Intervention to change parent–child reading style: A comparison of instructional methods

Colleen E. Huebner [a,*], Andrew N. Meltzoff [b]

[a]*Maternal and Child Health Program, Department of Health Services, P.O. Box 357230, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, United States*
[b]*Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences, University of Washington, United States*

Abstract

Dialogic reading is an evidence-based intervention to promote the language skills of 2- and 3-year-old children. This study examined conditions under which dialogic reading could be implemented in a community setting. Three methods of instruction were compared: (a) in-person with video instruction in small groups, (b) self-instruction by video with telephone follow-up and, (c) self-instruction by video alone. Results showed few parents read with a dialogic style prior to instruction. Instruction yielded more than a 4-fold increase in parents' dialogic reading behaviors and had significant positive effects on children's language use (including number of words and mean length of utterances) during shared reading. When the data were stratified by parents' education and instructional method (in-person vs. self-instruction), there was a significant difference favoring in-person instruction as the more efficacious method of instruction, especially for parents with high school education.
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1. Introduction

Reading to preschoolers is commonly accepted as a way to promote school readiness. In 1985, the National Academy of Education underscored the role of caregivers in reading development: "The single

most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (National Academy of Education Commission on Reading, 1985, p. 3). Parents have gotten the message. Surveys of home literacy activities find most preschool children are read to routinely. For instance, in 2001, the percentage of children ages 2–3 years read to by a family member every day of the previous week was 49% for children whose mothers had a high school education and 73% for children whose mothers were college graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Despite the widespread practice of reading with young children, empirical evidence of its benefits for language or literacy development is relatively recent (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Lonigan, 1994; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Research has shown positive effects of shared reading on preschool children's emergent literacy and oral language skills, including increases in vocabulary, knowledge of print (Reese & Cox, 1999) and complexity of conversational language (Morrow, 1988). Labeling novel words during shared reading can increase both expressive and receptive vocabulary (Senechal, 1997; Senechal & LeFevre, 2001), and repeated reading of the same story provides important lessons in narrative structure (Senechal & LeFevre, 2001).

Reading aloud with children is particularly effective when the shared reading is highly interactive. The advantages of an interactive, or "dialogic" style of reading on young children's oral language skills were demonstrated first by Whitehurst and his colleagues in a study of a shared reading program called "Dialogic" or "Hear-and-Say" reading (Whitehurst et al., 1988). The program for 2- and 3-year-old children is based on three principles: (1) the use of evocative techniques that encourage the child's active participation in telling the story, (2) use of feedback to the child in the form of expansions, corrections and praise, and (3) progressive change to stay at or beyond the child's current level of independent functioning (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994). Typically, instruction takes the form of two sequenced small-group sessions with an experienced trainer and videotaped illustration of the reading techniques.

Multiple studies of the last decade have confirmed and extended Whitehurst's findings that instruction in dialogic reading leads to significant changes in shared reading style and to positive effects on the expressive language skills of 2- and 3-year-old children. Positive results have been found with children from lower- and middle-income homes; in center- and home-based programs; and with typical development and developmental disabilities (Dale, Crain-Thoreson, Notari & Cole, 1996; Huebner, 2000a, 2000b; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1988; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992). Interestingly, the most consistent positive findings are from implementations that include home reading, with or without a concomitant group-based school or daycare dialogic reading component (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1994), suggesting the effects of dialogic reading for 2- and 3-year-old children are especially potent when delivered as a one-to-one activity.

Although the evidence in favor of highly interactive, or dialogic, reading is strong, adults do not typically read this way without instruction. In a study of 129 parents and their 2- and 3-year-old children, Huebner (2000a) reported parents' baseline reading style included few dialogic reading behaviors. The most common behavior was to read the text directly without engaging the child in the story. Following instruction in dialogic reading, parents changed their style dramatically. The average number of dialogic reading behaviors increased from 20 to 55 in a 5-min parent–child reading sample.

1.1. The need to translate research to practice

Evidence from dialogic reading programs demonstrates that it is relatively easy to teach parents and early educators how to maximize shared reading to foster language and literacy development in young