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## More Than a Zip Code: Addressing Home Factors Influencing Kindergarten Readiness Levels

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## **More Than a Zip Code: Addressing Home Factors Influencing Kindergarten Readiness Levels**

### **Introduction**

When children enter kindergarten possessing the foundational knowledge and skills for learning how to read, they are more likely to perform well academically, stay in school, and graduate on time. Unfortunately, far too many children begin school a year or more academically and developmentally behind their peers on pre-literacy and language skills (Feister & Smith, 2010). This most often is the case for economically disadvantaged children whose families earn only 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Guideline (i.e., less than \$44,400 for a family of four) or less and are eligible to participate in the National School Lunch Program (United States Department of Agriculture, 2013).

The lack of school readiness can have significant repercussions on a child. Specifically, they are more at risk of repeating grades, needing special education or other intervention services, and dropping out of school (De Feyter & Winsler, 2009; Baker et al., 2014). Such consequences have long-term social and economic impacts on families and communities. This article describes the important role that primary caregivers play in the development of emergent literacy skills of children, discusses programmatic considerations to effectively support primary caregivers in preparing children to be school-ready, and examines the role policy plays in ensuring more children enter kindergarten ready to learn how to read.

### **The Importance of School Readiness**

School readiness is defined as having the requisite set of physical, cognitive and social-emotional skills necessary to be prepared for kindergarten. This includes but is not limited to their “physical well-being, emotional maturity, social confidence, cognitive skills, language richness, and general knowledge” (De Feyter and Winsler, 2009, p. 412). Although there is not consensus on the level at which children should possess these skills upon entry into kindergarten, there is general agreement that some foundation is important to setting the child on a path to success. For example, a child is expected to play and get along with other children, control their emotions, work within a structure of rules and routines typically of a classroom-setting, and listen to and take orders from an adult or teacher. In addition, there is a foundation of knowledge and skills that serve as building blocks to future learning and are expected when children enter kindergarten, such as knowing the alphabet and the basic structure of words, having a basic

vocabulary, writing their name, being able to count and solving general problems.

Every child must develop this broad array of skills and competencies before entering the formal education system to be considered school ready. The process of preparing children for school requires a holistic understanding of early childhood development as well as of the influence the home environment and early experiences can have on their mental, physical, and social health. Environmental and experiential factors include, but are not limited to the child's relationship with primary caregivers, adequate nutrition, access to healthcare and preventative screenings, as well as a safe, language-rich home setting in which the child is encouraged to play, sing, read, and talk. All of these factors lead to more enhanced pre-literacy skill development.

Children from economically disadvantaged homes are more likely to enter school without pre-literacy skills such as being able to write their own names and letter recognition because they are less likely to attend prekindergarten, and more frequently enter school with limited language skills, as well as health, social, and emotional problems, which may interfere with their learning (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2010). Children from low-income families have limited language skills because they tend to be spoken to less frequently and often grow up in homes that lack literacy related resources. For example, books which are the cornerstone of many emergent literacy skills, are less common in low-income households. Nationally, 61% of low-income children have no age-appropriate books in their home (The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, 2015).

Children who are not ready for school, have a hard time achieving the same level of educational success as their peers who were school ready because the latter group continues to advance and develop literacy skills, while those who started behind must still acquire emergent literacy skills. Children who start behind struggle to reach their peers' level because a child's brain growth slows substantially after five years. Therefore, the early factors influencing school readiness are particularly important, as research shows that from birth to age three a child's brain develops more quickly than at any other time in their life (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014). In fact, through age five "as many as 700 neural connections per second" are formed (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.), and the human brain has attained 80 percent of its growth by age three (Coffey et al., n.d.).

Since a significant amount of the brain's development occurs before the child enters formal education, the child's early experiences have a

substantial impact on their school readiness (Griffin & Morrison, 1997; Blackwell et al., 2015). In order to optimize brain growth in the first few years of a child's life, it is important for primary caregivers to serve as the child's first teacher, engaging the child in high-quality interactions and exposing the child to literacy rich learning environments. This includes the primary caregiver exposing children to language via talking, reading, and singing. The more a child's brain is stimulated through pictures, words and games, the more a child's brain will process and translate the information into knowledge and skills, such as oral language development (e.g., learning how to talk). Understanding how to create such rich home learning environments requires an understanding of the dynamic process in which a child develops emergent literacy skills.

### **Emergent Literacy Development Process**

The development of literacy skills is a dynamic process similar to learning the intricacies of language and social interactions (Britsch & Meier, 1999). While literacy acquisition is a multi-faceted process, certain emergent literacy skills must be developed before a child begins to read, such as gaining an understanding of oral language and sound structure (Frusciante, 2009). In addition, emergent literacy skills "include book handling skills, recognition of words in their environmental context, graphophonetic skills, such as where words begin and end, phonological skills, and other metalinguistic skills such as context-dependency, and the processes of reading" (Puchner, 1995, p. 309). Eventually, children start to develop an understanding of syntax, such as how words are arranged to form a sentence, and word choice (Kassow, 2006a). While children need not have the ability to read upon entering school, it is necessary for children to possess at least some of the emergent literacy skills listed above.

Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) and Teale (1987) have speculated that the emergent literacy process is initiated by specific environmental stimuli, most commonly through exposure to a combination of oral language (speaking or singing) and print language, leading to the development of print awareness. Both types of language are developed by watching and interacting with adults (Frusciante, 2009), predominantly primary caregivers. Unfortunately, many low-income primary caregivers are unaware of their vital role regarding their child's development. This lack of understanding is the root of Hart and Risley's (2003) term coined "The 30 Million Word Gap."

This gap refers to the difference in the number of words heard by children growing up in mid- and upper-level income families versus those

growing up in families receiving welfare. By the time children are three years old, those from low-income households have heard, on average, 30 million fewer words than their affluent peers (Hart and Risley, 2003). By simply talking, reading, and singing with children 15 to 20 minutes each day from birth, primary caregivers can help their child learn how to talk, build a vocabulary and understand foundational skills for reading, such as knowing that the words are read from left to right and top and bottom on a page. The more a parent helps to foster the development of these emergent literacy skills, the better positioned the child will be for school (Frusciante, 2009). This early language gap is correlated to a child's vocabulary at age 3 which is predictive of their grade three reading achievement.

### **How Poverty Influences Early Literacy Development**

Having a literacy-rich home environment is an important factor in the development of emergent literacy skills. While low socioeconomic status families can provide literacy-rich home environments, they are less likely to have the time and material resources. For this reason, Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) describe family socioeconomic status as the strongest predictor of how well a child will perform in the first grade. Growing up in a low-socioeconomic status home is correlated with lower capacity for "cognitive processes, such as language, executive function, attention, and memory" because of the conditions children in poverty frequently encounter (Lipina & Posner, 2012, p. 3). For example, economically disadvantaged children tend to have fewer toys and games to stimulate their brains and spawn new learning and few, if any, books in the home to read aloud with caregivers, limiting their exposure to the written word and word diversity. Purchasing such items simply are a luxury families cannot afford. In addition, many low-income parents may work more than one low-wage job, limiting play and learning time available to spend with their child. Helping low-income families find time in their daily routines, such as cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry can be beneficial in helping to redirect that time for learning.

The detriments associated with poverty are greater during the critical years of development, the first five years of life, more than during later years of school. Specifically, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have access to quality healthcare, engage in constructive playtime, and participate in the formal childcare system, even if their families are eligible to receive child care subsidies. For many, such subsidies are insufficient to make the cost affordable, especially for high-quality child care programs. As a result, economically disadvantaged children are frequently

left in the care of an adult who oftentimes is ill-informed about how to support early learning and child development.

### **Caregiver Education and Beliefs and Their Impact on Early Literacy Skill Development**

The primary caregiver's formal educational attainment is often correlated with the early literacy achievements of their children. As an example, a child of a parent earning a four-year college degree is more likely to have a child that performs well academically as compared to a child of a parent earning a high school diploma. Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) found children with highly educated caregivers were more likely than their peers with less educated caregivers to have "acquired the necessary literacy skills by grade three" to begin reading to learn (Blackwell et al., 2015, p. 11). However, some researchers argue caregiver education alone does not account for the differences in literacy abilities of children (Blackwell et al., 2015; Skwarchuk et al. 2014; University of North Carolina Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2008). They have found caregiver attitudes and awareness of the importance of fostering literacy development is more important than caregiver educational attainment alone. Naturally, these two concepts appear to be intertwined, such that caregivers who valued their own education success and advancement tend to place importance on the education and development of their child and take steps to advance their own knowledge and skills on how to support their child's literacy development.

Caregiver education is correlated with "both parent reading beliefs and regular participation in literacy activities" (Blackwell et al., 2015, p. 11). Specifically, parents who believe that reading is a fundamental and important skill that their child must develop prioritize their time and other resources to actively engage in literacy development strategies with their child. Reading to the child before bedtime each night is a good example of how a parent may exhibit this value of literacy development and foster this same value in their children through the home literacy environment they create. Generally, caregivers who highly value education are more likely to create richer home literacy environments as compared to caregivers who place less value on education.

A study published by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill explored the interactions between mothers and their children while "reading" a wordless picture book. Mothers with less education spoke less frequently, used smaller vocabularies, and less complex language, such as using emotions and facial expressions when speaking, using different voices for various

characters illustrated in the pictures and incorporating sound effects or noises, during the recorded interactions. These findings supported the traditional conception that caregiver education plays a dominant role in how caregivers foster their child's early literacy development. However, a more complex picture appeared. The study found the mother's parenting style and knowledge of their child's development was more significant to the interactions than either income level or education level; mothers with a greater understanding of child development spoke more and used more complex language while engaging with their children (University of North Carolina Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2008).

The beliefs and knowledge caregivers hold regarding literacy can be measured by looking at various home activities, including caregiver-child shared storybook reading, the home literacy environment, oral language, and vocabulary supports (Blackwell et al., 2015). Caregiver perceptions and values can impact the development of their child's literacy skills in a positive way. This is because children appear to respond to caregiver expectations. Caregivers with high expectations for their children's learning, and those interested in developing their child's literacy skills, have children with more advanced emergent literacy skills and letter knowledge (Skwarchuk et al. 2014, p. 66). Helping parents to understand this link may increase their self-efficacy regarding their child's literacy trajectory (Blackwell et al., 2015).

### **Home Literacy Environments Foster Emergent Literacy Skills**

Since literacy gaps appear before children begin formal education, and because these differences in literacy cannot be attributed to differences in aptitude alone, there must be some other way to account for these differences. Disparities in literacy "arise from conditions outside of school" known as the home literacy environment (Blackwell et al., 2015, p. 10). The home literacy environment is comprised of the opportunities which help the child develop literacy skills. These opportunities can be rich, stimulating the child's learning or poor, hindering the child's "oral language, letter knowledge, reading ability and comprehension" (Blackwell et al., 2015, p. 11-12). Literacy rich environments emphasize the importance of speaking, reading and writing and incorporate materials and resources, such as books, devices to play songs, toys and writing tools, which are easily accessible for a child. In addition, literacy rich environments integrate learning activities into everyday routines and discourse between child and caregiver about their activities to reinforce learning.

Griffin and Morrison (1997) created a scale to understand the way home literacy environments predict literacy skills in kindergarten and how those effects can persist through second grade. Included in their measures

were traditional components of a home literacy environment such as “the amount of reading materials in the home, and the frequency of library visits, adult literacy-related behaviors, adult-child reading, and television viewing” (Griffin & Morrison, 1997, p. 233). After collecting measures on language, reading, general knowledge, and math skills for 295 children, they found the home literacy environment predicts language-based literacy skill variances among second graders, though not number-based literacy skills. Children exposed to a rich home literacy environment had a stronger vocabulary than their peers who lived in a poor literacy environment. However, more robust home literacy environments did not yield differences in a child’s ability to use numbers in mathematical operations by second grade.

The home literacy environment is extremely important for the development of a child’s emergent literacy skills and should have a variety of resources and opportunities for the child to engage in learning (Zucker & Grant 2007), including those noted previously in this section. Payne et al. (1994) found that the home literacy environment captured between 12% and 18.5% of the unique variance in language skills after controlling for parent IQ and parent educational attainment. Thus, the actions taken by caregivers and the home literacy environment they create impact the emergent literacy skills of their children, despite strong correlations existing between caregiver demographics including income, maternal education, as well as caregiver beliefs and knowledge about early literacy and language development (Burchinal et al., 2002; Blackwell et al., 2015). In fact, the frequency with which caregivers and children shared book reading was “found to be related to language skills, emergent literacy, and reading achievement of school-aged children,” while socioeconomic status was found to “not play a role” in these outcomes (Kassow, 2006b, p. 6). The same positive results associated with reading frequently and engaging in shared book reading were seen among families with both high-and-low socioeconomic status (Kassow, 2006b).

### **Programmatic Considerations for Supporting Families in Early Literacy Skill Development**

Primary caregivers play an almost singular role in the early development of their child; therefore, programs that only address the early literacy development of very young children without involving their primary caregivers have little chance of success. To successfully engage caregivers, effective programs designed to assist them in developing their child’s early literacy skills must take into account the resources available to caregivers and the needs of individual families and communities, including



their culture and language. In addition, effective programs engage families and convince them that teaching literacy to young children is valuable and will increase their child's chances of success in the future. Achieving this requires program leaders to be responsive to the diversity and socioeconomic status of families by making programmatic modifications based on these factors.

Effective literacy programs requires active participants. Moodie and Ramos (2014) describe caregiver participation as the cornerstone of successful family and youth literacy development programs. When caregivers subscribe to the mission of a program, a supportive partnership can be formed to aid in the healthy development of children, even before birth. Unfortunately, programs targeting low-income, particularly African-American and Latino families, are often unsuccessful at forming such partnerships and tend to have relatively low participation numbers (Geenen et al., 2001; Hughes et al., 2005; Frazier et al. 2007; Kazdin et al., 1997). This is in part the result of programs being poorly designed to engage the families and children they target. Kazdin et al. (1997) and Moodie and Ramos (2014) outline three major barriers preventing African-American and Latino caregivers from participating in family-based literacy programs. These barriers are structural, cultural, and attitudinal.

Caregivers typically encounter structural barriers to programs because of how a program may be designed. For example, the time at which the program is offered, how far a caregiver must travel to access the program and need for childcare are all potential structural barriers inhibiting caregiver participation in the program. Typically, African-American and Latino immigrants perceive these structural barriers as more exclusionary than Whites (Moodie & Ramos, 2014). Thus, when preparing family literacy programs, the needs of families should be considered and the structure adjusted so as to be sensitive to the time, transportation, and child care needs of the target population. Removing barriers, such as offering childcare onsite during the program, extending public transportation vouchers or partnering with an organization with a facility closer to the intended audience, are a few strategies to help alleviate barriers for participation.

Kazdin et al. (1997) identify two major attitudinal barriers. First, many minority and low-income families do not perceive or fully understand the value of the services being offered by literacy programs. These caregivers may not understand their role as their child's first teacher or how the early home environment impacts the rapidly developing brain of their children. Effective programs communicate these concepts succinctly and clearly.

Second, minority families often do not trust the organizations or people offering the program (Kazdin et al., 1997; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011). This is of particular concern for minority families and immigrants, particularly immigrants who may not have a legal documentation to live in the country, even if their children are born in the United States. Most often the distrust is with governmental agencies or nonprofit organizations who are delivering programs funded by the government. For undocumented immigrants, there is a fear of being caught and punished. For these reasons, extra effort is needed to reach out to these families and to gain their trust, especially because they may not perceive the services as being aligned with their values and they may not trust the organizations or people offering the programs. For example, some family literacy programs are run out of schools. However, African-Americans and Latino immigrants often feel unwelcome in their child's school (Moodie & Ramos 2014). This feeling can lead to distrust of schools and groups related to public education, especially when schools are perceived as extensions of the federal government.

Cultural barriers arise from a "mismatch in cultural beliefs between practitioners and parents" (Moodie & Ramos 2014, p. 5). Minority parents may feel isolated by existing family education and literacy programs because the programs tend to focus on mainstream American values including independence, open communication, and exploration. This type of socialization is at odds with many other cultures. For example, Latino mothers interviewed by Calzada, Fernandez, & Cortes (2010) felt that mainstream American culture was at odds with their Latino culture which focuses heavily on the concept of *respeto*. The term, meaning respect, refers to a set of cultural values prominent in Latino cultures which includes deference to elders and obedience as well as appropriate behaviors and boundaries to observe while in public (Moodie & Ramos, 2014). Properly adapting programs to be culturally sensitive encourages caregivers to enroll in family literacy programs (Moodie & Ramos, 2014).

Early literacy programs should be adjusted to match the values of caregivers and families. When programs match the motivation of caregivers, caregivers are more likely to attend and complete the program (Gross et al., 2001). This can be achieved by using the family or community's primary language, recruiting ethnically similar staff, partnering with organizations who have an existing relationship within the community, and seeking insights from members of the community on adjusting program materials (Moodie & Ramos, 2014).

When modifying literacy programs for specific cultures, it is important to take advantage of the resources already in the community. Minority cultures tend to have networks of people working together to help take care

of the community's children. These communities form networks of extended family members and "fictive kin (friends who become as close as kin)" to help primary caregivers perform tasks associated with parenting (García Coll et al. 1996, p. 1906). Programs can use the importance placed on relationships in the community to encourage networks of people to work together and help children and each other develop literacy skills. For example, relevant and effective religious networks are often seen in predominantly African-American communities. When working with African-American families, understanding the role of religion and spiritual beliefs is vital for program success. Researchers have found "black churches serve many functions in family life, and church members...are often seen as extended family" (Moodie & Ramos, 2014, p. 7). Thus, incorporating churches can help build trust and show respect for cultural identities.

When establishing new, family-literacy programs for minority groups, the goal should be to adopt "a culturally-informed approach" by adapting existing programs to align with both the culture of the people and the goals of the program (Moodie & Ramos, 2014, p. 8). Many programs fail to do this. Instead, programs frequently teach parents and children skills using approaches based on general characteristics of families. Furthermore, they have caregivers model "school-like activities in the home," rather than taking home environment, culture and access to resources into consideration (Puchner, 1995, p. 313). Another negative assumption that oftentimes misguides family literacy program development and delivery is that minority homes neither value literacy nor participate in home literacy activities. Programs that take an approach may be perceived as being disrespectful and insulting of caregiver culture and values (Puchner, 1995).

In addition, programs must be sensitive when providing advice to caregivers, especially surrounding parenting styles, which vary across ethnicities. Program coordinators should understand "optimal" parenting strategies may vary by culture. Because of these differences in "optimal" strategies, no one model of training or education program and style will be relevant for all populations and communities. Using a prescriptive approach might be perceived by caregivers as naïve, judgmental, or disempowering, thus decreasing the likelihood of their participation (Ortiz & Del Vecchio, 2013; Dawson-McClure et al., 2014; Calzada, Basil, & Fernandez, 2012; Moodie & Ramos, 2014). ← Calzada is 2013 in references

### **The Role of Policymakers and the Policies They Establish in Supporting School Readiness of Children**

Although the formal, public education system in America does not begin for most children until age four or five, policymakers and the policies they

establish play a vital role in ensuring that more children in our nation enter school possessing emergent literacy skills needed for them to learn how to read. Specifically, policies that enable families to access adequate healthcare, nutrition, stable housing, quality and affordable childcare, parent education programs and home resources supporting children from prenatal stages to age three, are all important contributing factors to school-readiness levels. Also, how such policies work in tandem with each other when they are implemented in practice is extremely important.

Financial support of early childhood education and literacy programs is extremely important and is the responsibility of policymakers. Because early education can yield returns of up to \$16 for every one dollar invested (Schweinhart et al., 2005) through reduced crime, decreased dropouts, and increased graduation rates, among other benefits, it seems like a wise use of government funds. Unfortunately, far too little is invested in early education and more specifically parent and family education and engagement. Policymakers must examine the level of investments made in these areas and boost funding for evidenced-based practices, such as home-visitation programs and formal education programs, such as Head Start and pre-kindergarten offered by school districts. Prevention, or rather, early support for child development is the key.

## **Conclusion**

Emergent literacy is multi-faceted and critically important to placing children on a path to academic achievement and realizing their fullest potential in life. The role that primary caregivers play in unlocking this potential cannot be underscored enough. Yet, many caregivers need educational and other wrap-around support and resources to adequately foster their child's development and learning at this critical stage. There are many considerations for how these services and resources are delivered in a way to ensure caregiver engagement and, ultimately, school readiness of children. When programs and services are integrated into a systems approach, policies serve to enable early literacy development, and community stakeholders come together to align resources, a greater impact will result for children and their families.

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