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Home support for emergent literacy: Follow-up of a community-based implementation of dialogic reading

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ABSTRACT

This study tested if parents taught to use an interactive ("dialogic") reading style to promote early vocabulary skills continued to read this way as their children grew older. Approximately half the 78 participants received instruction in dialogic reading when their child was age 2 or 3 years, the other half had no prior instruction. Parent–child reading evaluated more than 2 years after instruction showed significant group differences in parents' use of dialogic reading techniques. Analysis controlling for maternal education, child's age, and frequency of family reading found parents with prior instruction used on average 90% more dialogic reading behaviors than parents without instruction. Use of dialogic reading behaviors was associated with more active participation of the child in the reading session. Evidence of the ability to change parents' reading style through brief instruction is strong. Similar efforts could help parents play a further role in children's emergent literacy development.

Introduction

Parents, policy makers and early childhood researchers agree that reading with young children can help them prepare for school. Reading with young children is appealing largely because of the assumed link between being read to and learning to read. Empirical models from which to test assumptions about the processes leading to independent reading are relatively new. Most depict multiple domains of knowledge, interactions among domains and, within domains, a developmental progression of skills (e.g., Adams, 1990; Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Precursor skills begin with the ability to understand and produce language in the infant and toddler years, skills practiced in shared reading with an adult who focuses predominately on word meaning and book conventions such as front and back, top and bottom. A second strand of skills relates to decoding print and sound units including the abilities to name letter shapes, make associations between sounds and alphabet letters, and separate spoken words into constituent sounds (Adams, 1990; National Research Council, 2001; van Kleeck, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) group these emergent literacy skills and processes as "outside–in skills" (e.g., vocabulary and general world knowledge) and "inside–out skills" (e.g., knowledge of the rules for translating writing into meaning). Like Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), Adams (1990) suggests these domains of knowledge and skills are inseparable but are not fully integrated in the preliteracy period. van Kleeck (1998) proposes two stages of preliteracy development and posits their implications for preliteracy instruction. She advocates emphasizing print meaning and form sequentially, beginning with a focus on the meaning of words and print in the toddler and early preschool years and shifting in the later preschool years to give greater emphasis on print forms and the correspondence between forms and meanings.

A number of interventions have been designed to encourage parents' reading with preschool children. Typically, they share the goals of increasing the frequency of parent–child reading and improving children's vocabulary, syntactic skills, and their knowledge of the conventions of print and books. One of the most extensively studied book reading intervention programs is called dialogic reading. Unlike conventional reading in which the adult reads the text and occasionally asks for contributions from the child, dialogic reading is highly interactive. The child is encouraged to take an active role in telling the story while the adult coaches the child's understanding of the plot and teaches new vocabulary (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1988). Dialogic reading techniques are tied to the child's developmental level. The program for younger, 2- and 3-year-old children is taught to adults in two parts. The first teaches adults to ask simple questions about objects, actions, and events pictured on a page, to build a child's expressive and receptive vocabularies. The techniques taught next, typically 1–2 months after

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the initial instruction, use open-ended questions and expansions to elaborate the child's comments and questions. These behaviors foster simple grammatical skills and the ability to use language to describe and explain (Cole, Maddox, & Lim, 2006; DeBaryshe, 1993). Throughout, adults are encouraged to praise the child's participation in telling the story. The program for 4- and 5-year olds uses similar evocative techniques to encourage conversation about the pictures and words in the book and adds an emphasis on the understanding of concepts and narrative structure through adults' use of open-ended questions and "distancing" prompts that ask children to relate aspects of the story to their own experiences (Lonigan, 2006). Although dialogic reading methods are relatively easy to learn and well-liked by caregivers of young children (Blom-Hoffman, O'Neil-Pirozzi, & Cutting, 2006; Huebner 2000a), without instruction the behaviors occur infrequently during shared reading (Dickinson & Keebler, 1989; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Hammett, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2003; Huebner, 2000b; Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005).

Dialogic reading programs with preschool children have been tested in 1-to-1 interventions with parents and children (Arnold et al., 1994; Huebner, 2000b; Whitehurst et al., 1988), with small groups of children and a teacher in Head Start, and in other classroom settings (Huebner, 2006; Lonigan, Anthony, Bloomfield, Dyer, & Samwel, 1999; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006; Whitehurst et al., 1994). The intervention is implemented during a preschool year or, in community-based trials, taught to parents as a 4- to 8-week intervention program. In most studies, outcome data have been collected 6 weeks to 6 months following the end of the intervention period. Taken in sum, these studies have shown positive effects of dialogic reading on expressive language skills (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Huebner, 2000b; Lonigan et al., 1999; Wasik & Bond, 2001; Whitehurst et al., 1994; Zevenbergen, Whitehurst, & Zevenbergen, 2003), use of evaluative devices and reference to internal states of characters in the story (Zevenbergen et al., 2003), and receptive vocabulary (Huebner 2000b; Wasik & Bond, 2001; Whitehurst et al., 1988). A meta-analysis of 16 studies found significantly stronger effects on expressive than on receptive vocabulary (Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008).

The benefits of dialogic reading, along with its low cost, ease of use, and high acceptability have led to large-scale dissemination through public libraries (i.e., the Public Library Association's Early Literacy Initiative), early childhood education programs, and informal community-based programs (e.g., Hear and Say Reading with Toddlers, http://www.bainbridgeislandrotary.org/). As dialogic reading gains popularity, it becomes increasingly important to know the extent to which its effects on children and adults persist and its potential to support developmental advances in children's expressive language skills.

To date, only one study has examined long-term effects of a dialogic reading intervention. In this randomized controlled trial by Whitehurst and colleagues (Whitehurst et al., 1999), Head Start teachers and parents were taught dialogic reading techniques. Head Start classrooms were randomized to receive their usual curriculum or dialogic reading plus a phonemic awareness curriculum in the classroom. The phonemic awareness curriculum was designed to help children distinguish consonant sounds within spoken words. The children, ages 3 and 4 years, participated in dialogic reading sessions in small groups in the classroom and at home with their parents. Parents did not receive instruction in the phonemic awareness activities. Follow-up assessments at the end of kindergarten, first, and second grade, focused on the children only. Standardized tests of vocabulary and other emergent literacy skills (i.e., knowing the names of alphabet letters, print concepts, early writing) showed significant benefits for children in the dialogic reading condition at the end of the Head Start year and one year later, at the end of kindergarten. Positive effects of the intervention did not generalize to children's reading scores in the first or second grade. The authors speculate that the attenuation of group differences was due to the modularity of emergent literacy skills. Consistent with the models of the development of emergent literacy skills discussed above, they argue that success at independent reading depends on extensive vocabulary and print knowledge (skills that can be developed in the early preschool years by dialogic reading) and increasingly complex decoding skills. Because the follow-up assessments did not include assessments of the frequency or quality of parent–child reading interactions, it is not possible to know if advantages might have been greater for the subset of children whose families continued a habit of interactive reading.

Knowing if a brief and early dialogic reading program has long-term effects on the quality of shared reading is essential information for community-based efforts intended to promote young children's school and reading "readiness." Given growing evidence of the interdependent yet separable components of emergent literacy, a sequence of developmentally-timed, parent-focused interventions may be warranted to support language and preliteracy skills over the preschool years.

The present study is a long-term follow-up of parents who received instruction in dialogic reading when their children were 2 or 3 years of age. The goal was to learn if parents taught the techniques of dialogic reading when their children were young continued to read this way as their children grew older. Based on previous research that found most parents enjoyed dialogic reading (Huebner 2000a), we hypothesized parents would maintain a dialogic style, demonstrated by more interactive reading behaviors. We hypothesized also that parents' use of dialogic reading behaviors would be associated with greater participation by the child in sharing the story. To test these hypotheses, this study compared patterns of parent–child reading of two groups: 1) parents and children who, more than two years previously, had participated in an eight-week dialogic reading intervention (Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005), and 2) a comparison group recruited from the community at the same time as the intervention group but who received no intervention.

Method

Participants

Setting and eligibility criteria. The intervention and follow-up studies took place in a mixed-income, rural county in Western Washington with an annual birth rate of approximately 225 live births per year. The setting was selected in part because in this community relatively few young preschool age children are enrolled in early education programs. A home-based intervention was both feasible and had the support of policy makers, public health professionals, and the local libraries. The sample included parents contacted first when their children were ages 2 or 3 years. At that time, one group ($n = 125$) participated in an intervention study that tested three methods of instruction in dialogic reading and found all methods were effective (Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005). While the intervention study was concluding, a second set of parents ($n = 40$) were recruited to create a comparison group for this follow-up study. Parents indicated their interest in the future study by giving written permission to contact them when their children were older.

Participants eligible for the follow-up study were 108 parents who agreed to future contact and whose children would be at age 4 years during the period 8/2004–7/2006. Parents were invited by postcard or telephone call to participate. Of the 108 who were eligible, 18 parents declined, 4 children were excluded because they had begun kindergarten, and 8 families had moved out of the study area. The final sample included 78 parents and their children; 41 had participated in the previous dialogic reading intervention and 37 parent–child dyads had no prior experience with dialogic reading (see Fig. 1).