



# Editorial 197

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Readers of **Books for Keeps** are for the most part those who are passionate about bringing books and children together from the early years. Indeed it is encouraging to read in this issue's article on the Seven Stories bookshop that just under 40% of their sales are of books for babies and picture books.

That the role of books and other educational toys in early childhood is important in developing the parts of the brain dedicated to language and cognition has now been shown by a pioneering 20-year research study carried out at the Centre for Neuroscience and Society at the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Martha Farah, Director of the Centre, wanted to find out how a range of experiences in childhood might influence brain development.

Farah took data from surveys of the home life and brain scans of 64 participants from the age of four over twenty years. Researchers visited the children's homes and recorded how many children's books they had as well as whether they had toys that taught about numbers, colours and letters and whether they played with real or toy musical instruments. The researchers also evaluated how much 'parental nurturance' (warmth, support, and care) the child received from their parents. The surveys were carried out again when the children were eight and when they were between 17 and 19 when they also had their brain scanned.

The results showed that the cognitive stimulation from parents at the age of four was a key factor in predicting the development of several parts of the cortex in late teens. Professor Farah concluded that there is evidence for the existence of a sensitive period around the age of four that determines the optimal development of the cortex. Other factors including parental nurturance and cognitive stimulation at age eight had no effect.

When they reached their late teens participants were also given language tests and according to Farah, the thinner the cortex, the better their language comprehension.

This highly significant study conducted over twenty years showing that books in early childhood are the key to cognitive development 15 years later reminds us once again of the importance of sharing books with young children whether at home or a school. The ongoing decimation of our library services as councils cut public services will have serious repercussions for our children who need access to a range of picture books and to story sessions.

Amidst the gloom it has been encouraging to read of communities who are fighting back. For example, in October an alliance of squatters, retired booksellers and other local activists reopened the Friern Barnet library which Barnet council planned to sell off. The volunteer staff have stocked the shelves with 5,000 donated books and starting story telling sessions.

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