

Family Literacy

Mediating the Effects of Risk on Children's School Readiness: What are the Roles of Family Literacy and Parent Sense of Competence?

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The purpose of the study is to examine the predictive effect of emotional risk and family literacy practices on Head Start children's school readiness skills. Exposure to emotional risk factors (e.g., single mother) is associated with lower levels of language skills and delayed cognitive development (e.g., Sameroff & Fiese, 2000; Stanton-Chapman, Chapman, Kaiser, & Hancock, 2004). Alternatively, positive parenting practices, including the presence of parent-child literacy activities, have been found to relate to later language and literacy success (Bus, 1995; Senechal, 1997; Wood, 2002).

This investigation is part of a larger study examining the effects of a parent intervention program on children's academic, behavioral, and socioemotional functioning. The sample consisted of 111 children between 36 and 51 months of age ($M = 42.31$, $SD = 6.65$) attending Head Start in Nebraska.

For this study, emotional risk and family literacy activities were used to predict children's school readiness. Emotional risk scores were calculated by summing five potential indicators: adolescent mother, neither in school nor employed, single parent, parent lacking a high school diploma or GED equivalent, and/or family receiving public assistance. These risks were identified by the Early Head Start (EHS) National Research Evaluation study and have been considered in other early intervention studies for low-income populations (Raikes, Love, Kisker, Chazan-Cohen, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). The Bracken Basic Concepts Scale – Revised (BBCS-R; Bracken, 1998) School Readiness Composite (SRC) scores (e.g. colors, numbers, shapes) were used to measure school readiness. The shared reading/ verbal activities subscale of The Family Inventory-Revised (Taylor, 2001) was used to measure family literacy activities. While the authors originally planned to include parenting beliefs in analyses, the bivariate correlation between the measure used in this study, the Parental Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC; Johnston & Mash, 1989), and the outcome variable was non-significant, and thus not included in the final analyses. There was limited variability in parents' report of competence. This will be a future area of investigation.

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine the relation between school readiness scores, emotional risk and family literacy practices. Analyses indicated that (Step 1) emotional risk significantly related to school readiness ($R^2 = .13$, $F(1, 103) = 14.98$, $p < .001$) and that (Step 2) shared reading/verbal activities significantly predicted children's school readiness scores above and beyond that of emotional risk ($R^2 = .18$, $F(2, 102) = 11.54$, $p < .001$). The interaction of risk and shared reading/verbal activities was not significant (Step 3).

This study demonstrates that Head Start children exposed to emotional risk factors can benefit in additional ways from parents who engage in shared reading and verbal activities. Interventions targeting the specific family literacy practices of shared reading and verbal activities may contribute to skills affecting school readiness in this group of children and families.

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Parental Influence in Head Start Children's Language and Emergent Literacy Skills

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Emergent literacy refers to the developmental precursors of learning to read (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Many early literacy skills begin to develop even before children enter school (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) and persist into primary school (Juel, 1988). Given the developmental importance of emergent literacy during the preschool years, there is an interest in understanding the contributions that parents and preschool programs make in the development of those skills. The purpose of the current study is to provide evidence that parent-child book reading predicts increases in children's emergent literacy skills after controlling for parent education. Most studies that examine the influence of parent-child book reading in preschool programs do not take into account the shared environment (influence) of classrooms. This study is unique in that it uses multilevel model methodology that takes into account the classroom influence on children's language growth attributed to parent's book reading. This study has two hypotheses: H1: Head Start will be effective in increasing children's emergent literacy skills and H2: parent-child book reading would be more important than maternal education in predicting children's emergent skills. Children were assessed twice: once at the beginning of preschool, and again at the beginning of Kindergarten. In the current study, all families that registered their children for a Head Start program in a northeastern U.S. urban community were invited to participate. Only children that entered kindergarten the next year were analyzed (n=149). Given the nested design (children over time, within classes, between classes) multilevel modeling was used (Singer, 1998). The methodology divided the contributions of maternal education and parent-child book reading into two summary variables: an average per class and a deviation from the class. The first hypothesis investigated the effectiveness of the Head Start program in increasing children's receptive vocabulary (PPVT; Dunn & Dunn, 1981) and letter naming skills. This hypothesis was supported. Head Start was effective in improving children's receptive vocabulary (3.22 Age Standardized points) and letter naming skills (8.72 more letters named). The second hypothesis was partially supported. Exploratory analysis of the second hypothesis reveals that there was very little between classroom variance (15% for receptive vocabulary; and 8% for letter naming) to be explained. However, parent-child book reading accounts for 9% of the explainable variance while mother's education accounts for 72% of the explainable variance between classrooms. The classroom average maternal education predictor was significant (2.80, $p = .028$), such that classrooms with higher than average maternal education had students with higher vocabulary scores. Thus, for classrooms whose average maternal education was 1 point higher than average, children's receptive vocabulary was 3 points higher. There was not a significant finding for classrooms that read more than average, however the standard error is very large and more classrooms may be necessary to detect that effect. Contrary to our second hypothesis, maternal education remained a significant predictor for both outcomes, particularly at the classroom level.

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A Look at Low-Income Parents' Reading Practices with their Preschool Children

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Literacy concepts, knowledge and skills developed during the early childhood years are excellent predictors for future reading success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) provide evidence that early reading environmental experiences are crucial to the acquisition of early reading. The purpose of the present research was to examine the relationship between the characteristics of low-income families from a variety of backgrounds and their preschool children's language skills and enjoyment and exposure to books.

Methods

Participants

Children attending a Head Start program in New York City were invited to participate in this study. Twenty-four parents (6 of African descent, 2 of European descent, 2 of Asian descent; and 14 of Hispanic origin) , with children between the ages of 3.3 and 4.90 (mean age= 3.9 years) from two classrooms within the center, provided consent for participation and completed the survey. All children in this sample were described as using English as their first language.

Procedure

Parents completed the modified version of the Stony Book Reading Survey (1993) , a 41 item paper and pencil instrument. The children in the study were administered the Test of Early Language Development TELD-3. This test was used because it provided both a measure of receptive and expressive vocabulary and the normative sample contained low-income children.

Results and Conclusions

Low-Income Parents Literacy Practices

In general, parents reported engaging in literacy practices that enhanced their children's reading skills. The majority of parents reported that they frequently engaged in reading books to their children, and that their children enjoyed reading. Moreover, parents saw themselves as playing an active role in teaching their children new words and reading to them. In addition, parents also saw themselves as playing a critical role in helping their children to succeed in school.

Parents' Reading Practices and Children's Language Skills

A positive relationship was found between young children's expressive, receptive and spoken language skills and their exposure to books and enjoyment of reading. However, although a positive relationship was found between expressive and spoken language skills and going to the library, no relationship was found between going to the library and children's receptive language skills.

Parental Reading Practices and Children's Literacy and Language Characteristics

The results revealed that parents' who enjoyed reading had children who enjoyed being read to, tended to have a larger number of books in their home, and had children who had good receptive and spoken language skills. Moreover, parental education was found to be moderately related to both children's receptive and spoken language competency.

In short, the findings from this study have shown that there is a positive relationship between children's oral language skills and the type literacy practices and artifacts that they are exposed to. Moreover, the data suggest that the low-income parents in this study are providing their children with what appears to be a high literacy environment.

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Head Start Families' At-Home Involvement: Complex Effects on Early Vocabulary

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Compared to their more affluent peers, young children in poverty are far more likely to arrive at first grade with fewer of the skills they will need to learn to read, such as vocabulary knowledge (Hart & Risley, 1995; Lee & Burkam, 2002), but early interventions to help families support their children's literacy learning at home during the preschool years can be an important resource for supporting later reading achievement and academic success (Baker, Piotrkowski, & Brooks-Gunn, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childes, 2004; Wagner & Clayton, 1999). This is one of the primary goals of the Head Start (HS) program (Zigler & Freedman, 1987), and research shows that HS enrollment is linked to increased frequency of parents' involvement in school-based activities and relates to increases in children's general school readiness and social competence (Parker et al., 1997; Pizzo & Tufankjian, 2004).

The three goals of this study were first to explore the nature and extent of parents' self-reported involvement in vocabulary-building interactions with children at home both before and after the first year of center-based HS; second, to explore how this change in involvement relates to important child and family demographic variables; and third, to explore how this involvement across the year affects children's receptive vocabulary, directly and/or as a mediator of these demographic variables.

Data were drawn from the 2000-2001 Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), in which all participating children were enrolled in their first year of HS (total $n=967$). Family involvement was assessed in fall 2000 and spring 2001 through a brief parent interview in which parents reported the frequency of five vocabulary-building activities in the home (e.g., telling stories, talking about Head Start and other experiences, teaching letters and numbers, singing songs, and reading books) from 0 (never) to 2 (3 or more times per week). Children's receptive vocabulary was assessed in the fall and spring using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test – III (Dunn & Dunn, 1998). In fall and spring, parents also provided demographic information including maternal education, maternal ethnicity, employment status, family structure, welfare status, child age, and child gender.

Frequency of family involvement in vocabulary at home (FIVH) was calculated by summing responses to the items. Scores ranged from 0 to 10, with $M=7.180$ ($SD=1.995$) in the fall and $M=7.310$ ($SD=1.874$) in the spring. Change scores ranged from -7.00 to 8.00 , with $M=.132$, $SD=2.000$, indicating that involvement did not shift significantly after experiencing HS. Relations between demographic variables, FIVH and children's vocabulary were examined through a path model. Results suggest that FIVH in fall had a small but significant direct positive effect on vocabulary and mediated the effects of maternal education, maternal literacy, maternal minority ethnicity, and family structure; maternal literacy and maternal minority ethnicity also directly influenced fall vocabulary. Spring FIVH did not relate to spring vocabulary.

Results suggest that one year of enrollment in HS does not increase frequency of family involvement around vocabulary and that the influence of family involvement may change over the academic year. Findings also raise many questions about the mechanisms through which family involvement might be enhanced and assessed. Implications for future research and policy are discussed.

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