

Parenting Practices in Children's Language Development: a Survey Study in China

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Abstract: Reading aloud stories for children is one of most commonly-seen parenting practices to promote children's language development. Using data from 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), the present study examined the degree to which buying books, taking children outdoors, helping children read characters, and TV restriction predicted whether caregivers read aloud stories for children. The regression analysis results showed that the combination of the four independent variables significantly predicted parenting practices of reading aloud stories for children. It was found that caregivers read out for children aged 3 and 4 more frequently than for children aged 5. It was also reflected that children living at home had more opportunities to read out stories with caregivers. The findings provided reference for parenting practices for their children's language development.

1. Introduction

Factors in a family have a great influence on children's development. It has been proved that parents have a strong influence on school achievements of their children, more specifically, that parental involvement and monitoring are significant predictors of adolescent achievement ^[1]. Furthermore, encouraged by parents, children can take the perspective of others and develop prosocial behavior ^[2] or promote social-cognitive development ^[3]. In terms of language development in a family, language/dialect use, parental educational background, parenting styles, parenting practices, parental expectations, learning resources regarding language development, and so forth, constitute a certain language environment for children ^[4]. Children's language development can be subtly affected by the natural family language environment and is closely related to their overall development and communication with others in the future. Parents' spending time with their children to read, doing homework, and attending their children's school activities will exert a greater impact on children's language development. In order to clarify the relationship between parenting practices and the development of children's language, it is a necessity to conduct a survey to find out what parenting practices matter in promoting children's language development and to what extent the factors work.

2. Literature Review

Parenting practices are defined as specific behaviors that parents use to “socialize their children” [5]. A large amount of research revealed the positive influence of parenting practices on children or adolescents’ development of some certain aspects. A study on 3,781 high school students found that specific parenting practices (monitoring, achievement encouragement, joint decision making) were significantly associated with adolescent behaviors, such as academic achievement, drug use, and self-reliance [6]. Aguirre-Davila, Morales-Castillo, & Moreno-Vasquez examined the role of adolescent autonomy in the relation between parenting and academic achievement and concluded the positive impact of parenting practices on adolescent behaviors and outcomes [7]. A study conducted in 1787 households in the rural area of western China found that parenting practices significantly mediated between the caregiver's mental health and children’s cognition, language, and social-emotion development [8]. It was found that authoritative and authoritarian parenting practices were significantly related to social and academic performance of children in China [9]. A study on comparison of parenting practices of homeless mothers and low-income housed mother revealed that homeless mothers provided less learning and academic stimulation than did housed mothers, while mothers in both living arrangements provided more language stimulation to daughters than to sons [10]. Even for depressed mothers after pregnancy or giving birth to a child, parenting practices were found to increase children's cognitive and language development during early childhood [11].

Socioeconomic Status (SES) is a critical factor concerning with parenting practices. Although what SES represents does not fully reach agreement, it is universally accepted that children of higher SES have more access to resources that support their positive development than the children of lower SES. Relevant research findings from Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reveal that SES has a correlation with family reading resources, such as the number of books in a family, or financial support from parents for buying books to read, and ultimately influence the children’s reading proficiency [12]. Meanwhile, SES also determines the quality of housing environment. The selection of a neighborhood, viewed as “peers with acceptable values” [13], with whom children communicate outdoors, is a critical aspect of family management in the home domain [14], especially in Chinese contexts. Children play with neighbors not only providing themselves opportunities to speak with peers to develop language competence, but also offering topics for family members to discuss in the home domain.

Previous studies have demonstrated that parenting practices have a positive impact on children’s academic achievement, social behavior, cognitive, social-emotion, and language development. While parenting practices in developing language competence, such as telling stories for/with children and purchasing books of mother tongue or foreign languages, shall be discussed deeply, this study focused on five behaviors of parenting practices regarding children’s language development, namely, reading aloud stories for/with children, buying books for children, taking children outdoors to communicate with peers, helping children to read characters/words, and restricting children from watching TV. Although reading aloud to the infants or children may not mean more enriching parenting practices [15], obviously, among the parenting practices that might socialize the children to develop language competence, providing their children with time to read is often regarded as an easy way to implement for caregivers and also an efficient way. Specifically, the current study addresses two research questions:

(1) Is there correlation between the factors to be observed in the study, i.e. reading aloud stories for children, buying books, taking children outdoors, reading characters/words, and restricting children from TV?

(2) Can the four practices, buying books for children, taking children out to play, teaching Chinese characters, and TV restriction predict the practice of reading aloud for children?

3. Method

3.1 Data and Sample

The study used the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) data to examine the relationships among buying books for children, taking children outdoors, helping read Chinese characters, restricting children from watching TV, and reading aloud for children, and whether the first four factors can predict the last behavior. Conducted by Peking University's Institute of Social Science Survey, the CFPS is a nationally representative survey of households in China [16]. About 95% of the population from 25 provinces in Mainland China were interviewed on households' and individuals' demographic characteristics, SES, and perceptions of expectations, parenting practices, parenting styles, expenditure, and so forth. To meet the purpose of the current study, a cross-sectional design with household data from 2018 CFPS survey was applied. Data from two questionnaires on the family members' basic information and relationships were adopted and data from questions regarding parenting practices in language development were chosen to be examined. The 2018 CFPS included 8,735 proxy questionnaires answered by the child's guardian for children aged between 0 to 15, and a self-report for those aged 10 to 15. We first eliminated samples who answered "not applicable" or didn't answer the questions regarding parenting practices, with 7,568 observations deleted. After 1 sample was removed due to the outlier of age and 5 samples were dropped according to common sense, we limited the final analytic sample to children aged 3 to 5 (N = 1161). Basic descriptive statistics were listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics Of Children and for Children Care

Variable	Items	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	male	622	53.57
	female	539	46.43
Age	3	178	15.33
	4	466	40.14
	5	517	44.53
Residence Cared by	home	1060	91.30
	school	97	8.35
	other place	4	0.34
	kindergarten	386/0*	33.25/0
	grandparent(s)	369/395	31.78/34.02
	father	13/31	1.12/2.67
	mother	360/725	31.01/62.45
	the child itself	22/7	1.89/0.60
others	11/3	0.95/0.26	

* The data are differentiated as day/night.

3.2 Measures

Parent-reported responses displayed parents' perceptions on each variable. Variables of reading aloud stories, buying books, taking children outdoors, and helping read characters ranged according to the frequency, from 1=several times or less per year, to 5=every day. The frequency of restricting children from watching TV was measure from 1=never to 5=quite often (5-7 times per week). The analysis adjusted for multiple control variables, including children's gender (0=female; 1=male), location of registered residence (0=rural areas or no registered permanent residence; 1=urban areas), parents' age, education, marital status, and family income.

4. Results

Girls were not significantly different from boys in caregivers' reading aloud stories, $t(1159) = .65$, $p > .05$. However, frequency of reading aloud for children aged 3 and 4 was significantly higher than for children aged 5, $F(2,1158) = 5.36$, $p < .01$. Significant difference was also found in children's residence. Children living in other place had no opportunity of reading aloud stories with caregivers compared to children living at home or in school, $F(2,1158) = 5.66$, $p < .01$.

The correlation coefficients demonstrate a significant effect of buying books, taking children outdoors, helping children read characters, and TV restriction at home on reading aloud stories for children score. The large standard deviations in Table 2 also indicate great variability in reading aloud for children, reading characters, and TV restriction score. There was a small but significant correlation ($r = .12$, $p < .05$) between reading aloud stories score and TV restriction score.

Table 2 Correlation Coefficients Of Variables (n=1,161)

Variables		Descriptives		Correlation Coefficients			
		M	SD	1	2	3	4
DV	Reading aloud stories	3.20	1.46	0.38*	0.31*	0.40*	0.12*
IV	1 Buying books	1.99	0.99	-	0.24*	0.27*	0.05
	2 Taking outdoors	3.06	1.31	-	-	0.33*	0.03
	3 Character-reading	3.12	1.39	-	-	-	0.09
	4 TV restriction	2.68	1.39	-	-	-	-

* $p < 0.05$

Multiple linear regression was conducted to determine the best linear combination of buying books for children, taking children outdoors to communicate with peers or nature, reading Chinese characters, and restricting children from watching TV for predicting parenting practices in children's language development, specifically, reading aloud for children. Statistical assumptions, such as the normal distribution of residuals and the non-linear correlation between predicted variables and residuals were all met in the analysis, $RMSE = 1.254$, $Mean\ VIF = 1.12$ (Figure 1). The regression analysis results showed that the combination of the four independent variables significantly predicted parenting practices of reading aloud stories to/with children, $F(4,1156) = 103.68$, $p < .05$. The beta weights, presented in Table 3, suggested that the act of buying books contribute most to predicting the frequency of reading aloud stories ($\beta = 0.383$, $t = 9.78$, $p < .001$). The R square value was 0.264, which indicated that 26.4% of the variance in frequency of reading aloud stories for children was explained by the model. The standardized regression formulation is caregivers' reading aloud stories frequency = $0.802 + 0.383 \times$ buying books + $0.168 \times$ taking children outside to communicate + $0.284 \times$ character-reading frequency + $0.086 \times$ TV restriction.

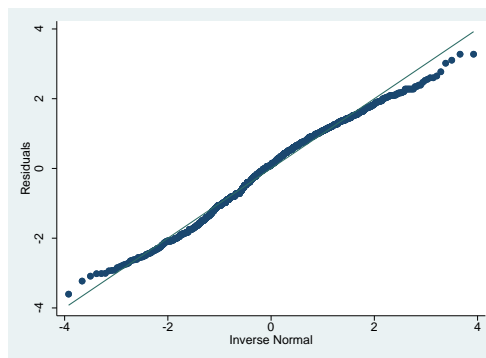


Fig.1 Normal q-q

Table 3 Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Reading Aloud for Children (n=1161)

	Variables	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F (4,1156)	Beta	95%CI	t (1139)	VIF
DV	Reading aloud stories	0.514	0.264	0.262	103.68*	-	-	-	-
IV	Buying books					0.383	0.31,0.46	9.78*	1.19
	Taking outdoors					0.168	0.11,0.23	5.56*	1.16
	Character-reading					0.284	0.23,0.34	9.89*	1.12
	TV restriction					0.086	0.03,0.14	3.25*	1.01

* $p < 0.05$

5. Findings and Discussion

According to the results above, the behavior of buying books contribute the most to predicting reading aloud for children. It must be essential to choose a book that is suitable for children of a certain age before reading out. Liu and Lin compared their parenting practices in teaching English to their son in Canada and in China, and found it was difficult for them to find suitable English books to read to their son in China, and so was the situation to find Chinese books to read in Canada^[17]. It is advised parents consult others with more knowledge in education or developmental psychology and choose the right books for their children.

It was also found that parents read less books for children when they were above 5 years old. This finding might be explained as children's developed skills to read books for themselves. With the help of modern technology, parents can easily obtain paper, audio, and video story learning materials. Fathers might contribute more to finding the resources, compared to the fact of "losing" to mothers in terms of care at home (day: 1.12%/31.01%; night: 2.67%/62.45%).

It is strongly recommended that children stay with parents due to enough care and plenty of company time. TV restriction is what Chinese parents often implement at home. Related to language development, TV watching takes higher risk of developing language delay^[18]. Reading aloud stories seems to a better way to take the time for children's language development instead of watching TV.

6. Conclusion

This study was conducted to determine if various forms of parenting practices regarding children's language development can influence the behavior of reading aloud stories for children, which is one of the most efficient ways to promote children's literacy. It was hypothesized that buying books, taking children outdoors, character-reading, and TV restriction will positively predict story-telling activity of caregivers. To test this hypothesis, multiple regression analysis was used. Results show that 26.4% of the variance in frequency of reading aloud stories for children can be accounted for by the four predictors. Looking at the unique individual contributions of the predictors, the result shows that buying books, taking children outdoors, reading characters, and TV restriction positively predict reading stories to/with children. This finding suggests that the caregivers who have bought more books, take children outdoors to communicate with peers or even the nature, read characters, and TV restriction at home find themselves more opportunities to share the stories via spoken communication with children, so that their language competence can be promoted by the reading-aloud stimuli.

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