



## The effect of baby books on mothers' reading beliefs and reading practices<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

The impact of a baby book intervention on promoting positive reading beliefs and increasing reading frequency for low-income, new mothers ( $n = 167$ ) was examined. The Baby Books Project randomly assigned low-income, first-time mothers to one of three study conditions, receiving educational books, non-educational books, or no books, during pregnancy and over the first year of parenthood. Home-based data collection occurred through pregnancy until 18 months post-partum. Mothers who received free baby books had higher beliefs about the importance of reading, the value of having resources to support reading, and the importance of verbal participation during reading. The results showed that providing any type of baby books to mothers positively influenced maternal reading beliefs, but did not increase infant-mother reading practices. Maternal reading beliefs across all three groups were significantly associated with self-reported reading frequency when children were at least 12 months of age.

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Reading story and picture books to young children has repeatedly been linked to positive developmental outcomes (e.g., Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Fletcher & Reese, 2005). Children who are read to frequently and beginning early in life show greater language ability than children who are read to less frequently or beginning at later ages (DeBaryshe, 1993; Dunst, Simkus, & Hamby, 2012; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Although the benefits of reading to children and actively engaging with them while reading are numerous and well documented (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 2001; Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, & Hunt, 2009; Mol & Bus, 2011; Mol, Bus, & de Jong, 2009; Phillips, Norris, & Anderson, 2008), less is known about what contributes to early parental beliefs about the importance of reading practices, especially for new mothers.

Research has noted three important contributions to early reading practices. These are mothers' knowledge of child development (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996); their beliefs about the benefits, importance, and feasibility of reading (DeBaryshe, 1995); and cultural factors, such as traditional story-telling and family reading practices or rituals (Hammer, 2001; Heath, 1983). Of these, our study focused particularly on how maternal reading beliefs are informed by knowledge of child development, and how that contributes to reading practices.

We operationalized reading beliefs as maternal expectations about reading to their child, including their ability to act as a teacher to their child, their self-efficacy related to reading to their child, and the resources they have available to them (e.g., DeBaryshe, 1995). This definition of reading beliefs is frequently employed when examining the association between reading beliefs and child outcomes (e.g., Bingham, 2007; DeBaryshe, 1995; Skibbe, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty, 2008).

Studies with preschool children have found that beliefs about the importance and feasibility of reading are significant predictors of home literacy practices, children's later reading achievement, and motivation for reading (Baker & Scher, 2002; Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997; Bingham, 2007; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). The interplay of maternal reading beliefs, reading practices, and children's emergent literacy skills are part of a dynamic system, where these and many other situational and cultural elements contribute to children's development and the establishment of maternal beliefs and practices (Smith & Thelen, 2003).

Given the links between more global maternal beliefs and parenting practices, it is surprising that, to date, little has been done to understand maternal beliefs about reading and their connection to reading practices in the early years of a child's life, as existing research has focused almost exclusively on parents of preschoolers. To address this gap, the present study employed a three-group randomized design to test whether a maternal education book intervention (i.e., baby books written in simple rhyming stanzas that included child development content) improved new mothers' beliefs about the importance and feasibility of reading to their child and their initiation and maintenance of reading behaviors in the first 18 months of motherhood.

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### Reading beliefs of parents of preschool-aged children

Beliefs about reading include parents' own reasons for reading (i.e., personal enjoyment or entertainment) and their role in teaching children to read (Baker et al., 1997; Bingham, 2007; DeBaryshe, 1995). However, the vast majority of evidence pointing to the importance of parental reading beliefs and early reading practices comes from research conducted during the preschool years. For example, maternal beliefs about the importance and benefits of reading are associated with mothers' reading practices with their preschool-aged children (Bingham, 2007; Celano, Hazzard, McFadden-Garden, & Swaby-Ellis, 1998; DeBaryshe, 1995; Weigel et al., 2006), and children's language skills and later interest in reading (Skibbe et al., 2008; Weigel et al., 2006). Bingham (2007) examined the association between the quality of mother-child interactions around reading practices, such as visiting the library and frequency of joint reading, and mothers' affect during joint reading practices. Bingham found that mothers' beliefs about the importance of reading significantly predicted the quality of literacy activities in the home, even after taking into account maternal education level. Similarly, Weigel et al. (2006), using structural path analysis, documented a positive association between reading beliefs and the activities that parents and children engaged in together, which then predicted children's interest in reading and print knowledge. Additionally, the path analysis indicated that parental reading beliefs directly predicted children's emergent writing and receptive language. However, it is unknown if these findings would generalize to all populations, including low-income, first-time mothers, or mothers of infants or toddlers.

In previous research, beliefs about the importance of reading were related to reading practices in the home and child outcomes such as children's motivation to read, interest in reading, and literacy skills such as print concept knowledge and receptive language skills (e.g., Baker & Scher, 2002; DeBaryshe, 1995; DeBaryshe & Binder, 1994; Weigel et al., 2006). Children's motivation to read was also positively associated with maternal beliefs about reading (Baker & Scher, 2002; Baker et al., 1997). For instance, children whose parents believed that reading was enjoyable and was a source of entertainment, and not solely used for skill development, were more motivated to read and enjoyed reading more, irrespective of income or ethnicity (Baker & Scher, 2002; Baker et al., 1997). Curenton and Justice (2008) found a positive, significant association between low-income mothers' reading beliefs and their children's pre-literacy skills, particularly their conventions of print. However, little work has been done with low-income mothers of infants and toddlers to investigate how reading beliefs can be formed or expanded through interventions, or the role these beliefs have in reading practices. Previous research from families with preschool-aged children found that maternal beliefs about the importance of reading led to increased reading activities in the home and children's emergent literacy. Understanding how these beliefs can be informed or positively altered during the infant and toddler years may help promote reading activities with young children, which in turn could lead to improved literacy outcomes for children.

### Reading beliefs of parents of infants and toddlers

In contrast to the growing body of knowledge about parental reading beliefs during the preschool years, little is known regarding the connection between reading beliefs and literacy practices for parents of infants and toddlers. One exception is a study that examined the link between joint reading frequency, caretaker demographics, caretaker literacy level, and beliefs about reading of low-income mothers (a large majority of whom were African-American) of young children one to five years of age (Celano et al., 1998). The researchers found a significant association between parent-child reading practices and listing reading as an enjoyable activity and part of a daily routine, and parental reading beliefs, as measured by DeBaryshe and Binder (1994) Parent

Reading Belief Inventory (PRBI). Interventions aimed at increasing reading practices, such as Reach Out and Read have been shown to be effective at improving beliefs about the importance of reading among parents of older infants (12 months) and toddlers (High, Hopmann, LaGasse, & Linn, 1998). However, much less is known about ways in which the reading beliefs of new mothers or mothers of young infants are developed or can be informed.

### Joint reading practices with infants and toddlers

The majority of the prior research about reading in the infant-toddler years focused on the importance of parental reading practices, rather than parental beliefs about reading. From this body of work, several studies have investigated the contribution of shared book reading during these early years with children's early literacy skills. Joint reading between parents and children has long been shown to have a positive, significant impact on a child's language and literacy development (e.g., Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994). A recent meta-analysis of studies that investigated infant and toddler outcomes associated with early reading found that the age at which parents begin to read to their children was related to children's literacy outcomes (Dunst et al., 2012). Specifically, Dunst et al. found that infants who were read to before they were 12 months of age had better literacy and language outcomes compared with children who were not read to until a later age. Although pediatric organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) have recommended that reading and early literacy be discussed at all well-child visits, starting in infancy (AAP, 2002), few empirical studies have explored how to promote early reading. The limited work on infants and toddlers suggests that the provision of free books can increase reading practices for low-income families in particular (High, LaGasse, Becker, Ahlgren, & Gardner, 2000; Mendelsohn et al., 2001).

### Culture, reading practices, and beliefs

Although pediatric professionals recommend that all families read to their children starting in infancy, regardless of income, race/ethnicity, education, culture, and other demographic characteristics (AAP, 2002), it is important to note that literacy practices and beliefs vary across economic, cultural, and racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Hammer, 2001). There is substantial evidence that families from different economic, cultural, and racial/ethnic backgrounds engage in a variety of behaviors that promote literacy skills in their children, such as singing and using print materials other than books, such as newspapers (Anderson-Yockel & Haynes, 1994; Heath, 1983; Heath & Branscombe, 1986).

Many studies have found evidence that mother-child reading interactions differed substantially across demographic groups, in which mothers of different communities and cultural backgrounds emphasized distinct practices and drew from different funds of knowledge to promote reading with their children (e.g., Anderson-Yockel & Haynes, 1994; Bus, Leseman, & Keultjes, 2000). In contrast, Hammer (2001) found few differences in reading behaviors among mothers of different social economic status (SES) levels, but instead found evidence that higher-SES parents may read more frequently to their children than lower-SES parents. This finding has been supported by recent studies of mothers with infants and toddlers that demonstrated that lower-SES parents read less frequently to their children, and that perceived barriers, such as book cost, may have led to less frequent reading (Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Harris, Loyo, Holahan, Suzuki, & Gottlieb, 2007). However, Harris and colleagues (2007) found that parents who had more positive beliefs about the importance of reading for the child's developmental outcomes engaged in more frequent reading practices, indicating that increasing maternal beliefs about reading may be one potential avenue to increase reading frequency among low-income mothers.

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