

Parent Involvement in Early Reading First: Effects on Children's Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Parent involvement in their children's education can take many forms. In this study we looked at parents' involvement in the home component of a preschool curriculum. Our research question was whether the frequency of completion of weekly home parent-child learning activities enhances children's academic gains above and beyond classroom influences. Participants were 120 Head Start children and their families. When classroom quality and child- and classroom-level demographic characteristics were controlled, children of parents who completed more home activities showed greater gains on emergent reading and math, and a trend towards greater gains on phonological awareness. This suggests that engagement in structured activities that are closely integrated with the ongoing classroom curriculum is an important form of parent involvement.

Introduction

Parent involvement in their children's education can take many forms (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong & Jones, 2001).

Educators often emphasize school-based forms of involvement (e.g., volunteering on campus, attending parent-teacher conferences and school events). However, home-based forms of involvement (e.g., reading aloud and other cognitively stimulating interactions) are more directly linked with children's academic growth, at least in early childhood (Bennett, Weigel & Martin, 2002; Fantuzzo, McWayne & Perry, 2004).

Our interest was in a specific form of parent involvement—participation in the home learning component of a preschool curriculum.

We hypothesized that more frequent completion of weekly home learning activities would be associated with stronger child academic gains over the course of the school year.

To more precisely estimate the effect of parent involvement, we controlled for classroom quality and a number of child- and classroom-level characteristics.



Method

Participants

Children & Families

- 120 Head Start children and their primary caretakers
- Mean child age 44.2 months, mean parent age 33.2 years
- 75% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 17% Asian American, 8% Other
- 34% of families spoke a foreign language at home

Classrooms

- 10 classrooms from the same Head Start program
- All were part of an Early Reading First project that provided extensive coaching and professional development and used the Learning Connections curriculum

Measures

Level 1 Predictors

- Age in months
- Native English speaker (NES)
- 1st vs. 2nd year in Head Start
- Home activities completed

Level 2 Predictors

- Full-day vs. part-day schedule
- Mean child age
- % Native English speakers (NES)
- Mean home activities completed
- CLASS PreK (classroom quality composite combining emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support)

Child Achievement

- Test of Early Reading Abilities 3rd Ed. (TERA)
- Developing Skills Checklist (DSC) mathematical and logical operations scale
- Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening PreK (PALS)
- Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test 3rd Ed. (PPVT)

Home Curriculum

- The Learning Connections curriculum includes weekly home learning activities. The activities take 10-15 minutes each. Activities extend content areas recently covered in the classroom.
- Parents were given instructions and needed materials for each activity. After doing the activity, parents returned a feedback sheet on which they rated the activity quality and commented on their child's reaction. 46% of feedback sheets were returned ($SD = .30$).
- The ERF coach was in the classroom twice per month to demonstrate the activities and discuss children's progress with parents.
- Three times per year coaches and teachers held more formal workshops for parents.

Results

We first estimated each child's growth (i.e., slope) on the four achievement tests. This was done using regression of posttest on pretest. Standardized residuals were used as dependent variables in the two-level multilevel analyses.

Figure 1: Pre and Posttest Means and SD for Child Achievement Tests

Measure	Pretest		Posttest	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
TERA	7.32	6.73	89.51	15.11
DSC	7.34	6.73	15.33	8.60
PALS	12.08	13.43	31.02	22.44
PPVT	83.37	18.19	87.44	16.30

Note. DSC and PALS are raw scores. PPVT are language quotients. For the TERA we used reading quotients at posttest and raw scores at pretest as some children were too young at pretest to be assigned quotient scores.

Figure 2: Standardized Regression Coefficients for Multilevel Analysis

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables			
	TERA	DSC	PALS	PPVT
Level 1				
Age	-.49**	.18*	.15	-.14
NES	-.02	.01	-.04	-.16
1 st vs. 2 nd year	.03	-.11	-.03	.08
Home activities	.20*	.35**	.17	.01
Level 2				
Full vs. part day	.13	.26	.24	.15
Mean age	-.21	-.13	-.06	-.22
Proportion NES	.16	.07	.28*	.15
Mean activities	.06	.03	.23	-.07
CLASS	-.01	.07	.13	.04

Note. ** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$; + $p < .10$. For continuous variables, Level 1 variables were group mean centered, Level 2 variables were grand mean centered. Categorical variables were dummy coded.

Net of the other child- and classroom-level predictors, home activity completion rates were significantly associated with growth on emergent literacy and math. Their was a trend in the direction of home activities also being associated with growth on phonological awareness.

Parents shared their views on the home activities through surveys and focus group discussions. Parents:

- Enjoyed the 1:1 time with their child
- Felt much more aware of their child's learning capacity
- Raised their expectations for what preschoolers can do

Conclusions

When parents completed more of the home learning activities, their children made larger gains during the school year on early math and literacy skills. These results suggest that low-income children benefit when their families engage in regular, structured enrichment activities that are closely aligned with the learning goals and content of the ongoing classroom curriculum.

Other programs have successfully engaged parents in home-based literacy (Whitehurst, Falco et al., 1988) and math (Starkey & Klein, 2000) activities, with resulting gains on child learning outcomes. In one study, reading aloud by parents was more effective than reading aloud by teachers (Whitehurst, Arnold et al., 1994).

Challenges for home learning efforts include participation, fidelity, and overcoming language barriers. In later years of our ERF project, weekly participation increased to mean levels of 70-80%. Teachers played a key role in inspiring involvement.

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For further information

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