

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

“Reading Feelings” research project

How does reading relate to children’s empathy?

Can reading help children become more empathic? And could empathy itself support children in becoming better readers? New evidence from a three-year research project at the University of Sussex suggests the answer is yes: children’s reading and empathy appear to develop side by side, each supporting and strengthening the other. These findings come from the “*Reading Feelings*” project, led by Professors Jane Oakhill, Alan Garnham and Robin Banerjee, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Although the full results will be published in the coming months, the first phase of analysis has revealed interesting ways in which children’s reading and empathy are connected.

To explore empathy, the researchers focused on two key aspects: **cognitive empathy**, the ability to recognise and understand people’s feelings, and **affective empathy**, which involves sharing others’ emotions and feeling motivated to help others in need. When examining reading, the researchers looked not only at **ability** - how accurately children read and comprehend - but also at **engagement**, including their motivation for reading, how often they read and how easily they feel transported into stories.

The project involved three studies conducted with children aged 8 to 10 from six primary schools in the southeast of England. Study 1 followed the same group of children over two years, tracking how empathy, reading skills and engagement developed and influenced each other over time. Studies 2 and 3 focused specifically on how children engage in reading fiction, examining whether specific kinds of individual and group activities strengthen the role of fiction in supporting empathy and prosocial behaviour.

The analysis of Study 1 has so far revealed a multilayered relationship between reading and empathy. Specifically, children with stronger reading skills had higher cognitive empathy later, and in turn, children who were better at understanding other people’s emotions (cognitive empathy) tended to become stronger readers as they grew older. Reading ability was also found to be related to affective empathy: better readers were able to share others’ emotions more easily. And, importantly, children who were more empathic (higher cognitive empathy) showed greater engagement with reading at later stages.

Studies 2 and 3 have added another compelling layer. When children were encouraged to pay attention to characters’ feelings and label the emotions they read in a story, their cognitive empathy was found to improve more than through reading alone. In addition, children who felt deeply immersed in stories showed higher affective empathy after reading, suggesting that the emotional pull of a narrative supports the sharing of others’ emotions. Meanwhile, discussing stories with peers helped children reflect more deeply on characters’ experiences and improved their broader ability to recognise emotions in real life.

The findings reveal a rich and multifaceted interplay between reading and empathy and support the idea that boosting empathy through reading is not just about practising a skill; it is also about providing children with meaningful, emotionally rich experiences with stories and supporting them in thinking about feelings, relationships and human behaviour.

As society looks for ways to strengthen children’s social and emotional development, this emerging evidence suggests that reading could become a key part of the solution. The research adds weight to growing calls for empathy to be prioritised within the national curriculum and for reading to be supported not only as an academic goal but as a pathway to understanding others and becoming kinder human beings.

Written by Dr Persefoni Tzanaki and reviewed by Profs Jane Oakhill, Alan Garnham and Robin Banerjee

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Raising Generation Empathy

the power of reading in social and emotional development