

Parent-Child Shared Book Reading and Children's Language, Literacy, and Empathy Development¹

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Parent-child shared reading interactions are part of the socio-cultural context of children's development (Pellegrini & Galda, 2003). Despite the fact that this activity has earned extensive scholarly research, there are still many open-ended questions regarding shared book reading and its myriad relationships to children's development. To date, much of the research has focused on the impact of book reading on children's language and emergent literacy skills (e.g. Bus, 2002). However, book reading also holds the potential to advance other aspects of development that have yet to be examined; for example, children's social-emotional adjustment.

Children's books often present social and emotional experiences (Zeece, 2004), and reading these books to children invites conversation about the emotions, motivations, and behaviors of the story's protagonists. Discussions between parents and their children that encourage the children to define emotions, to consider the motivations for characters' behaviors and their implications, and to understand the array of relationships of the characters and their surroundings, can help the children to express, understand, and regulate their own emotions (Colwell, 2001). The current study was conceptualized on the basis of these assumptions and in light of the small number of studies that have examined the significance of the nature of parental shared book reading on the child's development. This study explored the relationship between the frequency and the nature of shared book reading and children's language, literacy, and empathy skills.

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Book reading and children's language and literacy

There is clear evidence supporting the relationship between frequency of book reading to children's language development (van Kleeck & Stahl, 2003). Nonetheless, there is less agreement between researchers on the relationship between frequency of book reading and the development of literacy skills (Sénéchal, LeFevre, 2002). Studies that have focused on the nature of shared reading interactions found that it is related to both the child's language and literacy level. For example, Lese-man and de Jong (1998) found that the richness of conversation between parents and their 4-year-old children while reading (asking open questions and encouraging their participation in the conversation) predicted the children's vocabulary as well as their decoding ability at age seven. Studies have traditionally explored the impact of the frequency and the nature of shared reading on children's language and literacy. To date, however, there are no studies that have evaluated the connection between these aspects of book reading and children's empathy. The current study focused on this subject.

Book reading and children's empathy

Empathy is the ability to experience the feelings of another and to respond with an emotional response that is more appropriate to the state of the other than to the state of the individual (Hoffman, 2000). Empathy and emotional understanding result from the interaction between emotional skills (e.g., expressing emotions, identifying emotions) and cognitive skills (e.g., taking on a task, understanding the feelings and thoughts of another) (Strayer, 1989). The development of empathy is an important ingredient in one's social-emotional development. Emotional knowledge provides children with information on situations with their peers and behavioral norms in social situations (Denham et al., 2003).

Empathy develops during interactions in early childhood, where the mood of the caretaker is transferred to the child by touch, tone of voice, and facial expressions. This early version of sharing and awareness between adult and child creates a world of openness, empathic understanding, and connection between the child's emotions and the emotions of others (Kohn, 2000; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). Beyond the emotional connection between adult and child, parent-child dialogue helps children understand emotional perspectives such as emotions, intentions,

reasons, and motives (Thompson, Laible, Ontai, 2003). These types of conversations may take place in various day-to-day contexts, including playtime, discussing memories, and of course, during book reading. In this context, Denham and Auerbach (1995) examined conversations on emotions between 47 three- and 4-year olds and their mothers who were sharing a picture book where the characters express various emotions. The authors found a relationship between the nature of the mother's input (asking questions, providing explanations and instructions) and the richness of their children's language during the conversation. In addition, the children's emotional abilities were predicted by the way in which the mothers related to emotions during the picture book reading. The purpose of the current study is to examine the nature of the relationship between the frequency and the nature of joint book reading and children's language, literacy, and empathy skills.

Method

Participants

Participants were 78 children (31 boys, 47 girls) and their mothers. The children's ages ranged from 41 to 65 months ($M=54.72$, $SD=5.70$). All the children had at least one brother or sister ($M=2.25$, $SD=0.73$). Most of the mothers were married (91%) and their education included at least one academic degree (62.8%).

Procedure

Joint book reading took place in the child's home. At the outset of the meeting, mothers were asked to independently read a previously unseen book without being recorded. Thereafter, the mothers were asked to read the book to their child in their usual manner of reading, and the process was video recorded. Mothers were then asked to fill out a questionnaire that evaluated their frequency of literacy activities and book reading at home. In addition to the meeting in the home, researchers evaluated children's language, literacy, and empathy, in individual meetings at the preschool.

Measures

1. Home literacy activities – The mother was asked to rate 15 questions on a 7-points scale relating to the frequency of home-based literacy activities with the child in a variety of areas: looking at newspapers, letter games, writing activities, etc.
2. Frequency of book reading – The mother was asked how many times per week she reads books to her child.
3. Nature of book reading – Mothers were videotaped while reading the book “Frog on a Very Special Day” (Velthuijs, 2000) to their child. The story describes a situation of “deception.” Frog, the story’s protagonist, forgot that he has a birthday. His friends, however, haven’t forgotten and are preparing a surprise party. Frog is frustrated because he thinks his friends are distancing themselves from him. Toward the end of the story, Frog’s friends surprise him with the birthday party and the excited Frog is happy and enjoys himself. The mother-child interactions were transcribed, analyzed and coded. In the analysis, we related to all mother-child talk beyond the actual text of the story, including gestures and behaviors. Observational analysis reflected the following measures:
 - *Mental-emotional discourse* – This measure includes open/closed questions, as well as expansions that related to the mental realm (e.g., “Frog doesn’t know why today is a special day and he wants to know”; “What did the rabbit mean?”); to the emotional realm (e.g., “Frog is very sad;” “Oh no, poor Frog;” “What does Frog feel?”); and, to the social and moral realm (e.g., “His friends prepared a party for him;” “What good friends;” “Is it nice to behave like that?”). In addition, this measure included all mental terms that the mother used during the interaction (e.g., think, forget, surprise), and all emotional terms (e.g., sad, happy, joyful). The percentage of mothers’ mental-emotional discourse was calculated from their entire discourse.
 - *Link to child’s life* – This measure includes expansions by the mother that connect the story’s plot to the child’s life (“You also have a birthday soon;” “You also have good friends like Frog does”). The percentage of expansions dealing with the child’s life was calculated out of the mothers’ total discourse.
 - *Child’s mental terms* – This measure includes all mental terms uttered by the child during the interaction (“Frog is really *surprised* now”).

- *Attention incidents* – This measure refers to incidents of loss of attention by the child during the book reading. The percentage of these incidents was calculated in relation to the 22-page book.
4. Vocabulary – Children’s receptive vocabulary was evaluated using the *PPVT* (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test) (Dunn, Dunn, 1981). For each of 40 items, the children were shown 4 pictures and were asked to indicate the drawing that matches the word said by the researcher.
 5. Phonological awareness – Children listened to 30 spoken words with a CVC structure (e.g., *gar*). They were asked to provide the initial phoneme of the first 15 words and the last phoneme of the last 15 words.
 6. Letter knowledge -- Children were presented with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and were asked to name them.
 7. Empathy -- Children’s understanding of emotional situations was assessed using an empathy assessment tool (Strayer, Roberts, 2004). For each of five emotions: sadness, happiness, disgust, fear, and anger, the child was presented with two situations, via a story that depicted that emotion. For example: “Donna invited her friends to play with her; they agreed and came to play with her.” Or “Dan and his brother have a hamster that they love. The hamster is sick and about to die.” After hearing the story, the child was asked to respond to three questions: (1) How does the character feel? The child was asked to identify the appropriate emotion to the character from amongst four possible pictures of emotions. (2) How does the child feel after hearing the story? The child was asked to select the emotion to which he/she relates from amongst four random pictures showing emotions. (3) Why does the child feel this way? The child was asked to verbally explain why he/she picked that particular emotion. The child’s weighted answer produced a “score” summarizing their level of empathy. This score reflects the child’s ability to identify another’s emotions in various life situations, to match his emotions to that of another and to explain why he feels a similar emotion to the other.

Results

We examined the relationship between the frequency of literacy activities in the home along with the frequency and nature of book reading to the children’s level of vocabulary, phonological awareness, letter naming and empathy.

Table 1. Correlations between the frequency and the nature of literacy activities and shared book reading and children's language, literacy and empathy (N=78)

		Vocabulary	Letter Naming	Phonological Awareness	Empathy
Frequency	Home literacy activities	0.19 [^]	0.42 ^{**}	0.21 [*]	0.04
	Book reading	0.18 [^]	0.01	0.07	0.23 ^{**}
Nature of shared reading	Mental-emotional discourse	0.21 [*]	0.12	0.00	0.22 [*]
	Link to child's life	0.09	0.15	0.00	0.29 ^{**}
	Child's use of mental terms	0.20 [*]	0.04	0.01	0.27 ^{**}
	Attention incidents (%)	0.42 ^{**}	0.21	0.05	0.06

[^] $p < 0.06$, ^{*} $p < 0.05$, ^{**} $p < 0.01$

As evident in Table 1, we found that the variety of home literacy activities is related to the child's language and literacy levels, but not to their level of empathy. It was interesting to have revealed that reading books to children is related to the development of the child's empathy. Mothers, who read more to their children, related more to emotions and social situations while reading, and drew more connections between the story to the child's life, had children who demonstrated a higher level of empathy.

Due to the wide variance among the children on the empathy measure (ranging from 0 to 14), we divided the participants into three groups based on their developmental level of empathy as follows: The first group included 25% of the children who were established to be at the highest developmental level of empathy (19 children); the second group included children who were in the middle range (50% of the children, 40 children); and the third group included 25% of children who were found to be at the lowest developmental level of empathy (19 children). We focused on the first and third groups, those at either ends of the spectrum, to determine if there are differences between them in terms of the frequency of book reading and the nature of maternal discourse

during shared reading. A comparison between the groups revealed that mothers who report reading books more frequently with their children had children with higher levels of developmental empathy compared to those children whose mothers report a lower frequency of book reading ($t=2.31, p<0.05$). Similar results were found regarding the nature of the discourse: Mental-emotional discourse ($t=2.01, p<0.05$), link to child's life ($t=2.03, p<0.05$), and child's use of mental terms ($t=2.05, p<0.05$). Differences were found between the groups supporting the assumption that mothers' reference to mental and emotional contexts while reading books is positively related to their child's level of empathy.

Discussion

Literacy activities and children's language and literacy development

The current study found that the frequency of literacy activities at home (e.g., writing notes, looking at newspapers, and letter games) is correlated with both the child's language skills as well as literacy skills and that shared book reading (frequency and nature) is related to children's language skills. We assume that parents' construction of a relatively rich literacy environment reveals their conception of experiences and activities that are likely to promote children's development. It also testifies to their perception of themselves as responsible for providing a development-supportive environment. It is reasonable to assume that in a family with abundant literacy activities, the child earns encouragement in everything relating to spoken or written language. The current study strengthens previous studies (Bennet, Weigel, Martin, 2002) that demonstrate connections between the extent of literacy activities in the home and the level of language and literacy skills of the child.

Regarding the relationship between shared book reading and children's language and literacy, our results are in line with existing literature, which presents consistent evidence of the connection between book reading and language development (e.g., van Kleeck, Stahl, 2003) and less consistent evidence of the connection between book reading and early literacy skills (e.g., Sénéchal, LeFevre, 2002). The relationship between frequency of book reading and language can be explained by the books' rich vocabulary and the fact that repeated exposure to a wealth of vocabulary when reading books enriches the child vocabulary (DeTemple, 2001). There is evidence that mothers who include their

children in conversations and talk with them with rich vocabulary that includes words that are relatively rare in everyday language contribute to their children's language development (Weizman, Snow, 2001). Shared book reading encourages such conversations. However, it seems that book reading is less related to children's early literacy skills. The results of the current study are in line with previous studies that showed that mere exposure to books and looking at letters do not advance children's alphabetic skills (Aram, Levin, 2002). It may be that in order to promote children's alphabetic skills, activities that are more directly related to letters, phonological awareness and writing need to be used.

In the current study, we also found a relationship between the mothers' mental-emotional discourse during book reading and children's vocabulary. That is, children whose mothers related more to emotional, mental, and social aspects of the books' characters, showed larger vocabularies. We believe that mental-emotional dialogues that develop ideas, provide explanations for occurrences, and utilize emotion and mental terms, serve to challenge the children linguistically, and can thereby contribute to their language development. Similarly, we found that children who used more mental terms during the shared book reading had higher vocabulary levels. This finding is supported by a study by Peskin and Askington (2004), who found that greater exposure to meta-cognitive terms (e.g., knew, guess) during a conversation led to greater usage of those terms by the children.

Our evaluation of the shared book reading interaction also examined attention incidents during reading. We found a negative correlation between attention incidents during the interaction and children's language and literacy levels. That is, children who showed more attention disruptions while reading had lower vocabulary and literacy skill levels. Various explanations are possible for these negative correlations. The first posits that attention incidents are evidence of lower involvement and listening, and these distract from the flow of the learning (Senechal, Monker, 1995; Wasik, Bond, 2001). A different explanation relates to the connection between the nature of mother's conversation and the child's involvement, and maintains that rich conversation is less characterized by interruptions (e.g., Hargrave, Sénéchal, 2000). In the current study we found that mothers who didn't deepen or expand their conversation during book reading had children who were less involved and attentive. It may be that children whose mothers are less involved in the book reading and who have fewer expansions tend to be less interested and more distractible. At the same time, it is possible that mothers of

children with attention difficulties tend to rush through a book reading and relate less to emotional and mental aspects, and consequently, their children learn less from the experience of joint book reading. Future research can lend more insight to this phenomenon.

Book reading and children's empathy development

To the best of our knowledge, the study presented here is a pioneering study dealing with the connection between book reading and the development of empathy. Results from the study showed positive correlations between the frequency and the nature of joint book reading and children's empathy. To our mind, the reasons for this result are related to the both the content of the books as well as to the nature of the interaction between the mother and her child. Upright (2002) suggested that empathy is a learned ability, and therefore proposed promoting it in elementary school children using discussions of moral dilemmas where the teacher guides and directs the students to understand the other. Against this background, we assume that increasing activities with books that deal with social situations will allow children to adopt another's point of view without the emotional involvement necessitated in real life situations. Additionally, the positive interaction between parent and child that is promoted during book reading allows for the fostering of the child's emotional understanding. An enjoyable routine of joint book reading can generate more positive feelings of both mother and child (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Bus, van IJzendoorn, Pellegrini, 1995). Positive feelings and experiences allow children to learn about the world, to regulate their emotions, and to understand them better (Denham et al., 2003).

The present study's results add to previous evidence of a connection between the mother's behavior and emotional language during joint activities and the child's behavior and emotional language. Thus, for example, Denham and Auerbach (1995) found that mothers' questions about emotional situations predicted their children's help and concern towards another. Similarly, the mother's relationship to emotions and thoughts of the other were found to correlate with the child's ability to understand mental situations (Ratner, Olver, 1998). The current study's findings further demonstrate the connection between parental discourse that deals with emotions while confronting mental and social situations of book's characters and in the child's life, to the child's empathic ability. The more that mothers converse about emotions and mental situations during joint

reading, the more they will be able to add to their child's knowledge about emotional experiences, and to cultivate the child's emotional understanding and ability to express emotions. We think that parents have it in their power to contribute to their child's development of empathic skills using a day-to-day interactive context – shared book reading – and they should be encouraged to do so in a rich comprehensive way.

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