

# Measuring the Effect That the Partners' Dialogic Reading Program Has on Preschool Children's Expressive Language

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The effect the Parents as Reading Partners Nightly Encouraging Reading Success (PARTNERS) Dialogic Reading Program had on preschool children's expressive language was studied. Researchers found that the videotaped training and materials were successful at increasing the expressive language skills of preschool children classified as "at risk". Other program benefits such as increased time spent on reading and talking between parents and their children were also found.

*Keywords:* Dialogic Reading; Parent Involvement; Preschool Expressive Language

## Introduction

Reading aloud to children provides many benefits. Research has shown that reading to young children increases their future literacy achievement (Moore & Wade, 2003), increases vocabulary, knowledge of print (Reese & Cox, 1999), language acquisition, early reading performance, and school success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Although the benefits of reading aloud are extensive, reading aloud often limits a child's involvement in the reading process to more of a passive role.

Dialogic reading, a form of shared reading, is an interactive process in which parents or caregivers and their children share about a book they are reading or looking at together. Dialogic reading has been found to have similar benefits to reading aloud, positively impacting many aspects of children's literacy development (Philips, Hayden, & Norris, 2006; Shapiro, Anderson, & Anderson, 2002). However, because the focus of dialogic reading is verbal interactions between caregivers and their children, it also can be used to increase young children's expressive language and spoken vocabulary.

Dialogic reading utilizes open-ended questions to expand on children's comments and ideas. The program is based on encouraging children's participation, providing feedback, and adjusting verbal interactions based on children's ability (Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, Angell, Smith, & Fischel, 1994). Children's language usage is positively impacted by parents expanding on their conversations, redirecting the conversation to encourage the use particular types of language (e.g. descriptive words), and encouraging increasingly complex word choices as children's language develops (Snow, 1983). Dialogic reading has been shown to increase young children's vocabulary (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan, Fischel, Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994) and expressive language (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000).

## Current Study

There are very limited materials available to help preschool

teachers teach dialogic reading strategies to the families that they serve. The PARTNERS (Parents as Reading Teachers Nightly Encouraging Reading Success) Program was designed by one of the authors to provide dialogic training materials for families regardless of their literacy levels, language proficiency, or children's expressive language skills. The program focuses on parents' and caregivers' verbal interactions with their children instead of the adult's reading skills.

The current study is designed to measure the PARTNERS Program's effectiveness at increasing the expressive language skills of young children classified as "at risk". Children and families in this study attend a public early childhood center in a suburb of Chicago. The program offers early childhood education for preschool age students (3 and 4 year olds). All of the children attending the school have some type of delay, special need, or qualify through the Preschool for All program funded through the State of Illinois to serve preschool children identified as "at risk".

## Participants

Thirteen families participated in the twelve-week PARTNERS dialogic reading intervention. An additional thirteen families served as the control group, receiving no training in dialogic reading. Both parents and extended family caregivers were involved in the program.

The children and families in the control group were selected based on age and qualifying factors in order to make the two groups comparable (**Table 1**). The average age of children in both the PARTNERS training and control group was 4 years, 8 months. A majority of the children in both groups spoke a language other than English at home in addition to English.

## Method

Students' expressive language was measured using the picture-naming portion of the Individual Growth Developmental Indicators (IGDI) test developed at the University of Minnesota.

**Table 1.**  
Children's preschool qualifying factors.

	PARTNERS Training (n = 13)	Control Group (n = 13)
Developmental Delay	8	8
Speech Language	1	2
Preschool for All	4	3

Students taking the picture-naming test were presented with pictures on individual cards. They were asked to name the objects on as many of the cards as they could in one minute. The number of words correctly identified was recorded by the test administrator. Students' picture naming ability was assessed prior to the start of the study and twelve weeks later, at the end of the study.

### PARTNERS Training

All of the families receiving the PARTNERS intervention were invited to a brief thirty-minute introduction to the PARTNERS Program. The introduction was designed to provide participants an initial opportunity to watch the 12-minute PARTNERS video training together and receive materials. Of the thirteen families, only four were able to attend. Therefore, most of the program participants did not receive any in person information about the program. The video, the first children's book, and the corresponding Parent Notes were sent home to families who did not attend the training the first week of the study. No additional dialogic reading training was given to the people who were able to attend the introductory meeting. So, the training for both groups of families was the same. All families involved in the training were given the PARTNERS training video to keep regardless of whether they viewed the training at school or not.

Video training was provided because it is an easy and economical way to provide training to families. Arnold, et al. (1994) found that using a videotape to teach the dialogic reading method worked effectively to increase parents' use of dialogic reading skills. However, the generalizability of this finding is greatly limited because all of the children in the study had average or above average expressive and receptive language skills and came from middle or upper Socio-Economic Status (SES) families. Research by both Briesch, Chafouleas, Lebel, & Blom-Hoffman (2008) and Blom-Hoffman, O'Neil-Pirozzi, & Cutting (2006) found that videotaped instruction was effective for parent instruction in dialogic reading. Both study samples were more diverse than the previous study regarding SES; however, all of the participants' primary language in both studies was English. Therefore, there is still a need for research on the effectiveness of using videotaped dialogic reading instruction with low-income families, families whose primary language is not English, and with children classified as "at-risk".

The dialogic reading training provided on the video training used the acronym DARE to help parents learn the dialogic reading strategy. The DARE strategy, developed by the author, asks caregivers to:

Discuss the book with their child and ask their child to talk about what he sees. After their child answers, they should expand upon their child's response adding more detail, and then ask their child to repeat the extended response.

Ask their child questions about the pictures and teach new vocabulary related to the illustrations.

Read the story to their child.

Encourage their child to connect the story to his life.

Participants were asked to read with their child for 10 - 15 minutes a day. However, all of the steps in the DARE strategy did not need to be implemented each day. Parents were instructed to decide how they would use the DARE time. For example, they could spend two or three days discussing what their child sees before moving on to asking questions or reading to their child.

Preschool children brought home a book from the PARTNERS Program in their backpack each Monday. Training materials called Parent Notes were also included. The Parent Notes remind caregivers of the DARE strategy, provide sample questions to ask children about the book, and offer suggestions for vocabulary words related to the story that can be introduced.

### Materials

The books in the PARTNERS Program provided detailed and varied illustrations including culturally relevant items children are familiar with that could be used for discussion and retelling. All books selected included a simple story line that was interesting and culturally relevant to the children in the program. The books selected also supported preschool skills needed according to *The Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum for Ages 3-5*. Therefore, they were chosen because of their appropriateness to address cognitive development, logical thinking, language development, emergent literacy, and social/emotional development. The books focused on fiction, folk tales, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and informational text. Although the program is offered in both English and Spanish, only English materials were used for this study.

### Results

At the end of the twelve week PARTNERS program, children in both groups were again administered the picture-naming portion of the Individual Growth Developmental Indicators (IGDI) test. **Table 2** shows that although there was no significant difference in the number of words children were able to name at the pre-test, children whose families participated in the PARTNERS Program acquired significantly more words ( $p < .01$ ) from pre-test to post-test than children in the traditional preschool program.

Families in the PARTNERS program were also provided with a feedback sheet each week with the book that they were reading. They were asked "What effect has participating in the PARTNERS Program had on your reading time?" (**Table 3**).

In addition to collecting feedback through the form sent home, six parents also volunteered to provide feedback by

**Table 2.**  
Children's picture naming results.

	PARTNERS Video Training (N = 13)		No Training (N = 13)	
	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test
	M	M	M	M
Number Correct	18.00	22.38*	17.00	19.69

\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 3.**  
Feedback regarding the program.

	Number of Families (n = 13)	Percentage of Families
Increased conversation	9	69
Encouraged questioning	7	54
Increased time reading	5	42
Increased child's interest	3	23
Provided new ideas	2	15
Made reading more fun	2	15
Increased language	2	15
Provided new books	1	8

participating in a group interview. Participants were asked to share: "How has this program affected the time you spend with your child reading?" and "How does your child respond to your time reading together?" Parents shared that the PARTNERS program was effective in helping them spend time each day with their child reading. One parent shared, "It makes me take that time for him. He wants to read more. This has made it more fun. He asks questions." A similar comment was made by another parent, "Before the program I would just read. I think sometimes I was rushing. Now we spend the time. I'm reading more with them and they're getting into it."

The program was also effective at increasing interactions between parents and their children. One parent explained the program's effect on her child's language by stating, "It's increased the amount of time we spend together. It's helped his English a lot. I'm surprised how much time he wants to spend talking about the book." Another shared her doubts, "I was skeptical that asking questions would do anything. But, it really has. It's opened him up to other things."

Many of the parents explained that the PARTNERS Program increased their child's interest in and excitement for reading. "He looks forward to reading now. He wants us to put my daughter to bed early so we can read." "Before I was reading and thinking like, 'Why am I reading? You're not even listening?' But, now he is." This positive impact also extended beyond the child in the program as one parent told, "My younger child is more into reading now. He wants to be read to three times a day even though he is not in the program."

### Discussion

The current study was designed to measure the effectiveness of the PARTNERS Dialogic Reading Program in increasing preschool children's expressive language. A significant increase in expressive vocabulary was exhibited by the children in the PARTNERS group through their increased accuracy identifying words at the end of program using the Individual Growth Developmental Indicators (IGDI) picture naming assessment. Students from families who received dialogic reading training had significantly better accuracy, correctly naming 61% more words attempted than children of families who were in the traditional preschool group. Increases in expressive vocabulary development in young children are very important because research on language development in young children

has consistently shown the importance expressive and receptive vocabulary play in young children's ability to learn to read and succeed in school (Wasik, 2010).

Participants also responded positively to the program. A majority of the parents and caregivers surveyed said that the program was successful at increasing conversation between them and their children and that the program encouraged questioning during conversation. Other benefits discussed include increasing time spent together, increasing children's interest in reading, providing ideas, making reading fun, and increasing language. Parents in the group interview were able to provide more detailed responses explaining that the program encouraged them to spend more quality time sharing a book with their child, increased their child's vocabulary, and interest in reading.

### Limitations

The relatively small number of participants involved in this study is a limitation. Also, data regarding if or how often participants viewed the training video was not collected. Because the Parent Notes were included with each book, the program may have been able to be successfully implemented with children without watching the video. In the future, a larger study including information regarding participants' use of the training video would help strengthen the claim that the video was integral to the program's success.

### Conclusion

The PARTNERS Dialogic Reading Program provides young children with opportunities to share the reading experience with their parent or caregiver. This form of active engagement is important because it increases children's vocabulary development (Bloom, 2002) and provides children with exposure to new words in meaningful ways in their environment (Hart & Risley, 1995). When young children participate in activities such as dialogic reading they are provided with many benefits including increased opportunities for joint attention, modeling of new vocabulary, increased questioning, and feedback (DeBaryshe, 1995).

Huebner and Payne (2010) found that dialogic reading training can have long-lasting effects. In their study, they found that two years after receiving brief dialogic reading training, parents used 90% more dialogic reading behaviors than parents who had not received training. This leads to the conclusion that caregivers' literacy interactions with children can be positively influenced with limited training.

The PARTNERS Program increased the expressive language skills of young children classified as "at risk". It also proved to be an effective program at encouraging family involvement and education. Because the PARTNERS Program focuses on families talking about books with their children instead of just reading aloud, the PARTNERS Program provides materials that can be used with families regardless of literacy level, home language, or children's expressive language.

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