

Renaissance



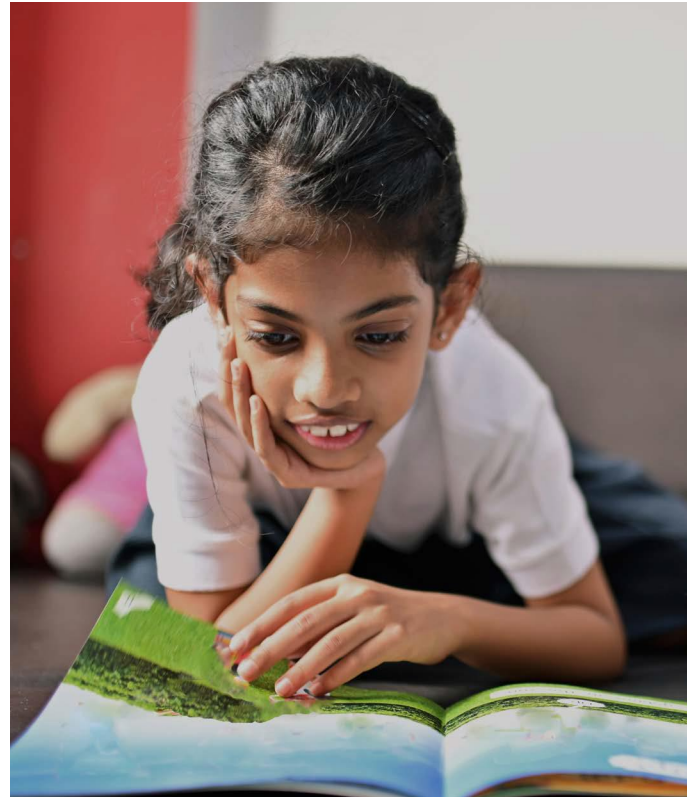
THE MAGIC NUMBER:

Why **15** minutes of daily reading changes everything

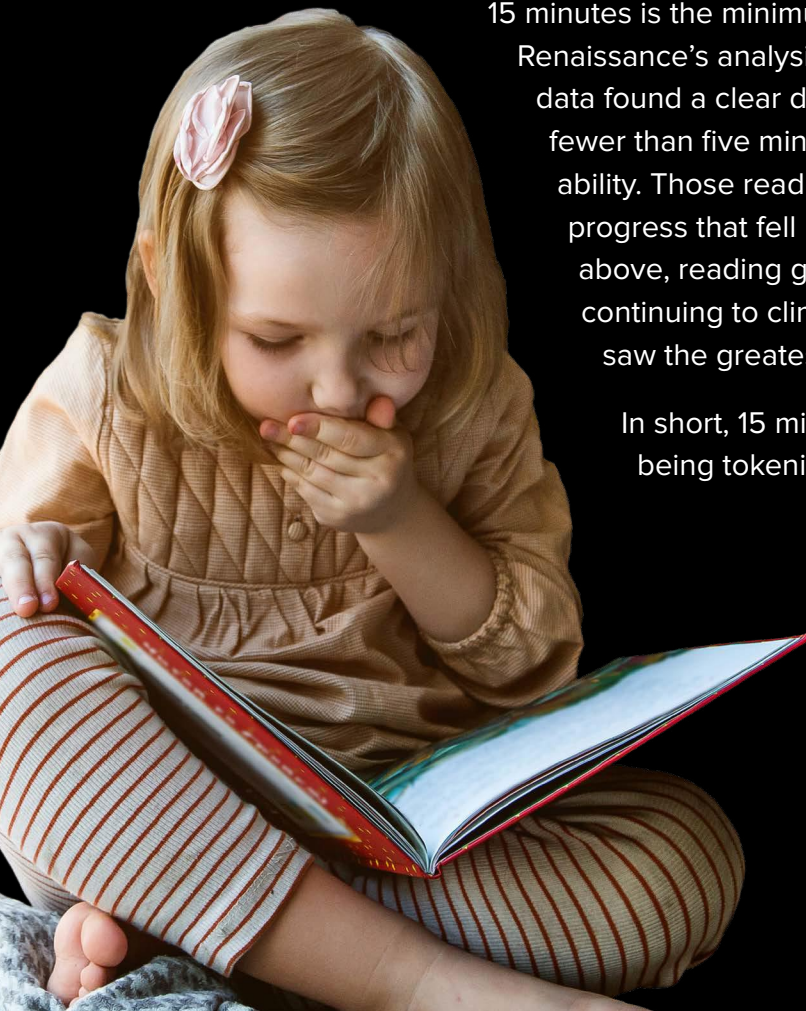


Introduction

Research on more than 2.2 million students shows that 15 minutes of daily reading is the threshold at which children start making above-average gains in reading ability. Below it, progress stalls. Above it, growth accelerates – and keeps accelerating. In a year when the government and the National Literacy Trust have launched the National Year of Reading, the evidence behind this simple benchmark has never been more relevant for teachers.



How long should a child read each day?



15 minutes is the minimum that makes a measurable difference.

Renaissance's analysis of more than 2.2 million students' reading data found a clear dividing line at this mark. Children who read for fewer than five minutes a day saw the lowest growth in reading ability. Those reading between five and 14 minutes made sluggish progress that fell below national averages. But at 15 minutes and above, reading gains rose sharply – exceeding the average and continuing to climb. Students reading just over half an hour a day saw the greatest gains of all.

In short, 15 minutes is the point at which reading practice stops being tokenistic and starts doing real work.



Are children in England reading enough?

They are not. The National Literacy Trust's 2025 Annual Literacy Survey – based on responses from nearly 115,000 children and young people – found that fewer than one in five aged 8–18 read something daily for pleasure, the lowest level in 20 years. Just a third said they enjoyed reading at all. Among boys, the figure was one in four.

England sits in a peculiar position internationally. The 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) ranked England fourth out of 43 countries for reading attainment – but just 29% of English children said they “very much like” reading, compared with 42% globally. Children are being taught to read effectively. They are choosing not to.

What happens to vocabulary when children don't read enough?

The long-term effects are striking. According to our research, a child who averages 30 or more minutes of daily reading between reception and Year 13 will encounter roughly 13.7 million words over their school career. A child reading fewer than 15 minutes a day will meet just 1.5 million. The difference is more than 12 million words.

Using widely-cited estimates – one new vocabulary word learned for every thousand words read – those two children arrive at the end of secondary school with vastly different word banks: around 13,700 new terms for the avid reader, against just 1,500 for the child who barely picks up a book. Even an ambitious classroom programme teaching 20 new words a week adds only 520 in a year. Reading does the heavy lifting that direct instruction, however good, simply cannot do alone.





Does daily reading matter more as children get older?

The evidence suggests it does. Data from the US National Assessment of Educational Progress found that the score gap between children who read “almost every day” and those who “never or hardly ever” read widened with age: 18 points among 9-year-olds, 27 points at 13, and 30 points at 17. International PISA data tells a similar story: across 32 countries, reading engagement was more strongly correlated with achievement than socioeconomic background, gender, family structure or time spent on homework.

This runs contrary to the common assumption that reading practice matters most when children are learning to read but becomes less important once the basics are in place. The opposite may be true – and it is one reason the government’s new Year 8 reading test, announced by Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson in October 2025, will target the secondary years where reading progress has long been known to stall.

What can teachers do with this evidence?

None of this means that 15 minutes a day is a silver bullet. Quality of instruction, access to books and what happens at home all matter. But the consistency of the evidence gives teachers and school leaders something concrete to work with – a target that is modest enough to be achievable and well-evidenced enough to be worth defending.

In the National Year of Reading, the simplest intervention may also be the most effective. 15 minutes. Every day. It’s not a slogan. It’s a threshold.

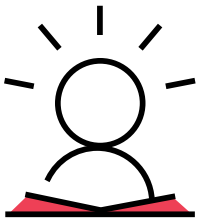


Key facts at a glance



How many words does a child encounter reading 30 minutes a day?

Approximately 13.7 million words between reception and Year 13 – compared with just 1.5 million for a child reading fewer than 15 minutes a day, according to Renaissance’s research.



Does reading engagement matter more than socioeconomic background?

International PISA data found that low-income students with high reading engagement outperformed high-income students with low reading engagement across all 32 countries studied.



How many UK children read daily for pleasure?

Fewer than one in five children aged 8–18 read daily for pleasure in 2025, according to the National Literacy Trust – the lowest level recorded in 20 years.

Sources

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