

4	27	3-41	13.5	5	1	1	3	3	
5 the most	33	4-18	9.7	1		2	2	13	

Figure 2: Early Readers in Early Childhood Education

Intense emotions (%)	Onset reading test word (TS)	ECE programs visited (more answers possible)				
		Average age	Home till age of 4	Day care	Play group	Gifted play group
1 the least	3yrs 9 m	1				
2	3yrs 5 m		1	1		

Early Readers and the School Experience

A research about children reading before the age of 4.

Written and translated by Kitty van Keulen

Introduction

You can't treat gifted children as just one group! Big differences can be found among them. Young gifted children in a recent research even showed a difference of about 5 years in reading levels, and there seemed to be a correlation with how intense the parents experienced their children's emotions.

Why?

During my training to become a Dutch Gifted Specialist, I researched the differences and needs of 4 year olds advanced in math. My questions were triggered by my prior experiences as a teacher in the US in elementary schools and at a school for gifted elementary school children. Big differences in math levels and experiences became apparent. The outcomes became fuel to offer Math Circle workshops in the Netherlands to teachers, as well as Math Circle meetings to young children with their parents present. Next I wondered about early readers before the age of 4. What would their reading levels be before the age of 4, and early school experiences look like? And what would they be offered in school in their 4 and 5 year old classrooms? Would they have access to reading materials at their level? What kind of support would they get in their 4 and 5 year old classrooms? How big would the differences be between them?

The Research

The survey was set out on social media and 81 Dutch parents answered the 38 mostly open questions. 77 children were reading before their 4th birthday. Most questions pertained to the 0-4 year period. In 50% of the families, the mother also read before the age of 4. And more than half of the sample (60%) suffered from insufficient education, support, and peers, resulting in staying at home and suffering emotional problems.

75% of the children who spoke their first words before the age of 8 months, showed a MLU (Mean Length Utterance) of seven words or more at the age of two, and about two thirds of them also spoke long sentences with conjunctions such as "because" and "since". However, there does not seem to be a direct correlation between the onset of talking and the age of reading the first words, unless "How intense the parents experienced their children's emotions" was taken into account too.

Intense Emotions

In one of the questions in the survey parents were asked how intense they experienced their child's emotions on a scale of one to five with one being the lowest level. But, one needs to take into account that parents of gifted children can be gifted too, and thus possibly experience their emotions deeply as well. Feeling deeply as a parent may influence how one experiences their child's emotions and how one may communicate with one's child at that moment.

Correlations were seen when we take "How intense the parents experienced their child's emotions" into account. The onset of the 1st word took first place at level 4 with 3 months, and at 5 months at level 3. The correlation was highest at level 5 and the youngest average age of the first spoken word was first observed at the age of 9,7 months old. In addition, the amount of children with a MLU of 7 or more words was more prevalent at the intensity levels 4 and 5. Also, both the average age and the actual age of the child reading their first word were relatively the youngest at intensity level 5.

When parents first observed their child reading, about 64% of the children read without holding a finger below the words, and 63% of them directly read the whole word.

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Many Early Readers attended some kind of Early Childhood Care, meaning daycare, playgroup (2.5-4 yr olds) or gifted children's play group, and/or home day care.

68 of the 77 parents reported their child's reading ability to their child care providers. The ECE providers responded in 44 cases that they did not believe it. 35 of those parents experienced their child's emotions at an intensity level 4 or 5. Ten other children, whose parents experienced an intensity on level 3 to 5 received additional education and services, like:

- More challenging toys from the day care, or after school care or kindergarten
- Letter stamps, letter games, making letters from clay, art, mini loco
- Books at their level or in their area of interest, adapted kindergarten tasks
- Activities connected to their interests at home
- Early school entrance

The advanced development of 20 children was described in detail in the transfer papers towards their future elementary school. Also their current reading capabilities were already described in the transfer to school papers for 8 children.

Figure 1: Early Readers Speak and Read

Intense emotions (77)		Onset speaking 1st word in months		Mean Length Utterance (MLU) at age 2									Onset reading 1st word in yr and month	
Level 1-5	# kids	range	Average age	8= my child also used the conjunctions because and since									range	average
				0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8		
1 the least	1	9	9						1				3yrs 9 m	3yrs 9 m
2	2	10-12	11					1				1	2yrs 3 m - 3 yrs 9 m	3yrs 5 m
3	14	4-38	12.8	1	1	1		2	2	2	2	3	1yrs7m - 3yrs11m	3yrs 10 m
4	27	3-41	13.5	5	1		1	3	3			10	1yrs 11 m - 3yrs 10 m	3yrs 6 m
5 the most	33	4-18	9.7	1			2	2	13			15	1yrs7m - 3yrs10m	3yrs

Figure 2: Early Readers in Early Childhood Education

Intense emotions (77)	Onset reading 1st word (75)	ECE programs visited (more answers possible)					ECE reaction when parents shared their child could read		
		Home till age of 4	Day care	Play group	Gifted play group	Home day care	They could not believe it (44)	They were glad we told (23)	Offered extra materials and coaching (10)
1 the least	3yrs 9 m	1							
2	3yrs 5 m		1	1		1	2		
3	3yrs 10 m	3	5	6	2	3	7	6	2
4	3yrs 6 m	4	6	9		3	16	6	2
5 the most	3yrs	5	10	15		5	19	9	6

Four to six year olds

Children who read words at the age of 4, display an advanced development since instruction to read in school will start at the age of 5 or 6 in groep 3. 24 of the 77 four year olds in the research were reading words, and 9 others were reading sentences of 3 words equaling the AVI start reading level. 11 children read sentences of 5 words or more, which equals a minimum of AVI M3 (a reading level of the middle of groep 3). In addition, 27 children read sentences with a comma and conjunctions such as “because” and “since”, equaling a reading level of AVI E5 (the end of groep 5), thus about 5 years above age level. A youngster very advanced in reading can be easily exposed to context he is not yet experiencing, nor interested in, nor emotionally

ready for. I've noticed this often as a teacher at the Dutch school in the US and at a school for gifted children. An advancement of 5 years is about a Ruf level IV [5].

Not Seen nor Understood

Children's underachievement can start at the first day at school if they are not seen and understood. Since gifted children can be much more aware and sensitive, especially if they are way advanced like the early readers in this research. In such a case, the impact can be immense if a (possibly) gifted child is not seen nor understood. What did the parents report about their (reading) behavior in the 4 year old class?

A bit more than half of the *Early Readers* did not show their reading capabilities in the 4 year old class. 37 of the 75 children (49%) were quite angry or sad at school or at home. For 54% of those 37 children, an intensity level of 5 was experienced by their parents. 28 children showed different behavior at home or school, and 24 of them also responded more often quite angry or sad. Although 12 children asked for books themselves, 12 other children's reading decreased at school. Ten children actually stopped reading altogether when entering their 4 year old class.

35 children received some differentiated curriculum towards their reading when entering their 4 year old classroom, and 21 of them received coaching. Eleven of those 21 children are currently 4 or 5 years old. Two other children did not get any adapted curriculum but some coaching in the 4 year old class. The children who received differentiated curriculum, got enrichment, deeper learning activities, acceleration and coaching. In addition, the parent teacher relationships were strong, resulting in good alignment to the child's needs. However, 33 of 75 parents reported explicitly that their child's advanced development and learning needs were not recognized nor met once they started.

Conclusion

It is remarkable how many parents quickly and extensively answered the questions in the survey. Obviously there was a high interest to participate. In addition, many parents and professionals on social media were interested in the outcomes of this research.

There does not seem to be a direct correlation between the onset of speaking and the onset of reading. As expected, there are correlations visible between how intense the parents experienced the emotions of their *Early Readers* and other data. In addition, there is a wide spread in children's reading skills when turning 4 years old and entering elementary school. Their highest reading level was 5 years above their instruction level in school. Teachers in 4 and 5 year old classrooms may need knowledge, skills and materials, and peers for the early readers with the same cognitive level, when the early readers enter their classroom. This in order to be able to present them with appropriate reading instruction, reading guidance and depth of learning.

Additional Reading

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Kitty van Keulen is a gifted and talent specialist in private practice with a background in teaching Pre-K-6 at Dutch and English American schools and in providing services as a developmental specialist in Early Childhood Special Education. She is connected to Peers4Parents and owner of Verwonder.net . She graduated from different programs including Novilo (Independent Talent Coach), WijsSein (Gifted Specialist), Pabo (Ba in Ed) and MA in ECSE (Santa Clara University in California).