



Parenting stress and home-based literacy interactions in low-income preschool families



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ABSTRACT

This study examined relations among parent education, parenting stress, and parental home-based educational activities to better understand the home literacy environment and parent-child interactions among low-income preschool families. Primary caregivers of 78 preschoolers (ages 3–5) participated. Separate hierarchical regression models indicated that after controlling for parental education, total parenting stress significantly predicted general home-based involvement, parent-child interactive reading, and parent-child modeling/monitoring in reading. Neither parental education nor parenting stress significantly predicted parent-child literacy skill building activities, which appeared to be universal among families regardless of education or stress levels. Among all stress factors, parenting stress due to parent-child dysfunctional interaction (PCDI) appeared as the best predictor of general home-based involvement as well as modeling and monitoring in literacy by caregivers, explaining 9% and 6% of additional variance in these behaviors, after parental education was controlled. The implications of these results for research and practice with diverse low-income families are discussed.

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1. Introduction: home-based family involvement in early literacy

Family involvement has been linked to positive outcomes for young children, including school readiness, academic performance, cognitive development, and behavioral and social-emotional functioning (Britto, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006; Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004; McLoyd, 1998; Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, & Peavy, 1999). It has become a mandate of educational legislation and a cornerstone of many early intervention programs, such as Head Start. Participation of parents has been shown to increase the effectiveness of early childhood development initiatives (Anderson et al., 2003). Family contributions appear to be particularly important for young children whose environments include multiple stressors, such as poverty and its correlates (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2013; McLoyd, 1998).

One purpose of the current study was to examine factors that specifically influence family activities that occur in the home, such as checking homework, providing age-appropriate literacy materials, and reading storybooks with children (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000; Ginsburg-Block, Manz, & McWayne, 2010b). Home-based involvement may be more feasible among low-income families than school-based

activities which require more flexible routines and access to transportation (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Some research studies have even linked home-based activities more closely to outcomes for low-income students than other forms of family involvement (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994).

A second purpose of the study was to better understand factors that influence families' use of specific home-based literacy behaviors that have been associated with increased academic outcomes among low-income children (Head Start Bureau, United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families, 2006; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002). Research on family early literacy practices has identified strategies related to positive outcomes for young children as well as a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of these strategies. For example, shared storybook reading increases young children's motivation for reading and explains significant variance in early literacy skills such as phonological awareness, decoding, and receptive and expressive vocabulary (Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002; Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995; Burgess, 1997), as well as predicting literacy outcomes over time (De Jong & Leseman, 2001). Parent-child shared reading that fosters high quality language interactions such as extended discussions surrounding a book, offers lexical richness (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000) and contributes to the affective quality of the reading environment (Baker et al., 2003), both of which influence children's motivation to read, engagement in literacy

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activities and early literacy skills. When parents and their children experience positive interactions around literacy, children become more engaged in those activities, which in turn enhance children's oral vocabulary and emergent literacy skills (Bennett et al., 2002).

Many effective forms of family literacy involvement capitalize on the social nature of learning through direct adult-child interactions like storybook reading or teaching letter sounds (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). Yet, other effective family literacy practices linked to children's learning take place outside of adult-child interactions, such as having children's books in the home or adult modeling of reading (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Deniz Can, Ginsburg-Block, & Golinkoff, 2007; De Jong & Leseman, 2001; Evans et al., 2000; Saracho, 2000; Stainthorp & Hughes, 2000). Research limited to either strategy that involves direct adult-child interaction or more distal contributions fails to capture the myriad ways low-income families support early literacy in the home or the complexity involved in providing this support (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). In the current study, we are interested in exploring factors that influence a comprehensive set of home-based literacy strategies among low-income families, including interactive strategies such as shared reading and skill instruction, as well as indirect strategies such as modeling and monitoring of literacy activities.

2. Status variables related to variability in family literacy involvement: income and education

There is much variation among low-income families in the level and quality of the home learning and literacy environment that they create (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2014). For example, while research shows that low-income parents may spend fewer hours at home reviewing and helping with homework than higher income families, there are within group differences (Fantuzzo et al., 2004). How are meaningful family literacy interactions abundant in some preschool families while other families report less frequent or positive interactions? Protective factors such as formal education, income, availability of learning materials, social support, English proficiency, flexible work schedules, as well as feelings of efficacy in parenting and management of parenting stress all may play a role in shaping the home learning environment (Foster, Lambert, Abbott-Shim, McCarty, & Franze, 2005; Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Mantzicopoulos, 1997; Ming & Powell, 2010).

Family resources and parent education appear among the most studied variables that contribute to or hinder home-based learning and literacy activities. Controlling for income, higher parent education levels alone have been associated with better pre-literacy, language and cognitive skills in young children (Curenton & Justice, 2008; Lugo-Gil & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008; Perry & Fantuzzo, 2010), while lower parent educational levels may place children at-risk for academic failure (Ceballos & Bratton, 2010). Indicators of family education such as caregiver literacy level may influence how adult family members interact with their children (Curenton, Craig, & Flanigan, 2008) and how much time they spend reading together (Duursma & Pan, 2011). Waanders, Mendez, and Downer (2007) found that African American mothers in Head Start with more years of education and a greater sense of competence regarding how to help their children's schooling reported more home-based educational involvement. Advanced maternal literacy skills were associated with diverse use of maternal language skills during storytelling and shared reading (Curenton et al., 2008). Iruka, LaForett, and Odom (2012) found that parent-child activities mediated the influence of maternal education on children's receptive language in a sample of Spanish-speaking families. While the relations between maternal education and child outcomes have been solidly established, the nature of the home literacy environment plays a uniquely important role in the literacy development of young children. Further, it is crucial to recognize that other factors beyond

family income and education promote or hinder family contributions to learning and literacy.

3. Potential mechanisms underlying family early literacy practices among at-risk families: parent, child and relationship factors

Underlying the income and education status variables, mechanisms including parenting self-efficacy and parenting stress may help to explain variation in the frequency and quality of family educational and literacy strategies (Wasik & Hindman, 2010). According to self-efficacy theory and research, parent and child characteristics influence parent educational involvement and the parent-child relationship (Deater-Deckard, 2005; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997). Parental self-efficacy, defined as the expectation caregivers hold about their ability to parent successfully, is a critical factor in understanding resiliency, coping mechanisms, parental mental health, parent-child interactions and other parenting behaviors (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Bandura, 1982). Grolnick et al. (1997) found that mothers who felt more efficacious in child-rearing activities such as regulating their child's behaviors and helping their children meet expectations, reported more engagement in cognitively stimulating activities with their children.

Inversely related to parental self-efficacy, parenting stress (Raikes & Thompson, 2005) is an indicator of the affective quality of the home learning and literacy environment (Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006). Variation in how low-income families respond to parenting stress likely influences family functioning and parent-child interactions. Abidin (1995) conceptualized parenting stress as a composite of three distinct yet related sub-domains; parental perceptions of parenting distress, stress due to child difficulty, and parent-child dysfunctional interaction. Parental distress is defined as distress resulting from unhappiness with the parenting role, feeling trapped as a parent, and feeling depressed in general. Child difficulty involves a child's behavior and self-regulatory abilities, including child moodiness, tearfulness, sleeping and eating habits. Parent-child dysfunctional interaction consists of the emotional quality of the parent-child relationship, taking into account children's affect towards their parents, their appreciation of parents' efforts, and parental satisfaction with their children's rate of learning (Abidin, 1995).

Research has shown that parenting stress is indeed related to both parent and child behaviors, as well as the quality of parent-child interactions. Increased levels of parenting stress have been linked to maternal unresponsiveness, inconsistency, strictness, emotional avoidance, too little or overly excessive stimulation, harsh discipline and less warmth during interactions with young children. These parental behaviors were in turn related to children's behavioral and conduct problems (LeCuyer-Maus, 2003; Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002; Mistry, Biesanz, Taylor, Burchinal, & Cox, 2004; Webster-Stratton, 1990). In one study, parenting stress explained 74% of the variance in maternal sensitive-responsiveness to their 12 month old toddlers (LeCuyer-Maus, 2003). Similarly, Pianta and Egeland (1990) found that high levels of maternal interpersonal stress were related to low levels of maternal cooperation with their children at 6 months old and maladaptive parent-child interactions when children were 42 months old. These findings demonstrate the interdependence of parent and child behaviors and the contributions of these behaviors to parent-child relationships and subsequent child outcomes. It appears that families fall on a continuum of perceived parental self-efficacy and parenting stress, which plays a role in shaping the home learning environment. The amount of parenting stress experienced by families and the ability of families to cope with stress may be a key to better understand the variability observed in the home learning environment among low-income families. Based on the self-efficacy and parenting stress literature, we predict in the current study that perceived amounts of total parenting stress will be negatively associated with general and literacy-

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