



# Low-income minority mothers' and fathers' reading and children's interest: Longitudinal contributions to children's receptive vocabulary skills<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Using data from a diverse sample of low-income African American and Latino mothers, fathers, and their young children who participated in Early Head Start ( $n=61$ ), the current study explored the association between parents' reading quality (i.e. metalingual talk) while reading with their 2-year-old children and their children's receptive vocabulary skills at pre-kindergarten. It further examined whether children's interest in reading mediated this association. There were three main findings. First, most mothers and fathers in our sample read relatively often to their children (a few times a week) and used some metalingual talk; fathers used more than mothers. Second, controlling for parental education, mothers' and fathers' early reading quality significantly predicted children's receptive vocabulary skills at pre-kindergarten. Third, children's interest in reading mediated the association between mothers' and fathers' reading quality and children's receptive vocabulary scores. These findings have important implications for programs aimed at fostering low-income children's vocabularies and suggest that both mothers and fathers need to be included in programs.

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## 1. Introduction

On average, children from low-income families hear language less frequently and of lower quality than children from middle- and high-income families (Hart & Risley, 1995), which places them at risk for language delays (Fiorentino & Howe, 2004; National Institute of Child Health & Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2001) that may persist upon kindergarten entry and throughout formal schooling (Duncan et al., 2007; Farkas & Beron, 2004). Low-income parents are also less likely than their middle-class counterparts to read to their children, which may be problematic because reading exposes children to language and promotes vocabulary development (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Whitehurst et al., 1994). However, this literature suffers from several limitations. First, it is mostly based on the frequency of reading rather than on the quality of the reading. Emerging research

suggests that not only frequency of reading, but also quality of reading promote children's vocabulary skills (Deckner, Adamson, & Bakeman, 2006; Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). Second, research on parent-child reading has primarily focused on mothers and has not included fathers. This omission is important because over the last two decades, research has shown that fathers contribute uniquely to their children's language development, over and above mothers' contributions (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006; Pancsofar, Vernon-Feagans, & The Family Life Project Investigators, 2010; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). And third, the research on parent-child shared book reading has not examined the potential child mechanisms that might explain why reading fosters vocabulary growth. Recently, scholars have shown that children who are attentive, experience enjoyment, and participate in the reading activity, in other words, show interest in reading, are more likely to learn new words than children who are not interested in reading (Deckner et al., 2006). In this study, we address these gaps by examining the associations among mothers' and fathers' reading frequency and quality, children's interest in reading, and children's receptive vocabulary skills.

Using a sample of low-income minority children and their mothers and fathers enrolled in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSREP), we seek answers to the following research questions: (1) What is the frequency and quality of

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maternal and paternal reading to their toddlers? (2) Does the frequency and quality of maternal and paternal reading with their toddlers, over and above one another, contribute to toddler's receptive vocabulary skills at pre-kindergarten? And (3) does toddlers' reading interest partially mediate the association between maternal and paternal reading quality and children's pre-kindergarten receptive vocabulary skills?

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

The present study builds from a [Vygotskian \(1978\)](#) theoretical framework that suggests that learning and development are socially mediated processes. Parents provide children with a range of socio-cultural experiences and scaffold their activities in ways that stimulate cognitive growth. In short, parents support language learning by providing a range of responsive and challenging linguistic interchanges that are attuned to their children's developmental needs ([Bruner, 1981](#)). One such experience is shared book reading. Research has shown that children who are read to often by their caregivers have better vocabularies than children who are not ([Bus et al., 1995](#)). The shared-book reading experience gives children the opportunity to learn new words and reinforce existing ones. Another aspect of the reading experience that is related to vocabulary skill building is the quality of reading (e.g. metalingual talk or talk that directs attention to language or vocabulary itself; [Deckner et al., 2006](#); [Jones & Adamson, 1987](#)). Examples of metalingual talk include labeling objects (e.g. that's a cow) or recasting the child's language (e.g. that's right, that's a frog?). Metalingual talk promotes vocabulary growth by highlighting new and reinforcing existing vocabulary words and by encouraging children to be more engaged or attentive during the reading process ([Lonigan, Anthony, & Burgess, 1995](#)).

### 1.2. Low-income toddlers' vocabulary skills

On average, children from low-income families have smaller vocabularies and slower vocabulary growth than children from middle- and high-income families ([Arriaga, Fenson, Cronan, & Pethick, 1998](#)). This difference has primarily been attributed to literacy experiences at home, in particular mother-child reading interactions. This research has mostly focused on reading frequency and quality of maternal talk. For example, low-income mothers, on average, are less likely to read to their children than middle or high-income parents ([Whitehurst et al., 1994](#)), speak fewer words to them ([Hart & Risley, 1995](#)), and are less likely to actively engage their children in discussion during reading interactions ([Purcell-Gates, 2000](#)). Nevertheless, there is also great within-group variability. In one study, approximately half of all low-income mothers read every day with their children ([Raikes et al., 2006](#)).

In contrast, research on how low-income fathers contribute to their toddler's language skills has focused more on how fathers talk with their children and less on how often they read to them. Fathers, across SES groups, more so than mothers, use language that conversationally challenges their children ([Ely, Gleason, Narasimhan, & McCabe, 1995](#); [Rowe, Coker, & Pan, 2004](#)). Low-income fathers have been found to ask more wh-questions (i.e. who, what, where, etc.) to their toddlers and elicit higher amounts of and more diverse speech (i.e. word types) from their children ([Rowe et al., 2004](#)). And fathers' vocabulary and grammatical complexity in the context of play has been directly linked to children's language skills, after controlling for maternal linguistic inputs ([Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006](#)). Additionally, among middle-class families, fathers have been found to use more metalingual talk (e.g. labeling) than mothers during linguistic interactions with their children ([Ely, Gleason, MacGibbon, &](#)

[Zaretsky, 2001](#)). We know of no research that examines the nature and frequency of metalingual talk among low-income fathers.

### 1.3. Parent-child shared reading and children's vocabulary skills

The importance of parent-child reading interactions for children's emergent language and literacy skills has been extensively documented in the literature ([Bus et al., 1995](#); [Mol et al., 2008](#); [Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998](#)). This robust body of research has identified three aspects of the reading interaction to be important contributors to children's vocabulary skills: frequency of reading, quality of reading, and children's interest in reading.

#### 1.3.1. Frequency of reading

Shared book reading provides children the opportunity to hear new vocabulary words and learn that letters represent sounds. Research has consistently shown that mothers, across SES groups, who read more frequently with their children, have children with more advanced expressive and receptive vocabularies ([Bus et al., 1995](#); [Raikes et al., 2006](#); [Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002](#); [Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998](#)). Although the associations between frequency of reading and children's vocabulary are concurrent and longitudinal, most studies report relatively small effects, suggesting that the frequency of reading is not the entire story ([Bus et al., 1995](#)).

To date, only a handful of studies have examined the frequency of father-child reading interactions despite evidence that many fathers read regularly with their children ([Cabrera, Hofferth, & Chae, 2011](#); [Duursma & Pan, 2011](#); [Duursma, Pan, & Raikes, 2008](#)). The few studies that include fathers have found similar findings to mothers. For example, [Duursma et al. \(2008\)](#) found that almost 60% of low-income fathers in their sample reported reading to their young children daily and that fathers who reported reading more often to their children at 24-months had children with higher cognitive scores at 36-months. Based on this review, we expect that children whose fathers and mothers read to them more frequently will have higher receptive vocabulary scores than children whose fathers and mothers read less frequently.

#### 1.3.2. Quality of reading

Increasingly, researchers are beginning to focus on the quality of reading interactions, suggesting that although children must be read to on a regular basis, it is the way parents engage their children during reading that can foster vocabulary growth ([Dickinson, De Temple, Hirschler, & Smith, 1992](#); [Mol et al., 2008](#)). Definitions of reading quality vary across the literature but generally, quality of reading refers to caregivers' relevant talk that extends beyond the text of the book (i.e. extra-textual talk). For example, mothers who engage in discussions during reading interactions have children who perform better on vocabulary measures than children whose mothers only read the text of the book ([De Temple, 2001](#); [Dickinson et al., 1992](#)). Interventions that promote dialogic reading between caregivers and children have been shown to foster children's vocabularies, although this effect is not as strong for low-SES families ([Mol et al., 2008](#)). Another way in which parents engage children during reading is by using metalingual talk ([Jakobson, 1960](#); [Jones & Adamson, 1987](#)). When parents label new objects, prompt their children to produce language, or recast their children's language (i.e. use metalingual talk), children are encouraged to draw upon existing vocabulary and learn new vocabulary. Research with mothers has shown that the use of metalingual talk during reading encourages young children to produce novel words and effectively fosters receptive vocabulary development ([Deckner et al., 2006](#); [Sénéchal, 1997](#)).

Although less studied, research with fathers has also found that the quality of father-child reading is related to children's vocabulary skills. For example, a study of low-income rural families found

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