

Parent-child book reading and language development in the early years

James Law and Jenna Charlton answer the question: ‘Does parent-child book reading impact on language development and/or school readiness in preschool children?’

For a number of years, population studies have shown that parental book reading in the early years is an important feature of what is sometimes called the child’s home learning environment (HLE) and appears to protect children from later difficulties. But is it possible to intervene to increase parental book reading, and what difference does it make to key areas of child development such as oral language and pre-reading skills? There have been a number of reviews of the intervention literature (systematic and narrative) but these have included a mixture of different types of studies and ages of children, and have a variety of different foci. We recently carried out a narrowly constrained systematic review focusing on book reading interventions carried out specifically by parents and carers with preschool children (up to the age of five years), and looking primarily at the impact

of parent-child reading interventions on expressive and receptive language and pre-reading skills.

Methods

We searched all the literature available in electronic databases over the past 40 years for parent-child reading intervention studies that included books or electronic readers. The studies had to have adopted a randomised or a quasi-experimental (matched) design with book reading being compared with no intervention. In all cases the intervention had to be carried out by the parent—ie not by early years or school staff, and the study needed to assess language outcomes (comprehension and/or expressive language) or pre-reading outcomes (for example, phonological awareness). To be included, studies had to report the children’s test performance before and after the intervention.

We identified 22 studies that met our inclusion criteria and, of these, we were able to combine (meta-analyse) the results from

16 studies. Altogether, the review reported on 751 children receiving interventions, and 569 control group children, with the reviews conducted across five countries. The mean age of the children was 40 months.

Results

There were a number of key findings from the review. The first is that the majority of the studies showed positive effects, but the largest effect by quite a long way was on receptive language skills. The average effect size of 0.68 for receptive vocabulary (see table 1) is equivalent to an advantage of eight months using criteria developed by the Education Endowment Foundation.

The average effect size for receptive vocabulary was twice that for pre-reading skills and for expressive language. This is especially important for two reasons. Receptive language skills are more predictive of later educational and social difficulties in school and, to date, evidence has suggested that early receptive language skills were the most difficult to change.

“Early book reading was powerful throughout the pre-school period, particularly for receptive language development”

Other findings from the review indicated that early book reading was powerful throughout the pre-school period, particularly for receptive language development, but that book reading was also effective for children over

three years of age, and slightly more effective with children from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds. There was some indication that studies that included electronic devices had similar effects to those that used books.

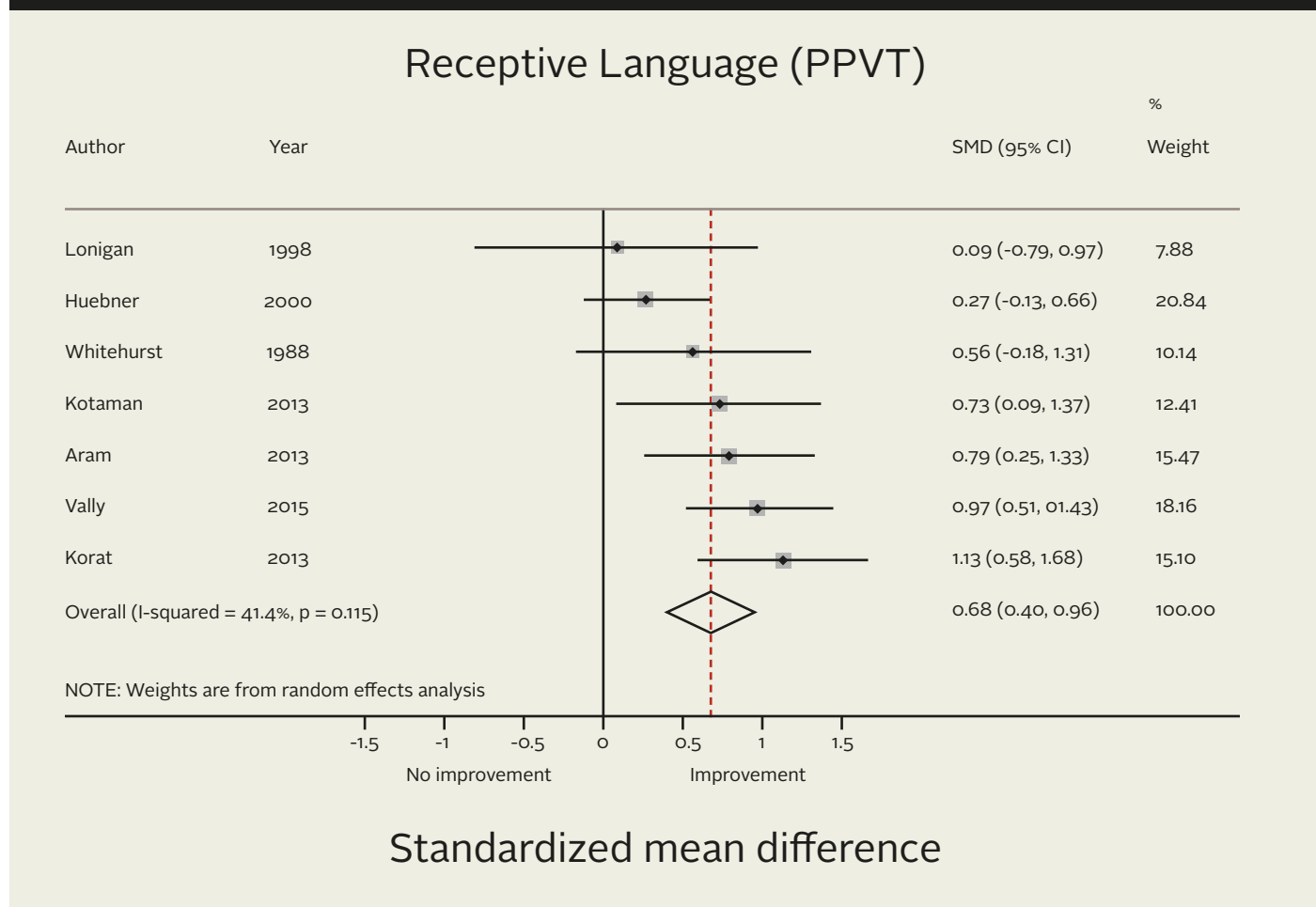
Interestingly, in practice, shared reading was found to be more effective than dialogic methods for receptive language development; dialogic methods involving more specific interaction behaviours from the parents such as the structured use of targeted questions. Importantly, and unlike most of the findings from the other reviews, our findings were relatively consistent or homogeneous (the results going in the same direction). This is almost certainly a function of the narrow focus of the review and gives us confidence in predicting what is reasonably achievable in this area.

Finally, the intervention effects seem to be as strong at relatively low doses as they were at higher doses, suggesting that book reading may have the potential to have an inoculation effect in terms of future child development, acting as a protective factor against potential risk factors for poor learning and wellbeing.

We were also interested in whether such intervention studies have been carried out in a range of different countries and, indeed,



Table 1: Combined effect sizes for receptive vocabulary



this was the case. While the majority (15) were carried out in the US, there were also two from South Africa, two from Canada, two from Israel, and one from Hong Kong. The findings were comparable across countries. None of the included studies had been carried out in the UK, something that indicates a stark gap in the UK literature.

Implications for SLTs

Our review explored the impact of parent-child reading on all children; it was not specific to those with language difficulties alone. However, our data suggests there that there is no *a priori* reason for assuming children with greater initial language difficulties would do less well in the context of such interventions. In fact, they responded in the same way—studies including these children reported positive effects.

The fact that the effect of parent-child book reading is so marked for language development—an important aspect of development, with long-term implications for learning and wellbeing—highlights the need for structured book reading promotion

activity that raises the awareness of parents and practitioners about the importance of parent-child reading. We believe, therefore, that SLTs should be, and are well-placed to, actively promote parent-child book reading with children with language difficulties, via their interactions with parents and carers.

It is showing parents how to be active partners in their child's communication that is important, and the book or device is the means by which this can be achieved. Importantly, parent-child reading has strong effects whether a book or an electronic device, such as a tablet or computer, is used. In addition, while a distinction is often made between dialogic or shared book reading techniques, our findings suggest both types of book reading may be encouraged, and that parent-child book reading in its simplest form can have a powerful impact.

SLTs are well-placed to deliver a message for parents and carers directly: that reading to the child in the early years, ie long before they are learning to read, can have a marked effect on children's abilities. There

is a need for parents to understand this; that even though their child may not be able to read, there are still clear benefits to them engaging in shared reading with their child. Actively engaging parents in the book reading process has the potential to make a real difference to the child's language outcomes, and this is especially true for vulnerable pre-school children. ■

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