



DEVELOPMENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

The Effects of Early Reading with Parents on Developing Literacy Skills

NATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL ON THE DEVELOPING CHILD

is a multi-disciplinary collaboration of leading scholars in neuroscience, early childhood development, pediatrics, and economics. Housed at the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, the Council works to bring sound and accurate science to bear on public decision-making affecting the lives of young children.

For more information on the Council and the science of early childhood, go to www.developingchild.net.

A review of a recent study examining the effects of mother-child bookreading during the first three years of life.

Why was this study done? Parents are encouraged to read storybooks to their preschoolers to promote language and cognitive skills. But how important is bookreading to infants and toddlers, who have not begun to develop literacy skill? Does the frequency of parent-child bookreading in the first three years enhance cognitive development, especially for lower-income children who show early delays in language and cognitive skills? Are there benefits even for young children for whom English is not their primary language?

How was the study conducted? Mothers and children were participants in an evaluation study of Early Head Start, a federal program serving 62,000 very low income families in 7,000 communities nationwide. Early Head Start provides home- or center-based services to enhance child development and parenting skills. A sample of more than 1,100 mothers was interviewed when their children were 14, 24, and 36 months old. Some of the mothers participated in Early Head Start, and others were in a control group. Mothers were asked about the frequency of their storybook reading, along with questions about family resources and stresses. Standard measures of the child's vocabulary and cognitive ability were also performed by well-trained researchers.

What did the study find? Nearly half the mothers reported reading daily to their infants at 14 months, and this proportion increased at each subsequent age. The frequency of reading was associated with children's language and cognitive scores at the same age and at later ages. In general, the more that mothers read to their children the greater the gains for children's vocabulary and cognitive ability such that, by age 3 (when children begin to be interested in pre-reading activities), mothers who had been reading daily during the preceding two years had children with significantly elevated language and cognitive scores. These findings were especially apparent for English-speaking children, although daily reading in Spanish also enhanced language and cognitive outcomes for Spanish-speaking children. Most importantly, maternal reading and child language had a mutual "snowball" effect in which early exposure to reading promoted vocabulary gains that, in turn, led to more reading and vocabulary growth. In

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SCIENCE BRIEFS

summarize the findings and implications of a recent study in basic science or clinical research.

Studies are selected for review based on their scientific merit and contributions to understanding early development. No single study is definitive, of course. Understanding of early development is based on many studies that, taken together, permit broad conclusions and human applications.

Generalizing to human children the results of studies with animals, for example, must be done cautiously and confirmed by research with children and their families. The National Scientific Council rests its work on a rigorous discussion of the validity of many studies like these conducted over many years and using different methodologies and samples.

other words, young children exposed to lots of early reading began talking more and showing an interest in books that provoked further shared reading with the parent and, in turn, the momentum for additional cognitive and vocabulary growth.]

What do the findings mean? Taken together, these findings suggest that reading to very young children even before children have begun to identify letters can form an important foundation for vocabulary development and language skills later in life. This is especially true for lower-income families where offspring are more likely to fall behind in early language and cognitive achievement. Beginning early may help create momentum in preliteracy development that can benefit children as they acquire literacy skills as preschoolers. Therefore, programs that improve the awareness and ability of low-income parents and caregivers to read frequently to infants and toddlers may lead to important literacy gains in the school years. ●

Title and Authors: Raikes, H., Pan, B. A., Luze, G., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Brooks-Gunn, J., Constantine, J., Tarullo, L. B., Raikes, H. A., & Rodriguez, E. T. (2006). Mother-child bookreading in low-income families: Correlates and outcomes during the first three years of life. *Child Development* 77:924-953.