Title registration for a systematic review: 
Parent-child reading to improve school readiness and language development at school entry  
James Law, Cristina McKean, Jenna Charlton, Robert Rush, Fiona Beyer, Cristina Fernandez-Garcia

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TITLE OF THE REVIEW

Parent-child reading to improve school readiness and language development at school entry: a systematic review

BACKGROUND

Stark gaps open up between the oral language skills of children from higher socio-economic backgrounds and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds by the time they reach compulsory schooling. These gaps persist beyond primary school (Jerrim, 2013; Law, King, and Rush, 2014; Bradbury, Corak, Washbrook, and Waldfogel, 2015) and into adulthood (Law, Rush, Parsons, and Schoon, 2009). Language development is important because it is closely associated with literacy, school attainment and social wellbeing, and early difficulties have been shown to correlate with a range of adult outcomes. Parent-child book reading interventions in the preschool period have been proposed as a potential solution to this problem, but there is a need to bring the evidence together to help inform policy and practice.

Most aspects of child development are highly sensitive to the child’s environment (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). For example, a child’s oral language skills are clearly associated with the input they receive from their parents (Hart and Risley, 1998) and others in their immediate environment. The quality of this early stimulation anticipates subsequent development. Indeed, oral language skills or oracy are essential to good progress in school, helping develop literacy, promoting narrative skills and facilitating access to the curriculum (Alexander, 2009). Language is the medium of consolidating learning, enhancing well-being through communicating with peers and teachers and negotiating with others in unfamiliar situations. While most parents recognise this, there can be a tension between their desire and capacity to prepare their own children as best they can for every aspect of life. While compulsory education aims to compensate for differences in parental means by universal instruction, the picture in terms of the support provided prior to formal schooling is mixed.

While socio-economic factors (income, housing, maternal education) are clearly important as proxies for the input that the child receives, specific aspects of the child’s environment (children’s books in the home, TV viewing, shared book reading) have also been shown to be relevant (McKean et al., 2015) as children develop. Indeed, parent-child reading is commonly perceived as a key indicator of the “cultural capital” often associated with the development of social differentials in adolescence (Sullivan and Brown, 2015). These relationships are necessarily complex. Magnuson and colleagues, for example, demonstrated that maternal education can improve the child’s home learning environment (as measured by the HOME score), yet they did not find that this caused (mediated) the improved language outcomes in 3 year olds (Magnuson, Duncan, Metzger, and Lee, 2009). Parent-child reading is a more logical candidate process as the vehicle for the promotion of child language and transmission of “cultural capital” in the early years, as it relies on parental activity, values and engagement.
rather than more static aspects of the home learning environment. In addition to complementing school educational activity, parent-child reading can promote a positive attitude to reading, and link into the child’s interests. Furthermore, shared book reading exposes children to a wider range of novel vocabulary and complex language structures than everyday conversation. When Farrant and Zubrick (2012) investigated the relations in a very large sample of 3-year-old Australian children, they found that the effect of joint book reading completely mediated the relation between maternal education and child attainment. Our own analysis suggests that early book reading in lower socio-economic groups may be especially important in predicting later language development (King, McKean, and Rush, 2017). While the focus is commonly on the role that mothers play in stimulating their children’s development it is becoming increasingly important to consider the effects of other family members (fathers, grandparents, partners) too. (Lamb, 2010). Yet, although book reading is widely advocated in primary care and very early education, a number of issues about its implementation as an intervention require clarification. For example, it would be helpful to know for whom it is most effective, whether effects are short term or sustained and whether such interventions can or should be scaled up. It would also be useful to understand whether such interventions impact the performance of all children equally or have the potential to mitigate inequalities.

Parent-child reading interventions exist in different forms. They range from increasing access to books (for example, through ‘book gifting’ in which the parent is given a book with or without instruction) through increasing parent-child book reading frequency without consideration of interaction style, to the fostering of specific book-sharing styles and techniques such as “shared book reading” (Close, 2001). In the most structured examples, known as interactive or “dialogic” reading the parent or experienced adult is trained in a specific type of responsiveness to the child and/or use of questioning. Although some of these programs have a commercial identity, in most cases they are not owned or distributed by a specific developer. All of these interventions overlay what parents already do with their children. Alternative reading media (television, tablets etc.) are equivalent to book reading for many, although their developmental influence may differ, with some evidence suggesting that students engage in different learning strategies that might short-circuit comprehension when engaging with digital devices compared to print (Wastlund, Norlander and Archer, 2008; Mangen, Walgermo and Kolbjorn, 2013). Studies vary in the level of definition of parent-child reading that they provide. In intervention, studies it should be clear which level of intervention is being used but other activities at baseline may not be captured. In cohort studies parents are asked about their own activities with the child but these are often confined to relatively constrained questions about the number of times the parent reads to the child, whether it was the father or the mother extended family or another adult, and whether the child was regularly taken to the library.

Key to understanding the role of parent-child reading is how to define the most appropriate outcome of the process. Parent-child reading functions as a structured space for interaction, for the focus of attention, for the development of the relationship between parent and child,
and the development and extension of vocabulary. It also potentially impacts on early reading skills (What Works Clearing House (WWC), 2015). As such, joint reading has a wide application in developing fundamental skills for learning and relating to others, and is potentially important for “school readiness”. Although concerns have been raised about the precise definition of this term (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015), it is commonly understood to refer to the child’s capacity to engage with other children and with school activities more widely (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Unsurprisingly, therefore, oral language is a major feature of school readiness. In England, for example, the Early Learning Goals comprise three core skills, communication being prime among them, with more formal school outcomes of literacy and numeracy being contingent on language.

Although book reading and language development have been linked in both the shorter and the longer term (Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992), concerns have been raised about the value of parent-child book reading as a universal intervention. For example, it has been suggested that universal interventions (e.g. book gifting) may benefit most those who need them least effectively widening rather than narrowing social disparities (Goldfeld, Napiza, Quach, Reilly, Ukoumunne, and Wake, 2011). In England, a recent Department of Education report concluded that simply “encouraging parents to listen to their children to read was not [necessarily beneficial]” (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2010) and a recent meta-analysis of shared booked reading specifically indicated that while there were mixed effects for comprehension and language development there were no discernible effects on alphabetics and general reading achievement (WWC, 2015). Programmes such as Bookstart, which gifts free books to children at two key ages before school (0-12 months and 3-4 years) to help families read together, have become key components in Surestart programmes in England (Wade and Moore, 2000). Yet many of the findings of the evaluation of Surestart were difficult to interpret, in part because of their lack of specificity (Rutter, 2006). Despite such reservations, parent-child reading has again been highlighted in the recently initiated Read On, Get On campaign in England (Save the Children, 2015) still citing an old review (Bus, Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini, 1995) as the primary source of evidence. The concern is that intervention evidence is being inappropriately over-interpreted, leading to blanket policy recommendations which may well not be warranted (Clark, 2004). Bookstart has inspired a range of similar programmes implemented throughout the world: located in Austria, the Channel Islands, Belgium, Demark, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Republic of Ireland, Spain, Switzerland, Malta, Japan, Korea, Thailand, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, North and South America, Australia and New Zealand (Bookstart, 2017). In the USA, the Reach Out and Read programme operates in all 50 states, working with doctors who ‘prescribe’ books to families. Evidence shows that families served by Reach Out and Read share books more often, and their children enter kindergarten with larger vocabularies and stronger language skills than children not involved in the programme (Reach Out and Read, 2014). Also in the U.S, Head Start and Early Head Start are programmes of the Department of Health and Human Services which provide free learning and development services to children aged birth – 5 years old and pregnant women from low income families. The programme integrates research-based health, educational, nutritional and parent involvement services to over 1
million children and their families across all 50 states. With a range of services offered, parent-child reading interventions are situated within these rather than an overall focus of the programme. Based on Hart and Risely’s (1995) research that some children heard 30 million fewer words by their 4th birthday than others, the Thirty Million Word Initiative (TMW) launched in Chicago is an innovative parent-directed program designed to harness the power of parent language for child development and language learning. Research shows that the TMW Initiative is significantly increasing the amount of talk parents use with their children (Suskind, Leffel, Hernandez et al, 2013). Although these international initiatives show positive impact on parent-child intervention, and will involve shared reading opportunities between parents, caregivers and children, they are not specific to parent-child reading interventions per se.

Key to such an analysis is the role played by variables that influence the relationship between an underlying independent predictor variable (social disadvantage, parent-child reading etc.) and the outcome (school readiness/oral language), namely mediators and moderators. Mediators suggest a causal mechanism; moderators (e.g., sex, race, class) generally affect the strength of the relationship. Parent-child book reading may be considered a mediator if it were found to play a causal role in the relationship between social disadvantage and school readiness. The role played by ethnic and cultural differences both in terms of reading exposure and response to intervention (Manz, Hughes, Barnabas, Bracaliello, and Ginsburg-Block, 2010) are potential moderators. There is a lower level of parental reading in some ethnic groups in the US (Kuo, Franke, Regalado et al, 2004), and evidence of differential access to home language children’s books and of cultural differences in book and story sharing styles; each of which may influence the effectiveness of interventions (Manz et al., 2010).

In this study, the relevant intervention literature will be reviewed. We will synthesise the evidence of specific effects of parent-child reading to children aged 1-5 years on “school readiness” and children’s oral language development in order to formulate strategies for policy makers and practitioners. For the purposes of the review, the term ‘parent-child’ will be used to represent interaction between primary caregiver(s) and children. Primary caregivers include parents, grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, and step parents.

**OBJECTIVES**

The specific objectives are captured in the following research questions.

- What is the evidence of effectiveness of parent-child book reading with preschool children in improving school readiness, oral language, and parent-child interactions?

- How does effectiveness vary between characteristics of children, for different adult relationships to the child and with different reading intervention activities?
• To what extent does this evidence translate into sustained improvements in language and literacy outcomes for children?

• What should be recommended to early years’ practitioners, commissioners and policy makers about the messages associated with early parent-child reading?

EXISTING REVIEWS

There are two existing systematic reviews on the topic of early reading and the impact it has on child development. Bus et al. (1995) carried out a quantitative meta-analysis of the available empirical evidence related to parent-preschooler reading and several outcome measures. Although relatively dated this review is widely cited as the authority on the subject, and is cited in many key policy documents. From a methodological point of view this review does not adhere to current review standards (Campbell). For example, the effects of both the intervention and the observational data are added together in the meta-analysis and the numbers within the interventions are aggregated rather than allowing variation between included studies as a random effect. Likewise, it does not present funnel or forest plots making it difficult to assess bias or heterogeneity. The review makes no clear analysis of population subgroups and there is speculation but no analysis of factors such as the age of the study. In terms of its content the effect estimates are large by the standards of educational studies especially for the oral language outcomes and these may well have been inflated by the review methodology. The review is often cited as demonstrating evidence that interventions are more effective for children from low socio-economic backgrounds yet the process by which this conclusion is reached is poorly specified and measurement issues are not considered. Finally, Bus et al. (1995) and most other investigators overlook the role played by the father and other adults in the child’s immediate environment, a factor which is becoming especially important in contemporary families where employment and childcare arrangements may vary considerably.

As second and more recent review (Mol and Bus, 2008) examined the association between parent-child book reading and vocabulary. However, this review is too narrow in scope with respect to the type of intervention provided (dialogic-approaches), as well as its single outcome measure. None of the existing reviews provides adequately for appropriate targeting of early parent-child reading interventions at scale across the full population which is essential for determining policy implications. Thus, it is not possible to conclude as to which children benefit the most from such interventions; whether the gap in attainment associated with social disadvantage is narrowed or widened; how large an effect might be gained and by which types of intervention; who is reading to children in which families and to what extent.

There is a similar systematic review to the proposed review here registered (but not completed) in the Campbell library (Wilson, Norvell, and Kissinger, 2016). This similar review has a wider focus; on any parent-mediated interventions to foster early language and literacy skills in young children (although it is recognised that parent-reading interventions
are likely to be included in these). The proposed review here is more specific, and differs from the Wilson et al (2016) review in a number of ways. Firstly, it will focus on parent-child reading interventions only, whereas the Wilson review will explore a variety of parent-mediated interventions and the influence of the home environment. Therefore, interventions in the current review must include direct contact between parents and children, whereas in the Wilson review, contact with children in the intervention is not required for inclusion. Secondly, primary outcomes differ between the reviews, the proposed review here will focus specifically on oral language and school-readiness, therefore primary outcomes include language, early literacy and social-emotional and behavioural development of children with a focus on school readiness. The Wilson review does not focus on school-readiness, and includes primary outcomes of language and literacy only, with no social-emotional and behavioural outcomes. It is however acknowledged that there will be some overlap in outcomes (i.e. literacy skill forms part of school-readiness, 'language' as a whole concept includes oral language). Finally, whilst the populations overlap in age range, the proposed review focuses on intervention for preschool children only (1-5 years), whilst the Wilson review focuses on preschool but also early school aged children (2-6 years). Focusing on ages 1-5 is important as many parent-child book reading interventions such as Bookstart which is in operation globally begins in the child’s first 12 months of life. In addition, the emergence of language in children begins around 12 months, therefore it is important to capture impacts on language development during these early years. The age range of children in the current study stops at age 5, and this allows us to capture the impact of programmes such as Bookstart that provide children with books at age 4 years. In addition, this 5-year cut-off is necessary in a review that specifically focuses on parent-delivered intervention, as once children are in school they are then influenced in their reading by their teachers, teaching assistants and peers, which may confound results.

There is also a further similar review registered by protocol (but not completed) within the Cochrane library (Macdonald and McCartan, 2014) which focuses on centre-based interventions for improving school readiness. The review differs from the proposed review in several ways: in the focus of intervention (including a broad category of educational interventions for school readiness compared to parent-child reading interventions only as proposed here), the context of delivery (centre-based only, including preschools, nursery units, kindergartens, registered childcare facilities as opposed to the home-environment, the primary focus of the proposed review), who delivers the intervention (anyone but may or may not include parents, as opposed to parent-child interventions only), and the age of the child (3-7 years therefore including school-aged children compared to 1-5 years in the proposed review).

There is a need to update the Bus et al. (1995) overarching review, taking into consideration recent developments in the field, systematically synthesising interventions and using population studies to understand longer term outcomes in the population as a whole and explicitly examining the role played by potential mediators and moderators of the process in both intervention and largescale population studies. It is important to bring these data
together to establish how much potential parent-child reading has for reducing inequalities in school readiness and oral language skills.

**INTERVENTION**

The proposed review will include any intervention which involves direct parent-child reading to improve oral language and/or school readiness in preschool children (aged 1-5 years). Intervention included must meet the following criteria:

1. Intervention must involve direct parent-child reading. For the purposes of the review, the term ‘parent-child’ will be used to represent interaction between primary caregiver(s) and children. Primary caregivers include parents, grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, step parents.

2. Intervention must involve direct interaction between parent and child who is aged between 1 and 5 years old. This means that parents must be actively engaging in shared-reading experiences with children, that is to say that the child will be guided and supported in reading by their parent or primary caregiver, and they are the ones who will be ‘delivering’ the intervention to the child.

3. Intervention includes all types of reading interventions; these must be in the form of a practice (e.g. parent training, or a change in frequency of reading) or programme (e.g. that which includes a manualised set of instructions), and these must explicitly differ from typical parent-child reading that may already occur as part of typical parent-child interactions.

4. Intervention is carried out in the home environment, child development centre or may be online/computer-based.

Interventions will be excluded under the following criteria:

1. Interventions that are primarily delivered by a professional practitioner or specialist (including speech and language therapist, teacher, teaching assistant or psychologist) will not be included.

2. Interventions that are primarily delivered within a school setting by school staff will not be included.

**POPULATION**

Studies will include parents of children aged 1-5 years old. Children must not be aged any younger than 1-year old, or any older than 5 years old. Parents will be those who are primary caregivers of the child, therefore including biological parents, grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, step parents or any other individual(s) recognised as a primary
caregiver to a child. Eligible children will be under the primary care and supervision of their parents or primary caregiver. In studies where a proportion of included children are outside of the 1-5-year age range, they will be included if (50%) of children fall within the included age range. All children of 1-5 years are considered eligible, therefore there are no restrictions due to ability/disability, delay, or disorders.

There are no restrictions of parents or children based on socio-demographic factors including age, race, ethnicity, country, language, or socioeconomic status (SES), income and education status.

**OUTCOMES**

Outcomes in this review include two broad categories of oral language and school readiness. Within each of these are a number of constructs, studies reporting each of these will be grouped and coded and analysed separately.

Oral language outcomes include:

1. Vocabulary
2. Expressive language (narrative, grammar)

School readiness outcomes include:

1. Behavioural, social and emotional development (e.g. attention, self-regulation, following directions, social relationships and social cognition)
2. Early literacy (e.g. letter naming, print awareness, phonological awareness)

Secondary outcomes include:

1. Parent-child interactions

Studies included in the review must report on one or more of the primary outcomes.

**STUDY DESIGNS**

The review will include experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Studies must report on comparison between children receiving parent-child reading intervention as defined above, and children not receiving intervention for reading or receiving ‘treatment as usual’, i.e. typical parent-child reading that may already occur as part of typical parent-child interactions during preschool years. RCT or quasi-experimental studies must meet at least one of the following criteria:
1. In RCTs individual participants or groups of participants have been randomly assigned to intervention and control conditions.

2. In quasi-experimental studies participants in the intervention and control conditions have been matched. One of the matching variables must be reported at pre-test and must be at least one of the outcome measures.

3. In studies where subjects are not allocated randomly there must be evidence for initial equivalence of groups.

Studies will be excluded that meet the following criteria:

1. Cohort studies.

2. Before and after studies.

3. Experimental single subject designs.

4. Narrative/descriptive studies

5. Quasi-experimental studies that report only post-intervention data, therefore equivalence of groups pre-intervention cannot be determined.

Studies may be carried out in any country and published in any language.

REFERENCES


Save the Children. (2015). Ready to read: Closing the gap in early language skills so that every child in England can read well. London: Save the Children.


**REVIEW AUTHORS**

**Lead review author:** The lead author is the person who develops and co-ordinates the review team, discusses and assigns roles for individual members of the review team, liaises with the editorial base and takes responsibility for the on-going updates of the review.

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- Content: Law, McKean, Charlton
- Systematic review methods: Charlton, Fernandez-Garcia, Beyer
- Statistical analysis: Rush
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POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors of this review have no conflicts of interest to declare.

PRELIMINARY TIMEFRAME

• Date you plan to submit a draft protocol: January 31 2017
• Date you plan to submit a draft review: June 30 2017

AUTHOR DECLARATION

Authors’ responsibilities

By completing this form, you accept responsibility for preparing, maintaining, and updating the review in accordance with Campbell Collaboration policy. The Coordinating Group will provide as much support as possible to assist with the preparation of the review.

A draft protocol must be submitted to the Coordinating Group within one year of title acceptance. If drafts are not submitted before the agreed deadlines, or if we are unable to contact you for an extended period, the Coordinating Group has the right to de-register the title or transfer the title to alternative authors. The Coordinating Group also has the right to de-register or transfer the title if it does not meet the standards of the Coordinating Group and/or the Campbell Collaboration.

You accept responsibility for maintaining the review in light of new evidence, comments and criticisms, and other developments, and updating the review every five years, when substantial new evidence becomes available, or, if requested, transferring responsibility for maintaining the review to others as agreed with the Coordinating Group.

Publication in the Campbell Library

The support of the Coordinating Group in preparing your review is conditional upon your agreement to publish the protocol, finished review, and subsequent updates in the Campbell Library. The Campbell Collaboration places no restrictions on publication of the findings of a Campbell systematic review in a more abbreviated form as a journal article either before or after the publication of the monograph version in Campbell Systematic Reviews. Some journals, however, have restrictions that preclude publication of findings that have been, or will be, reported elsewhere and authors considering publication in such a journal should be aware of possible conflict with publication of the monograph version in Campbell Systematic Reviews. Publication in a journal after publication or in press status in Campbell Systematic Reviews should acknowledge the Campbell version and include a citation to it. Note that systematic reviews published in Campbell Systematic Reviews and co-registered with the Cochrane Collaboration may have additional requirements or restrictions for co-publication. Review authors accept responsibility for meeting any co-publication requirements.
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