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FAMILY

Messy House, Messy Minds

The connections among kids, reading, and an orderly home.

By Emily Bazelon

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Read to your kids. It's a mantra from educators that President Obama likes to invoke, most recently in his [address](#) to Congress this week. For good reason: Plenty of studies drive home the connection between reading to your child and your child learning to read to himself. But what if this isn't the only path to early literacy? Wouldn't we welcome an alternative for children who can't sit still to listen to books—or for parents who fall asleep reading them? Except, uhm, if that alternative heads straight for another source of parental woe: keeping the house neat.

In a recent academic article with the Mary Poppins title of "[Order in the House!](#)" Anna D. Johnson and Anne Martin of Columbia's Teachers College, along with a couple of co-authors, looked at the effect of household order on kids' reading skills. Their sample is relatively narrow: 455 kindergartners and first-graders, all twins, who live in Ohio and western Pennsylvania, nearly all of them white and middle-class. The researchers divided the kids in two groups: those with mothers who have above-average reading skills and those whose mothers are average readers. For both groups, they controlled for socioeconomic status, meaning that their results can't be explained away by class differences among the kids. (Fathers are absent from this study, like many of its kind. The research was done only with mothers, because double interviews cost more and also, Martin says, because the mother is "usually the best recorder" of family events.)

Both groups of mothers were asked about how often their children are read to—and also how often they amuse themselves with books. Then the mothers were asked a separate set of questions about order at home, designed to get at what researchers call "executive function." A few sample responses: "It's a real zoo in our home," "The children have a regular bedtime routine," and "We are usually able to stay on top of things." A shout-out to all my endearingly, creatively messy friends (but not to my husband, who *still* shouldn't leave his shoes in the middle of the front hall): It's clear that by an "ordered home," Johnson and Martin do not mean a spotlessly neat and clean one.

Surprisingly, the amount of shared parent-child reading time did not matter, on average, for the reading skills of either group of kids. What mattered instead, for the kids of average-reader mothers, was how often a child amuses herself with books. What mattered for the kids of the high-reading moms was how orderly the family's home was. What to make of these not-so-intuitive results?

Well, they do *not* mean it's time to cancel bedtime reading. For one thing, as I said earlier, lots of

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studies support its importance. For another, we are talking about only one slice of kids here: the children of middle-class mothers. The authors also point out that even for this group, the results may reflect mostly timing. Much of the research on early reading research involves preschoolers, whereas this study focused on slightly older kids. Maybe "the effects of shared reading would have emerged earlier, and therefore was not detected in the present study," Johnson and Martin say.

They offer another theory to explain their findings about the benefits of order. It may be that "household order taps a more fundamental characteristic of parents or households, such as maternal industriousness, planning ability, or conscientiousness, that gives rise to both orderliness and better reading skills in children." This is the idea of executive functioning, which captures "planning and problem-solving abilities." Maybe order helps promote reading only among the children of the high-reading mothers because it's what the authors call a "higher order element"—in other words, it matters only once you've got the basics down, which means reading to your kids pre-kindergarten and surrounding them with books.

In any case, order and executive function are aspects of parenthood that hasn't actually been studied much until now, according to Fred Morrison, a professor of education and psychology at the University of Michigan. "This is an example of a new set of research that is opening up vistas of parenting we haven't really looked at in the last 10 to 15 years," he said.

Morrison likes the Johnson-Martin study for that reason. But like the authors themselves, he stressed that the findings are preliminary, since they haven't been replicated. And Morrison isn't convinced that order and organization actually account for why some kids of high-reading moms learn to read earlier and better than other kids with similar moms. He suggested another aspect of parenting that's also beginning to get more attention: warmth and responsiveness. Johnson and Martin didn't measure this, so we can't know whether another explanation for their results about early literacy lies in how warm and responsive parents are—how much they ask questions and encourage kids' curiosity. This, of course, is an entirely different thing than putting your kids to bed at the same time every night. Parents may be good at one and not the other.

I asked Morrison, as well as Johnson and Martin, about a pet theory of mine for why kindergartners and first-graders might be better served by playing with books by themselves rather than being read to. Maybe in kindergarten and first grade, kids figure out that the books they can generally read to themselves (if they're not *super* early readers, anyway) are not nearly as thrilling as the books their parents read to them. My own 6-year-old would much rather listen to full-fledged chapter books like [Beezus and Ramona](#) or [The Wolves of Willoughby Chase](#) than toil through an early reader—even a good one like [Frog and Toad](#). Sometimes I think that reading to him on demand is slowing him down rather than speeding him up. I'm not complaining, mind you. I don't think it matters much for most kids whether they become fluid, independent readers at 5 or 6 or 7. But I do think Simon is gaming the system a bit.

Johnson and Martin were skeptical of my theory. Morrison nicely called it an interesting question but said no one has explored it. So, hey, there's a good graduate-school project for some ed student out there. In the meantime, I suppose I will put a little thought into whether my house would pass the Johnson-Martin standard for orderliness. I'm not ready for an inspection. But we do have pretty regular bedtime and morning routines. Usually, I think of this as a matter mainly of my own sanity. Who knows—maybe it's turning my kids into readers, too.

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