

Improving children's cognitive and socio-emotional development through book-sharing

Poverty places children at risk of not achieving their developmental potential. Factors such as lack of cognitive stimulation, harsh parenting practices and aggression in early childhood hinder development and may result in future violent behaviour. Interventions that target the intersection between early childhood development, parenting and early violence prevention are needed to address these problems.

ENGAGING CAREGIVERS IN BOOK-SHARING

A promising intervention is parents sharing picture books with their young children. In 2014 Stellenbosch University and the University of Reading conducted a randomised controlled trial of a book-sharing intervention in Khayelitsha, a low-income peri-urban township in Cape Town, South Africa.¹ Caregivers met in groups with a trainer once a week for eight weeks to learn about and practise book-sharing.

GRANT DETAILS

PROJECT: Evaluation of a parenting intervention to prevent the development of aggression in children in South Africa

ORGANISATION: Stellenbosch University

PROJECT LOCATION: Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa



As a result of this intervention, carers' book-sharing skills improved and they became more sensitive and responsive in their interactions with their children. Findings indicated marked improvements in the children's development: their attention spans increased, as did their vocabulary and language comprehension.

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There was also preliminary evidence that the children became more social and empathetic. The book-sharing intervention benefited both the carer-child relationship and the child's cognitive and socio-emotional development.

THE BENEFITS OF EARLY BOOK-SHARING

The "Benefits of Early Book-Sharing" trial² aims to evaluate whether this already effective parenting intervention can further improve parenting skills that promote children's social understanding and empathy and reduce their aggressive behaviour. It will do this by adapting the books used in the previous book-sharing trial to include themes relating to emotions, intentions, perspectives and pro-social behaviour.

The research team is conducting a randomised controlled trial in Khayelitsha to evaluate the intervention by comparing a group participating in the programme with another that receives no intervention. The sample comprises 140 caregivers of children aged between 23 and 27 months.

In the intervention, a facilitator trains caregivers in supportive book-sharing with young children. Training is carried out in small groups over eight weeks. Each session focuses on teaching caregivers different techniques to apply when sharing a picture book with their children. For six months after the last session, the facilitator visits the participants once a month to deliver a new picture book and discuss their book-sharing. Data is collected at baseline, post-intervention and at six months post-intervention through

interviews, child assessments, and filming the caregiver and child doing interactive tasks. ■

STUDY CONTRIBUTION

The Benefits of Early Book-Sharing trial aims to evaluate the impact of an early parenting intervention on several risk factors for the development of violence, such as harsh parenting practices and early childhood aggression. If successful, this trial could help decrease childhood aggression and later violent behaviour. The intervention is brief, simple and inexpensive. It is readily deliverable in low- and middle-income countries, where it has the potential to be of most benefit.

¹Vally, Z., Murray, L., Tomlinson, M. & Cooper P.J. 2015. The impact of dialogic book-sharing training on infant language and attention: A randomized controlled trial in a deprived South African community. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 56(8): 865-873. DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.12352.

²Dowdall, N., Cooper, P.J., Tomlinson, M., Skeen, S., Gardner, F. & Murray, L. 2017. The Benefits of Early Book-Sharing (BEBS) for child cognitive and socio-emotional development in South Africa: Study protocol for a randomised controlled trial. *Trials*, 18(118). DOI: 10.1186/s13063-017-1790-1.