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An investigation on emergent literacy skills of preschool children with disabilities

Susan Biesz
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AN INVESTIGATION ON EMERGENT LITERACY SKILLS
OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

by
Susan Biesz

A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Special Education Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Advisor

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ABSTRACT

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AN INVESTIGATION ON EMERGENT LITERACY SKILLS
OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES
2007/08
Dr. Joy Xin
Master of Arts in Special Education

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between home literacy activities provided by parents and their children’s emergent literacy skills. A total of 11 parents and their preschool children with disabilities participated in the study. A survey was provided to obtain parents’ strategies used during parent-child joint reading activities in the home. The Emergent Literacy Skills Assessment was administered to participating children to evaluate their emergent literacy skills in six areas including identifying primary shapes and colors, letter identification, reciting the alphabet, identifying the parts of a book and identifying their own name in print. The surveyed parents reported they often read to their child, identify signs and logos, sing songs and nursery rhymes and point to and read the words aloud but are less likely to encourage their children to write words, recall story details and point to words while reading. Results suggest that watching Sesame Street, reciting the alphabet, pointing to the words while reading aloud and singing nursery rhymes positively affect a child’s emergent literacy skills. Their influence on preschoolers’ emergent literacy skills indicates that parents need training or learning strategies for home literacy activities to enhance their children’s emergent literacy skills.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Parents play an important role in their child’s life (Watson, Layton, Pierce & Abraham, 1994). They are the first teachers at home to model oral language through conversations with their children. Children often communicate orally with their parents, and imitate their parent’s speaking, thus, speaking with parents becomes part of a child’s home experience (Haney & Hill, 2004). This early communication with parents provides a great opportunity for children to develop their oral language. Children learn much about oral language, reading and writing by observing what occurs in their families. They, then, begin to speak, read and write as part of their home experience (Heath, 1983). Later, they come to realize that print is part of their environment, and communicates messages to fulfill a variety of important functions. Parents provide their children with crayons, paints, markers and other writing tools to do scribbling or color pictures at home, creating an environment to facilitate literacy skills (Hadadian & Weikle, 2003). Very early, children begin to communicate orally with family members and imitate parent’s modeling of reading and writing. At first, they rely exclusively on picture clues and memory. With increased experiences, they begin to focus on the information that print materials convey (Snow, 1983 & Sulzby, 1985).

The role of parents in fostering their child’s emergent literacy skills is recognized as being extremely important. There appears to be a great variation in parental perceptions about literacy and the knowledge of how to best encourage a child’s literacy
development. Studies examining the role of parents in helping their preschooler develop literacy skills often show that the findings and recommendations are not always immediate or effective (Rich, 1985). It is found that some parents lack strategies to stimulate literacy development in their children (e.g. Auerbach, 1989; Serpell, 1997; Shannon, 1996). Parents do not always have the skills and tools needed to support their child’s literacy development in the home, a preschool environment helps to facilitate reading success (Rich, 1985).

Reading is fundamental to a child’s academic, personal, and social development. It is perceived to be a process as well as a product that involves both cognitive and linguistic construction (Kamil, Mosentahl, Pearson & Barr, 2000). According to Hay, Elias and Booker (2005), the development of children’s reading needs a conducive and supportive home and school environment. It is found that parents can help their children gain literacy skills at home through joint storybook reading. During such reading experiences, parent and child interact, discuss the story elements, share the child’s past experiences, and draw correlations between pictures and words together with parents. This experience influences emergent literacy skills such as phonological awareness and oral language development. Because of this important reading experience, parents are encouraged to read to their children and engage in such enjoyable reading experiences when children are young. Early reading experiences with their parents prepare children for the benefits of formal literacy instruction in school. Parental involvement in their child’s reading has been found to be the most important determinant of language development and emergent literacy establishment (Bus, Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995).
According to Light & Kelford-Smith (1993), children with disabilities have fewer literacy opportunities at home comparing to their non-disabled peers. Often, parents of children with disabilities are overwhelmed meeting the child's daily needs, because many of these children require extra services outside the home. Children with significant speech problems and/or physical disabilities are given limited access to reading, drawing, and writing materials, even though it has been demonstrated that these limitations can be overcome (Blischak, 1995; Katims, 1991). Often, parents of children with significant disabilities do not understand the importance of engaging their children in activities to develop literacy skills such as reading and drawing activities.

It is suggested that parents of children with disabilities need to: 1) read regularly and aloud to their children, 2) take time to interact with their disabled child, and 3) provide reading and writing materials for their children to use (Hadadian & Weikle, 2003). It is evident that parents who introduce their babies to books provide children a head start experience and an advantage over their peers throughout primary school (Wade & Moore, 2000). This early reading experience is critical for children with disabilities. Involving parents with reading activities at home has significantly positive influences not only on reading achievement, language reception and expression (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich, & Welsh, 2004), but also on a child's interest in reading and attitudes towards reading in later years (Wade & Moore, 2000). For decades, research has shown that children whose parents read to them would become better readers and perform better in school (e.g. Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998; Saracho, 1997; Moss & Fawcett 1995).

Educators need to be aware of the significant contribution of parents to their children's learning by providing a stimulating environment for learning oral language,
reading and writing, especially during the early years. Involving parents in their child's reading program will strongly support young children to develop literacy skills that will also strengthen their later year's achievement in school. The parent-child shared reading experience at home is especially important for young children with disabilities when they are developing their early literacy skills.

Statement of the Problem

Young children with disabilities often have delays in language development. According to Hadadian and Weikle (2003), parents of preschool children with disabilities use general literacy practices in the home less frequently than parents of preschool children without disabilities. Children with developmental disabilities receive less exposure to print and literacy experience, and fewer opportunities to interact with adults in literacy-related activities (Katims, 1991). Marvin and Mirenda (1993) indicated that learning to read and write were considered the top priorities by parents of children without disabilities, however, developing communication and self-help skills were priorities for parents who have children with disabilities. Often, those parents provide fewer opportunities for their child's literacy development at home. For example, a parent may need to focus on teaching a disabled child how to eat instead of spending that extra time for reading. Learning to use a spoon may be considered more important to the parent of a disabled child than providing crayons for the child to practice drawing and coloring. They also have lower expectations for their child's literacy development. Thus, literacy skill development seems to become a lower priority for their children.

Preschoolers are required to participate in shared book reading activities that stimulate verbal interaction to enhance their knowledge about print concepts (Justice,
Weber, Ezell, & Bakeman, 2002). According to Saracho (1997), home literacy activities have a direct correlation to a child’s reading readiness skills. Home literacy activities include parent reading to their children, singing rhymes or children’s songs, pointing out story elements, and writing or drawing on paper. The importance of family-child engagement in literacy activities to children’s learning and readiness for school is listed as one of the goals in the National Education Goals (1999). It suggests that for all children in America to start school ready to learn, parents need to devote time each day to be involved in their children’s learning. The U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics (1998) reported that children whose families engaged in several different types of literacy activities are more likely to show multiple signs of emerging literacy skills than other children.

There are six components of emergent literacy identified by Lipson and Wixson (1994). These components include print awareness, concepts of book print, story sense, phonological awareness, matching of speech to print, and control of reading and writing. Incorporating these six components through daily storybook reading will facilitate reading readiness. Shared book reading is an ideal context for the development of children’s language skills, because it provides: (1) opportunities for children to development new concepts, (2) opportunities for the adult to monitor children’s comprehension through questioning, and (3) occasions for children to expand vocabulary and listen to and practice more advanced language forms (Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1999). It appears that joint reading activities facilitate oral language development in preschool children. For decades, research has shown that children whose parents read to them
become better readers and perform better in school (e.g. Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Saracho, 1997; Moss & Fawcett, 1995).

During shared book reading, parents use many different literacy strategies and activities at home. Research investigating the factors that have influenced children’s reading achievement reported significant correlations between regular engagement in early preschool literacy activities, having a greater number of books in the home, the amount of time parents spent reading with their child, and the child’s attitude towards reading (Morrow, 1989). Early preschool literacy activities include joint reading, asking questions about the story, singing nursery rhymes and songs, writing letters or words on paper, and pointing to familiar signs and logos. Researchers have discovered that behaviors such as children hearing stories and then retelling their favorite stories to themselves, their friends, stuffed animals or pets, greatly facilitate children’s emerging literacy development (e.g. Durkin, 1966; Katims, 1994; Teale & Sulzby, 1989).

However, parents are often engaging in literacy activities without being aware they are doing so. For example, having activities together with their children such as doing arts and crafts, reading to children and telling stories together is associated with acquiring literacy skills (National Center for Educational Statistics 1998). It seems appropriate parent training by school professionals will help parents understand different literacy strategies and activities that can be provided at home to support their children’s learning of literacy skills. In order to promote effective parent-child joint reading, educators should get first hand information about how parents are involved in their children’s literacy activities at home, and how those activities help children develop emergent literacy skills.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of parent-child joint reading at home on children’s reading readiness skills, and to investigate how the joint reading activities during parent-child reading impact the development of children’s emergent literacy skills.

Significance of the Study

In the past, studies have examined children’s emergent literacy skills using shared reading models. Different shared reading techniques have been researched, and the Dialogic Reading Model is one. This model includes language focused intervention such as creating meaningful picture books to give children an opportunity to discuss real and meaningful experiences. It is found that early childhood literacy often correlates with parent-child reading activities at home. There are studies (e.g. Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson & Barr, 2000; Hay, Elias & Booker, 2005) involving young children as samples to examine preschool literacy development, parent child storybook reading, and improvement of emergent literacy skills. Most of the participants in the studies were children without disabilities, and limited research involving preschool children with disabilities. Are parent-child home literacy activities effective with preschoolers with disabilities? During this study, home literacy environments and parent strategies will be investigated. This present study is designed to examine the effects of home literacy activities and strategies used in parent-child reading at home for children with disabilities. Methods and strategies parents used at home when reading to their preschool children with disabilities will be identified as well as the effectiveness of
parent-child joint reading. It is attempted to clarify appropriate strategies for parents
during joint reading activities to improve young children’s emergent literacy skills.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the strategies parents used during parent-child joint reading at
   home with their children with disabilities?

2. Will parent-child joint reading improve the reading readiness skills of
   preschool children with disabilities?

3. What correlations are found between home literacy activities and a child’s
   emergent literacy skills?
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Emergent Literacy Skills

The term “emergent literacy” is used to denote the idea that literacy acquisition is conceptualized as a developmental continuum, with its origins early in a child’s life, rather than a phenomenon that begins when children enter school (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). The process of becoming literate begins long before a child enters a formal education environment (Haney & Hill, 2004). Emergent literacy encompasses expressive and receptive language as well as reading and writing skills.

By looking not merely at conventional manifestations of reading or writing, but considering also such manifestations as children’s rereading of familiar books before they are fully literate, 3-year-olds’ uses of environmental print, or writing with scribbles or random-appearing letters, and by examining literacy not merely from adult perspectives but also from the children’s viewpoints, we can see that emergent literacy learning occurs in virtually every young child in a literate society like ours (as cited in Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002, p.295).

According to Lipson and Wixson (1994), there are six major components of emergent literacy skills identified for preschoolers. These include (a) print awareness, (b) concepts of book print, (c) story sense, (d) phonological awareness, (e) matching of speech to print, and (f) control of reading and writing. It is found that an active participation in literacy experiences to include these six components have been
shown to improve comprehension and language development in young children. Storybooks selected with a well-developed story structure, delineated characters, a definite setting, a clear theme represented by characters facing problems or seeking goals, and episodes that lead to the main character’s attaining the goal or resolving the problem, are important for young children. When selecting books for these children, the following suggestions are recommended: (a) books with interesting language, such as rhythmic words and phrases, (b) books with concepts appropriate for developmental levels, (c) books that have sturdy construction for manipulation, and (d) books that are enjoyable to the adult who is reading to the children (Hay & Fielding-Barnsley, 2007). For an enjoyable reading experience the books should be interesting and engaging.

Early Reading Development

The process of becoming literate individuals starts as early as infancy. Babies develop recognition of sounds, pick up inflection and accents of their parents, thus, beginning the process of literacy. According to Newberger (1997), during the first three years of life, brain connections develop quickly in response to outside stimulation. A child’s experiences influence the wiring of his brain and the connections in his nervous system. Therefore, when we snuggle with a baby or talk with him in a singsong, undulating rhythm, we are contributing to the growth of his brain. As a result of this interaction, parents who begin to read and talk with their infants would support the child on the road to successful literacy development.

One study demonstrated that thirteen-month-old infants, whose mothers were more verbally responsive during toy play, spoke their first words and their first 50
words much earlier than children of mothers who were less responsive (Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, Kahana-Kalman, Baumwell, & Cyphers, 1998). A caring, connecting relationship with verbal communication from parents helps their children’s literacy development (Berger, 1998).

Home Literacy Environment

Parental literacy-related beliefs and activities that afford children opportunities to learn are important in preschool children’s language acquisition and literacy development (Bennett, Weigel & Martin, 2002). A study of 143 families and their preschool-age children was undertaken to examine the relationship between the family environment and children’s language and literacy skills. Results from this study support the link between the home literacy environment and young children’s acquisition of emergent literacy skills (Bennett et al. 2002). It is found that literacy variables such as shared reading, parents’ attitudes toward and interests in reading books, and parental education may strongly impact young children’s language outcomes (Bennett et al. 2002).

Given that children are exposed to words and language when reading books with their parents it is not surprising those children who are read to acquire literacy skills at a faster rate. It is likely that parents who are well-educated can better provide a literacy-enriched home environment, positively affecting their children’s language and literacy skills (Bennett et al.’s 2002). Similarly, it may be that articulate parents provide a family environment to foster their children and serve as models for verbal behaviors. In Bennett et al.’s study (2002), the results showed a strong relationship between parents’ literacy-related beliefs, parent-child home activities, and preschool
children’s language development and literacy competencies. Given the importance of language and literacy skills in regards to a child’s future academic development and achievement, these findings are vital to educators and parents.

According to Teale and Sulzby (1986), the home environment can be the source of three broad categories of a child’s literacy experience. These experiences include: (a) interacting with adults in writing and reading activities; (b) exploring print on his/her own; and (c) observing adults modeling literate behaviors (e.g., reading the newspaper). This environment should include spending time in one-on-one conversation with their child, reading books, providing writing material, demonstrating the uses of print, and maintaining a joyful, playful atmosphere around literacy activities (Snow et al. 1998). Storybook reading has received the most attention within the array of parent-child literacy activities to enhance oral-language and early-literacy skills. The importance of the home environment is grounded in the fact that the home serves as a setting in which language and literacy is first encountered (Strickland & Taylor, 1989). Creating a setting for young children will offer experiences and support to make language and literacy accomplishments possible.

LeFevre and Senechal (1999) indicate in their research on home literacy environments that there are two different aspects of the home literacy experiences with respect to the role such experience might have in the development of oral and written language. Of the participants in this study, the middle-class parents have knowledge of children’s literature related to children’s oral language skills, whereas the amount of teaching about reading and writing reported by parents was related to
children’s acquisition of written language skills. One important implication of these findings is that home literacy experiences should not be considered a unitary construct. Rather, storybook reading and parent teaching may be independent experiences, with different links to early skills and ultimately to reading acquisition.

**Parent-Child Shared Story Book Reading**

Parental involvement, such as shared reading, in a child’s early learning experiences is a critical factor in his/her successful school achievement. Shared reading enhances language and literacy outcomes by strengthening the child’s language skills. It provides children opportunities to learn emergent literacy skills, such as awareness of spoken and written language, knowledge of book reading, so that children can experience the enjoyment of books and reading activities (High, LaGasse, Becker, Ahlgren, & Gardner, 2000). According to Bus & Ijzendoorn (2000), shared reading is the single most important activity for developing the technical skills needed to read and write as well as how to use those skills to enhance a child’s thinking skills and reasoning abilities. Reading books aloud exposes children to grammatical forms of written language and displays literature rules while oral conversation typically does not. Books often integrate pictures to words, for example, words associated with shapes and colors are often displayed in pictures, therefore, the child is hearing the word and simultaneously visually connecting the word to the picture.

The frequency of parent-child reading may not be as important as the quality of the shared reading experience. The assumption should not be made that more is better regardless of the quality of the time spent involved in parent-child reading.
activity. Bus et al. (1995) indicated more research is needed to further explore the aspects of shared reading that are most beneficial. According to their study there seems to be no magic effect when only reading to children. Instead, children need to be engaged in the activity to become readers. Parents need to ask questions and relate what is being read to the individual child’s experiences. Literacy is a function of parents’ ability to positively involve their children in literacy activities, but not simply providing a print-rich environment. A parent sets aside time to read does not mean that time is spent in a productive and engaged manner (Berger, 1998). Therefore, parent training is important to increase the quality of shared reading. Parents need to understand the importance of relating the print, the words being read and the pictures to the child’s individual experiences. The child needs to be asked questions pertaining to the story being read which will then engage the child in the act of shared reading. Engaging the child in the shared reading experience will foster his/her emergent literacy skills.

**Parent-Teaching of Emergent Literacy Activities**

The process of becoming literate begins long before a child enters a formal education environment (Morrow 1989). An understanding of activities most effective for facilitating the acquisition of emergent literacy skills can serve to enhance literacy outcomes. Parent-teaching of literacy skills is an important contributor to the development of emergent literacy skills in young children.

Haney and Hill (2004) examined the relationship between parent-teaching activities and emergent literacy in preschool children. The emergent literacy skills assessed in their research included vocabulary, concepts of print, and reading readiness for
example, identifying letters, sounding out letters, and reading words with two or three letters. It is found that children who received some type of parent-teaching obtained higher scores on all early literacy skills. These results indicated that programs targeted at optimizing the development of young children, such as early intervention and preschool programs, should encourage parents to teach their young children literacy skills in order to facilitate their emergent literacy development. Parents also reported that direct teaching of letter and sound correspondence was the literacy activity they most often provided to their children. Most parents were comfortable with these skills as they mirror the kind of teaching they learn from educational television. It is also found that children receiving instruction in writing words scored significantly higher on the measure of alphabet knowledge and early decoding skills. Thus, this parent-teaching activity provided children opportunities to explore a connection between oral language and print materials to construct for themselves knowledge about sound/symbol relationships and alphabet knowledge necessary for building decoding skills. However, children who were taught ‘reading words’ or ‘reading stories’ did not have significantly higher scores on alphabet knowledge. Parents who taught their children to read stories emphasized the text memorization rather than letter-sound correspondence. This study is consistent with the existing literature supporting home literacy teaching experiences for young children. Adams (1990) concludes that one irrepressible interpretation is that the likelihood that a child will succeed in school depends most of all on how much she or he has already learned about reading before getting there.
Dialogic Reading

The Dialogic Reading method is known to facilitate the expressive language skills of children from lower and middle income homes, and children with normal development, and those with developmental disabilities (Whitehurst et al., 1998; Craine-Thoreson & Dale, 1999; Lonigan 1998). Dialogic Reading differs from typical reading in that it emphasizes a child’s active involvement in telling and retelling the story. Instruction in Dialogic Reading consists of as few as two brief sessions. These include asking questions, expanding the child’s responses, and giving praise. The strategies of Dialogic Reading are straightforward and easy to demonstrate.

In a randomized controlled study of Dialogic Reading in Seattle, Washington, analyses of audiotapes of home reading showed remarkable changes in parents’ reading style after attending training sessions. Compared with parents in a comparison condition, and with their own baseline reading, parents in the Dialogic Reading intervention group quickly learned to read with more questions, more expansions and repetitions, and gave more praise to their children. In turn, children in the Dialogic Reading group used more one-word and multiword utterances during reading and demonstrated more sophisticated language skills on a standardized test on word application (Huebner, 2000). The results of this study are particularly impressive because most parents began the program with a strong tradition of family reading, and the majority of the children were developing normally. That the intervention could enhance the language abilities of these preschoolers testifies to the benefits of this reading program. In this study, sociodemographic factors and self-
identified parenting stress were identified to be associated with parents’ participation during the program. It is found that parents with fewer social and financial resources were less likely to adopt regular reading as a family routine (Burgess 2002).

The benefits of Dialogic Reading intervention appear to derive from its ability to help parents of very young children experience books as objects or reciprocal interaction for pleasure (Heath 1983). For many parents, especially parents who lack time or have difficulty in reading, this intervention program helped parents from unfamiliar experience to become the familiar. It also helped parents provide a new and safe context for their preschoolers’ independence in learning during which both parent and child engendered shared pride in their accomplishments (Huebner, 2000).

**Literacy Activities at Home**

Shared reading between parent and child is an essential way to reinforce emerging literacy skills. In addition, there are other activities that parents can do with their children to reinforce literacy skills. According to Berger (1998), a literacy area at home that focuses on books, writing activities, songs, and creative activities with help from a parent or by themselves is one effective method that supports literacy. Reading letters on the boxes in the grocery stores encourages a child’s letter recognition. The print is often large and sometimes the child will recognize the box from seeing it at home. When a preschooler helps a parent create a grocery list he/she is being exposed to print and the importance of written words. If a child goes to a restaurant, the parent and child can read the menu together. Reading signs while riding in a car is a great reading opportunity. When the child identifies the letters, for example on a STOP sign, he/she is beginning the process of reading and recognizing
the letter's meaning. An important aspect of home learning is to keep the activities so that the child is successful and feels good about his or her accomplishments. The ability for child and parent to communicate through their learning activities also opens the door for mutual understanding and continuing communication with each other.

**Literacy Routines**

A literacy routine is the regular use of a variety of techniques to enhance children's abilities to listen, to observe, to imitate, and to develop their language, reading and writing skills (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002). A literacy routine in the home environment would include joint reading, following a recipe, writing a grocery list with a child, or any variation of functional interaction with print.

Educators promote programs designed to get parents to read to their children, particularly those at risk for reading problems, because research indicates that children who learn to read easily and early are read to at home (Durkin, 1996; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Research suggests that within a framework of highly familiar and contextualized routines, children are able to participate in adult-mediated interactions that tap the child's maturing word-reading skills (Tassin, Poche', White & Irwin, 2004). Learning to read is correlated with being read to frequently. Reading to preschool children in one-on-one pairings or in very small groups helps them develop eye focus and listening skills. This activity also stimulates imagination, language skills and sensory awareness (Kupetz & Green, 1997). When talking and reading parents need to use simple language and eye contact and respond to the child's cues.
and vocalizations (Berger, 1998). This suggests that parents need to be reading appropriate books to their child.

The importance of engaging the child in the literature being read is often understated. Literacy routines should promote reading techniques that encourage physical closeness, positive involvement, and enjoyable times together (Huebner, 2002). There are many activities parent and child can be engaged in learning literacy skills at home. Parent-child shared reading, parent-teaching, and Dialogic Reading are examples for parents to support their children's early literacy development. Daily routines involving reciting nursery rhymes, watching educational television, reading labels on food boxes, and reciting the alphabet are also helpful for young children to develop emergent literacy skills.

Effects of Parental Support for Children’s Early Language Development

Goal One of the National Education Goals (1999) recognizes the importance of family-child engagement in literacy activities to children’s learning and readiness for school. The goal suggests that for all children in America to start school ready to learn, parents need to devote time each day to reading to them. The importance of daily shared reading needs to be stressed to all parents of preschool children both disabled and their non-disabled peer. Parents can provide additional ways to enhance children’s literacy skills at home, for example, music, games, art activities, finger plays, puzzles, dramatic play and other positive interactions. It is found sharing and teaching nursery rhymes and preschool rhythmic activities would encourage a child’s linguistic awareness, especially those as young as 3 (Lawhorn & Cobb 2002).

Tassin et al. (2004) listed eight strategies used by parents to prevent literacy acquisition difficulties. The strategies included: joint book reading, environmental print awareness, conventions of print, concepts of phonology, alphabetic/letter knowledge, sense of story, experience with writing materials, and adult modeling of literacy activities. Participants were randomly selected by delivering questionnaires to three day care facilities. All subjects were between ages 3 through 5 years. Parents had two weeks from the date of distribution to complete and return the questionnaire. For this study, 95 surveys were delivered and 54 were returned. This research found that children respond well and appear to benefit from joint book reading experience with their parents and should be encouraged to use all literacy acquisition strategies to help their children gain meaning from print. Children benefit from joint book reading when the books are predictable and meaningful. Parents need to help their children use all literacy acquisition strategies to help gain meaning from print. This research suggests that children are responsive to parents during shared literacy activities.

In Burgess's study (2002), a high correlation between receptive and expressive vocabulary and the number of children's books in the home was found. This research studied the relationship between the home literacy environment and the
developmental and educational outcomes related to early literacy acquisition. The participants were 115 four- and five-year-olds. Children completed two standardized tests of oral language and four test of phonological sensitivity. The home literacy environment was assessed via a survey completed by parents. Results of this study indicate how important it is for parents to read to their preschool children. If parents only have a small amount of time to spend with their child that time should be used for shared reading.

Edwards (1992) found that the failure of many African-American children, especially low-income families, may be related to the fact that many of these children come from homes where their parents have never read a book to them. Millions of parents with poor reading skills cannot engage in book-reading interactions with their children because of their own reading deficiencies, and others do not understand the importance of parental support (Nickse, Speicher, & Bucheck, 1988). Chall, Heron, and Hilferty (1987) indicated that “twenty-million Americans can’t read a bedtime story to their child” (p.190) and many children have limited experiences with books (e.g. Durkin, 1996; Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich & Welsh, 2004; Teale, & Sulzby, 1989). It is also found that even parents with marginal literacy skills can learn to share books with their children (Mason, 1980). For example, Edwards (1992) developed a book-reading program for low-income African-American parents and children. In this program, Parents as Partners in Reading helped other parents read simple books to their child, educated the parents on the importance of reading to their child, and modeled effective book reading behaviors. Through this activity, parents were able to successfully participate in book-reading activities with their children.
When parents are given the tools and training needed they can be successful educators of their children. After acquiring the skills to read to their children parents often have a different perspective about reading. It is found that parents can be effective teachers to provide children with the best training possible to read. This is demonstrated in a parent’s comment: “In essence, a way in which I as a parent can make a difference is by taking the time out to assure my child that reading is a fundamental part of our lives.”

Emergent Literacy Skills of Preschool Children with Disabilities

Preschool children with disabilities demonstrate a range of disabilities including mild to severe mental retardation, learning, behavioral, physical disorder, as well as general developmental and speech and language disorders. Preschool children with disabilities learn literacy skills in the same manner as their non-disabled peers. Procedures including immersing the children in a literature-rich environment with multiple daily readings and encouraging children to independently interact with books results in the literacy development of children with and without disabilities (Katims, 1994).

Early literacy learning occurs in the home. In the home environment, children observe print naturally in a variety of forms. For example, they observe their parents reading and writing, and learn to value these behaviors early in their life. However, children with disabilities experience fewer opportunities in reading and writing activities with their parents (Light & Keford Smith, 1993). Preschool children with speech and language impairments are at significant risk for later literacy learning difficulties (Watson et al. 1994). Often, parents of children with disabilities are
engaged in meeting their child’s daily needs and teaching their child life skills.
Reading and writing activities are often viewed as the secondary. Therefore, it is important for the parents to expose their children to a variety of print materials at home.

Katim’s study (1994) on *Emergence of Literacy in Preschool Children with Disabilities* indicated that preschool children with disabilities were able to demonstrate behaviors associated with emerging literacy, given structured opportunities to interact with meaningful, literature-rich environments. These children learn skills as they participate in literacy activities with adults as models. They will continue to grow toward conventional literacy by exposure to other whole-language environments in which reading, writing and oral language are presented and used in personally meaningful ways (Katims, 1994). Children need to be exposed to literacy skills as early as possible. Parents play an important role as active participants in this process, especially those who have children with disabilities (Snow et al., 1998). Children with disabilities develop basic literacy in ways remarkably similar to those of children without disabilities (e.g. Katims, 1991; LeFevre & Senechal, 1999; Kupetz & Green, 1997). To become literate, children must apply their knowledge of spoken language and their understanding language application in the process of reading and writing. Learning to read and write is, therefore, a natural step in the process of language development. The connection between spoken and written language are well established in that (a) spoken language provides the foundation for the development of reading and writing; (b) spoken and written language have a reciprocal relationship, such that each builds on the other to
result in general language and literacy competence; and (c) instruction in spoken
language can result in growth in written language, and instruction in written language
can result in growth in spoken language (Asha, 2001).

Parents are the initial communicator with their child (Asha, 2001). They
model language when speaking, singing and reading to their children. Promoting
early literacy development of young children includes: (a) introducing cardboard or
cloth books with brightly colored pictures, (b) providing rhyming books for reading,
(c) playing games like “What’s that?” and “Where’s the ball”, (d) pointing out words
on signs at the park, zoo or when walking or driving, (e) If the child becomes restless
or fussy while reading, put the book away to avoid a negative association to reading
(Kupetz & Green, 1997). Young children gain a substantial amount of knowledge
about language development through talking, reading, playing, singing, touching,
smiling, and other forms of interaction that are mutually enjoyable stimulators which
enhance emergent literacy skills. Frequent social interactions with adults are more
likely to develop oral language by imitating their parents (Lawhorn & Cobb 2002).
Thus, parents need to be active participants in this process and understand how to
facilitate their child’s language and literacy skill development. This is especially
important for parents who have children with disabilities (Snow & Griffin 1998).

Preschool Programs for Children with Disabilities

Preschool children with disabilities are at risk for later literacy difficulties.
The inclusion of reading and writing in preschool programs are directed at developing
all modes of communication and providing normalizing experiences for children with
disabilities (Watson et al 1994). Preschool programs based on an enhancing
emerging literacy skills focus on providing a variety of print related experiences for children. Such programs offer a print rich environment in which children encounter literacy related artifacts (i.e. storybooks, newspaper, signs), interact with print through functional activities such as reading recipes and looking at menus and observing others using print for a variety of purposes (Watson et. al 1994). These activities must occur to some degree at home and other preschool environments in order for all children to learn the functions of print materials so that literacy may emerge (Teale & Sulzby 1986; van Kleeck, 1990). Literacy rich environments are crucial for helping children with disabilities strengthen their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

A preschool day should include activities that are developmentally appropriate and interesting to children will provide many opportunities for teachers to model appropriate language, expand upon child utterances, and incorporate print based interactions (Watson et. al, 1994). The components of an emergent literacy based preschool program should include circle time, story time, and a story related activity. Centers in a print rich preschool environment should include an art and writing center, a dramatic play center, and a library center. Active participation in literacy experiences has been shown to improve comprehension and language development (Morrow, 1989).

Preschool educators need to foster the literacy link between home and school. One way to do this is to copy children composed stories and send them home for nightly reading by family members. Teachers can also keep families informed about classroom themes and storybooks being used in the classroom, as well as providing
individualized information about their children’s experiences and accomplishments. This gives the parents the necessary information to help the children practice and elaborate on language and literacy skills at home. Similarly, when parents share information about the children’s experiences and emerging skills observed in the home, educators can help the child elaborate on these in the classroom setting. By including emerging literacy skills in preschool programs for children with disabilities, future language and literacy problems may be minimized (Watson et. al 1994).

Summary of the Literature Review

The development of emergent literacy skills is dependent on a child’s experience with both oral language and print materials. There are a variety of techniques that can be used to enhance a child’s emergent literacy skills. The exposure to print materials in the home directly correlates to a child’s emergent literacy skill development. It is never too early to begin reading to a child. By reading to young children, parents can help develop an understanding about print at an early age as they learn to make connections between words and meanings (NAEYC, 1997). Engaging children at an early age in literacy activities, parents can help foster a lifelong passion for reading that will lead to benefits in all areas of development as the child grows up.

Due to the various needs of preschoolers with disabilities they may not have sufficient exposure to print materials to acquire literacy skills at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. Therefore, parents need to be encouraged to facilitate the development of emergent literacy in their young child by providing appropriate literacy routines at home. As stated in the research, there are basic strategies used by
parents to promote literacy acquisition. Joint reading, one of the strategies, seems to have the highest positive effect on a child’s literacy and language development.

Studies show that parents have the most influence on preschoolers’ emergent literacy skills (i.e. Lawson & Cobb 2002; Adams 1990; Bennett et al. 2002). Despite the proven importance of a home literacy environment, there are still far too many preschool children who are not having the shared book reading experience with their parents. More research in the area of promoting home literacy environments is needed to focus on variables and frequency of parents and children reading together. Research suggests that within a framework of highly familiar and contextualized routines, children are able to participate in adult-mediated interactions that tap the child’s maturing word-reading skills (Adams 1990). Research also indicates that preschoolers are responsive to parental prompts on a range of early literacy activities. Professionals working with parents of young children may encourage them to incorporate early literacy acquisition strategies, particularly prompts, into shared book reading interactions as well as everyday interactions (Justice, Weber, Ezell, & Bakeman, 2002).

Preschool programs are particularly beneficial for children who experience limited emergent literacy experiences in the home environment. Formal preschool experiences in both regular preschool programs and those for children with disabilities include opportunities to listen to story book reading, examine books, say nursery rhymes, write messages and view and talk about print materials. These experiences lead to improved literacy achievement of young children in the school years.
Parents of children with disabilities need to be encouraged to provide literacy activities for their children in warm and loving environments. Children with disabilities can master many important skills and concepts associated with reading as a result of being involved in the action of reading and other meaningful literacy activities. Early literacy does not mean teaching reading to infants and toddlers nor does it just involve books. Sensitive and responsive relationships with parents and caregivers are a vital component of the child’s experience with reading and language development. Learning to read is essentially a social process. Sharing reading a book is important communication to very young children. The successful development of emergent literacy skills is contingent on a secure attachment between the parent and child (Bus et. al 1995).
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Setting

This study was conducted in a special education self-contained classroom in a public school located in a school district in the southern area of New Jersey. According to the NJ Department of Education’s District Factor Group (DFG), the township where the school is located was classified “DE” based on the 2000 Decennial Census data. The DFG measures a community’s socioeconomic status (SES) and is ranked from “A” to “J”, with the latter classifications as the highest SES. Thus, this school district is located in a community with a mid to lower socioeconomic status. The majority of the population is blue collar workers.

The school is one of the three public schools in the district, and the only preschool for children with disabilities. There are also five classrooms for fourth through eighth grade students and one self-contained classroom for children with autism. There are many different educational programs in this school, and the preschool program for students with disabilities is one of them. This program consists of a morning and afternoon session for children from ages three to five in a self-contained special education classroom. There are a special education teacher, a speech therapist, a part time occupational therapist, and a part time physical therapist, and a full time teacher assistant in the classroom to work with the 13 children with various disabilities.
Participants

Students

The participants for this study included 13 preschoolers with disabilities in a self-contained classroom and their parents. The children have had an average of two years of preschool experiences, with an age range from 3.3 to 5.6. All children were classified as having a disability in the category of preschool children with disabilities. A preschool child with disabilities is determined by an identified disabling condition and/or a measurable developmental impairment, which occurs in children between the ages of three and five and requires special education and related services. Table 1 presents the general information of the participating students.

Table 1: General Information of Participating Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of years attending preschool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participating parents were all parents of children attending the preschool program for children with disabilities. The age ranges of the participating parents are from 20 to above 40, and their education level ranged from high school graduation to a college Bachelor’s degree. Table 2 presents the general information of the participating parents.

Table 2: General Information of Parent Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Design

A survey was provided to parents to obtain reading strategies used with their children. Data was collected using a literacy skills test to determine participating children’s emergent literacy skills. Correlations were drawn from survey responses to compare and contrast activities used by parents at home and their children’s performance outcomes of emergent literacy skills.
Instrumentation

Parent Survey

The survey consists of 16 items including demographic information and questionnaire regarding the strategies parents used to enhance their child’s emergent literacy at home (see Appendix B). Demographic information includes: participant’s parent’s gender, age, and level of education, their child’s gender and age, and years attending preschool. The strategies listed in this survey include: parent-child shared reading, awareness of environmental signs, alphabetic/letter knowledge, story comprehension, their child’s experience with writing materials, adult modeling of literacy activities, story recall, and educational television viewing.

The parent survey was adapted from a questionnaire used in a previous study by Tassin, Poche’, White and Irwin (2004). In their study, their survey was developed for determining parent’s use of literacy acquisition strategies with preschool children. It had 14 questions with 9 questions to examine how parents used different strategies with their children at home. Their survey was modified to fit this present study. The modifications include one question added to the Demographic Information to obtain the child’s preschool attendance and years of experience, and another question regarding educational television viewing was added into the questionnaire. The survey was developed as a Likert scale, ranging from (1) Never, (2) Seldom, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often, and (5) Always, of which 1 point represented “never”, 2 points for “seldom, 3 points for “sometimes”, 4 points for “often” and 5 points for “always”.

Children’s Literacy Skills Assessment

The instrument used to determine the literacy skills of preschool children with disabilities was the Emergent Literacy Skills Assessment developed by the current school members of the preschool team for children with disabilities. The team members included a learning disability teacher consultant, a speech therapist, and a special education teacher. The assessment includes six areas of emergent literacy skills: (a) color identification, (b) shape identification, (c) oral name identification in a print format, (d) letter sounding out, (e) letter identification, and (f) book awareness (see Appendix B). This instrument was derived from consolidating emergent literacy information from the *Brigance Inventory of Early Development* (2004), a standardized criterion-referenced assessment for young children evaluating all skill areas. In this present study, the assessment was used to examine participating children’s current emergent literacy skills.

In order to determine content validity, two parents of preschoolers took the survey as a pilot test. Neither mentioned any concern for understanding the survey questions and statements, nor did the parents take more than five minutes to complete the survey. All survey questions were appropriate as mentioned by the two parents. This means that the survey items are valid and should be available for parents to understand and answer all questions in less than five minutes.
Procedures

Survey

After the permission was granted from the director of special education, the survey was delivered to each participating parent. Each student was required to take the survey home in their daily folder located in their book bag. An informational cover letter with a consent form was attached to each survey for parents (see Appendix A). All parents were given one week to complete the survey and return it in their child’s daily folder. In order to yield a high return rate, a reward was given to the children whose parents returned the survey by the deadline.

Assessment

The *Emergent Literacy Skills Assessment* was administered to each participating preschooler after receiving his/her parent survey. Data were collected by the researcher in six areas of emergent literacy skills based on knowledge at the time of the assessment. The participating preschoolers were asked to verbally identify the 8 primary colors and 8 primary shapes. They were also asked to visually identify their name within a group of 8 other names. The preschoolers were asked to verbally say or sing the ABC’s and visually identify as many of the 26 letters in the alphabet as possible. Subsequently they were asked to verbally identify the parts of a book including the cover, pages, and how to hold the book. This *Emergent Literacy Skills Assessment* was administered by a special education teacher with the preschoolers individually in the classroom.
Data Analysis

The independent variables in this study included gender and age of parent and child, parent level of education, and their child’s preschool experience. Information was collected in the first six questions of the survey. Other independent variables were the literacy activities used in the home. Variations in activities used by parents and their children’s emergent literacy skills as determined through assessment data to evaluate children’s performance outcomes, were serving as dependent variables. Correlations between the reading activities and the child’s outcomes were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The impact of both variables was studied using cross-tabular analysis by SPSS. Correlations and descriptive statistics (frequency distribution, percentages, and measures of central tendency and dispersion) would be presented to demonstrate the data in regards to the research questions.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Profile of the Sample

The subjects for this study were parents and their children enrolled in a preschool program in New Jersey during the 2007-2008 school year. A total of 13 copies of the survey were distributed to the parents. Of those, 11 were completed and returned, yielding a return rate of 85%. The survey respondents were parents including 8 females (73%) and 3 males (27%), with an age range of 19 to 45.

Table 3 presents demographic data on the educational background of the participating parents. More than half of the respondents (55%) had a high school diploma or GED.

Table 3: Parents’ Level of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participating children included 10 males (91%) and 1 female (9%) between the ages of three and five, with the majority (55%) being four years old. These children attended the preschool for one to two years with the majority (73%) attending school for two years.
An overall of the survey responses indicate that the parents provided literacy activities at home with their children and engaged in those activities. Table 4 presents their responses.

Table 4: The Literacy Activities Parents Used at Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read Together</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point Out Familiar Signs and Logos</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point to Words While Reading</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing Songs and Nursery Rhymes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point Out Letters and Sounds</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point Out Story Elements</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write Letters or Words</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point and Say Words Aloud</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask Recall Questions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results showed that 92% of parents always and often read to their children at home, 72% used familiar signs and logos, 63% always point to words when reading to their child and 46% often sing nursery rhymes and children’s songs to their children. When reading to their children, pointing out letters, sounds and story elements are often done by 36% of parents. Writing letters or words on paper is often or always done by 36% of parents, and 82% often point to and read words in books, newspapers, and candy and grocery labels to their children. Recall questions about a
story are asked by 46% of parents sometimes. When it comes to watching the TV program, Sesame Street, parents report 46% of their children sometimes, 27% seldom and 9% never watch it.

The results of this survey indicate that parents often and always point to the words as they read to their child. Sometimes parents point out familiar logos, sing songs and nursery rhymes, point out letters and sounds, and discuss story elements with their children. The parents responding to this survey were least likely to encourage their children to write letters or words and ask their children recall questions when reading them a story.

Children’s Literacy Skills

The participating children were given an emergent literacy skills assessment. Results of the assessment demonstrate 82% of the children could identify all the primary colors. Seventy-two percent of the children could identify all the primary shapes. Identifying first name in print was done by 82% of the children. Reciting the alphabet was completed by 64%. However, 27% could identify all 26 alphabet letters. Over half of the children (55%) could identify some parts of a book and how to properly handle the book. Table 5 presents the results.
Table 5: Emergent Literacy Skills Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify Primary Colors</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify Primary Shapes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print Name</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Recite Alphabet</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Identify Letters</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Identify Parts of a Book</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correlations between Parent Activities and Child’s Literacy Outcomes

Correlations between the home reading activities and the children’s learning outcomes were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software (SPSS). The impact of both variables was analyzed using cross-tabular analysis by SPSS.

A Pearson product moment was calculated to examine the relationship between watching Sesame Street and emerging literacy skills. A strong negative correlation was found ($r = -.771, p<.01$), indicating a significant linear relationship between watching Sesame Street and color identification. A strong negative correlation was found ($r = -.782, p<.01$) between Sesame Street and identifying parts of a book. These correlations demonstrate that children who watch Sesame Street are more likely to be able to identify colors and parts of a book.
Correlations were also identified between reciting the alphabet and emerging literacy skills. A moderate negative correlation was found between being able to recite the alphabet and identify letters in print ($r = -0.629$, $p < 0.05$). A strong negative correlation was found between being able to recite the alphabet and identifying shapes ($r = -0.810$, $p < 0.01$). A significant, yet moderate negative correlation was found between reciting the alphabet and color identification ($r = -0.624$, $p < 0.05$). These correlations demonstrate that children who can recite the alphabet are more likely to be able to identify letters in print, and identify shapes and colors.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to demonstrate the relationship between parents who read aloud and point out familiar signs and logos. A strong positive correlation was found ($r = 0.742$, $p < 0.01$), indicating a significant linear relationship between the two variables. This correlation indicates that children whose parents read aloud also tend to point out familiar signs and logos to their children. There is a moderate positive correlation between parents singing nursery rhymes and children reading their name in print ($r = 0.638$, $p < 0.05$). A significant, yet moderate, negative correlation was found between pointing to words when reading to a preschool child with a disability and that child's ability to identify colors ($r = -0.649$, $p < 0.05$). This correlation indicates that parents who point to words when reading to their child may moderately influence their child's ability to identify colors. There was no statistically significant correlation between parents reading aloud to their child and children's emergent literacy skills.
Summary of the Study

This study investigated the literacy activities parents used during parent-child joint reading at home and how those activities impact their child’s development of emerging literacy skills. A total of 11 children with disabilities from three to five years of age together with their parents participated in this study.

A survey was distributed to the parents of the preschool children attending a public school. The first six survey questions collected demographic data and 10 investigated reading activities used to enhance children’s emergent literacy skills in the home. An Emergent Literacy Skills Assessment developed by the preschool’s teachers was used to examine the participating children’s emergent literacy skills.

Descriptive statistics and correlations were presented based on the data from the completed parent survey and the children’s literacy skills assessment. Significant statistical differences between variations of activities used by parents and children’s performance were determined using Pearson product-moment.
Discussion

The responses to the survey indicate that the majority of participating parents are engaging in literacy activities in the home with their preschool children with disabilities. Parent-child reading is one of the strategies most often used at home by parents to support their child’s literacy acquisition and reduce reading difficulties. As indicated in the survey, parents are reading to their children, however, fewer parents point to the words during reading or ask their child to recall details from the story. A majority of parents often point to and read words on candy wrappers and grocery labels and point out familiar signs and logos to their children. Parents are also engaged in singing songs and nursery rhymes with their children. Parents are less likely to point out letters and sounds, point out story elements, or encourage their children to write letters or words. These findings are consistent with that of Tassin et al’s study (2004) emphasizing the parents’ influence on their child’s academic progress when parent-child joint reading activities are provided in the home.

Results from the emergent literacy skills assessment indicate that parent-child joint reading alone does not considerably improve a child’s reading readiness skills. No connection was found between parent-child reading and a child’s improvement on any one specific emergent literacy skill. Other activities such as reciting the alphabet, identifying letters in print, singing nursery rhymes and pointing to words during reading need to be incorporated into home literacy activities to influence a child’s emergent literacy skills. Bus, van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995) support family literacy programs and indicate the need to further explore the aspects of parent-child shared reading that are most beneficial for the child. Family literacy programs have
been advocated for young children, especially those with disabilities. Time spent during parent-child reading activities should positively effect the child’s emergent literacy skill development. Further exploration is needed as these programs could provide accurate guidance to parents regarding the best practice strategies to prepare children for reading readiness.

This study found specific correlations between home literacy activities and a child’s certain emergent literacy skills. The correlation between watching the TV program Sesame Street and emerging literacy skills was significantly strong. The results show that children who watch Sesame Street were more likely to identify colors and the parts of a book. This activity can be provided by parents who are non-readers, however, parents need to be made aware of the benefits of their child engaging in watching educational television. The results of this study also show that children who had experience of reciting the alphabet are more likely to be able to identify letters in print, and identify shapes and colors. It appears that a preschool child would benefit from singing the ABC’s. There is a moderate correlation between parents’ singing nursery rhymes and children being able to read their own name in print. There was no statistically significant correlation found between parent-child joint reading and a child’s improvement on any one specific emergent literacy skill. These results suggest that parents who engage in not only reading to their children but also encouraging them to watch Sesame Street, recite the alphabet, sing nursery rhymes and songs may have the greatest influence on their child’s emergent literacy skill development.
Limitations

Limitations of this study include sample size and the population of only children with disabilities. This research was conducted in one district where the population is on the same socio-economic level. The survey was limited to 16 questions with self-reported information collected. When conducting this type of survey, honesty is sometimes an issue. Parents often know what is expected of them in society and what is considered positive parenting so that they may answer questions as they feel socially acceptable, which may not be the reality. Other methods may need to be considered to further investigate parents' home reading activities.

Implications

Children need to be exposed to literacy skills as early as possible, and parents need to be active participants in this process, especially those who have children with disabilities (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Parent involvement during the preschool years is crucial for the child’s future educational success. In this present study, it is found that parents need to be given the tools and education on how best to enhance their child’s emergent literacy skills through home literacy activities. Parents have the most impact on their preschool child’s skill development as they are the ones who spend the most time with their child. Katim (1994) indicates that preschool children with disabilities were able to demonstrate behaviors associated with emerging literacy and parents have the most influence on preschoolers’ emergent literacy skills. Parent training needs to be provided so parents understand the most useful skills to enhance
and provide the best practices for their child’s emergent literacy skills. This study has found that parents are reading to their children but may not be using best-practices to improve their child’s emergent literacy skill development. Parents who are non readers or poor readers need to be encouraged to sing songs, say nursery rhymes and have their child watch educational television programs. Whether through family literacy centers or school training it is imperative parents be taught best-practices for enhancing emergent literacy skills in preschool children. Thus, parents would be prepared and competent to work with their child to develop literacy skills at home.

Recommendations

Further studies should be conducted with larger populations to confirm the findings of this study. A follow-up analysis could be done using the same subjects to compare future gains in emergent literacy skills. A study could be conducted to research how home literacy environments would affect a child’s emergent literacy skills. More research in the area of promoting home literacy environments is needed to focus on variables of parent and child interactions during joint reading activities. Preschool teachers should be encouraging parents to read to their child daily using incentives and rewards. School districts could provide training for preschool staff on how to provide parents strategies for effective literacy activities in the home environments. Further research may consider comparing effects of parent home literacy activities on their child’s emergent literacy skills both before and after training. An expanded scope to include both children with and without disabilities may also be considered in participating populations for future studies.
Conclusions

The results of this study generally confirmed the findings of previous related studies on parent-child joint reading and the impact on their child’s literacy skills. Children need to be exposed to literacy skills as early as possible and their parents should be primary instructors in the home providing joint-reading activities. This process would be particularly important for the parents who have children with disabilities. It is imperative that the educational system and the community take an active role in helping parents of preschool children develop the skills necessary to provide best-practices in creating literacy enriched home environment.
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APPENDIX A

Subject Information/Consent Form
February 11, 2008

Dear Parents,

For my graduate studies in special education, I am conducting a survey for my thesis at Rowan University. My Survey explores literacy activities used at home and how they affect children’s emergent literacy skills.

This survey is designed to take only a few minutes of your time. Participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. No names will be used on the survey or in the research paper. I also need consent to do an emergent literacy test with your child. This is a brief test that includes alphabet recognition, primary shape and color recognition, name recognition, and book awareness. As your child’s teacher I am already aware of their skills in these areas but for research purposes I need your consent.

I know your time is precious, but I do need as many surveys back as possible for my research to be valid. As a token of my appreciation for every survey returned all the children in the class will receive a special treat.

If you choose to participate in this study:

- COMPLETE THE FORM BELOW and return it in your child’s daily folder.
- After COMPLETING THE SURVEY please return in your child’s daily folder.
- Please return all materials by February 19, 2008.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me as 499-4647 extension 4712. Thank you for your cooperation and for responding to this survey.

Sincerely,

Susan Biesz

To: Susan Biesz

I give my consent to participate in this survey exploring literacy activities used at home and how they affect children’s emergent literacy skills.

Printed name __________________________ Signature __________________________ Date __________

PLEASE DETACH BEFORE SUBMITTING THE SURVEY.
APPENDIX B

Survey Instrument and Skills Assessment
Questionnaire for Determining Parents Use of Literacy Activities in the Home

1. Gender of parent/legal guardian completing the questionnaire (Please circle one).
   Male                Female

2. Age of parent/legal guardian completing the questionnaire (Please circle one).
   Younger than 20     20-30     30-40     Above 40

3. Number of years your child has been attending this preschool.
   1  2  3

4. Gender of preschooler (please circle one).
   Male                Female

5. Age of preschooler (please circle one).
   3 years  4 years  5 years

6. Highest level of education completed by parent/legal guardian completing this questionnaire. (Please circle one).
   Less than 12th grade  High School Diploma/GED  Bachelor's Degree
   Associate's Degree  Master's Degree  Doctoral Degree

7. Do you and your child read together? (Please circle one)
   Never  1  Seldom  2  Sometimes  3  Often  4  Always  5

8. Do you point out and name familiar signs and logos to your child (example: McDonald's, Nike)? (Please circle one)
   Never  1  Seldom  2  Sometimes  3  Often  4  Always  5

9. Do you read to your child and point to the words as you read them? (Please circle one)
   Never  1  Seldom  2  Sometimes  3  Often  4  Always  5
10. Do you sing nursery rhymes or children’s songs to/with your child? (Please circle one)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
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11. Do you point out letters and the sounds letters make to your child? (Please circle one)

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<tr>
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<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
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12. Do you point out story elements to your child (example: characters, setting, plot, sequence of events)? (Please circle one)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
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</table>

13. Do you and your child write letters or words on paper (example: child’s name)?

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<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
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<td>5</td>
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</table>

14. Do you point to and say words aloud to your child (example: words in books, newspapers, and candy and grocery labels)? (Please circle one)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
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15. Do you ask your child recall questions about the story?

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<th>Seldom</th>
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16. Does your child watch Sesame Street?

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<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
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</table>
Emergent Literacy Skills

Color Identification:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Y N</th>
<th>Y N</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
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<tr>
<td>Green</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
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<td>Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
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Shape Identification:

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<tr>
<th>Shape</th>
<th>Y N</th>
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<tr>
<td>Square</td>
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<td>Circle</td>
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<td>Triangle</td>
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<td>Rectangle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oval</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamond</td>
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</table>

Can Identify Name in Print: Y N

Can Say ABC's: Y N

Identifies circled letters in print:

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Identifies Parts of a book: cover Y N turns pages Y N

Holds book right side up Y N

Name: __________________________