

Is There a Decline in the Reading Romance?

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It has been claimed that research on reading attitudes shows that as children get older, their interest in reading declines.¹ Young children, it is thought, enjoy a "reading romance," but this starts to disappear around grade four and continues to decrease through adolescence.

This paper reviews the research on the development of attitudes toward reading to see if this decline actually exists. We conclude that there is far less of a decline than usually assumed, that many studies show no decline at all, and that at no stage do children show a negative attitude toward reading.

Method

Before reviewing the studies, we need to discuss method.

1. Several studies on the development of attitudes toward reading include questions that tap students' attitudes toward academic reading; for example, reading assignments in texts. Because the focus here is on self-selected pleasure reading, these analyses will not be considered here.
2. Sometimes questions ask students to compare reading with other activities; for example, would you rather read or do X? Ranking or comparing free reading with other activities is not a valid way of tapping attitudes. Consider the following case (hypothetical), in which two students are asked to answer on a one- to five-point scale:

How much do you like reading?	
<i>Student A</i>	<i>Student B</i>
4.0	2.5

How much do you like football?

<i>Student A</i>	<i>Student B</i>
4.5	2.0

Student A likes football more than he likes reading; student B likes reading more than he likes football. But we should not conclude that A is negative about reading. A clearly likes reading more than student B does.

A similar problem occurs when investigators ask such questions as, "Would you rather read or draw a picture?" Student A might be a dedicated reader, and only a slightly less dedicated reader. Student B might hate both, but not hate reading quite as much as drawing. Results would indicate that B likes reading but A does not.

Among the many examples of this kind of question are questions asked by Tunnell et al., who asked children whether they would rather read a book or draw a picture.² McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth asked children to compare reading with playing: "How do you feel about reading instead of playing?"³ Even an extremely dedicated pleasure reader might prefer "playing."

3. In this study, we are not interested in how much children read, just how much they enjoy reading. Many external factors influence how much children (and adults) read, such as access to books and the pressure of other activities. We want to know if there is a decline in the desire to read.

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Here is an example: Ley, Schaer, and Dismukes reported that frequency of reading appeared to decline between grades six and eight.⁴ While 32 percent of the sixth graders said they read for enjoyment "almost every day," by grade 8, only 20 percent reported doing so. But the study also reported that the same students increased the amount of time they were devoting to homework, with 22 percent of sixth graders and 40 percent of eighth graders reporting between one and two hours. The study reported no decline in attitudes toward reading, as discussed below.

4. In comparing scores, we should look at the average response to individual questions, and not only the total of the entire questionnaire (the converted as contrasted to the raw score).⁵ Although statistical significance is unaltered, differences can appear exaggerated when we look at the total score. A slight difference in each question can make the total score look very large. Here is a hypothetical example. Eight-year-old readers and ten-year-old readers take a questionnaire consisting of thirty questions. Students are asked to indicate their attitude on a scale of one to five. For each question, the eight-year-old children are only slightly more positive, only a tenth of a point. But if we total the score, the eight year olds appear to be much more enthusiastic, scoring 112 compared to 105.
5. We will not consider details about where children read, such as the library or at home. Individual variables may affect this. For example, poor children may have little chance to read at home or at the public library.
6. Other concerns: In an otherwise valid questionnaire, Estes includes a few questions of dubious value. Avid readers may disagree with the statement "books make good presents" because they prefer to select their own reading.⁶

Dedicated pleasure readers with plenty of access and time to read might also disagree with "a certain amount of summer vacation should be set aside for

reading," as being pointless, as this time is available to them already. Avid readers might also object to enforced reading.

The "reading at home" segment of the Heathington Primary Scale, used in Parker and Paradis, contains questions that ask children how they feel when reading a book to someone else at home, and when reading with a friend after school, activities that may not be valued by all motivated readers.⁷ It also asks about reading at bedtime, which may not be approved of in all families.

McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth asked, "How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?" It has been reported that those who do more pleasure reading tend to read narrowly, preferring series books or the works of one author or genre.⁸ Thus, a reader deeply involved with Harry Potter may, at least temporarily, claim a lack of interest in a wide range of reading.

Do you like to read?

The question "Do you like to read?" appears to avoid the problems discussed above. This simple question taps just what we are looking for: pure enjoyment, regardless of how much children enjoy other activities or whether they have access to books or a place to read.

Nevertheless, even this question could underestimate interest in reading, because it can be interpreted as reading only "serious" literature. Mellon reported that 82 percent of the ninth graders she studied said that they read in their spare time.⁹ Mellon felt, however, that respondents "didn't trust" that the questionnaire was really dealing with self-selected pleasure reading, and considered the kind of reading they liked as "not quite legitimate."¹⁰ Here are three illuminating comments by her subjects: "I don't like reading except for comic books or magazines," "... I hate reading unless it's a magazine about something I like," and "I don't like to read much except for romance, mystery, and scary books."¹¹ Of the sixty-six respondents in Mellon's study who claimed they never read in their spare time, forty-nine checked several categories of leisure reading when asked what they liked to read!

The use of fewer questions will, of course, make questionnaires less reliable, but we feel

that it is better to use fewer valid questions (or even only one valid question) than many questions that do not probe what we are really interested in investigating.

The use of a question such as "Do you like to read?" brings up the issue of pleasing the experimenter. Verification of the results using other methodologies can help us deal with this.

Two analyses are presented here. The first includes what must be categorized as imperfect studies. These studies present the results of questionnaires that contain some appropriate and some inappropriate questions, but unfortunately do not give us the results for individual items. They provide us with a crude analysis of the development of attitudes.

A narrative review of the studies is presented, followed by a summary. We provide details of each survey in order to give readers a clear picture of the size of any developmental changes. It was, unfortunately, not possible to compute effect sizes in many cases.

Estes reported that children in grades three through six were more enthusiastic about recreational reading than those in grades seven through twelve.¹² The difference was statistically significant, but not very large (see table 1). The questionnaire administered by Estes contained twenty-eight statements, and children indicated their agreement or disagreement on a scale of one to five. The mean item score for the third through sixth graders was 3.79, for the seventh through twelfth graders, 3.5, only about a 6 percent difference. One interpretation of this data is that the older children maintained nearly as high an interest in reading, despite additional pressures.

Parker and Paradis administered the Heathington Primary Scale (published in Alexander and Filler) to children in grades one through three and the Heathington Intermediate Scale to children in grades four through six.¹³

Table 1. Results from Estes: Attitudes toward Recreational Reading

Grade	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Score per Item
3-6	106	16.4	3.8
7-12	98	17.1	3.5

scale = 1-5

The two measures each contained four questions, but the questions were somewhat different; thus we can only inspect changes in attitude within the two groups. Both scales ask children to express their feelings about reading in a variety of situations, including reading at home, reading at school, and "organized reading in the classroom."

The "reading at home" segment comes closest to pure recreational reading, but as noted earlier, this part of the primary scale had some doubtful questions. The questions on the secondary scale appear less objectionable, asking children how they feel about reading in their room, whether they wish they had a library full of books at home, and a question that appears to us to be the most valid: whether children enjoy reading at home.

Students responded on a one to five scale, where one equals strongly disagree. Table 2 presents the mean response to the "reading at home" questions. It is clear from these results that there is little change in attitude toward reading from grade one to three and little change from grade four to six. If anything, there is an increase in positive feelings about reading. Also, it is clear that these children like to read, with the average response being about four out of a possible five.

Tunnell et al. included eighteen questions focusing mainly at recreational reading. Some questions compared reading to other activities, another was directed at school books, and another dealt with frequency of reading.¹⁴ Several questions, however, looked at enjoyment only. The scale used was one to five, where one equaled strongly disagree and five equaled strongly agree. Table 3 presents their results.

Table 2. Results from Parker and Paradis: Attitudes toward Reading at Home

Category	Score
Primary Scale	
Grade 1	3.80
Grade 2	4.10
Grade 3	4.13
Secondary Scale	
Grade 4	3.47
Grade 5	3.85
Grade 6	3.80

scale = 1-5

Table 3 shows a clear drop from grade five to six, but we do not know which items on the questionnaire were responsible. Note that the most negative group, the sixth graders, remained at least somewhat positive about reading; a neutral attitude would be 3.0. All other grade levels were quite enthusiastic.

Ley, Schaer, and Dismukes found very little difference among 164 students in a longitudinal study covering sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.¹⁵ About half the students were urban, half rural. Table 4 presents scores for the enjoyment subscale of the Teale-Lewis Reading Attitude Scale, which consisted of eleven questions, ranked from one (strongly agree) to four (strongly disagree). There was clearly no decline with age, a result that was true for other subscales as well (reading for individual development and reading for utilitarian purposes). The table includes the converted score—the average score per item. The mean for all groups

was close to the middle (2.5). Means for the other subscales were higher, the highest being eighth graders, who averaged 3.32 for the utilitarian subscale.

McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth used the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey. I focus here only on the recreational reading portion.¹⁶ As noted earlier, most of the ten questions were of questionable validity, but some were appropriate, such as "How do you feel about spending free time reading?" and "How do you feel about reading for fun at home?" Table 5 presents total and converted scores, based on the one to four scale. A slight decline is seen for the boys (about 10 percent from grades one to six), but in general subjects indicated that they liked reading (neutral = 2.5). Unlike Tunnell et al., the drop is gradual from grade one to six for the boys.

Chapman and Turner also show evidence for a decline in attitude toward reading (see

Table 3. Results from Tunnell et al.: Reading Enjoyment

Mean scores	Arkansas Sample*	N	Illinois Sample*	N
grade 2	4.05 (.82)	45	4.01 (.71)	49
grade 3	4.10 (.56)	46	4.17 (.70)	48
grade 4	4.22 (.63)	39	3.61 (.76)	39
grade 5	4.01 (.52)	42	3.73 (.73)	76
grade 6	3.53 (.70)	44	3.15 (.86)	80

scale = 1-5

*Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviation.

Table 4. Results from Ley, Schaer, and Dismukes: Reading Enjoyment Subscale

Grade	Total*	Converted	Females		Males	
			Black*	White*	Black*	White*
6	28.2 (7.3)	2.56	29.6 (7.2)	26.2 (7.4)	30.6 (4.8)	26.2 (7.4)
7	29.3 (7.2)	2.66	27.7 (5.0)	29.4 (7.5)	29.6 (7.2)	29.6 (7.3)
8	28.2 (6.8)	2.56	28.3 (7.1)	28.7 (6.7)	28.2 (6.9)	27.8 (7.0)

Converted = average score per item; scale = 1-4.

*Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviation.

Table 5. Results from McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth: Elementary Reading Attitude Survey

Grade	Boys*	Converted	Girls*	Converted	Total*	Converted
1	30.0 (6.0)	3.0	31.9 (5.2)	3.2	31.0 (5.7)	3.1
2	29.0 (5.7)	2.9	31.7 (5.3)	3.2	30.3 (5.7)	3.0
3	28.5 (5.6)	2.85	31.6 (5.2)	3.2	30.1 (5.6)	3.0
4	27.6 (5.9)	2.8	31.3 (5.1)	3.1	29.5 (5.8)	2.95
5	26.5 (5.9)	2.65	30.7 (5.5)	3.1	28.5 (6.1)	2.85
6	26.0 (6.1)	2.6	29.7 (5.7)	3.0	27.9 (6.2)	2.8

scale = 1-4

*Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviation.

table 6).¹⁷ Once again, however, overall attitudes are positive (their scale was one to five, with a mean of 2.5), and differences are not overwhelming, except for the substantial drop between years three and five (ages eight and ten). Chapman and Turner reported that the difference between grades one through three and grades four through five was significant, using a Scheffe test ($F(8,1532) = 38.9, P < .01$).

Chapman and Turner only provide five of the ten questions they used: (1) Do you like word games in class? (2) Is it fun for you to read books? (3) Do you look forward to reading? (4) Do you like reading to yourself? and (5) Do you like reading at home? One of them has nothing to do with reading; it is not at all clear that children who like word games in school also like recreational reading.

Baker and Wigfield asked fifth and sixth graders to fill out a reading motivation questionnaire.¹⁸ Two categories of questions came close to probing pure reading for pleasure. Dedicated pleasure readers would probably respond positively to the questions in the curiosity category, which included the following:

- If the teacher discusses something interesting I might read more about it.
- I read to learn new information about topics that interest me.
- I like to read about new things.
- If I am reading about an interesting topic I sometimes lose track of time.

Some of the questions in their involvement and curiosity categories asked whether children read specific kinds of books, such as mysteries, fantasy and make-believe, adventure books, books about people in different countries, and books about hobbies.

Table 6. Results from Chapman and Turner: Reading Self-Concept Scale

Year	N	Attitude*
1	143	4.27 (.79)
2	160	4.37 (.67)
3	159	4.40 (.56)
4	150	4.06 (.78)
5	159	3.87 (.82)

scale = 1–5

Note: year 1 = five year olds; in New Zealand, reading instruction begins on or close to the child's fifth birthday.

*Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviation.

Age differences (between grades five and six) were not significant for these two categories. However, there were significant differences favoring younger children for two other scales: social ("I talk to my friends about what I am reading," "I often read to my brother and sister"); and recognition ("My friends sometimes tell me I am a good reader," "I like to get compliments on my reading"). Thus, there were no age differences in the categories of questions coming closest to pure reading for pleasure.

The mean for responses for all children in the curiosity category was 3.2 on a scale of one to four, where one equals very different from me, two equals a little different from me, three equals a little like me, and four equals a lot like me. The mean for responses in the involvement category was 3.14, indicating that as a group these children were positive about reading.

In no case thus far do children ever show negative attitudes toward recreational reading. Only Tunnell et al. and Chapman and Turner show clear drops in attitudes toward reading.¹⁹

Bean asked preservice teachers to do a reading autobiography, in which subjects were asked to comment on what they read and their feelings associated with reading as they grew up.²⁰ Responses were coded "globally for positive or negative attitude statements."²¹ As shown in table 7, Bean reported overall positive attitudes toward reading and no change over time.

Table 7. Results from Bean: Global Impressions from Reading Autobiographies

Age	% Positive Attitude	% Mixed Attitude	% Negative Attitude
grades 0–5	71	16	13
grades 6–12	73	13	13
beyond grade 12	80	13	7

N = 45

Table 8. Results from Bean and Readance: Global Impressions from Reading Autobiographies

Hawaii Sample (N = 35)			
Age	% Positive Attitude	% Mixed Attitude	% Negative Attitude
grades 0–5	77	17	6
grades 6–12	32	57	11
beyond grade 12	63	31	6
Mainland Sample (N = 18)			
Age	% Positive Attitude	% Mixed Attitude	% Negative Attitude
grades 0–5	61	28	11
grades 6–12	22	28	50
beyond grade 12	61	39	0

Bean and Readance is the only study of this kind to show a decline in the middle and high school years (see table 8).²² In the Hawaii sample, the decline was due to more subjects categorized as mixed; the percentage of negative attitudes remained low at all stages. However, in the mainland sample there was a clear increase in the percentage who had negative attitudes. This exceptional case, however, consists of only nine students. Bean and Readance noted that the decline in the middle stage (middle school and high school) was "usually based on the increasingly complex and seemingly uninteresting content of textbooks."²³ Responses were thus probably based on attitudes toward academic reading as well.

Figure 1 summarizes the results of the first analysis.

The second analysis is simpler. Here we include studies in which we have answers to the simple question, "Do you like to read?" uninfluenced by answers to other questions. Included are a few studies that did not examine change in attitude over time. These studies, however, confirm that attitudes toward reading are positive at all ages.

Neale and Proshek used the Semantic Differential to sample attitudes of middle school children toward a number of stimuli, including "reading a book."²⁴ They found overall positive reactions to this item, and no change from grades four to six (see table 9). Note, however,

that in general, students became significantly more negative toward several other stimuli (neutral score equals 32).

Neale and Proshok also reported that whatever negative attitudes there were about reading were largely due to middle-class boys. They presented data for grades four, five, and six combined (see table 10).

Davies and Brember asked respondents from randomly chosen elementary schools several inappropriate questions, including, "How do you feel about reading to a teacher?" "How do you feel about reading to your parents?" and "How do you feel about reading to yourself at school?"¹⁴ The last question may have been interpreted as school-related reading, not pleasure reading. In all cases, there was a clear decline in enthusiasm about reading as children get older. But there was a clear increase in positive responses to the one question that was appropriate: "How do you feel about reading to yourself at home?" at ages ten to eleven (table 11).

Eccles et al. report a decline in reading attitudes from grades one to three.¹⁵ The questions used were:

1. In general, I find reading? (From one, very boring, to seven, very interesting or fun.)
2. How much do you like reading? (From one, not at all, to seven, very much.)

The differences are statistically significant ($F = 5.65$, $p = .001$), but the effect size reported by Eccles et al. ($d = .01$) is small. This small effect is confirmed by inspection of the means. First and second graders differed by only .12 points on a seven-point scale, while second and third graders differed by only .26 points (see table 12).

It is also clear that children at all three grades enjoyed reading: on a seven-point scale, the mean is 4.0.

Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen asked fourth grade students from three elementary schools the simple question, "Do you like to read?"¹⁶ In one of the schools, 59 percent of the students were considered low income (received free or reduced lunch), while at the two others, 17 percent and 18 percent were in this category. Forty-three (20 percent) of the students were categorized as limited English proficient, and, of these, five were considered beginners in

Figure 1

Summary of Studies: Analysis One

Is there a decline in interest in reading?

Estes	Grades 7-12 are 6 percent less positive than grades 3-6
Parker and Paradis	No change from grades 1-3, no change from grades 4-6.
Tunnell et al.	Little change from grades 2-5, drop at grade six
Ley Schaefer, and Dismukes	No change from grades 6-8
McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth	Little difference in girls, 10 percent decline in boys from grades 1-6
Chapman and Turnner	Slight increase from ages 5-7, drop at age 8
Baker and Wigfield	No difference between grades 5 and 6
Bean	No change
Bean and Readance	Clear decline in grades 6-12

Do they like to read?

Estes	Yes, mean = 3.5, 3.8 (scale 1-5)
Parker and Paradis	Yes, mean = 4 (scale 1-5)
Tunnell et al.	Yes, means from 3.15 to 4.2 (scale 1-5)
Ley Schaefer, and Dismukes	Somewhat. Mean = 2.6 out of 4 (scale = 1-4)
McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth	Yes, means for girls = 3.0 to 3.2, for boys, 2.6 to 3.0 (scale = 1-4)
Chapman and Turnner	Yes, means from 3.87 to 4.4 (scale = 1-5)
Baker and Wigfield	Yes, mean = 3.2 for curiosity, 3.14 for involvement (scale = 1-4)
Bean	Yes, 71-80 percent like to read
Bean and Readance	Yes in early childhood and adulthood (61-77 percent), not in grades 6-8

Table 9. Results from Neale and Proshok: Semantic Differential

Stimulus	Grade Four	Grade Five	Grade Six
Mother	49.0	47.8	47.3
Father	48.3	47.2	47.6
My teacher*	47.8	45.4	43.9
Reading a book	45.6	45.2	44.6
My school building	44.7	43.6	42.2
My classroom*	45.1	43.2	39.4
Me*	44.1	41.8	40.0
My school books*	43.4	42.8	39.9
Following rules*	42.7	40.9	38.1

* = significant decline in attitude; range = 8 to 56, mean (neutral = 32)

Table 10. Results from Neale and Proshok: Attitudes toward Reading a Book

Subjects	Attitude
Low SES boys	44.0
Low SES girls	44.0
High SES boys	42.9
High SES girls	48.3

grades 4,5,6 combined

Table 11. Results from Davies and Brember: Percent Responding Happy or Very Happy to "How Do You Feel about Reading to Yourself at Home?"

Age	Boys	N	Girls	N
6-7	68	109	68	107
8-9	74	99	78	90
10-11	84	102	92	104

English. Nearly all students said they enjoyed reading (216, or 96 percent).

Kim and Krashen asked the same question of 103 sixth graders from a high-poverty

school.¹⁷ All but four were considered proficient in English. A large majority of the students said they liked to read (87, or 84 percent). Of the sixteen who said they did not like to read,

Table 12. Results from Eccles et al.: Value of Activities

Grade	N	Attitude*
1	283	5.76 (1.36)
2	320	5.62 (1.45)
3	260	5.38 (1.30)

scale = 1–7

*Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviation.

nearly all said it was because books were boring: "I dislike reading because it is boring and because if I keep on reading I will go to sleep." In fact, ten of the sixteen who said they disliked reading used the word boring in their responses. Only one subject disliked reading because it was "hard." This suggests that even these sixteen would like to read if they had access to more interesting reading material, which is a severe problem for children living in poverty.²⁹

The READ California poll surveyed 201 subjects between ages ten and seventeen, 48 percent male, 52 percent female, mostly in the southern California area.³⁰ Their results confirm that teenagers like to read. Sixty-four percent of the READ California respondents rated reading seven or better on a scale of one to ten, where one equals not fun and ten equals a lot of fun. Thirty-six percent agreed that reading is "really cool," and another 55 percent agreed that reading is "kind of cool," a total of 91 percent of the sample.

Studies in analysis two present an even more cheerful picture than those in analysis one (see figure 2). One study showed no change, one an increase in enthusiasm, and one a slight decline in attitudes toward reading. Overall, there is little doubt that children and adolescents say that they like to read.

Discussion and Implications

According to the research presented here, there is only scattered evidence for a decline in interest in reading, and very little evidence for dramatic drops in reading attitude. Only one study found evidence of significant hostility to reading at any age, and the sample size was modest.³¹ As noted earlier, this conclusion applies to leisure, voluntary reading. There is little doubt that attitudes toward school-related reading show a sharp decline with age.³²

Figure 2

Summary of Studies: Analysis Two

Is there a decline in interest in reading?

Neale and Proshok	No change, grades 4–6
Davies and Brember	More positive with age, ages 6–11+
Eccles et al.	yes, slight

Do you like to read?

Neale and Proshok	Yes, mean = 45 (range 8–56)
Eccles et al.	Yes, means from 5.38 to 5.76 (scale 1–7)
Davies and Brember	Yes, 68 to 92 percent happy or very happy to read at home
Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen	Yes, grade 4: 96% percent like to read
Kim and Krashen	Yes, grade 6: 84 percent like to read
READ California	Yes, ages 10–17: 91 percent think reading is "kind of cool" or "really cool"
	No in adolescence (11 percent, 50 percent dislike reading)

This review was limited to survey studies in which questionnaires and reading autobiographies were employed. There is a great deal of additional evidence from studies of sustained silent reading showing that children and adolescents enjoy reading, and, of course, from numerous reports of adults' love of reading.³³ There is little doubt that many people enjoy reading as a leisure activity.

One might, of course, ask whether this is good enough, whether the profession needs to work harder to get children to enjoy reading. Should we worry about the small percentage of students that say they do not enjoy reading? We should, but the first line of offense might be to simply make sure good reading material is available and that children are exposed to good stories. Research with younger readers strongly suggests that children who engage in more literacy activities at home and who have positive experiences with readalouds show greater interest in reading.³⁴ As noted earlier, most of Kim and Krashen's reluctant readers claimed that reading was boring, which suggests that they had little access to good reading material.³⁵ These children came from a high-poverty school, which means a print-deprived environment.³⁶

Before considering more exotic means of increasing interest in reading, a sensible approach might be to provide interesting books to read and introduce even older children to good stories through readalouds.³⁷ ●

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