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

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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

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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?

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.

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