



Expanding home visiting outcomes: Collaborative measurement of parental play beliefs and examination of their association with parents' involvement in toddler's learning



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 May 2015

Received in revised form 1 December 2015

Accepted 21 December 2015

Available online 12 January 2016

Keywords:

Parental beliefs

Toddler play

Home visiting outcomes

Scale development

Rasch modeling

Low-income child development

Parent involvement in children's learning

ABSTRACT

Home visiting is a unique method of service delivery that has the potential to strengthen parenting attitudes and behaviors that are critical to children's early development and learning. Although there is growing interest and federal support for evidence-based home visiting, meaningful assessment measures to appropriately evaluate and monitor program outcomes for young children and their families are lacking. In partnership with a national home visiting program, this study used a mixed-method approach to develop an assessment of parents' perceptions of play for families of two- and three-year-old children, named the Toddlers & Play Scale. English and Spanish versions of the scale were independently and rigorously analyzed, with results indicating a unidimensional scale for both versions. The measure represents parents' perspectives about salience of play to children's early learning. Parent's report on the Toddlers & Play was found to be significantly correlated to their reported involvement in children's learning, particularly for Spanish-speaking parents. This study is an initial step in examining the role of parental play beliefs and behaviors as facilitators of home visiting service delivery. Directions for advancing the psychometric quality and application of Toddlers and Play are delineated.

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1. Introduction

Socioeconomic disadvantage continues to plague children in the United States, with our nation's infants and toddlers at the highest risk for living in poverty. Recent demographic studies reveal that almost half of our nation's infants and toddlers live in socioeconomic hardship, with 25% of these young children living in homes with incomes that fall at or below the federal poverty line (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2014). The grand majority (nearly 90%) of infants and toddlers who live in poverty, experience multiple socioeconomic risks, including ethnic minority status and residence in homes where English is not the primary language (Halle et al., 2009). Compared to their higher-income peers, low-income children face a greater risk of cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development deficits prior to starting kindergarten (Gershoff, 2003). Among low-income children, those who are non-English speaking, and particularly Spanish-speaking, face heightened risk

for poor cognitive and language outcomes in later years (Halle et al., 2009).

1.1. Child-development-focused home visiting

Home visiting is a growing means for fostering healthy development among low-income children. Reflecting the dedication of resources by the Obama Administration, the number of low-income families and children served by home visiting has more than tripled in two short years, expanding from 34,180 in 2012 to 115,545 in 2014 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Home visiting, however, encompasses programs that vary in goals and approaches (Avellar & Supplee, 2013). Child-development-focused home visiting is distinguished by its primary goal to children's early learning and development in addition to its recognition that parents' are the pivotal mechanisms for bolstering children's outcomes (Raikes et al., 2006). Advancement of child development-focused home visiting is contingent upon satisfying federal standards for empirically documenting effectiveness in improving children's health and development. Recently, the Administration formulated the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) to oversee the implementation of evidenced-based home visiting

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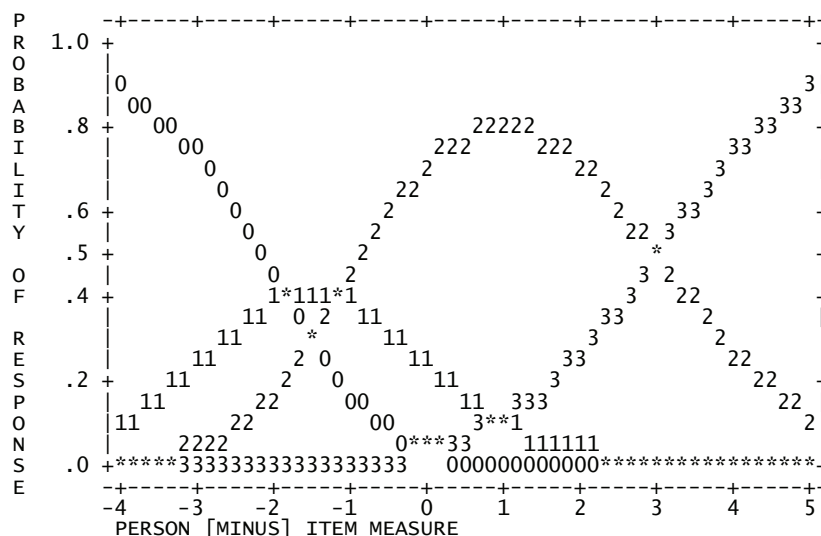


Fig. 1. Rating category probability curve for English Toddler & Play Scale.

programs for low-income children and families. MIECHV efforts are steered by the Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness (HomVEE; Avellar et al., 2015) initiative which is an ongoing process for identifying home visiting programs as they achieve empirical validation of effectiveness. To date, HomeVEE has identified 19 home visiting program models that are deemed evidenced-based, with 12 models focused on child development outcomes.

Sadly, the promise of home visiting for improving children's development has not been revealed among the evaluations of child-development-focused HomVEE model programs. Collectively, only 19% of the wide-range child outcomes examined in these evaluations has shown favorable effects for home visited children. Although there are several contexts for understanding these dim findings in a manner that allows home visiting advancement to move forward, a clear methodological implication is a strong need to create psychometrically-sound, developmentally and culturally meaningful, measures that align with the programs' goals.

1.2. Children's play as context for intervention

Play is often the focal point of child development-focused home visiting program's approach when providing services to infants and toddlers. For example, the Parent–Child Home Program (PCHP; Levenstein, Levenstein, & Oliver, 2002) aims to improve low-income toddlers' language abilities by fostering parents' engagement of their toddlers in play as well as using play as a basis for book sharing and dialoguing. PCHP's theory of change asserts that parents' verbal interactions with children, like those that occur naturally during play, are the vehicle for fostering children's development and school readiness. This theory of change is supported by research associating play with children's gains in cognitive, language, and social competencies in addition to promoting children's physical development (Mathieson & Banerjee, 2010; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). During the toddler years, play is uniquely characterized by a progression from sensorimotor to symbolic functions (Casby, 2003). Emanating from infancy, sensorimotor play enables infants to explore objects through their senses and movements. As children approach two-years of age, play evolves from exploration to becoming opportunities to apply and advance their mental operations. Symbolic play enables children to transcend an egocentric focus, applying actions and roles to others and external objects. Toddlers begin to imitate actions that

they have observed in others. Through pretense, toddlers begin to incorporate objects with imaginative functions into their play.

1.3. Parent's beliefs about developmental salience of play

Parents fulfill an instrumental role in fostering the progression and quality of their toddlers' play. Through interacting with their children during play, parents shape social competencies, scaffold cognitive abilities, and promote language acquisition (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). These early experiences formulate stable trajectories for development. A longitudinal study conducted by Keane and Calkins (2004) demonstrated that parents' report of problematic social behaviors during the toddler years was consistent with teacher observations in preschool and subsequently kindergarten. Moreover, observations of social difficulties during the toddler years were associated with diminished peer acceptance in kindergarten. At the same time, parents' elicitation and support of child-oriented play during the toddler years fosters children's long-term cooperative behavior and overall social competence (Kochanska, Kim, Boldt, & Koenig Nordling, 2013).

Consistent with sociocognitive theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), parenting behaviors are motivated by their values and beliefs. This is true for the manner in which parents' engage with and encourage toddlers' play (Harkness et al., 2011). Although parental beliefs about play vary greatly across cultures, belief that young children's play is a mechanism for learning is common among Latinos and Euro-American parents in the US (Fasoli, 2014; Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008). Studies have demonstrated that parents who value play in this manner are likely to engage their children in play and to foster their toddlers' play with other children (Fasoli, 2014; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004).

Parents' beliefs that play is valuable for early learning have been associated with positive outcomes for children. Fogle and Mendez (2006) demonstrated that parents' views of play as developmentally significant were associated with parents' and teachers' observations of children's effective competencies for interacting with peers and their infrequent expression of disruptive or isolated play. On the other hand, children whose parents did not hold these play beliefs were involved in interactive peer play less often. Gleason (2005) found that children whose parents regarded their children's imaginative play as an important learning experience showed advanced language development.

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