

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT



Parent-child reading to improve language development and school readiness

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WHAT WE KNOW ALREADY

For a number of years now population studies have shown us that parental book reading in the early years is an important feature of what is sometimes called the child’s Home Learning Environment (HLE) and appears to protect children from later difficulties. But is it possible to intervene to increase parental book reading and what difference does it make to key areas of child development such as oral language and pre-reading skills? There have been a number of reviews of the intervention literature (systematic and narrative) but these have included a mixture of different types of studies and ages of children and have a variety of different foci. In this report we carry out a narrowly constrained systematic review focusing specifically on book reading interventions carried out specifically by parents and carers with preschool children (up to the age of five years) and looking primarily at the impact of parent child reading interventions on expressive and receptive language and pre-reading skills.

WHAT DID WE DO?

We searched all the literature available in electronic databases over the past forty years for parent/child reading intervention studies which included books or electronic readers. The studies had to have adopted a randomised or a quasi-experimental (matched) design

with book reading being compared with no intervention. In all cases the intervention had to be carried out by the parent – i.e. not by early years or school staff and the study needed to assess language outcomes (comprehension and/or expressive language) or pre-reading outcomes (for example, phonological awareness). To be included studies had to report the children’s test performance before and after the intervention

WHAT WE FOUND

We identified 22 studies which met our inclusion criteria and of these we were able to combine (meta-analyse) the results from 16 studies. Altogether, the review reported on 751 children receiving interventions, and 569 control group children, and were conducted across 5 countries. The mean age of the children was forty months. There were a number of key findings from the review. The first is that the majority of the studies show positive effects but the largest effect by quite a long way was on receptive language skills. The average effect size of 0.68 for receptive vocabulary (see Table 1.) is equivalent to an advantage of 8 months using criteria developed by the Education Endowment Foundation.

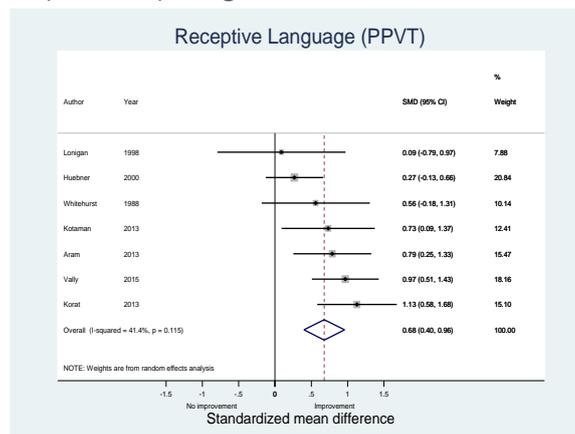


Table 1. Combined effect sizes for receptive vocabulary

The average effect size for receptive vocabulary was twice that for pre-reading skills and for expressive language. This is especially important for two reasons. Receptive language skills are more predictive of later educational and social difficulties in school and, to date, evidence has suggested that early receptive language skills were the most difficult to change. Other findings from the review indicated that early book reading was powerful throughout the preschool period particularly for receptive language development, but book reading was also effective for children over three years of age and slightly more effective with more socially disadvantaged children. There was some indication that studies which included electronic devices had similar effects to those that used books. Interestingly, in practice, shared reading was found to be more effective than dialogic methods for receptive language development. Importantly and unlike most of the findings from the other reviews our findings were relatively consistent or homogeneous (the results going in the same direction). This is almost certainly a function of the narrow focus of the review and gives us confidence in predicting what is reasonably achievable in this area. Finally, the intervention effects seem to be as strong at relatively low doses as they were at higher doses, suggesting that book reading may have the potential to have an inoculation effect in terms of future child development.

We were also interested in whether such intervention studies have been carried out in a range of different countries and indeed this was the case. While the majority (15) were carried out in the US there were also two from South Africa, two from Canada, two from Israel and one from Hong Kong. The findings were comparable across countries. None of the included studies had been carried out in the UK. In the light of common practice in some areas it is significant that we identified no intervention studies which sought to assess the effects of a universal model of book gifting, simply giving books to everyone. Similarly, we found no

studies which allowed us to draw comparisons between the relative role of mothers, fathers, other carers and siblings. And finally, we were not able to capture long term effects of such interventions.

In summary, this is a tightly constrained systematic review with clear findings. The results are coherent even if the average outcomes were slightly lower than some other reviews. Nevertheless they give a clear indication of the level of response that should be predicted from this type of intervention.

WHAT WE SHOULD DO NEXT?

The fact that the effect of parent-child book reading is so marked for language development, an important aspect of development that has long-term implications for learning and wellbeing, highlights the need for structured book reading promotion activity. A distinction is sometimes drawn between *dialogic* and *shared* book reading. We could find no difference between the two for expressive outcomes, but a greater impact of shared reading approaches for receptive outcomes. Clearly a critical message is that it is showing parents how to be active partners in their child's communication that is important, and the book or device is the means by which this can be achieved. There is clearly support for this type of interaction to be a central part of the public health offer in the UK delivered by health visitors but it is also a message for carers more widely, that reading to the child in the early years, ie. long before they are learning to read, can have a marked effect on children's abilities. For early years workers there is also a message, namely that, while books are already a central component of early years provision (preschool/nursery etc) this is not necessarily the case at home. Actively engaging parents in the book reading process has the potential to make a real difference to the child's language outcomes, and this is especially true for vulnerable preschool children.

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