

Home learning experiences boost low-income kids' school readiness

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Home learning experiences that are consistently supportive in the early years may boost low-income children's readiness for school. That's the finding of a new longitudinal study that appears in the journal *Child Development*.

The study was done by researchers at New York University based on research conducted as part of the national Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project, which is funded by the Administration for [Children and Families](#). The study was also supported by the National Science Foundation.

Previous research has found that on average, children living in poverty are less well prepared to start school than children from middle-income homes. For example, they're less likely than more well-off youngsters to be able to recognize letters of the alphabet, count to 20, write their names, or pretend to read a storybook. Despite their lower performance, there is substantial variation in the skills of children living in poverty, which may be explained by their early experiences in the home.

This study looked at more than 1,850 children and their mothers from predominantly low-income households, that is, households at or below the federal poverty line. During home visits when the children were approximately 1, 2, 3, and 5 years old, the researchers gathered information on how often children took part in literacy activities (such as shared book reading), the quality of mothers' engagements with their children (such as children's exposure to frequent and varied adult

speech), and the availability of learning materials (such as children's books). From this information, the researchers calculated a total learning environment score at each age for each of the children. They also measured the number of words the children understood and their knowledge of letters and words at age 5.

"The quality of children's environments over time varied greatly," according to Eileen T. Rodriguez, survey researcher at Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., who led the study when she was at New York University. "Some children experienced environments that were uniformly low or high in language and literacy supports at all ages examined, while others experienced environments that changed as they developed."

The researchers found that differences in the children's learning environments over time predicted their readiness skills. As one example, children whose learning environments were consistently low in quality across the four ages studied were much more likely to have delays in language and literacy skills at pre-kindergarten than children whose environments were uniformly high at all the ages.

"Our findings indicate that enriched learning experiences as early as the first year of life are important to children's vocabulary growth, which in turn provides a foundation for children's later school success," notes Rodriguez.

Experiences that occur as children are poised to enter kindergarten also matter, particularly in contributing to children's early reading skills. "Home learning experiences that are consistently supportive in the early years may close the school readiness gap of children from low-income backgrounds," notes Rodriguez. The researchers also found that characteristics of children and families, including children's cognitive ability as infants, mothers' race and ethnicity, education and

employment, and family's household income predicted the course of children's early learning environments.

Rodriguez says practitioners should offer both direct and indirect support to help families provide better learning experiences for their children at home. Direct support would involve efforts to promote literacy behaviors, while indirect support would involve targeting areas that might be associated with their ability to provide such support, such as mothers' education.

In addition, efforts should be carried out as early as the first year of life. "Interventions early on may set families on an altered trajectory of support if families are supported in their efforts to engage children in routine literacy activities, interact with children in supportive ways, and provide children opportunities to learn about their worlds through educational materials," according to Rodriguez.

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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