Reading is a mental activity, but we use our bodies to do it. Meanings in the text do not just transfer into the reading mind, they have to be sensed and interpreted. Moreover, we do not read texts; we read books, emails, newspapers, SMSes etc., all of which have material existence in some form. The practice of reading is located in certain places: in reading chairs, beds, libraries and schools. The materialistic and bodily aspects of reading are plentiful.

Naturally, readers use their senses while reading. But reading also produces illusions of materiality: it makes us sense imaginary landscapes and beings. Reading often evokes strong emotions and affects in readers. Characters of a novel can feel more real than people in reality. The immaterial can serve as a mirror, in which the reader can reflect his or her material life. Even though reading as a bodily practice and a sensual activity has been discussed since ancient times, discourses concerning bodily reading have mostly targeted women, children and young people. Children’s reading practices have been related, and still relate, to his or her developing body and psychological maturity.

To control children’s reading is to control their bodies. This control has been practiced in several ways. Reading has been promoted because it brings children and young people inside, away from the streets, and keeps them sitting, thus preventing noisy and rampant play. On the other hand, children’s reading has been disapproved of because it lures them to idleness. Furthermore, reading has been thought to transform children. At its simplest, moral reading has been thought to materialise to decent behaviour whereas immoral reading to cause indecent acts. The idea of reading as a transformative power still exists, and with the rise of the brain research, it is perhaps stronger than ever.

This symposium approaches the materiality of childhood reading from various perspectives that include both children’s own experience and discourse on children’s reading. The presentations represent different research traditions and cover a period from the 19th century to today. They consider questions of power, identity, corporality and emancipation in relation to children’s reading.

Keywords: children, reading, historical research, identity, power