

The Effects of Childhood Exposure to Newspapers on Adult Readership

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Summary

Two recent Readership Institute studies show a relationship between exposure to news and newspapers in childhood and reading newspapers as an adult.

The research provides statistical evidence that children who grow up in homes where news is regularly read and discussed tend to read newspapers more as adults.

Children who were exposed to a newspaper through class-related activities in school also show higher newspaper readership as adults than those who had no such exposure. Of the two types of exposure, “at home” has the greater impact on adult readership.

The implications are that newspapers should look for opportunities to foster newspaper usage among children in the home as well as schools and should promote and perhaps facilitate discussions about news between parents and children.

Access, then, from early stages of life is important. But it’s also necessary to feature and promote content that children will talk about and to present it in engaging ways.

Newspaper Readership in Childhood

(From the New Readers study, a mail survey to 10,800 readers of local daily newspapers in 52 U.S. markets, October 2003-January 2004.)

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in newspaper readership, attitudes and behavior across different age and racial/ethnic groups. All respondents were current newspaper readers.

The pattern that adult newspaper readership (as measured by Reader Behavior Scores, or RBS) is positively correlated to exposure to newspapers as a child—holds true across all ethnic and age groups. Respondents who grew up in homes where newspapers were read and discussed on a daily basis show significantly higher levels of readership than respondents who were exposed less frequently. Not surprisingly, respondents who read newspapers most frequently as children have the highest adult readership.

There was one surprise finding. The study reveals that across demographic groups, Caucasians who recall a school class where a newspaper was read or discussed demonstrate equal or slightly lower readership levels when compared to their counterparts who recall no such class.

The study reveals that Caucasians are more likely than members of other ethnic groups to have grown up in a home where the paper was read or discussed by family members. Hispanics are less likely than members of other groups to have grown up in newspaper reading families or to have read newspapers as children. Interestingly, however, African American and Hispanics who read as children or grew up in newspaper-oriented homes have higher readership than Caucasians who read as children or grew up in newspaper homes.

The highest readership levels come from exposure to the newspaper both at home and at school. However, it appears that exposure to the newspaper exclusively at home has a stronger impact on adult readership than does exposure to the newspaper exclusively in school.

Results by Ethnicity

Q37. When you were growing up, to what extent was a newspaper read or discussed by people in your home?											
	Overall		White		African American		Hispanic/Latino		Asian/Pacific Islander		
	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	
Almost every day	50	4.72	54	4.67	46	4.97	40	4.81	44	4.61	
A few times per week	22	4.25	22	4.21	21	4.40	23	4.40	22	3.93	
Very infrequently	12	4.36	11	4.23	12	4.46	15	4.58	15	4.48	
Seldom or never	12	4.19	9	4.14	14	4.30	18	4.26	13	4.01	
Do not remember	4	4.39	3	4.48	7	4.34	5	4.23	6	4.35	

Q38. When you were growing up, did you read any part of a daily newspaper?											
	Overall		White		African American		Hispanic/Latino		Asian/Pacific Islander		
	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	
Almost every day	34	4.90	35	4.88	33	5.09	27	4.96	38	4.65	
A few times per week	28	4.48	28	4.42	29	4.64	29	4.61	28	4.26	
Very infrequently	19	4.10	19	4.00	20	4.26	21	4.35	18	3.97	
Seldom or never	14	4.07	14	4.03	14	4.19	18	4.08	13	4.19	
Do not remember	4	4.63	4	4.74	5	4.51	5	4.53	3	4.11	

Q39. When you were in elementary, junior high, or high school, did you...											
	Overall		White		African American		Hispanic/Latino		Asian/Pacific Islander		
	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	
Have a class where a newspaper was regularly used or discussed?											
Yes	47	4.46	46	4.39	53	4.75	48	4.53	43	4.35	
No	42	4.51	44	4.52	35	4.51	40	4.56	46	4.28	
Regularly read the student newspaper?											
Yes	62	4.63	63	4.59	60	4.76	57	4.76	63	4.46	
No	30	4.20	30	4.18	29	4.44	34	4.20	27	3.98	

Results by Age

Regardless of current age, respondents who grew up in homes where newspapers were read and discussed on a daily basis demonstrate significantly higher levels of readership than respondents who were exposed less frequently or not at all. Not surprisingly, respondents who read newspapers frequently as children also have higher readership in adulthood than those who read less frequently (or not at all) as children.

Some other findings of note:

- Sixty-six percent of 18-24 year olds remember a class where newspapers were either read or discussed and 60% said they regularly read the student newspaper.
- Newspaper readership in the home appears to be declining by generation. Over half (54%) of respondents over the age of 35 say newspapers were read or discussed almost every day in their home. That number drops to 36% for 18-24 year olds.
- The trends appear even starker for childhood readership. Thirty-nine percent of respondents over age 35 say they read the newspaper growing up. Only 16% of 18-24 year olds say they read the newspaper growing up.

Q37. When you were growing up, to what extent was a newspaper read or discussed by people in your home?										
	Overall		18-24		25-34		35+			
	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS	%	RBS		
Almost every day	50	4.72	36	4.07	44	4.25	54	4.93		
A few times per week	22	4.25	30	3.63	27	3.94	19	4.59		
Very infrequently	12	4.36	14	3.78	14	3.85	11	4.73		
Seldom or never	12	4.19	16	3.37	12	3.73	11	4.61		
Do not remember	4	4.39	5	3.40	3	3.78	5	4.70		

Q38. When you were growing up, did you read any part of a daily newspaper?											
	Overall			18-24			25-34			35+	
	%	RBS		%	RBS		%	RBS		%	RBS
Almost every day	34	4.90		16	4.25		25	4.31		39	5.07
A few times per week	28	4.48		33	4.10		30	4.15		27	4.69
Very infrequently	19	4.10		29	3.43		25	3.84		16	4.49
Seldom or never	14	4.07		19	3.19		16	3.68		13	4.49
Do not remember	4	4.63		3	3.82		3	3.99		5	4.86

Q39. When you were in elementary, junior high, or high school, did you...											
Have a class where a newspaper was regularly used or discussed?											
	Overall			18-24			25-34			35+	
	%	RBS		%	RBS		%	RBS		%	RBS
Yes	47	4.46		66	3.80		54	4.11		41	4.83
No	42	4.51		28	3.59		37	3.91		47	4.78
Regularly read the student newspaper?											
Yes	62	4.63		60	3.99		61	4.17		62	4.90
No	30	4.20		34	3.31		31	3.77		29	4.57

A Closer Look at the Effects of Reading at Home and Reading at School

A natural question that arises from this research is, “Which childhood activity is more likely to produce strong adult readership?—reading the newspaper in school or having the newspaper regularly discussed in the home.”

To analyze this question, we combined two questions:

Q37. When you were growing up, to what extent was a newspaper read or discussed by people in your home?

Q39. When you were in elementary, junior high, or high school, did you have a class where a newspaper was regularly used or discussed?

By combining the responses to these questions, five groups are created. Those who had a newspaper read or discussed:

1. In home and in class
2. In home but not in class
3. Neither in home nor in class
4. In class but not in home
5. Those who don’t remember

Overall, the analysis indicates that having the newspaper in the home probably has a stronger impact on adult readership than does having a school class where a newspaper was regularly used or discussed. Readership levels are similar for the “in home and in class” and the “in home but not in class” groups (RBS of 4.55 vs. 4.57). However, adults who read only at home have a significantly higher RBS than those who read only in school (4.57 vs. 4.12).

	RBS
Read at home and in class	4.55
Read at home but not in class	4.57
Did not read at home or class	4.36
Did not read at home but did read in class	4.12
Do not remember	4.57

These overall results do show some differences by age and ethnic group. For example, for young people (under age 35) the highest RBS scores are found among people who were exposed to the newspaper both in home and in the classroom. The same pattern holds true for African Americans. In general, this seems to be the consistent theme—readership is strongest when children are exposed to the newspaper in the home and at school.

Interestingly, for every ethnic group, readers who recall having a class where newspapers were regularly used or discussed but were not exposed at home report the lowest RBS levels (even lower than those who had no exposure at all.)

	As a child, the newspaper was read or discussed ...	RBS	Count
Age 18-24	In home and in class	3.92	622
	In home but not in class	3.67	242
	Neither in home nor in class	3.44	131
	In class but not in home	3.62	263
	Do not remember	3.67	143
Age 25-34	In home and in class	4.19	931
	In home but not in class	4.01	520
	Neither in home nor in class	3.74	285
	In class but not in home	3.79	254
	Do not remember	4.09	269
Age 35+	In home and in class	4.85	2419
	In home but not in class	4.81	2213
	Neither in home nor in class	4.70	915
	In class but not in home	4.68	408
	Do not remember	4.77	1245
White	In home and in class	4.47	2520
	In home but not in class	4.58	2061
	Neither in home nor in class	4.31	738
	In class but not in home	3.95	450
	Do not remember	4.59	930
African American	In home and in class	4.86	546
	In home but not in class	4.63	265
	Neither in home nor in class	4.42	166
	In class but not in home	4.30	134
	Do not remember	4.53	256
Hispanic/Latino	In home and in class	4.63	701
	In home but not in class	4.65	448
	Neither in home nor in class	4.47	331
	In class but not in home	4.33	265
	Do not remember	4.58	351
Asian/Pacific Islander	In home and in class	4.44	205
	In home but not in class	4.24	201
	Neither in home nor in class	4.33	95
	In class but not in home	4.14	75
	Do not remember	4.50	118

Newspaper Readership in Childhood

From the 2003 National RBS Benchmark Study, a telephone survey among 3,000 randomly selected adults. (http://www.readership.org/consumers/rbs/data/rbs_2003_questionnaire.pdf)

Results of this study indicate there is a statistically significant relationship between in-home news consumption growing up and newspaper readership today.

Respondents who read a daily newspaper while growing up, lived in a home where newspapers were read or discussed regularly, or who watched news on television with parents are better readers of both their local newspaper (as measured by Reader Behavior Scores or RBS) and of newspapers in general (as measured by Total Reader Behavior Scores or TRBS) than their counterparts. (For a complete description of RBS, see <http://www.readership.org/consumers/rbs/main.htm>.)

Not surprisingly, those who read newspapers most frequently growing up have the highest readership scores (both RBS and TRBS) now. The following tables highlight the readership scores for each group. Overall, these findings are consistent with those of the other study—both at-school and in-home exposure to newspapers during childhood have positive effects on adult readership. Of the two, in-home exposure seems to have the strongest impact.

When you were growing up, how often did you read any part of a daily newspaper?

	Percent	RBS	TRBS
Almost every day	28.1	3.84	4.64
A few times per week	31.2	3.67	4.31
A few times per month	12.8	3.16	3.73
Less than once a month	3.9	3.18	3.67
Seldom or never	23.3	3.35	3.87

When you were growing up, to what extent was a newspaper read or discussed by people in your home?

	Percent	RBS	TRBS
Almost every day	41.5	3.63	4.36
A few times per week	26.6	3.63	4.32
A few times per month	8.8	3.25	3.95
Less than once a month	2.2	3.06	3.56
Seldom or never	19.7	3.53	3.91

**When you were growing up, how often did you watch news on television—either national network news or local news—with your parents or other adults living in the household?
(analysis excludes respondents 65+)**

	Percent	RBS	TRBS
Almost every day	52.0	3.47	4.19
A few times per week	23.5	3.46	4.14
A few times per month	7.2	3.24	3.84
Less than once a month	1.8	3.23	3.72
Seldom or never	15.2	3.55	4.14

The national RBS survey included several questions to measure respondents’ exposure to school-related newspaper initiatives. Although the question was asked of all respondents, RI conducted this analysis only on adults less than 44 years old, who are more likely to have been exposed to Newspaper In Education-related programs.

Among 18-44-year-old respondents, those who had exposure to newspapers in school have slightly higher readership levels today. In all cases, however, it appears that the most dominant driver of adult readership is in-home exposure to the newspaper as a child.

When you were in elementary or junior high school, did you...

18-44-year-old respondents	Yes			No			Difference	
	N=	RBS	TRBS	N=	RBS	TRBS	RBS	TRBS
Take a civics class that explained how government works?	1183	3.12	3.79	369	2.94	3.53	+0.18	+0.26
Complete a project that involved reading the newspaper?	1128	3.14	3.77	411	2.94	3.6	+0.20	+0.17
Have a class where the teacher used or referred to articles in the newspapers?	1237	3.09	3.74	300	3.02	3.69	+0.07	+0.05
Talk about news and current events in class discussions?	1364	3.09	3.74	193	3.02	3.65	+0.07	+0.09
Cut out stories from newspapers to create a scrapbook or journal?	869	3.2	3.82	675	2.91	3.61	+0.29	+0.21
Regularly talk about news events with your friends in informal settings or outside the classroom?	723	3.08	3.83	826	3.08	3.64	+0.00	+0.19
Have a class where newspapers were distributed and read?	671	3.17	3.79	868	3.02	3.67	+0.15	+0.12

** Between 1-3% of respondents answered “Do not remember” for each question.*

Similar to the other study, results of this survey indicate that, overall, those who were exposed to the newspaper at home and at school have approximately the same adult readership levels as those who were exposed to a newspaper exclusively at home. Those who recall exposure in the classroom, but had no exposure at home report significantly lower readership scores.

	RBS	Count
In home but not in class	3.67	1290
In home and in class	3.63	830
In class but not in home	3.18	229
Neither in home nor in class	3.38	633

Among the youngest respondents and among all ethnic groups except Caucasians, a combination of in-home exposure and at-school exposure to newspapers results in the highest readership levels. Among older respondents and Caucasians in general, the primary in-home exposure to a newspaper seems to be the primary contributor to adult readership levels.

		RBS	Count
Age 18-24	In home but not in class	2.47	79
	In home and in class	2.96	112
	In class but not in home	2.46	55
	Neither in home nor in class	2.58	48
Age 25-44	In home but not in class	3.26	485
	In home and in class	3.38	391
	In class but not in home	2.96	113
	Neither in home nor in class	2.83	255
Age 45-64	In home but not in class	3.92	463
	In home and in class	3.95	258
	In class but not in home	3.95	45
	Neither in home nor in class	3.70	182
Age 65 or older	In home but not in class	4.42	255
	In home and in class	4.89	66
	In class but not in home	4.87	14
	Neither in home nor in class	4.22	145
White/Caucasian	In home but not in class	3.73	1091
	In home and in class	3.61	661
	In class but not in home	3.25	158
	Neither in home nor in class	3.45	529
African American	In home but not in class	3.67	82
	In home and in class	4.33	66
	In class but not in home	3.63	32
	Neither in home nor in class	3.46	49
Hispanic/Latino	In home but not in class	3.13	31
	In home and in class	3.33	42
	In class but not in home	2.27	18
	Neither in home nor in class	2.99	20
Asian/Pacific Islander**	In home but not in class	2.26	20
	In home and in class	2.75	12
	In class but not in home	1.00	5
	Neither in home nor in class	2.83	3

** Asian / Pacific Islander results should be considered directional only. The sample size for this group is too small to be statistically reliable.