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Home Libraries Provide Huge Educational Advantage

Will your child finish college? The answer may be as close as your bookshelves, or lack thereof.



Get thee a home library. Research shows that your child's academic success may depend on it. (Doug Miller / flickr.com)

April 8, 2010 • By [Tom Jacobs](#) • [33 Comments and 0 Reactions](#)

In an era of electronic entertainment, the term “home library” increasingly has the word “video” in the middle. But before parents start giving away books to clear shelf space for DVDs, they’ll want to consider the results of a [comprehensive new study](#) (PDF).

After examining statistics from 27 nations, a group of researchers found the presence of book-lined shelves in the home — and the intellectual environment those volumes reflect — gives children an enormous advantage in school.

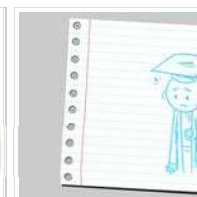
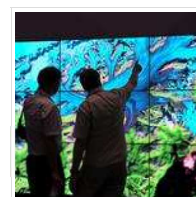
“Home library size has a very substantial effect on educational attainment, even adjusting for parents’ education, father’s occupational status and other family background characteristics,” reports the study, recently published in the journal *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*. “Growing up in a home with 500 books would propel a child 3.2 years further in education, on average, than would growing up in a similar home with few or no books.

“This is a large effect, both absolutely and in comparison with other influences on education,” adds the research team, led by University of Nevada sociologist [M.D.R. Evans](#). “A child from a family rich in books is 19 percentage points more likely to complete university than a comparable child growing up without a home library.”

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This effect holds true regardless of a nation's wealth, culture or political system, but its intensity varies from country to country. In China, a child whose parents own 500 books will average 6.6 more years of education than a comparable child from a bookless home. In the U.S., the figure is 2.4 years — which is still highly significant when you consider it's the difference between two years of college and a full four-year degree.

The researchers used data from the World Inequality Study, which pooled information from a series of representative national samples. In most nations, survey participants (a total of more than 73,000 people) were asked to estimate the number of books in their parents' home when they were 14 years old. The scholars compared that figure with other factors influencing educational achievement, including the education levels of one's parents.

"Regardless of how many books the family already has, each addition to a home library helps the children get a little farther in school," they report. "But the gains are not equally great across the entire range. Having books in the home has a greater impact on children from the least-educated families. It is at the bottom, where books are rare, that each additional book matters most."

Evans and her colleagues contend the number of books at home is an excellent reflection of a family's "scholarly culture," which they describe as a "way of life in homes where books are numerous, esteemed, read and enjoyed." An early immersion in such a culture "provides skills and competencies that are useful in school," and/or engenders "a preference for and enjoyment of books and reading that makes schooling congenial, or enjoyable," they conclude.

So mom and dad don't have to be scholars themselves; they just have to read and respect books, and pass that love of reading down to their children. Anna Quindlen was clearly onto something when she [wrote](#): "I would be the most content if my children grew up to be the kind of people who think decorating consists mostly of building enough bookshelves."

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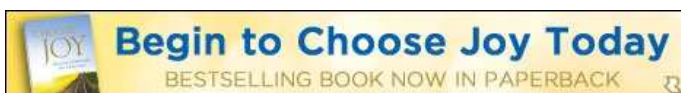
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About Tom Jacobs

Staff writer Tom Jacobs is a veteran journalist with more than 20 years experience at daily newspapers. He has served as a staff writer for The Los Angeles Daily News and the Santa Barbara News-Press. His work has also appeared in The Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune and Ventura County Star.



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Nancy • 3 years ago

I am a librarian, MSLS; my husband a businessman (MBA). Our two children were 2 years apart. Both were read to identically; equally had access to thousands of books. One completed graduate school. The other did not finish junior college. Why?

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mwe • 3 years ago

I'm a bit wary of the conclusions drawn in this article -- perhaps the author has confused cause and effect. Full bookshelves don't create scholarly children; parents do. The quantity of reading material in the home is almost certainly less a factor in a child's educational success than his or her parents' genetic makeup, academic encouragement, and intellectual curiosity. I'd argue that the books are the evidence of the forces at work, and not the force itself.

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tess • 3 years ago

Thank you for this article. My mother never received her high school diploma. The child of an immigrant mechanic with a 4th grade education, she was kicked out of 9th grade for mouthing a teacher and promptly sent out to help support her family. HOWEVER, my mother truly valued education, and she made every effort to learn as much as she could alongside my older siblings as they attended high school. By the time I was born, Mom and Dad had collected an impressive selection of books: the classics, an encyclopedia set with yearly updates, many Time/Life science and history books, and as many nonfiction/fiction bestsellers as they could find. We did not own library cards because we were too far out of town, so my mom created a library of 1000's of childrens books for us. When one is surrounded by so many books, right there at your fingertips, you are given independence and power to explore, to find answers, to imagine beyond your world. I have always been thankful for that gift! My love affair with books continues, and a portion of the bookshelves that graced my childhood home now festoon my daughter's bedroom and our family room, a gift to my children and the many friends they bring to play and read at our home.

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Sherrie Young • 3 years ago

Dear Mr. Jacobs,

We at the National Book Foundation read your article, "Home Libraries Provide Huge Educational Advantage," and would like to congratulate you on a

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