

Subtitles on children's TV boost reading skills

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Broadcasters are considering whether to supply subtitles by default

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It is the dilemma of every parent with young children. Is it acceptable to leave them in front of the television while you finish the washing-up, check your emails or savour a few minutes' peace?

Soon they may be able to expunge their guilt and tell themselves that letting their offspring watch another episode of Peppa Pig, SpongeBob SquarePants or Dora the Explorer will boost their education.

Broadcasters are considering whether to make same-language subtitles appear automatically on cartoons and other children's programmes in the light of research showing that this can have a dramatic impact on literacy.

International studies showed that primary school children who watched television with subtitles were more likely to reach expected standards of reading — and more likely to handle advanced texts — than those who did not. This has prompted an entrepreneur to start a campaign to urge broadcasters in Britain to turn on subtitles by default for children's television shows.

Oli Barrett, whose previous initiatives include a challenge for pupils to invest £10, which has become Britain's biggest enterprise competition, is in talks with the BBC, Sky, YouTube, Amazon and Netflix to urge them to switch on subtitles by default for children's television, initially for on-demand programmes.

Parents are already able to turn on subtitles manually but few do so. If broadcasters were to supply them by default parents would still be able to disable them but would have to consciously choose to do so.

"For me, realising that putting same-language subtitles on kids' television can have a profound effect on their reading and on their literacy was just a eureka moment," Mr Barrett said.

A BBC spokesman said: "We met with Oli Barrett this week to discuss his thoughts around automatic subtitling and will continue to look at how we can improve what we do for viewers in this area."

The most extensive research has been led by an Indian academic, Brij Kothari, whose non-profit organisation Planet Read has tested the effects on literacy of adding captions to the songs of Bollywood films.

One study in Maharashtra state found that 68 per cent of children who watched the films with subtitles in their native language reached basic reading standards for their age compared with 43 per cent in the control group and 39 per cent in the subtitles group read advanced texts compared with 24 per cent in the control group.

Other studies in the US and New Zealand found gains in reading ability among pupils who watched children's television or films with subtitles.

The campaign is backed by National Literacy Trust, which said that with children watching two hours of television a day and spending another two hours looking at on-demand content, it was important to look for new opportunities to familiarise them with words. It also called for more research.

Jonathan Douglas, trust director, said: "Turning on the subtitles could provide added educational value."
