



Parents' Role in Fostering Young Children's Learning and Language Development

CATHERINE S. TAMIS-LEMONDA, PhD
EILEEN T. RODRIGUEZ, PhD

New York University, USA

(Published online March 27, 2008)

(Revised November 5, 2009)

Topic

Language development and literacy
Parenting skills

Introduction

During the first years of life, children undergo major developmental changes across a range of domains. In particular, the entry into “formal language” is one of the most heralded achievements of early development. Language enables children to share meanings with others, and to participate in cultural learning in unprecedented ways. Moreover, language is foundational to children’s school readiness and achievement. For these reasons, a vast body of research has been dedicated to understanding the social-contextual factors that support children’s early language and learning. This work is also central to practitioners, educators and policy makers who seek to promote positive developmental outcomes in young children.

Subject

Developmental scholars have long been interested in documenting the social experiences that help explain within- and between-group variation in children’s early language and learning.^{1,2} This work is anchored in the writings of scholars such as Bruner^{3,4} and Vygotsky,⁵ who posited that learning occurs in a socio-cultural context in which adults and primary caregivers support or “scaffold” young children to higher levels of thinking and acting. According to this view, children who experience sensitive, cognitively stimulating home environments early in development are at an advantage in the learning process.

Problem

Research into the factors that promote positive language growth and learning in young children is central to addressing achievement gaps that exist in children from different ethnic, language, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Children enter school with different levels of skill, and these initial differences often affect children’s subsequent language growth, cognitive development, literacy and academic achievement.^{6,7,8} Children who exhibit delays at the onset of schooling are at risk for early academic

difficulties and are also more likely to experience grade retention, special education placement, and failure to complete high school.^{9,10,11}

These delays are particularly evident in children living in poverty. Children from low-income households lag behind their peers in language skills from early on,^{2,12} and have been shown to develop vocabularies at slower rates than their peers from more economically advantaged households.⁷ Smaller receptive and productive vocabularies, in turn, predict children's later reading and spelling difficulties in school.^{8,13}

Research Context

The demographic profiles of minority and immigrant populations in the U.S. and Canada have changed dramatically over the past decade— a shift that has generated research on the widespread disparities that exist in children's school readiness across ethnic, racial and socioeconomic lines.^{14,15,16,17,18} Because group disparities in learning exist prior to kindergarten, researchers and practitioners alike seek to understand the role of children's early home environment in the learning process.^{19,20,21,22,23}

Research Questions

Inquiry into the role of the home environment on young children's language and learning can be classified under two broad questions: (1) *Which aspects of parenting matter for children's early language and learning, and why?* and (2) *What factors enable parents to provide a supportive environment to their young children?*

Recent Research Results

Which aspects of parenting matter, and why? Three aspects of parenting have been highlighted as central to children's early language and learning: (1) the frequency of children's participation in routine *learning activities* (e.g., shared bookreading, storytelling); (2) the *quality of caregiver-child engagements* (e.g., parents' cognitive stimulation and sensitivity/responsiveness); and (3) the provision of age-appropriate *learning materials* (e.g., books and toys).²⁴

Early and consistent participation in routine *learning activities*, such as shared book reading, storytelling, and teaching about the letters of the alphabet, provide children with a critical foundation for early learning, language growth and emergent literacy.^{25,26,27,28} Routine activities provide young children with a familiar structure for interpreting others' behaviors and language, anticipating the temporal sequencing of events, and drawing inferences from new experiences.^{29,30} Moreover, engagement in learning activities expands children's vocabularies and conceptual knowledge.³¹ In particular, shared bookreading, as well as the sharing of oral stories, facilitate young children's vocabulary growth, phonemic skills, print concept knowledge, and positive attitudes toward literacy.^{25,27,32,33,34,35}

A plethora of studies also indicate that the *quality of parent-caregiver interactions* plays a formative role in children's early language and learning. In fact, the amount and style of language that parents use when conversing with their children is one of the strongest predictors of children's early language. Children benefit from exposure to adult speech

that is varied and rich in information about objects and events in the environment.^{7,36,37} Additionally, parents who contingently respond to their young children's verbal and exploratory initiatives (through verbal descriptions and questions) tend to have children with more advanced receptive and productive language, phonological awareness, and story comprehension skills.^{38,39,40,41}

Finally, the *provision of learning materials* (e.g., books, toys that facilitate learning) has been shown to support young children's language growth and learning.^{42,43,44} Learning materials provide opportunities for caregiver-child exchanges about specific objects and actions, such as when a parent and child pretend to cook a meal. In such instances, materials serve as a vehicle for communicative exchanges around a shared topic of conversation. Specifically, exposure to toys that enable symbolic play and support the development of fine motor skills has been shown to relate to children's early receptive language skills, intrinsic motivation and positive approaches to learning.^{45,46} In addition, children's familiarity with storybooks has been linked to their receptive and expressive vocabularies and early reading abilities.^{26,27}

What factors predict positive parenting? Researchers agree that parenting is multiply determined by characteristics of both parents and children. In terms of parent characteristics, parent age, education, income, and race/ethnicity (to name a few) have all been shown to relate to the three aspects of parenting discussed above. For example, compared to older mothers, teen mothers display lower levels of verbal stimulation and involvement, higher levels of intrusiveness, and maternal speech that is less varied and complex.^{47,48} Mothers with fewer years of education read to their children less frequently^{25,49} and demonstrate less sophisticated language and literacy skills themselves,⁵⁰ which affects the quantity and quality of their verbal interactions with their children.² Parental education, in turn, relates to household income: poverty and persistent poverty are strongly associated with less stimulating home environments,⁵¹ and parents living in poverty have children who are at risk for cognitive, academic, and social-emotional difficulties.^{52,53} Finally, Hispanic and African American mothers are, on average, less likely to read to their children than White, non-Hispanic mothers;⁵⁴ and Spanish-speaking Hispanic families have fewer children's books available in the home as compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts.²⁵ These racial and ethnic findings are likely explained by differences in family resources across groups, as minority status is often associated with various social-demographic risks.

Child characteristics, such as gender and birth order (as two of many examples), have also been linked to early measures of language and learning. For example, girls tend to have a slight advantage over boys in the early stages of vocabulary development,^{55,56,57} and studies have documented that families spend substantially more time in literacy-related activities with girls than with boys.⁵⁸ Firstborn children have slightly larger vocabularies on average than their later-born peers.⁵⁹ Further, mothers differ in their language, engagement and responsiveness toward their first- and laterborn children, with input favoring firstborns.⁶⁰

Research Gaps

In light of evidence that children from low-income and minority backgrounds are more likely to exhibit delays in language and learning at school entry, additional work is needed to understand why these differences exist, and how to best support parents in their provision of positive home environments for their children. Future research should investigate the ways in which multiple aspects of the home learning environment jointly contribute to developmental outcomes in children. Moreover, studies on “school readiness” should begin at the earliest stages of infancy, as this is the period when foundational language and knowledge develops. In this regard, research on the language development and school readiness of children from language minority households should focus on how in- and out-of-home language experiences jointly contribute to children’s proficiency in both English and their native language. Finally, most research on the social context of children’s language and learning is focused on children’s interactions with mothers. Given the rich social networks that comprise infants’ and toddlers’ environments, future studies should examine the literacy opportunities offered by multiple members of young children’s social worlds, including fathers, siblings, extended family members, and childcare providers.

Conclusions

There exists irrefutable evidence for the importance of children’s early language and learning for later school readiness, engagement and performance. Children’s experiences at home are critical to early language growth and learning. In particular, three aspects of the home literacy environment promote children’s learning and language: learning activities (e.g., daily book reading), parenting quality (e.g., responsiveness), and learning materials (e.g., age-appropriate toys and books). Additionally, parents with more resources (e.g., education, income) are better able to provide positive learning experiences for their young children. Finally, children also play a key role in their own learning experiences, as exemplified by links between child characteristics and parenting behaviors. Children affect parents just as parents affect children; it is therefore critical to acknowledge the transactional nature of children’s early language and learning experiences.⁶¹

Implications

Research on children’s early learning environments is relevant to policy makers, educators, and practitioners who seek to promote the positive language development and learning of young children. Intervention and preventive efforts should target multiple aspects of children’s early language and learning environments, including supporting parents in their provision of literacy-promoting activities, sensitive and responsive engagements, and age-appropriate materials that facilitate learning. Moreover, these efforts should begin early in development, as children are likely to benefit most from supportive home environments during the formative years of rapid language growth and learning.^{22,62,63} Finally, interventions with parents that aim to support children’s learning should attend to the cultural context of early development when working with parents from different backgrounds, and also consider the broader social context of parenting by attending to the barriers created by poverty and low parental education.

To learn more on this topic, consult the following sections of the Encyclopedia:

- [How important is it?](#)
- [What do we know?](#)
- [What can be done?](#)
- [According to experts](#)
- [Key messages](#)

REFERENCES

1. Burns MS, Griffin P, Snow CE, eds. *Starting out Right: A Guide to Promoting children's Reading Success. Specific Recommendations from America's Leading Researchers on How To Help Children Become Successful Readers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 1999.
2. Hoff E. The specificity of environmental influence: Socioeconomic status affects early vocabulary development via maternal speech. *Child Development* 2003;74(3):1368-1378.
3. Bruner JS. The ontogenesis of speech acts. *Journal of Child Language* 1975;2(1): 1-19.
4. Bruner J. *Child's Talk: Learning to use Language*. New York, NY: Norton; 1983
5. Vygotsky LS. *Myshlenie i rech'*. [Thought and language]. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; 1962.
6. Dickinson DK. *Bridges to Literacy: Children, Families, and Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell; 1994.
7. Hart B, Risley T. *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes; 1995.
8. Snow CE, Porche MV, Patton ED, Tabors PO, Harris SR. *Is Literacy Enough? Pathways to Academic Success for Adolescents*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing; 2007.
9. Campbell FA, Ramey CT. Effects of early intervention on intellectual and academic achievement: A follow-up study of children from low-income families. *Child Development* 1994;65(2):684-698.
10. Kaufman P, Alt MN, Chapman CD. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2001. Statistical Analysis Report NCES 2005-046*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics; 2004.
11. Lee VE, Burkam DT. *Inequity at the Starting Gate: Social Background differences in Achievement as Children Begin School*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2002.
12. Nord CW, Lennon J, Liu B, Chandler K. Home literacy activities and signs of children's emerging literacy: 1993 and 1999. *Education Statistics Quarterly* 2000;2(1):19-27.

13. Duncan GJ, Dowsett CJ, Claessens A, Magnuson K, Huston AC, Klebanov P, Pagani LS, Feinstein L, Engel M, Brook-Guns J, Sexton H, Duckworth K, Japel C. School readiness and later achievement. *Developmental Psychology* 2007;43(3):1428-1446.
14. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2005. Washington, DC: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics; 2009.
15. Ferguson HB, Bovaird S, Mueller MP. The impact of poverty on educational outcomes for children. *Paediatrics & Child Health* 2007;12(8):701–706.
16. KewalRamani A, Gilbertson L, Fox M, Provasnik S. *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Minorities* (NCES 2007-039). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences. U.S. Department of Education; 2007.
17. Rouse CE, Brooks-Gunn J, McLanahan S, eds. School readiness: Closing racial and ethnic gaps. *The Future of Children* 2005;15(1):1-195.
18. Thomas EM. *Readiness to Learn at School among five-year-old Children in Canada*. Catalogue No. 89-599-MIE. No. 004. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.
19. Beals DE, DeTemple JM, Dickinson DK. Talking and listening that support early literacy development of children from low-income families. In: Dickinson DK, ed. *Bridges to literacy: Children, Families, and Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell; 1994:19-40.
20. Chall JS, Jacobs VA, Baldwin LE. *The Reading Crisis: Why Poor Children Fall Behind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1990.
21. Dickinson DK, DeTemple J. Putting parents in the picture: Maternal reports of preschoolers' literacy as a predictor of early reading. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 1998;13(2):241-261
22. Shonkoff J, Phillips D. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 2000.
23. Whitehurst GJ, Lonigan CJ. Emergent literacy: Development from prereaders to readers. In: Neuman SB, Dickinson DK, eds. *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*. New York, NY: Guilford Press; 2003:11-29.
24. Rodriguez ET, Tamis-LeMonda CS, Spellmann ME, Pan BA, Raikes H, Lugo-Gil J, Luze G. The formative role of home literacy experiences across the first three years of life in children from low-income families. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. In press.
25. Raikes H, Pan BA, Luze G, Tamis-LeMonda CS, Brooks-Gunn J, Constantine J, Tarullo LB, Raikes HA, Rodriguez ET. Mother-child bookreading in low-income families: Correlates and outcomes during the first three years of life. *Child Development* 2006;77(4):924-953.
26. Payne AC, Whitehurst GJ, Angell AL. The role of home literacy environment in the development of language ability in preschool children from low-income families. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 1994;9(3-4):427-440.
27. Senechal M, LeFevre JA, Hudson E, Lawson P. Knowledge of storybooks as a predictor of young children's vocabulary. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 1996;88(3):520-536.

28. Snow CE, Dickinson DK. Social sources of narrative skills at home and at school. *First Language* 1990;10(29):87-103.
29. Nelson K. How children represent knowledge of their world in and out of language. In: Siegler RS, ed. *Children's Thinking: What Develops?* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; 1978:255-273.
30. Nelson K. *Event Knowledge: Structure and Function in Development*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; 1986.
31. Bloom L. Language acquisition in its developmental context. In: Damon W, ed. *Handbook of Child Psychology*. 5th ed. New York, NY: J. Wiley; 1998:309-370. Kuhn D, Siegler RS, eds. Cognition, perception, and language; vol 2.
32. DeBaryshe BD. Joint picture-book reading correlates of early oral language skill. *Journal of Child Language* 1993;20(2):455-462.
33. Dickinson DK, Tabors PO. Early literacy: Linkages between home, school and literacy achievement at age five. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 1991;6(1):30-46
34. Lyytinen P, Laasko M, Poikkeus A. Parental contributions to child's early language and interest in books. *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 1998;13(3):297-308.
35. Wagner RK, Torgesen JK, Rashotte CA. Development of reading-related phonological processing abilities: New evidence of bidirectional causality from a latent variable longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology* 1994;30(1):73-87.
36. Evans GW, Maxwell LE, Hart B. Parental language and verbal responsiveness to children in crowded homes. *Developmental Psychology* 1999;35(4):1020-1023.
37. Weizman ZO, Snow CE. Lexical input as related to children's vocabulary acquisition: Effects of sophisticated exposure and support for meaning. *Developmental Psychology* 2001;37(2):265-279.
38. Beals DE, DeTemple JM. Home contributions to early language and literacy development. *National Reading Conference Yearbook* 1993;42:207-215.
39. Hann DM, Osofsky JD, Culp AM. Relating the adolescent mother-child relationship to preschool outcomes. *Infant Mental Health Journal* 1996;17(4): 302-209.
40. Silven M, Niemi P, Voeten M. Do maternal interaction and early language predict phonological awareness in 3-to-4-year olds? *Cognitive Development* 2002;17(1): 1133-1155.
41. Tamis-LeMonda CS, Bornstein MH, Baumwell L. Maternal responsiveness and children's achievement of language milestones. *Child Development* 2001;72(3): 748-767.
42. Neuman SB, Roskos K. Access to print for children of poverty: Differential effects of adult mediation and literacy-enriched play settings on environmental and functional print tasks. *American Educational Research Journal* 1993;30(1): 95-122.
43. Senechal M, LeFevre JA, Thomas E, Daley K. Differential effects of home literacy experiences on the development of oral and written language. *Reading Research Quarterly* 1998;33(1):96-116.
44. Tabors PO, Roach KA, Snow CE. Home language and literacy environment: Final results. In: Dickinson DK, Tabors PO, eds. *Beginning Literacy with Language:*

- Young Children Learning at Home and School*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes;2001:111-138.
45. Tomopoulos S, Dreyer BP, Tamis-LeMonda C, Flynn V, Rovira I, Tineo W, Mendelsohn AL. Books, toys, parent-child interaction, and development in young Latino children. *Ambulatory Pediatrics* 2006;6(2):72-78.
 46. Gottfried AE, Fleming JS, Gottfried AW. Role of cognitively stimulating home environment in children's academic intrinsic motivation: A longitudinal study. *Child Development* 1998;69(5):1448-1460.
 47. Keown LJ, Woodward LJ, Field J. Language development of pre-school children born to teenage mothers. *Infant and Child Development* 2001;10(3):129-145.
 48. Whiteside-Mansell L, Pope SK, Bradley RH. Patterns of parenting behavior in young mothers. *Family Relations* 1996;45(3):273-281.
 49. Scarborough HS, Dobrich W. On the efficacy of reading to preschoolers. *Developmental Review* 1994;14(3):245-302.
 50. Rowe ML, Pan BA, Ayoub C. Predictors of variation in maternal talk to children: A longitudinal study of low-income families. *Parenting: Science and Practice* 2005;5(3):259-283.
 51. Garrett P, Ng'andu N, Ferron J. Poverty experiences of young children and the quality of their home environments. *Child Development* 1994;65(2):331-345.
 52. Brooks-Gunn J, Duncan GJ. The effects of poverty on children. *The Future of Children* 1997;7(2):55-71.
 53. Smith JR, Brooks-Gunn J, Klebanov PK. The consequences of living in poverty for young children's cognitive and verbal ability and early school achievement. In: Duncan GJ, Brooks-Gunn J, eds. *Consequences of Growing Up Poor*. New York: Russell Sage; 1997: 132-189.
 54. Yarosz DJ, Barnett WS. Who reads to young children? Identifying predictors of reading of family reading activities. *Reading Psychology* 2001;22(1):67-81.
 55. Bornstein MH, Haynes OM, Painter KM. Sources of child vocabulary competence: A multivariate model. *Journal of Child Language* 1998;25(2):367-393.
 56. Fenson L, Dale PS, Reznick JS, Bates E, Thal DJ, Pethick SJ. *Variability in Early Communicative Development*. Chicago, IL: Chigago Press; 1994. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development; vol 5(59).
 57. Pan BA, Rowe ML, Singer J, Snow CE. Maternal correlates of toddler vocabulary production in low-income families. *Child Development* 2005;76(4):763-782.
 58. Teale WH. Home background and young children's literacy development. In: Teale WH, Sulzby E, eds. *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.;1986:173-206.
 59. Hoff-Ginsberg E. The relation of birth order and socioeconomic status to children's language experience and language development. *Applied Psycholinguistics* 1998;19(4):603-631.
 60. Bornstein MH. Parenting Infants. In: Bornstein MH, ed. *Handbook of Parenting*. 2nd ed., Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Associates; 2002:3-44. Children and parenting; vol 1.

61. Sameroff AJ, Fiese BH. Models of development and developmental risk. In: Zeanah CH Jr., ed. *Handbook of Infant Mental Health*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Guilford Press; 2005:3-19.
62. Tamis-LeMonda CS, Cristofaro TN, Rodriguez ET, Bornstein MH. Early language development: Social influences in the first years of life. In: Balter L, Tamis-LeMonda CS, eds. *Child Psychology: A Handbook of Contemporary Issues*. New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2006:79-108.
63. Hirsh-Pasek K, Burchinal M. Mother and caregiver sensitivity over time: Predicting language and academic outcomes with variable- and person-centered approaches. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 2006;52(3):449-485.

To cite this document:

Tamis-LeMonda CS, Rodriguez ET. Parents' role in fostering young children's learning and language development. Rev ed. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2009:1-9. Available at: http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Tamis-LeMonda-RodriguezANGxp_rev-Language.pdf. Accessed [insert date].

Copyright © 2008-2009

This article is funded by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and the Canadian Council on Learning's Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre.

