



Associations between early shared music activities in the home and later child outcomes: Findings from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The benefits of early shared book reading between parents and children have long been established, yet the same cannot be said for early shared music activities in the home. This study investigated the parent–child home music activities in a sample of 3031 Australian children participating in *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) study. Frequency of shared home music activities was reported by parents when children were 2–3 years and a range of social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes were measured by parent and teacher report and direct testing two years later when children were 4–5 years old. A series of regression analyses (controlling for a set of important socio-demographic variables) found frequency of shared home music activities to have a small significant partial association with measures of children's vocabulary, numeracy, attentional and emotional regulation, and prosocial skills. We then included both book reading and shared home music activities in the same models and found that frequency of shared home music activities maintained small partial associations with measures of prosocial skills, attentional regulation, and numeracy. Our findings suggest there may be a role for parent-child home music activities in supporting children's development.

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Introduction

Early shared book reading between parents and children holds many developmental benefits. Higher frequency of parent-child book reading has been strongly and consistently associated with language and literacy achievement across early childhood (Silinskas et al., 2012). Less is known about its influence on social-emotional outcomes. In contrast, there is very little research that

examines whether shared home music activities are also of benefit to children's development. Research on the efficacy of family music therapy interventions for children with special needs or from particular risk backgrounds suggests that guided parent-child music activities hold social development benefits for children (Nicholson, Berthelsen, Abad, Williams, & Bradley, 2008; Oldfield, 2006; Williams, Berthelsen, Nicholson, Walker, & Abad, 2012). Participation in formal early music education classes has been linked with better self-regulation skills (Winsler, Ducenne, & Koury, 2011), enhanced cognitive processing (Flohr, Miller, & deBeus, 2000), and enhanced phonemic awareness (Gromko & Poorman, 1998) in young children. However, little is known about the extent to which *informal* early shared home music activities have positive longitudinal developmental benefits for *all* children. In this study, we examine the extent to which frequency of shared home book reading and shared home music activities at 2–3 years are associated with a range of cognitive and social-emotional outcomes at 4–5 years. Further, we estimate the extent to which shared home music activities are associated with these outcomes when both shared home book reading and music activities are included in the same models. We do this by using two single-item measures

[☆] This paper uses unit record data from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC). The LSAC study is conducted in partnership between the Department of Social Services (DSS), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The findings and views reported in this paper are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the DSS, AIFS, or the ABS. This study was supported by ARC Discovery Project DP130102488 *Being and becoming musical: Toward a cultural ecological model of early musical development* (Barrett & Welch 2013–2015).

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of shared home book reading and shared home music activities and include measures of seven developmental outcomes in an exploratory approach to this under-researched area. The investigation of the role of these two distinct early home learning activities across a range of developmental domains will contribute to greater understanding of those early parent-child activities that best support children's development.

The importance of early home learning environments

A substantial body of literature has established the relations between the general quality of the home learning environment and positive academic (Melhuish, Phan et al., 2008; Skwarchuk, Sowinski, & LeFevre, 2014) and social outcomes for children (Foster, Lambert, Abbott-Shim, McCarty, & Franze, 2005). The home learning environment comprises shared parent-child activities aimed formally or informally to expose children to concepts of numeracy and literacy (e.g., we play games that involve counting; we identify words on signs; Kleemans, Peeters, Segers, & Verhoeven, 2012; Skwarchuk et al., 2014), or the availability of materials that encourage specific skills (e.g., I buy my child maths workbooks; Froyen, Skibbe, Bowles, Blow, & Gerde, 2013). Measures of the home learning environment vary in their content and specificity but, typically, involve asking parents to report on the frequency particular activities occur, or in-home observations.

The general quality of the home learning environment in the early years has been linked to a wide range of positive developmental outcomes for children including enhanced communication, language, and literacy skills (Hartas, 2011; Hindman & Morrison, 2012), numeracy skills (Anders et al., 2012), school readiness (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009), social and emotional skills including self-regulation (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009; Foster et al., 2005; Hartas, 2011), and fewer behavior problems (Hindman & Morrison, 2012). It appears that the mechanism through which home learning environments stimulate positive developmental trajectories for children relates primarily to domain-specific skills presented within home learning activities. For example, books and book reading expose children to words they may not hear in daily conversation, thus expanding their vocabulary (Sénéchal, 2006). Counting games and songs expose children to early numeracy concepts (Skwarchuk et al., 2014).

The ways in which home learning activities support domain-general skills such as self-regulation, behavior, and prosocial skills has been far less researched. It is conceivable that particular shared parent-child home learning activities that require joint attention, active cooperation, turn-taking, and immediate feedback between parent and child, would support children's self-regulatory and social development. Such contentions are evidenced in recent research that links parent-reported frequency of formal home learning activities, such as teaching letter names and doing math workbooks, with enhanced parent-reported cooperation and compliance in preschool children (Hindman & Morrison, 2012). The current study builds on such work by investigating the relations between the informal home learning activities of shared book reading and shared home music activities, and a number of domain-general developmental skills.

Shared book reading

The most frequently studied aspect of the home learning environment is home literacy practices, including number of books in the home, reading behaviors of parents, and frequency of shared book reading. The benefits of shared book reading, particularly in relation to domain-specific skills such as children's literacy competency, are well established (Sparks & Reese, 2013). Shared book reading is correlated positively with the development of

vocabulary, comprehension, and narrative skills (Farrant & Zubrick, 2013; Sénéchal, Pagan, Lever, & Ouellette, 2008). These skills are integral to reading development across the early school years (Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Sénéchal, 2006). Shared book reading has also been linked to children's math achievement (Baker, 2013; Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006; Melhuish, Phan et al., 2008; Melhuish, Sylva et al., 2008).

The links between shared book reading and domain-general areas of development such as social, emotional, and self-regulatory skills, have been less researched, with most of the existing studies cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal, in nature. Frequency of mother-child literacy-related activities in the home (including shared book reading) has been cross-sectionally linked with teacher-rated positive approaches to learning, social skills, and self-regulatory functioning in children aged 4–6 years (Baker, Cameron, Rimm-Kaufman, & Grissmer, 2012; Farver et al., 2006; Foster et al., 2005). Further, home literacy involvement has been found to mediate the relation between socio-economic status and social skills (Foster et al., 2005), and behavior problems and academic achievement (Haak, Downer, & Reeve, 2012), highlighting the protective role that shared home learning experiences may play for children from particular risk backgrounds.

In one of the few longitudinal studies, Baker (2013) found in an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth cohort (ECLS-B) of 5190 families, that more frequent home literacy practices at 24 months were associated with higher sustained attention and fewer negative behaviors in direct assessments of parent-child interactions when children were 4-years-old. A further longitudinal study has also linked the relatively poorer quality of the home learning environment with poorer self-regulation and behavior problems as measured by symptoms of Attentional Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in German children from kindergarten to Grade 2 ($N=924$; Schmiedeler, Niklas, & Schneider, 2013). Taken together, existing cross-sectional and a limited number of longitudinal studies suggest that frequency of shared book reading is associated with more positive language and cognitive skills in children and more positive social-emotional skills. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no prior study has tested for these longitudinal associations in a large Australian cohort. The current study, in part, addresses this gap and is also unique in including a range of both cognitive and social-emotional outcomes in a longitudinal design spanning two to five years.

Music as a home learning activity

While research has identified the positive developmental benefits of early shared book reading, very little is known about the benefits that may accrue from early shared music activities in the home. Parent-child music activities in the early years include joint and supported singing (including action songs, counting songs, nursery rhymes, and children's songs), generating original songs to accompany routine activities, dancing, playing basic instruments, and listening to music on CD, DVD, and MTV (Barrett, 2009, 2011, 2012). In these contexts shared music activities may function as 'signs' or 'cultural tools' (Vygotsky, 1986/1934) as parents use the conventions of songs and nursery rhymes to build their child's understandings of cultural conventions.

A number of measures of the early home learning environment used in large cohort studies include items related to such music practices (Baker, 2013; Hartas, 2011), and home numeracy and literacy scales often include musical activities such as "we sing counting songs" and "we make up rhymes in songs" (Skwarchuk et al., 2014). Such measurement items not only recognize the supportive role of music in developing numeracy and literacy skills, they also recognize that music provides an important context in which parents and children engage in home learning.

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