



## Review

# A descriptive review and meta-analysis of family-based emergent literacy interventions: To what extent is the research applicable to low-income, ethnic-minority or linguistically-diverse young children?

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## ABSTRACT

The acquisition of emergent literacy for young children who are ethnic-minority, low-income or non-English speaking is threatened by myriad social risks. Given the need for empirically-supported interventions for these groups, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken, involving both a descriptive review and a meta-analysis. The 31 selected published articles each satisfied criteria for being an intervention study involving caregivers in its delivery to children between the ages of two to six years. A meta-analysis was conducted using a subset of 14 studies that utilized an experimental or quasi-experimental design. This two-pronged review demonstrated significant limitations in the generalizability of this literature to these important groups of children. Future directions for advancing intervention development are presented.

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Long before children enter kindergarten, fundamental language and emergent literacy skills are formulated through their interactions with caregivers in home contexts. Young children acquire a collection of emergent literacy abilities, including receptive vocabulary, phonological awareness, print knowledge and concepts, and story understanding, which strengthen throughout childhood, enabling them to develop advanced literacy skills, such as narrative production, decoding, and comprehension (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001). In fact, evidence consistently points to the stability of children's rate of literacy skill development, showing strong predictability of preschool skills to middle childhood reading abilities (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). The stability of this literacy trajectory is troublesome for those children who are showing deficits at this young age. Sadly, many more ethnic-minority and low-income preschool children experience underdeveloped language and literacy skills than their Caucasian counterparts (Brooks-Gunn, Rouse, & McLanahan, 2007; Dickinson & McCabe, 2001).

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Home contexts and emergent literacy

Many facets of the home context are relevant for emergent literacy skill acquisition, including caregivers' responsiveness to their children's expressions of emergent literacy abilities, involvement with their children in language and literacy-based activities and routines, and the provision of literacy materials (Hart & Risely, 1995; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). Perhaps one of the most frequently studied indicators of the home literacy environment, shared storybook reading, has been repeatedly shown to foster young children's vocabulary and early language development, both of which are important precursors to early reading abilities (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995; Raikes et al., 2006b; Roberts et al., 2005; Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). The benefits of shared book reading go beyond reading skill acquisition to include promoting literacy as a tool for obtaining general knowledge and developing children's use of language in interpersonal exchanges (Heath & Thomas, 1992). Other common aspects of home literacy environments, including the number of books in the home, library visits, time spent reading with the child, and the child's age at which shared reading began, have also been shown to predict children's immediate and long-term literacy outcomes (Roberts et al., 2005; Rush, 1999).

Variation in the richness of home literacy environments is associated with families' socioeconomic status and culturally-rooted perspectives of young children's readiness for literacy skill acquisition (Heath, 1986). The financial stress and social complexities associated with poverty (e.g., unemployment, community violence, single-parent status) can impact caregivers' mental health and their emotional capacity for effective parenting (Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002). Rush (1999) showed that among ethnically diverse Head Start children, minimal caregiver supervision and involvement with children was associated with children's underdeveloped vocabulary and phonemic awareness skills. Additionally, children with minimal levels of caregiver supervision and involvement displayed free play which was characterized by non-interactive, passive activity, such as television watching, and was not sustained on a specific activity for a reasonable amount of time. More recently, Roberts and colleagues (Roberts et al., 2005) demonstrated the longitudinal impact of similar aspects of the home environment during infancy on children's literacy skills at the age of four and at kindergarten entry for low-income, African-American children.

In addition to the emotional strain, poverty restricts caregivers' resources for providing literacy materials and activities as well as accessing early childhood services that may stimulate children's literacy skill growth (Linver et al., 2002). Brooks-Gunn and Markman (2005) estimate that families' insufficient access to materials accounts for about one-third of the effects of poverty on young children's development and learning. For instance, simply acquiring books to read with children is a challenge for low-income families. Poor children are three times more likely than non-poor children to have only a few books in their homes (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005).

Beyond socioeconomic influences, the impact of cultural beliefs on families' engagement of young children in literacy activities is evidenced in the ethnic trends of book reading frequency and the availability of books at home that emerged from a national evaluation of the Early Head Start program (Raikes et al., 2006a,b). Findings from this evaluation revealed that, among this large sample of families of relatively equal income status, Caucasian caregivers more frequently engaged

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