

## Abstract

A rich vocabulary in early childhood is considered a central factor in child development, both for mastering spoken language and for future literacy development. In this study, we implemented an intervention program for vocabulary enrichment amongst mothers from a low-SES and their 2-to-3-year-old children. Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model, we focused on the contribution of the distal environment (SES and home literacy environment) and the proximal environment (maternal mediation) to children's learning of new words. This contribution has not yet been examined amongst Hebrew-speaking families from a low SES with toddlers. Study participants included 23 mother-child dyads (46 participants total), who live in low-SES neighborhoods, as ranked by the Central Bureau of Statistics. The dyads were randomly divided into two groups: intervention and control. Mothers in the intervention group were provided with a group training to promote their mediation during shared book reading with their child. The control group received the regular day-care program. The intervention took place over six weeks and included three in-person training meetings once every two weeks, along with three video demonstrations that were sent to the mothers digitally in between the in-person trainings. Information on the families' SES and home literacy environment were collected at the beginning of the study. Shared mother-child reading was video-recorded prior to and following the intervention program and children's knowledge of target words was measured before and after the intervention. We hypothesized that (a) children whose mothers received the training to promote mediation would progress in learning new words more than children of mothers who did not receive the training; (b) maternal mediation in the intervention group would improve following the training compared to the control group; (c) maternal mediation, home literacy environment, and family SES would contribute to the children's word learning, in this order; and, (d) the contribution of family SES, home literacy environment, and maternal mediation for word learning would be larger in the intervention group compared to the control group.

Results showed that children whose mothers received training progressed in expressive word learning more than children whose mothers did not receive the training. Maternal mediation did not improve following the training, though there was a trend towards improvement in the number of children's initiations and maternal elaborations in the intervention group. Results also revealed that the number of children's initiations during shared reading, maternal familiarity with children's books, home literacy environment, family income,

and the definitions of difficult words that were provided to children by mothers during reading contributed to children's expressive word learning, in this order. Family SES, particularly father's education, followed by the improvement in child's initiations contributed to children's receptive word learning. It was further found that SES contributed to expressive word learning amongst children whose mothers received the training compared to those who did not, and that home literacy environment contributed to receptive word learning of children whose mothers received the training compared to those who did not.

The study's results highlight the importance of children's proximal and distal environments for learning new words. Specifically, SES, home literacy environment, encouragement of child initiations during shared book reading, and providing definitions for difficult words in the text by the parent during shared book reading are relevant. The results strengthen the need to develop parental training programs, as early as possible, to promote children's language development in general, and particularly for new vocabulary words. This can help create a better starting point from which children can acquire literacy.