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Childhood Availability of Books Predicts Later-Life Cognitive Function

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Abstract

Background. Cognitive function has been shown to be influenced by individual and social factors across the life course, such as social participation and occupational complexity. Few studies have investigated to which extent early cognitive stimulation may influence later-life cognitive function. We investigated whether the number of books available in the parental household predicts cognitive function and decline at older age.

Method. Cognitive function (verbal fluency, immediate and delayed recall) of 10,818 respondents to the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe aged 50 and older was assessed in 2004/5, 2006/7, and 2010/11. Controlling for childhood socioeconomic status (SES) assessed by parental occupation and characteristics of the parental household, we examined the impact of books available at home at age 10 on cognitive function at older age using mixed (random) effects models with random intercept.

Results. Controlling for childhood health, childhood SES, education, and school performance, the number of books available in the parental home was positively associated with overall cognitive function at ages 50 and older. There was no association with six-year overall cognitive decline, but this was due to contrasting patterns for different cognitive domains. Having fewer books at the parental household was associated with slower aging-related decline in verbal fluency, but significantly faster aging-related cognitive decline in immediate and delayed recall. Associations remained after controlling for later-life health and socioeconomic status.

Discussion. Cognitive stimulation during childhood as measured by the number of books available at the parental household may prevent decline in memory function at older age.