



Society for Research in Child Development

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PRESS RELEASE

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Reading to Very Young Children Improves Language and Cognitive Development

English-speaking mothers who begin reading to their children at a very early age have toddlers with greater language comprehension, larger, more expressive vocabularies and higher cognitive scores by the age of 2. Meanwhile, Spanish-speaking mothers who read to their children every day have 3-year-olds with greater language and cognitive development than those who aren't read to. These results, based on research from researchers at the universities of Nebraska-Lincoln, Iowa State, New York, Columbia and Harvard, and from Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., are published in the July/August issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers chose their focus because while numerous studies have shown connections between parental reading to preschoolers and children's language development in low-income families, there has been surprisingly little research of low-income children below the age of 3. Yet this is a very important period for the language development required for later reading success.

Researchers studied 2,581 families in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project and a control group in 17 communities across the U.S. Within a subgroup of 1,101, they explored in-depth relations between reading and child outcomes for English- and Spanish-speaking families. The children were evaluated at ages 14, 24 and 36 months.

About half the mothers reported reading daily to their children at each age, although slightly more mothers read daily when their children were 2 and 3 than when they were 14 months. White mothers reported reading more frequently than mothers in other racial/ethnic groups, as did mothers of girls, firstborn children and children in the Early Head Start program.

In addition to the findings noted earlier, the researchers also found that reading and children's vocabulary seemed to enhance one another beginning as early as 14 months in English-speaking groups. In other words, the more mothers read, the better the children's vocabulary, which, in turn, encouraged more reading.

"Thus, we propose a snowball model in which reading and vocabulary lead to more language opportunities and competencies for children," said lead author Helen Raikes, Ph.D., professor of Family and Consumer Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "This study shows relations between reading to children and children's language and cognitive development begin very early and implies that parent-child bookreading and other language-oriented interventions for vulnerable children should begin much earlier than has generally been proposed."

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The researchers also found that most children in the study, with the exception of non-English speaking children, had access to picture books. Thus, the team recommended that libraries, intervention programs and commercial vendors increase the availability of picture books with language and cultural themes of interest to non-English speaking families.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Vol. 77, Issue 4, *Mother-child bookreading in low-income families: Correlates and outcomes during the first three years of life*. By Raikes HH, Raikes HA (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), Pan BA (Harvard), Luze G (Iowa State University), Tamis-LeMonda CS, Rodriguez ET (New York University), Brooks-Gunn J (Columbia University), Constantine J and Tarullo LB (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.) Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.