**This Is What Happens When You Read to a Child**

Justin Worland TIME Parents Newsletter April 27, 2015

For years, child advocacy groups have recommended that parents read to babies, even though research hasn’t been clear on what the practice does to a child’s brain. Now, a new brain scan study explains that reading to a child early and often activates the part of the brain that allows them to understand the meaning of language.

The study, presented last weekend at a meeting of the Pediatric Academic Societies, looked at 19 preschoolers and their interactions with their parents. Nearly 40% of the children came from low-income backgrounds. Parents filled out a questionnaire that assessed their habits for raising their children and included questions asking whether the parents had taught their children skills like counting, how often the parents talked with their kids and how early and often parents read to their children.

Researchers then attached brain scanners to the children as they listened to stories. Reading at home with children from an early age was strongly correlated with brain activation in areas connected with visual imagery and understanding the meaning of language.

“For parents, it adds credence to the idea of reading with kids,” says study author John S. Hutton, a pediatrician at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital. “Getting a peek into the brain, there seem to be some differences there that are pretty exciting.”

The study adds to past research showing that reading has many positive effects on young children, like teaching the rules of syntax, expanding children’s vocabulary and helping children bond with their parents, Hutton says. But the new study is among the first to add real understanding of what actually happens to young brains.

Hutton says he hopes that further research will help us provide parents with guidelines on best practices for reading to children. “This is sort of an early signal,” Hutton says. “In terms of how much and how often, that’s the kind of thing we’re hoping that future studies will look into.”

**2015 Children’s Book Award Winners**

The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend. By Dan Santat. Illus. by the author. Little Brown.

In four delightful chapters, Beekle, an imaginary friend, undergoes an emotional journey looking for his human. Vibrant illustrations add to the fun. (2015 Caldecott Medal Book)

You Are (Not) Small. By Anna Kang. Illus. by Christopher Weyant. Two Lions.

A heated debate quickly ensues when two furry creatures can’t agree on who is big and who is small. Expressive illustrations and cleverly simple text come together to provide a humorous tale with an unexpected and satisfying conclusion. (2015 Geisel Medal Book)

Viva Frida. By Yuyi Morales. Illus. by the author. Roaring Brook/Neal Porter.

Vibrant photographs and minimal, evocative text beautifully portray the unique imagination and creativity of iconic artist Frida Kahlo. (2015 Belpré Illustrator Medal Book & Caldecott Honor Book)