

Abstract

Preschool children's emergent literacy (EL) skills are considered an important factor in predicting their acquisition of reading and writing in school. The child's age and environmental variables such as family socio-economic status (SES) and home literacy environment (HLE) are central factors in the development of EL skills. In the current study, we examined the relations between these factors, their contribution to children's EL skills as assessed by their parents during the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel. In addition, we took parent's gender into consideration. We hypothesized that: (a) positive relations will be found between the independent variables, i.e., HLE and child's age, and between HLE and family SES; (b) positive relations will be found between the independent variables (SES, HLE, child's age) and the dependent variable of parents' assessment of their child's EL skills; (c) mothers will assess their child's EL skills as higher than fathers; (d) mothers from a middle SES will assess their child's EL skills as higher compared to fathers from a low SES; (e) positive relations will be found between frequency of shared book reading and assessment of the child's EL skills, which relate to the outside-in system (including knowledge and skills outside the world of print, such as vocabulary and story comprehension); (f) positive relations will be found between frequency of the child writing and assessment of the child's EL skills, which relate to the inside-out system (including knowledge and skills within the print world, such as phonological awareness and early reading and writing skills); (g) child's age, parent's gender, HLE, and SES will each contribute, relatively separately and in this order, to parents' assessment of the child's EL skills.

Participants in the study included 165 parents of preschoolers – 74 fathers and 91 mothers. Kindergarteners were 48% of the sample, and preschoolers were 52%, with 48% boys and 52% girls. Most of the parents in the study were from a middle SES, with some from a middle-high SES and some from middle-low. Parents completed a digital questionnaire from January to March 2021, in the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, when children and their parents spent numerous hours at home. The questionnaire included information about the family's demographics, home literacy, and child's EL skills as assessed by the parent.

As hypothesized, the study's findings indicated significant positive relations between family SES and HLE, and between child's age and HLE. Similarly, positive relations were found between child's age, HLE and SES to the child's EL skills as assessed by the parent. In contrast to our expectations, we did not find significant differences in the assessment of children's EL skills between mothers and fathers, nor between mothers from a middle SES and fathers from a low SES. We found positive relations between frequency of shared book reading and child's EL skills relating to the outside-in system.

As well, we found a positive relation between frequency of the child's writing and their EL skills relating to the inside-out system. The study's results indicate that the HLE has a larger contribution to the child's EL skills, as assessed by the parent, compared to the other variables. While child's age and SES had a contribution to the child's EL skills, this was smaller than the contribution of the HLE. Parent's gender did not have a significant contribution. The discussion section presents explanations for the study's findings, as well as educational implications and suggestions for future research.