Fall 2012

Parent-Child Conversations about Letters in Early Childhood

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Recommended Citation


http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/vol8_iss1/53

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Emergent literacy refers to the idea that learning about language and print is a gradual process that begins before children receive formal literacy instruction. Emergent literacy plays an important role in learning to read and developing lifelong reading skills. The current study examines one aspect of emergent literacy, the home literacy environment, to investigate how young children begin to learn about letters, sounds, and print. Most studies on the home literacy environment have focused on shared book reading; however, our goal is to explore whether other contexts promote literacy-related talk. The current study longitudinally investigates parent-child conversations about literacy during the preschool years. We analyzed one hour of conversations between 53 parent-child pairs that were recorded during everyday specific letter talk. General literacy talk refers to mentioning the topics of reading and writing without specifically labeling letters or words. Explicit letter talk refers to labeling specific letters, words, and sounds. Results indicate that children at 30 months old exhibit more general literacy talk than explicit letter talk. Children at 42 months old, however, exhibit more specific letter talk. At both 30 and 42 months of age, toy play promotes the greatest amount of explicit letter talk. However, at 42 months, children have begun to use more letter talk in activities related to writing and drawing. Results also indicate that children contribute to conversations at both 30 and 42 months of age only slightly less than their parents. Future studies will measure how children’s early exposure to print and literacy influences kindergarten readiness and reading preparedness.