here](#)).

Now, I'm prepared to answer a burning scientific question that has kept absolute zero researchers up at night: Can a three-year-old read *The Hobbit*?

Turns out: yeah, pretty much. Here's Roman reading from Chapter 1:

In a hole, in the ground, there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry bare, sandy, hole, with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.



Of course, there are still plenty of words he can't read! While he could handle most of *The Hobbit*, I haven't let him read the whole book himself (there's too much violence, and the small font size, confusing names, and enough unknown words would likely wear him down). But for the class of books that he has any business reading alone, like early readers and chapter books, he can do so. He reads by himself for pleasure every day now, quickly and silently plowing through his growing library, and his decoding abilities have met the limits of his comprehension.

As you can tell, I'm quite proud of how well he's done, to the degree I risk coming across as supercilious about the whole thing (now there's a word he probably can't read). A few months ago, I gave him the **SDQA test**, a simple way of determining

reading level, and he got all the 3rd-grade-level words correct (so somewhere around eight or nine-year-olds).

Estimating reading level isn't very meaningful from a practical perspective, however. Goodhart's law of measures becoming targets has made vicious work education. For example, [in a study](#) wherein researchers had college students read the first few paragraphs of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, only 5% of English majors could passably describe what was going on.

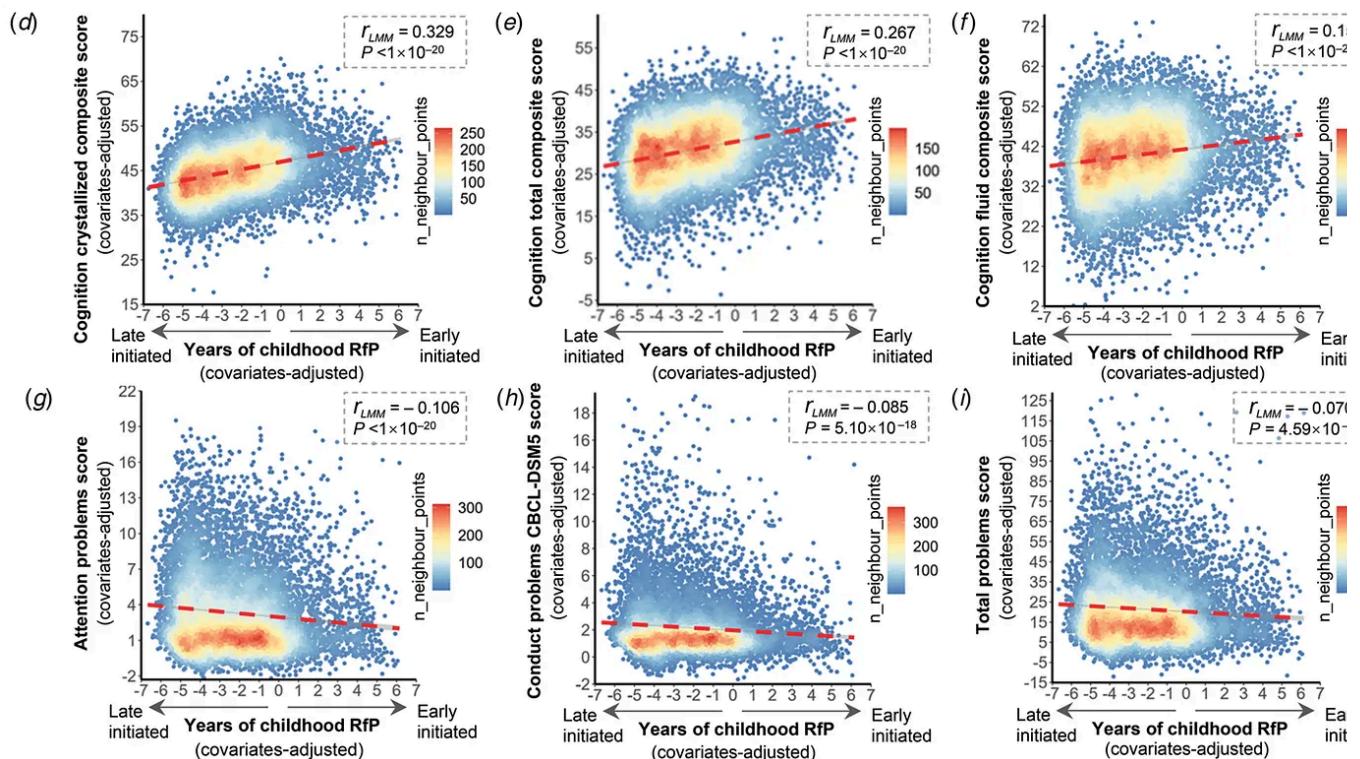
Instead, I think the only literacy milestone worth caring about is whether a child reads for pleasure, because...

Read for pleasure, make brain big.

In the Adolescent Brain and Cognitive Development (ABCD) project, a cohort of over 10,000 children in the US was tracked longitudinally. A 2023 [analysis of the data](#) revealed that the earlier a child was reading for pleasure, the more this correlated with higher scores on cognitive tests and lower numbers of mental health issues, even after controlling for things like socio-economic status, such that...

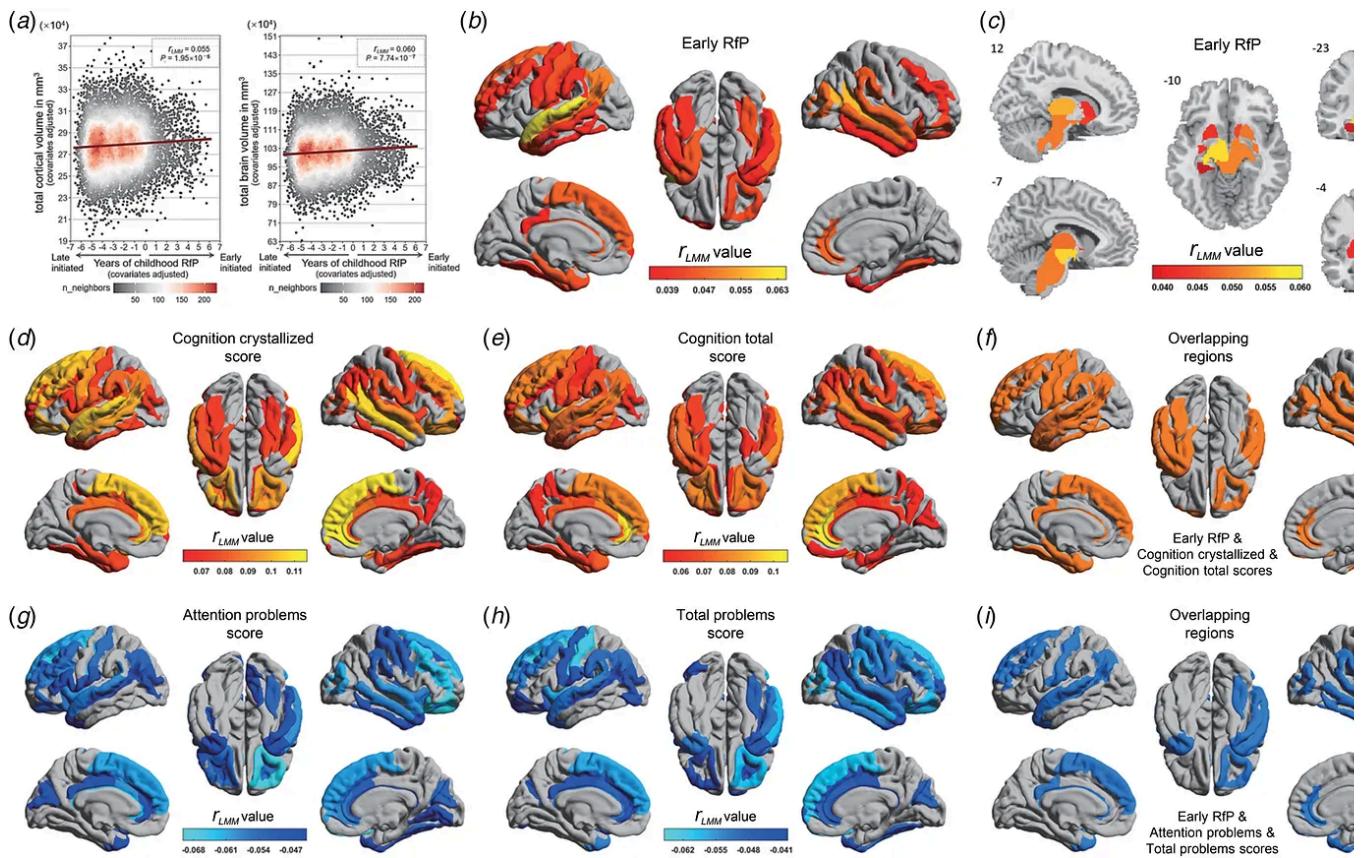
...cognitive performance was better and the mental problems were lower in young adolescents with higher levels of early RfP [reading for pleasure].

Here is years of reading for pleasure plotted against a number of such outcomes:



[Sun et al. \(2023\)](#)

In fact, the researchers found that reading for pleasure—and the more years spent doing so—may literally lead to larger brain volumes in adolescence.



[Sun et al. \(2023\)](#) (note how the effects are non-localized)

The positive effects showed up after controlling for genetics (as best one can, using genome-wide analyses in the full cohort). ABCD also had a participating of 711 twins and, interestingly, estimations from the twin data revealed that, while early reading-for-pleasure does have a genetic component, the majority of the trait's variance appears environmental.

Put it all together, and early reading for pleasure stands out in the scientific literature, in that it has (a) very broad cognitive benefits, (b) good empirical support for this class of thing, (c) has a large environmental component, and (c) actively replaces and competes with screen time, which is usually neutral or negative in the literature (in the ABCD cohort, screen time had an inverse correlation with reading for pleasure).

Type your email...

Subscribe

This last point, that reading for pleasure fills a certain time in the day, means daily...

Thank god for this new independent activity.

When I look back on my official reasons for teaching reading so early, oh, how naive I was! All pale in comparison to the true benefit.

Holy smokes, does early reading make parenting easier sometimes!

It's all the advantages of an iPad, none of the guilt. You've unlocked *infinite self-entertainment*. Long drive? Bring a book. Or five. Roman toddles into restaurants clutching a book as a backup activity, and reads while waiting in boring lines. Books are also calming, and so helps with emotional regulation. Toddler energy descends rapidly into deviance? Go read a book! It's a parenting cheat code. I don't know if this alone justifies the hours spent, but it sure is one heck of a benefit.

Here's a recent picture of him in his natural habitat, in one of his nooks (looking ever less like a toddler and more like a real little kid).



Reading for pleasure was the lodestar that governed my entire teaching process. A lot of other “teach your child to read” methods are based on modular lessons and exercises, which makes learning to read separate from what it’s all about, which is enjoying books. Comparatively, I did it by mostly reading books together, because it turns out reading books is a skill in itself. Not only does this practice the attention span needed to follow through with a book until its end; more subtly, it practices the skills you, a developed adult, don’t ever notice. E.g., sentences in picture-heavy books sometimes start at the top of a page, sometimes at the bottom, sometimes they’re broken up in the middle between images, or are even inside them. So the reader needs to scan for where to start. Easy for you! But not so easy for a three-year-old without prior practice. You, an adult, can physically hold books splayed open with different spines and thicknesses, and also you, as an adult, can easily flip single paper-thin pages without messing up your spot. But

you're three? So much of what we do effortlessly is invisible to us. Like how when encountering any new book, there are a few initial pages with tiny text about publishing and copyright. This is the most difficult material, and yet skipping it is not obvious to someone just learning to read. So to get better at reading books you have to read books!

All in all, this took about one year of tutoring.

The details for anyone who wants to replicate this can be found in a series of guides: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), and [Part 3](#), and the last part here. Privately, I've already worked with one person who wanted to get his own daughter reading early, and so far has had success. Eventually, I'll put all these parts together in a book on the science and practice of (very) early reading, with edits and additions.

In Part 2, “[Getting your child to love reading in 2024](#),” I discuss how, if the goal is reading for pleasure, then you must have books front and center in terms of daily entertainment. I also discuss the practicalities of setting up a daily “school time” (starting at less than 10 minutes a day, expanding to ~30 minutes a day by the end of the process).

In Part 3, “[The BIG GUIDE to teaching LITTLE PEOPLE how to sound out words](#),” I overviewed how to start and progress with phonics. I also detailed my approach to “blending” sounds, one of the most difficult steps, as well as how to play a “sentence completion game” I developed, which is useful for mastering simple phonics before early readers get introduced.

I took inspiration from my historical research on “[aristocratic tutoring](#),” but I pulled what’s effective from the science of learning, like how...

Spaced repetition turbocharges learning (and yet most schools don’t use it).

Side note: I still read to Roman every night. Together, we’ve worked our way through many classics of children’s literature (favorites include *The Wonderful*

Wizard of Oz and Peter Pan).

One night, we came across a character posing this riddle: "If you were to combine the movement of a circle and the movement of a line, what would you have?"

I asked Roman to guess. Without hesitation, he said, "A swirl." I was surprised since that was just about the given answer: A spiral.

Anyway, a spiral represents the ideal Platonic structure for learning, via its combination of a circle (return) and a straight line (progression). And the modern science of learning tells us that "spiral learning" is indeed incredibly effective because it automatically builds in **spaced repetition**—the review and reminder of what's been learned, spaced out at ever-increasing intervals. Such "interleaving" that mixes old and new things is vastly more effective than the "block learning" most traditional classrooms.

The power of spaced repetition has been known for 150 years. It replicates and creates **large effects**. So why is spaced repetition (or even its more implementable form, spiral learning) not used all the time in classrooms? No one knows!

One reason might be that "memorizing" has become a dirty word in education (the "rote" part has become implicit). Yet all learning involves memory: it's a spectrum, which is why spaced repetition improves generalization too (really, it improves **learning anything at all**). The second reason is that the "block model" of learning (learn one thing, learn the next) is much easier to implement in mass education; just as a factory, by being a system of mass production, is made as modular as possible, so too are our schools.

Type your email...

Subscribe

Unbounded by such concerns, I could go two steps forward, one step back. But I needed a set of phonics-based early readers that was large enough to trace a spiral. After completing simple phonics (described in **Part 3**), Roman could read "The cat sat on the mat" (slowly), but not "the feline reclined on the carpet." Luckily, I've

pointed to Julia Donaldson's **Songbirds Phonics books**. Julia Donaldson is a renowned children's book author, so unlike other phonics-based progression books, her set is well-written, with good illustrations, clever nods for parents, an appropriate air of delight. They're good books, in other words. This matter immensely, since the whole point is getting the kid to love books!



These are not available in the US by normal publishers. A travesty. You can, however, [order them through Amazon](#)

I took the Donaldson books and quite literally traced out a massive Archimed spiral. If you had charted our progress from session to session, it would have looked like this: originating in the middle with the simplest Stage 1 books, more books were added, repeating for a time but then becoming rarer and rarer in their procession, making way for newer books. We started with goals like reading a single book in a single session. By the end, he often read three or four books.



So much re-reading didn't feel unnatural because, as any parent can tell you, toddlers love to re-read books (and re-watch movies, and re-play games, ad infinitum).

I didn't bother optimizing this process much. I just went with my gut about whatever he needed to practice, or when he was ready for a new book and thus often new phonics rules. To teach the rules explicitly, I also used spaced repetition: an iPad flashcard app stored sets of words that reflected different simple phonics rules (like "car, bar, star," etc., for "ar"). Occasionally, I would notice him stumbling over some rule we had already covered, and so we'd quick

review the relevant set of words just to brush up (I didn't track or optimize this review).

Following this spiral, doing flashcards when it felt needed, and adding in non-Donaldson books that were phonically simple enough (e.g., *Hop on Pop*), was enough to get to the final stage, wherein...

I became lazy and he did all the work.

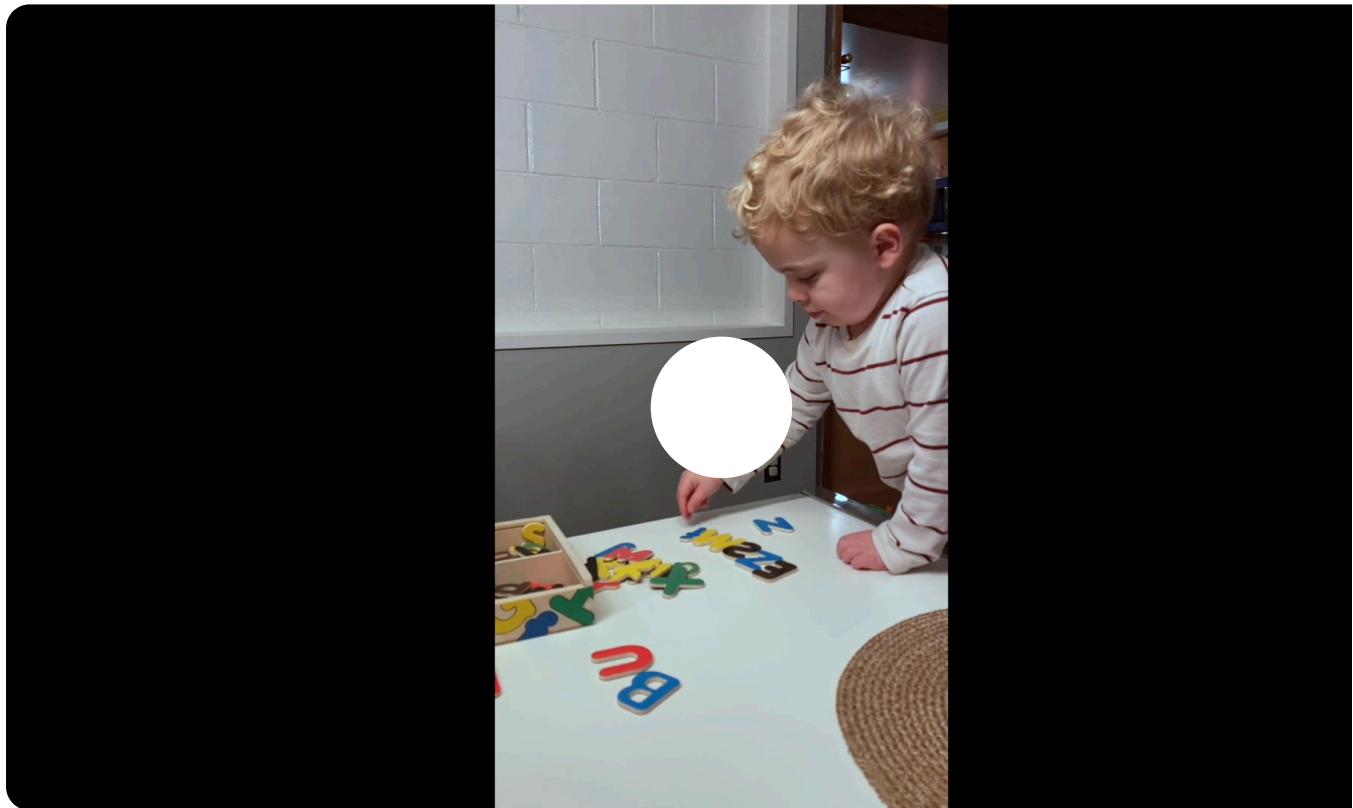
The choice to become lazy was made consciously, on purpose. I was increasingly dissatisfied while trying to teach the phonics of complex words; e.g., "ought," "though," "through," and "plough." Say those aloud and you'll see why. Therefore I don't recommend highly advanced phonics. Rather, phonics is like the training wheels on a bike. Great at the early stages, but the goal is to take them off.

So once he felt ready, I decided to stop teaching phonics. I ditched the flashcards and the spiral of re-reading. We switched to general early readers, like *Frog and Toad*, and rarely repeated anything. When Roman made mistakes or ran into new words, I simply told him how to pronounce the word then and there, rather than explicitly teaching the rules to those words. The only remaining spaced repetition was asking him, before proceeding to the next page, to find in the text any words he'd mispronounced ("Can you find 'special?'"), just to quickly reinforce the correct version.

I was nervous about this abandonment of phonics. I suddenly didn't have to do anything other than select our early reader(s) for the day and sit with him. All learning began to unfold internally; I had no access to it. Yet the momentum was there. Via the magic of the human brain extrapolating from limited data, funded not with billions of dollars worth of compute but with a thermodynamically-efficient budget of raspberries and chicken nuggets, he just got better and better with every session, until my presence was unnecessary for anything but advanced books.

That's not to say this whole process was easy! Just that it got easier. Teaching reading is front-loaded, in that decoding simple words and blending them together is where a lot of structure and thought is needed. But by the end we were just reading whatever looked fun, and my role became correcting errors. Look back on the whole process, what mattered most was that I made it fun and interesting and committed mental time and energy to the session, and that we did it regularly. In this, it resembled many other things in the world, where the hardest part is showing up and trying.

Here's a compilation of what the entire progression looked like:



FAQs

Have there been any negative effects?

My main worry was that this would cut into his imaginary play. But he quickly settled into a healthy state wherein his reading occurs at will and freely, in his

many chosen nooks. So he dips in and out during the downtime at the house, while otherwise playing outside in the yard, building stuff, fiddling with action figures and toys, putting on his costumes, making up games with his sister, or doing activities resembling typical preschool stuff (sensory play, puzzles, maze activity books, volcano sets). His mother is teaching him to write his letters and draw, so he can spell out simple messages now, like birthday cards and well-wishes (e.g., while drawing a thunderstorm he'll write "BOOM" over the top of it). How much he reads every day depends on the circumstances and his mood. Sometimes it's hardly at all, because he's at the beach or distracted by a new toy, or has some long-running imaginary game. Some rainy days he reads a ton. Fullfilling a toddler's day is hard work—their hours are not our hours, and successfully getting a toddler from 6AM to 7PM is rarely a question of "How can I squeeze in this thing, we're fully booked!" but usually more like "Oh god, dinner is in an hour and they're already getting insane!"

Did teaching early reading require any sort of coercion?

No. By far the most common problem was that he enjoyed our sessions too much and would be mad when they ended. I eventually bought a 30-minute hourglass for him to flip at the start, which helped create an official ending when the sand trickled out. Getting him out to "school" (we did it in my office, which sits in the backyard) was basically never a problem. Toddlers and kids love schedules and rituals, and once "school" was in that category, it was just something we did every day. I always brought snacks, and so he'd chomp on berries or toast or whatever else (you can learn to read with your mouth full). He's still young enough to unconditionally love getting attention from his parents, and he had me all to himself for a solid chunk of time.

Of course, occasionally, classic toddler issues would crop up. I'm not claiming the process was easy 100% of the time. Teaching anything serious and hard (and reading is hard) requires at least *some* authority; otherwise you can't ever say "Okay, stop dropping goldfish on the rug and giggling like a maniac for no reason, let's pay attention and try again, I know you can do it." You have to hold the line.

that, ultimately, you are there to learn. But I was no taskmaster—we spent a lot of time discussing what we were reading (sometimes called “**dialogic reading**”), giggling, acting things out, and just chatting too. I’m going to do this same process with my daughter and am actively looking forward to it.

Why bother with phonics? Why not just memorize sight words from the beginning?

That could work. But starting with phonics has some advantages: (a) it gives a sensible progression with clear mastery levels, and (b) helps them conceptualize that words are “chunks,” which helps generalizing later, even if they never learn precisely why some “chunk” is pronounced the way it is (most adults don’t know this either). More generally, toddlers are sort of like AIs—they will overfit.

Phonics means you know for sure what they’re learning. I personally wouldn’t want this process to be a black box from the beginning. It’d be easy to get stuck and you wouldn’t know why.

Are you sure he’s not just memorizing the books?

Yes, I’m 100% sure. Especially now—he can pick up any random book in the children’s section of the library and read it—but I was sure even back when we were primarily working with a constrained set of books by one author. Still, it’s a real concern. Toddlers have incredible memories. In the early stages of the process, the distinction between memory and learning was indeed blurry. Early on, he probably memorized chunks of many of the Julia Donaldson books—if not to the point of being able to recite them verbatim, at least to the point of being deeply familiar with them. However, due to delaying early readers until he could decode the simple sentences I generated, which were different each time (via a sentence completion game in **Part 3**), he always understood the point was about sounding out the words, even if he knew them already ahead of time. Familiar was often good, not bad, for learning. A new book is a stimulating experience! Where do you look? The images are distracting and toddler-brain-melting in their novelty. Re-reading was key, in that the real learning could take place after he dealt with its content as a book qua book and so could look beyond that and pay close attention to the letters.

Do you plan to continue an accelerated education via tutoring?

Yes, for the foreseeable future. Now that reading is finished, we've moved on to math in our morning sessions. I'll write more about this, too (right now it involves 100 tiny plastic ducks). Our local school system here is not the best, and he's not attending preschool. This gives us plenty of time to find a situation that works for him. But for now, he's focused on being a kid: he has a good social life, attends events daily, like public classes hosted by local organizations, and has an extended family and friend group. I'm keeping my eye out for interesting microschools, tutoring experiences, and things of that nature. If anyone knows any exciting educational opportunities in Boston, the surrounding areas, or Cape Cod, let me know. Same goes for someone in the area who'd be right for a well-paid and travel-compensated part-time tutoring/nanny position for a kid (or kids) like this.

"Teaching early reading is unfeasible for everyone to do, because X, Y, and Z."

True. This isn't right for everyone. There's no one path. Plenty of kids learn to read in traditional school (albeit usually later) and then read for pleasure plenty.

Does reading so early single him out?

I'm sensitive to this concern. As of now, I don't think he has a clear conception of how, e.g., his friends can't read, or that he can read better than some kids three times his age. He's still the same person, just one who reads a lot. He's aware that adults *like* that he can read, but he's mostly too shy to show off to strangers. Not that he, in the blithe ignorance of the young, always notice its effects.

For instance, a couple of months ago we went on a humble errand to the pharmacy of our local CVS. Roman had been reading in the car, so he brought along a book almost as big as he is and stood mumbling the words as we waited. Standing primly in line behind us happened to be an older well-put-together woman, who had about her the matronly and bookish air of a former teacher—exactly the kind of woman you'd find at the desk of your local library. At first she smiled and took his reading as a novelty, but as time went on she leaned closer to listen, curious. This occurred several times, as if to confirm. Then, unable to contain herself, she declared aloud with amazement, "He's actually reading!" to everyone around.]

was said in the tone of needing to attract attention to this thing, this unexpected thing, unfolding in front of you in, of all places, CVS. She didn't take her eyes off him after that, smiling and occasionally blinking as if in bewilderment. Having soon gotten what we came for, we left. But as we passed by on the way out, and she kindly looked down at him tottering past, I saw that she was quietly, in the concealed and unobtrusive manner of someone unused to doing so in public, wiping away tears.

Subscribe to The Intrinsic Perspective

By Erik Hoel · Thousands of paid subscribers

Bridging the two cultures of science and the humanities

Type your email...

Subscribe

By subscribing, I agree to Substack's [Terms of Use](#), and acknowledge its [Information Collection Notice](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).



311 Likes • 30 Restacks

Discussion about this post

Comments Restacks



Write a comment...



Kim Louise 28 May

Heart Liked by Erik Hoel

My mother did this with me too (although not so systematically - just reading books with me regularly and putting kids' educational channels on TV that happened to teach phonics). She sent me to preschool already reading fluently; the teacher didn't believe her until I read her a primer she'd given me to take home.

In the 3rd grade I tested at an 8th grade reading level, and in high school I scored 790/800 on the reading portion of the SAT without specifically practicing for it. They called me "gifted," but I just started with several years of experience reading for pleasure when my peers had little to no reading experience. I think that early confidence snowballed into further successes. Now I'm a couple years out of high school and my job is translating Japanese novels into English.

So although I'm a sample of one, I strongly believe that this approach really does give kids a valuable head start.

 LIKE (13)  REPLY



Rohit Krishnan 28 May

 Liked by Erik Hoel

This is fascinating! Thank you for writing this. We saw both our kids start reading around age 3. The younger one a bit faster because he wanted to do what his brother did. I think they both learned alphabets first, mostly our fault, and we didn't do much beyond reading with them occasionally. We took them to places where reading things were interesting for them: these were mainly museums. Which made them also learn words first, animals and dinosaurs facts to begin with, but also planets and general science, and then back-solved to start reading.

An interesting part was that at his Montessori school the teachers told us the 3yo wasn't reading. Turned out it's because they were doing 3 letter simple words, and he didn't care to read them.

 LIKE (12)  REPLY

66 more comments...