

Preschool language skills are associated with better reading comprehension at school



The evidence suggests that successful instruction for reading comprehension should target a broad set of language skills

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review examines the relationships between skills in preschool and later reading comprehension. The review summarizes evidence from 64 longitudinal studies that have observed these relationships.

A variety of language skills related to both language comprehension (e.g., vocabulary and grammar) and code-related skills (e.g., phonological awareness and letter knowledge) is important for developing decoding skills and, in turn, reading comprehension in school. Thus, reading comprehension instruction is more likely to be successful if it focuses on a broad set of language skills.

What is this review about?

Determining how to provide the best instruction to support children's reading comprehension requires an understanding of how reading comprehension actually develops. To promote our understanding of this process, this review summarizes evidence from observations of the development of language and reading comprehension from the preschool years into school. The main outcome in this review is reading comprehension skills.

Understanding the development of reading comprehension and its precursors can help us develop hypotheses about what effective instruction must comprise to facilitate well-functioning reading comprehension skills. These hypotheses can be tested in randomized controlled trials.

What studies are included?

This review includes studies that observe the relationship between preschool language and code-related skills and later reading comprehension. A total of 64 studies were identified, all of which were included in the analysis. However, several of them suffered from considerable attrition, used convenience sampling, included a selected sample and failed to report on important study and sample characteristics.



The studies spanned 1986 to 2016 and were mostly performed in the USA, Europe and Australia.

What are the main results in this review?

Code-related skills in preschool (e.g., phoneme awareness and letter knowledge) are indirectly related to reading comprehension via word decoding. Linguistic comprehension is directly related to reading comprehension skills. Code-related skills and linguistic comprehension were strongly related. Moreover, language comprehension was more important for reading comprehension in older readers than in younger readers.

A broad set of language skills is important in developing reading comprehension

How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies up to February 2016. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in December 2017.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

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About this summary

This summary was prepared by the authors based on their Campbell Systematic Review 2017:14 Preschool predictors of later reading comprehension ability by Hanne Næss Hjetland, Ellen Irén Brinchmann, Ronny Scherer, Monica Melby-Lervåg (DOI 10.4073/csr.2017:14). Tanya Kristiansen redesigned, proofread and produced the summary. Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.

What do the findings of this review mean?

These results show that a broad set of language skills is important in developing reading comprehension. The results also suggest that successful instruction for reading comprehension should target a broad set of language skills.

In future studies, the effectiveness of instruction that targets such a set must be tested in randomized controlled trials. Additionally, future longitudinal studies should address issues of reliability, missing data and representativeness.

