



Parental writing support and preschoolers' early literacy, language, and fine motor skills



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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the nature and variability of parents' aid to preschoolers in the context of a shared writing task, as well as the relations between this support and children's literacy, vocabulary, and fine motor skills. In total, 135 preschool children (72 girls) and their parents (primarily mothers) in an ethnically diverse, middle-income community were observed while writing a semi-structured invitation for a pretend birthday party together. Children's phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, word decoding, vocabulary, and fine motor skills were also assessed. Results revealed that parents provided variable, but generally low-level, support for children's approximation of sound-symbol correspondence in their writing (i.e., graphophonemic support), as well as for their production of letter forms (i.e., print support). Parents frequently accepted errors rather than asking for corrections (i.e., demand for precision). Further analysis of the parent-child dyads ($n = 103$) who wrote the child's name on the invitation showed that parents provided higher graphophonemic, but not print, support when writing the child's name than other words. Overall parental graphophonemic support was positively linked to children's decoding and fine motor skills, whereas print support and demand for precision were not related to any of the child outcomes. In sum, this study indicates that while parental support for preschoolers' writing may be minimal, it is uniquely linked to key literacy-related outcomes in preschool.

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Introduction

Writing activities provide a unique opportunity for young children to practice fundamental early language, literacy, and fine motor skills in a meaningful and engaging context (Levin, Share, & Shatil, 1996). As a child begins to write, he or she must first generate and articulate an idea, which reinforces vocabulary and background knowledge (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). In addition, the child must employ code-related skills such as letter and sound knowledge to decide which marks to place on the page and in what order, translating units of sound into units of print. Further, the child must

make decisions about punctuation and other writing conventions and reflect, even implicitly, on the value of print as a vehicle for conveying meaning (Clay, 1975, 1987; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Finally, in holding and moving the writing implement, the child practices and improves his or her fine motor skills. Writing is thus a unique context in which to take advantage of and further refine foundational language, literacy, and motor competencies. Further, writing may be even more beneficial when accompanied by support from a parent or other adult (DeBaryshe, Buell, & Binder, 1996). The current study examines parents' writing support during a joint task and its relations with three skill sets that are fundamental in writing development: (1) fine motor skills, (2) spelling and decoding skills, and (3) the use of language to compose meaningful text (Berninger et al., 2006).

Strong writing skills are associated with a number of positive outcomes, including early literacy skills as well as long-term educational and career success (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Correlational

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research demonstrates that children with stronger writing skills have more sophisticated letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and spelling competence, as well as larger vocabularies (Bloodgood, 1999; Levin et al., 1996; Molfese, Beswick, Molnar, & Jacobi-Vessels, 2006). In addition, writing skills have been found to strongly relate to fine motor skills – as strongly as they relate to children's letter knowledge (Gerde, Skibbe, Bowles, & Martocchio, 2012). Advantages associated with early writing proficiency appear to endure over time. Children's word writing skills at the end of kindergarten uniquely predict children's literacy skills including spelling, reading comprehension, and oral reading at the end of first grade, controlling for vocabulary, IQ, and concepts of print (Levin et al., 1996). More recently, a comprehensive meta-analysis concluded that being able to write letters and one's own name during preschool and kindergarten predict and support decoding, reading comprehension, and spelling achievement in first grade and beyond (Lonigan, Schatschneider, & Westberg, 2008).

Writing activities encourage children to practice literacy and fine motor skills, which may engender a cascade of positive learning outcomes (Puranik, Lonigan, & Kim, 2011). For example, activities that involve early letter and sound learning are associated with growth in phonological sensitivity, alphabet knowledge, and knowledge of letter sounds (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998), which leads to later improvements in both word reading and comprehension (Al Otaiba, Puranik, Ziolkowski, & Montgomery, 2009; Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1999; Ehri, 2004; Ehri et al., 2001). Recent work also suggests that because writing activities combine fine motor movements and visual processing, they may foster children's literacy skills (Neumann, Hyde, Neumann, Hood, & Ford, 2012). More striking still, an intervention study with children ages 3–5 showed that when children practiced writing, their emergent literacy skills improved significantly in comparison to peers who only interacted with storybooks (Aram & Biron, 2004). Although the import of writing has been established for a number of literacy-related outcomes, many questions remain regarding what parents can do to support children's writing.

In addition to examining children's decoding, sound awareness, and alphabet knowledge skills, we investigate how children's fine motor skills and vocabulary relate to the supports that parents provide during writing activities. Fine motor skills place limits on how much text children can produce and how quickly they can produce it (Berninger, 1999), as well as how much attention children can focus on meaning-related aspects of writing as opposed to the mechanical aspects (Puranik & Al Otaiba, 2012; Puranik & Apel, 2010). For language skills, we sought to replicate and extend the findings of Sénéchal and colleagues (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal et al., 1998), who used parent-report measures to assess parents' support for children's writing and letter learning and found no links with children's vocabulary skills.

How do writing skills develop?

Given the complexity of the writing process and its short- and long-term relations to valuable early outcomes, it is important to understand how children develop and integrate these component skills over time. Writing has its earliest beginnings in children's drawings, which use physical marks to communicate about objects and ideas (Levin & Bus, 2003). Children form ideas first about the universal features of writing (e.g., linearity, symbolic function of letters for spoken sounds) and subsequently the features of writing that are specific to a given language (e.g., directionality, conventional spelling; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Tolchinsky, 2003). Throughout this process, children's written products progress through a relatively predictable series of stages, from scribbling to scribble writing to forming letter-like shapes to using

conventional letters (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Sulzby, 1992). Children's progress is characterized by increasingly sophisticated compositions with gradually more accurate approximations of conventional writing, with concerns about precise letter formation and appropriate spelling becoming relevant only in the final stages. Congruent with these stages, the current study examines writing using an emergent literacy perspective, which is based on evidence suggesting that children acquire many skills associated with literacy and writing development before kindergarten (Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

The role of parents in children's writing development

A major factor in the development of early literacy skills, including writing, is social interactions with and observations of caregivers and other adults (Aram & Levin, 2011; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), especially parents (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD-ECCRN), 2004). There is evidence that parents of preschoolers practice writing letters and words with their children on a regular basis (Hindman & Morrison, 2012; Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared, 2006). These efforts appear to benefit children. One of the earliest studies of parent-child writing activities examined the quality of 5- and 6-year-old children's production of a letter (i.e., a letter to a friend, relative, or fictional character) both with and without the help of their mother (DeBaryshe et al., 1996). Children produced longer letters, followed writing conventions more closely, and used better spelling when they had help than when they wrote independently. Similarly, other research has observed that when parents provide more directive instruction in a joint writing task with their preschoolers, children produce more conventional writing output (Burns & Casbergue, 1992). Given the role of writing as an opportunity to practice other skill sets, parents' efforts may transfer to other areas; for example, Evans and Shaw (2008) reviewed evidence showing that parents' writing with children was linked to stronger letter knowledge, phonological awareness, concepts of print, and printed words. Several concurrent and longitudinal studies have confirmed these findings (Hindman & Morrison, 2012; Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Levy et al., 2006; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

Yet, to date, few studies have unpacked parent-child writing interactions to observe what parents actually say and do to teach their children about writing and, in particular, how parents might differ from one another in these efforts. Parent-child writing interactions in English have seldom been observed during the preschool years; however, when studied directly, parents vary in how they support children's writing (Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002). To understand these nuances, the current study uses a fine-grained paradigm that was developed for directly observing the content and quality of mothers' writing support in low-SES Israeli families (Aram & Levin, 2001, 2004). The paradigm involves analyzing videotaped observations of mothers and children during a joint writing activity, focusing on two major tasks: isolating sounds within words to match them with corresponding letters (i.e., graphophonemic support), and producing letter forms on paper (i.e., print support). Although parents sometimes choose to write down children's ideas for them (Burns & Casbergue, 1992), the current coding system also gauges the parent's efforts to involve the child in actively producing writing using the same techniques as expert writers, including segmenting the words into sounds, connecting those sounds with the appropriate letters, and forming letters and words on the page (Ehri et al., 2001).

In addition to graphophonemic and print support, the current study investigates an aspect of parents' writing support that has received little attention: demand for precision. As children progress through the stages described above, their writing is often

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