

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Utilizing Parental Homework as a Form of Parent Involvement in Early Care and Education

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A novel way of promoting parent involvement was tested: homework was given to preschool parents, to read to their children at home using the dialogical reading method. An earlier study showed that the homework led to actual increases in children's pre-literacy skills. The current study investigated whether the parents in the experimental group actually changed their overall amount or type of parent involvement with the program, as compared to control group parents. Results show that the preschool parental homework led to a shift in the content of parent-teacher communications. They became much more focused on the individual child's development. The findings suggest that parents can respond enthusiastically to homework from their child care program, this homework can contribute to a shift in the nature of teacher-parent communications, and can have significant impacts on child development.

Keywords: parent involvement, homework, language development, dialogic reading

The importance of parent involvement in early care and education programs has been assumed by practitioners since the 1960's when Head Start was created and made parent involvement a matter of policy (Zigler & Styfco, 2000). Bronfenbrenner's theory also predicts that children's development will be enhanced if parents and early care and education programs interact in concert, working in mutually reinforcing ways in both the home of preschool settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Early childhood researchers and school researchers both have shown a correlation or causal relationship between parent involvement and child outcomes (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008; Eptstein, 1991; Fantuzzo, Tighe, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Love et al., 2005; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Owen, Ware, & Barfoot, 2000; Sui-Chu & Willms,

1996). However, only one form of parent involvement has produced repeated evidence, from solid experimental designs, of causing gains in children's learning. That type of involvement has been parents helping their children learn at home (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005).

Because preschoolers are too young to be given responsibility for homework, this type of parental involvement may seem impractical for the preschool years. However, a few prior studies have supported this general idea. For example, the Family Development Research Program (Lally & Honig, 1977) found low-income parents to be receptive to a weekly book-lending service provided by home visitors. Similarly, the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPO) program (Baker, Piotrkowski, & Brooks-Gunn, 1999) teaches and assigns specific parent-child activities, and has been delivered through early care and education programs. In contrast to these studies, the current study was not part of a larger, comprehensive intervention, but attempted to test just the parental homework component in early care and education settings for a short intervention period of six weeks.

In an earlier report, the current authors tested the effects of parent involvement on child language outcomes in a sample of community child care programs (Kim & Riley, 2011). We now ask what might be learned about the presumed mediator of that effect, changes in parent involvement. Specifically, we ask (1) did parents in the intervention group increase their amount of communication with the teachers and early childhood programs, as compared to control group parents?; (2) did the content of parents' communications with the teachers and programs differ in the treatment group, as compared to the control group parents?

METHODS

Data were collected from 81 parents, their 81 preschool children (ages 27 to 46 months at the beginning of the study), and the 18 lead teachers and 12 program directors of the children's early care and education programs. The children were largely from households of married parents (86%). Parents' median educational level was a "4-year college degree" and the median annual income was under \$20,000 (in 2009). Of the 81 children, 45% were boys and 75% were Euro-American.

The early care and education programs were randomly divided into two groups. The teachers in both groups received a workshop on children's language development, but the teachers in just the treatment group received an additional workshop on how to recruit parents to read to their children at home using the dialogic reading method. The treatment group centers were also provided with book bags to give the parents each week, containing a picture book and a guide sheet on using the dialogic reading method. By comparing the two groups at the end of the study, we could see if the parent homework (to read to the child at home) had an effect on the child's language development, and on parent-teacher communication.

The homework was to use dialogic reading with the child for six weeks. This is a method of reading in which the adult stops on each page and involves the child in thinking about the story. It changes the child from being an audience to the adult's reading performance, to being a co-creator of the story and its meaning. Prior research has shown that this method causes significant gains in children's vocabulary size (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998). After six weeks, parents and teachers were each asked about their frequency of communicating with each other, and the usual content of those communications.

RESULTS

To our surprise, parents and teachers in the two groups did not differ in the amount of their communications with each other, whether by notes or in person. Even though the teachers in the intervention group were trying to encourage the parents to read at home (the homework), this did not appear to cause any increase in overall communications. However the content of communications did change. While the two groups were equal in their frequency of communication about the program (for example, reminders about field trips, daily schedule changes, upcoming activities), they differed in the frequency of communication about the specific child. In both their face-to-face communications and in notes sent home, the treatment group experienced significantly more communications between parents and teacher about the behavior or development of the specific child, concerns about the child, parenting tips for that child, etc.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The intervention was a workshop delivered to early childhood teachers, on how to use parent homework assignments to increase a specific form of parent involvement in the program: reading to children at home using the dialogic reading method. We expected to see dramatic differences in the amount of parent-program communications. Instead, we found that parents and teachers in the treatment group changed the content of their ongoing communications, with a greater emphasis on children's individual development. In our earlier report (Kim & Riley, 2011), we also showed that the intervention led to an actual increase in children's vocabulary size and understanding of print.

Lesson #1: You might not need to invest more time in communications with parents, but pay attention to the content of communications. Communications that are individualized are exactly the type with the greatest potential to change parenting behaviors and affect individual child development. One interpretation of the current findings is that parent-teacher communication can be improved and made more effective without increasing its frequency, but by changing its content. Parent involvement activities may not need to be more time consuming, if they are more informative about the specific child.

Lesson #2: Engaging early childhood teachers and parents in a joint project promoting the child's development may create a positive shift in the teacher-parent relationship and communications. The homework assignment gave the two adults a joint project on which to work, each in their own setting, but with the same child. Surprisingly, the child-specific content of their communications appeared to spread from discussions of the book reading activity to other aspects of child development and parenting, including for example issues of child health and social behavior. This suggests a hypothesis that once communications between teacher and parent move from general program information (e.g., what the class did that day) to conversations about the specific child (e.g., the child's excited use of a new word), then child-specific conversations will spread to other aspects of child development and adult-child

relationships, as the teacher and parent increasingly view each other as partners in child development.

Anecdotally, a teacher and director from the treatment group reported that the intervention had led to improvement of the parent-center relationship that had lasted for several months after the intervention. One teacher said that she could see the difference between parents who participated in the study and those from classrooms not participating (only classrooms with 2.5~3.5 year-old children participated in the study). The biggest difference was that parents who were in the study were more willing to be actively involved in several kinds of events and activities in the center, and they were more cooperative with teachers and directors.

Lesson #3: Early childhood teachers can apply the parental homework idea to other domains of child development. Practitioners in the early care and education field may notice the potential of applying the parent homework idea to other domains of child development. Consider the potential for parents to be given homework assignments to play specific games at home involving impulse control or counting skills during the same weeks these aspects of children's development are being emphasized in the program. The development and testing of such homework materials represents a ripe opening for collaboration between scholars and practitioners.

Lesson #4: Early childhood teachers can educate parents. The current findings also have implications for the field of parent education. If the parent homework intervention is conceptualized as a form of parent education, then the findings reported here are as promising as they are unusual. With out-of-home care of preschoolers having become the norm in industrialized societies, we might begin to conceptualize the early care and education program as the most widespread institution providing childrearing education to parents. We suggest a hypothesis for the parent education field, that parent education programs delivered through existing relationships and settings in the parent's life, characterized by trust and daily interactions, are more likely to be effective than interventions based on a new relationship or new setting. Instead of inventing a new setting called "a parenting education workshop," we might be more effective by modifying the functioning of existing settings in the parent's life. In a roundabout way, the current study validates the commitment to parent education written into Project Head Start at its birth, and the inclusion of family-centered practices in the criteria for accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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