

# Use of apostrophes by six to nine year old children

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## Do children need to be taught about the use of apostrophes?

Some young children seem able to infer rules about using apostrophes without being taught directly about them, but most need to be taught how to use them. The authors of this study tested a total of 312 pupils in four state primary schools in the South East of England. They found that teaching children about the use of apostrophes produced clear and positive benefits, yet the overall levels of correct use of apostrophes, even after explicit instruction, were low. The authors suggested that children may need more opportunities to consolidate their understanding and to practise the correct use of apostrophes.

### Keywords:

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## Contents

Do children need to be taught about the use of apostrophes? .....	1
What did the study find out about improving the use of apostrophes?.....	2
Summary of findings.....	3
The effects of teaching on use of apostrophes .....	4
What factors influence children’s independent use of apostrophes? .....	4
The study aims and design .....	5
Limits to the study.....	6
Definitions .....	6

Contractive apostrophes (contractions).....	6
Possessive apostrophes (possessives).....	6
Token frequency.....	6
Type frequency.....	6
What are the implications for practitioners? .....	6
Where can I find out more? .....	7

## What did the study find out about improving the use of apostrophes?

The main findings of the research were as follows:

- children in all year groups were more successful in the use of contractive than [possessive apostrophes](#);
- better spellers in Year 2 showed some ability to use apostrophes without explicit teaching;
- Year 3 pupil scores showed marked improvements in the use of [contractive apostrophes](#) after being taught;
- Year 4 pupils showed marked improvements in the use of possessive apostrophes after being taught, compared with the performance of the previous year on the use of possessive apostrophes; and
- the average score in the tests on the use of apostrophes in Year 4 (after pupils had been taught about both types of apostrophe) was still only about 50%.

The researchers also wanted to explore in more detail what might affect children’s spontaneous use of apostrophes. In particular, they looked at whether the frequency with which different types of apostrophe appeared in children’s reading material made a difference to their ability to infer correct usage. The researchers also examined whether frequency of occurrence of apostrophes similarly influenced children’s ability to infer correct usage. Token and type frequencies are measures used by the researchers to explore both how frequently children encountered apostrophes and also how frequently they encountered different *types* of apostrophe in order to understand how children started to use them without explicit teaching:

- [Type frequency](#) refers to the number of different items which use an apostrophe and counts only the first instance of any particular apostrophised word.

- **Token frequency** is the total number of instances of each or the two types of apostrophised word.

They found that:

- how frequently children encountered a range of different types of apostrophe had no effect on children’s correct use of apostrophes; but
- the overall frequency with which they encountered apostrophes did have an effect on correct use.

### Summary of findings

#### Pupils’ scores on use of contractive apostrophes

	Year 2	Year 2	Year 3	Year 3	Year 4	Year 4
	's	n't	's	n't	's	n't
Mean score out of 10: strict scoring	1.76	1.78	2.85	4.08	4.87	5.04
Mean score out of 10: lenient scoring *	1.84	2.6	2.89	5.17	4.93	7.09

\* Lenient scoring: when marking the pupils’ tests, the researchers realised that many children seemed aware of the need for an apostrophe, but put it in the wrong place, e.g. was’n’t. They therefore investigated the effect on the scores if this mistake were to be counted as correct. They then found that scores for all Year groups on the n’t contraction were boosted significantly more than scores on the ‘s contraction. Results for Y2 showed a difference that was not apparent with strict scoring.

#### Pupils’ scores on use of possessive and contractive ‘s

	Year 2	Year 2	Year 3	Year 3	Year 4	Year 4
	Pos. ‘s	Con. ‘s	Pos. ‘s	Con. ‘s	Pos. ‘s	Con. ‘s
Mean score out of 10	1.44	1.62	1.89	2.72	3.36	3.79

## The effects of teaching on use of apostrophes

The study showed very clearly the positive effect of explicit teaching. There were interesting variations across year groups. There was no significant difference between the successful use of contractive 's and possessive 's by Year 2 pupils, who had been taught *neither*.

There was no significant difference between the successful use of contractive 's and possessive 's by Year 4 pupils, who had been taught *both*. Yet there was a highly significant difference for Year 3 pupils, who had been only taught the use of contractive apostrophes, but not possessive apostrophes, in favour of the former.

Y3 pupils also did much better with the contractive n't apostrophe than the contractive 's apostrophe.

In Year 4, pupils who had been taught about the use of the possessive apostrophe showed much higher test scores for this than pupils in the previous year group. The gap in performance between use of contractive and possessive apostrophes which became apparent in Year 3 was closed in Year 4 after the pupils had been taught to use both types of apostrophe.

The researchers pointed out that overall levels of correct use of apostrophes in the tests were still rather low. Mean scores for entirely correct apostrophe use by Year 4 children who had been taught both types of apostrophe never exceeded 50%. The authors suggested that children might need more opportunities to consolidate their understanding and to practise the correct use of apostrophes.

## What factors influence children's independent use of apostrophes?

Can children infer rules about use of apostrophes without being taught? The researchers suggested that, yes, it seems that some can. Year 2 children showed some ability to insert apostrophes appropriately, despite having had no instruction from the class teacher on the subject. Good spellers in Year 2 (defined as those who scored above the median spelling age of 7 years 2 months) were more likely to use apostrophes than their peers with lower spelling ages.

The researchers set out to discover whether independent use of apostrophes was influenced by children's exposure to a wide range of examples of the use of a specific type of apostrophe, or by the sheer number of instances of a specific type of apostrophe use. They looked at two different measures of frequency: [token frequency](#) and [type frequency](#) in order to explore this question about the mechanism by which children made inferences about apostrophe use.

They determined how often different types of apostrophe occurred in children's reading material using the different frequency measures and compared these with children's correct usage. The researchers noted that contractive apostrophes (e.g. can't, isn't, won't, there's, he's, let's) appeared far more frequently than possessives (e.g. Mum's, John's, dog's, farmer's) when measured by 'token frequency'. In contrast, for type frequency, the number of different words

using a possessive apostrophe was greater than the number of different items using a contractive apostrophe.

The researchers used two different sets of questions in which they matched pairs of questions first for type frequency and then for token frequency. They then examined the pupils' results to see whether either measure had an effect on pupils' use of apostrophes. They found that type frequency had no effect on children's correct use of apostrophes, but that token frequency did.

In other words, pupils' exposure to a wide range of *different examples* of possessive apostrophes did not help them to make inferences about apostrophe use, whereas exposure to a large number but *smaller range* of types of contractive apostrophes did help some children to make inferences about the use of the contractive apostrophe.

## The study aims and design

The aims of the study were:

- to determine whether, and to what extent, children could infer rules about use of different types of apostrophe without being explicitly taught about them;
- how much difference teaching made to children's correct use of apostrophes; and
- whether the frequency with which different types of apostrophe appear in children's reading material makes a difference to their ability to infer correct usage.

The researchers gave simple spelling tests, at least one week apart, to whole classes of the following year groups:

- Year 2 children, who were not officially taught how to use any type of apostrophe;
- Year 3 children, who were taught how to use the contractive type of apostrophe in the interval between the two tests; and
- Year 4 children, who were taught how to use the possessive type of apostrophe in the interval between the two tests.

In between "filler" questions, which gave an indication of each pupil's spelling age, the children answered questions which required the use of apostrophes. The researchers compared the children's performance on the two tests in order to measure the effectiveness of teaching about apostrophes in Years 3 and 4. The research focus in Year 2 was on whether children could infer rules about apostrophes from their reading and, if so, whether this ability to infer was affected by the frequency of apostrophe use in children's books.

### Limits to the study

The authors noted that none of the words on the tests required pupils to spell words with a plural s, so they could not gauge the extent to which pupils over-generalised the use of apostrophes.

## Definitions

### Contractive apostrophes (contractions)

Contractive apostrophes are used when a letter is missing. The contractive n't always has the letter o missing. Other examples include the contractive 's, in which the missing letter may be i from the word "is" (She's reading), u from the word "us" (Let's go shopping), or the letters "ha" from the word "has" (He's gone out); or the contractive 've from the word "have" (They've gone out). There are a number of other types of contractive apostrophes.

### Possessive apostrophes (possessives)

Possessive apostrophes show that one thing belongs to another, or to a person, e.g. the dog's bone (the bone belonging to the dog); the teachers' room (the room belonging to the teachers)

### Token frequency

Token frequency is defined as the total number of instances of each type, so, if wouldn't appears five times, didn't appears ten times and haven't appears twice, then the token frequency of the n't contraction is seventeen and if Dad's appears three times, cat's appears once and Katy's appears twice, the token frequency of the possessive 's is six. Using the measure of token frequency, contractions are found more than four times as frequently in children's writing than possessives.

### Type frequency

A different measure of frequency refers to the number of different items which use an apostrophe. This 'type frequency' counts only the first instance of any particular apostrophised word. Since most nouns can be used in the possessive form but there are a limited number of words which are shortened and use a contractive apostrophe, type frequency in children's literature is much higher for possessives than contractions: (359:153).

## What are the implications for practitioners?

In completing this digest, the authors began to ask questions about implications for practitioners.

Teachers wanting to improve children's correct use of apostrophes may wish to consider the following:

- The study found that pupils experience more difficulty with the contractive 's than the contractive n't. Do you explicitly teach the contractive 's, as well as the contractive n't, when you teach apostrophes? Do you include a range of examples?
- The study commented that children were likely to over-generalise their use of possessive apostrophes. In Year 4 and above, do you explicitly teach that simple plurals do not take an apostrophe?
- Are there some of your pupils who struggle to understand plurals? If so, you need to address this issue before they can begin to understand the correct use of apostrophes.
- The study suggested that some children independently notice apostrophes in their reading. Do you support this process by drawing young readers' attention to examples of apostrophes and their function and ensuring access to a range of texts making use of a range of apostrophes?
- The study found improving, but still relatively low rates of successful use of apostrophes amongst Year 4 pupils. Do you provide your pupils with enough opportunities for consolidation and practice? Do teachers of older year groups also provide opportunities for such practice?

School leaders wanting to improve children's correct use of apostrophes may like to consider:

- the patterns of explicit apostrophe teaching and the incidence of apostrophes in the most widely used reading material; and
- whether to advocate spending more time on consolidation in Years 4,5 and 6.

## Where can I find out more?

Collins, J., Hammond, M. and Wellington, J. (eds) (1997) *Teaching and Learning with Multimedia*. London:Routledge.

Useful information on how ICT can be used to developing apostrophe teaching can be found in the following: "Effective pedagogy using ICT for literacy and numeracy in primary schools."

Pages 65-69 cover 'Teaching the correct use of omissive apostrophes in Year 4 using multimedia software'. The link below will take you to a pdf version of the document.

[http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ecls/research/project\\_ttaict/TTA\\_ICT2b.pdf](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ecls/research/project_ttaict/TTA_ICT2b.pdf)

General information on the National Literacy Strategy can be found at:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/>

The Standards website link below takes you to a section of the Literacy Strategy revising the use of possessive apostrophes.

[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/teaching\\_resources/nls\\_framework/year5/term3/?level=sentence](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/teaching_resources/nls_framework/year5/term3/?level=sentence)

The primary resources website has an online quiz which includes tests of the plural apostrophe:  
<http://www.primaryresources.co.uk/online/apostrophes.htm>

A TRG (Teacher Research Grant) summary “Extending children’s spelling strategies” investigates the effectiveness of raising spelling achievement through teaching the structure and process of cued spelling for Year 6 children.

<http://www.tta.gov.uk/php/read.php?sectionid=82&articleid=689>