



## Research Paper

# Family context and children's early literacy skills: The role of marriage quality and emotional expressiveness of mothers and fathers



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## ABSTRACT

The marital relationship is critical for the emotional structure of the family and has implications for children's socioemotional and behavioral outcomes. However, little is known about the effect that the marital relationship has on children's academic achievement. The current study considers whether the family emotional environment and the home learning environment (HLE) that parents provide are mediators in the relation between marital functioning and preschool-aged children's early literacy skills. Results suggest that the marital relationship relates to children's early literacy skills through the influence of both positive and negative emotional expressiveness on the HLE. We also found that some of these family processes are different for mothers and fathers. The impact of the marital relationship on positive expressiveness and the effect of emotional expressiveness on HLE-related parenting were greater for fathers than mothers. These findings underscore the significance of marital and family processes when considering children's early literacy skills.

## 1. Introduction

Children's ability to acquire foundational early literacy skills, such as letter knowledge (Bowles, Pentimonti, Gerde, & Montroy, 2014; Foulin, 2005; Piasta, Justice, McGinty, & Kaderavek, 2012) and phonological awareness or the awareness that a spoken word consists of smaller sound units (e.g., syllables and phonemes) (Alloway et al., 2005; Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; Lonigan, Schatschneider, Westberg, & The National Early Literacy Panel, 2008), significantly predict children's later reading skills even when children's socioeconomic status, IQ, and vocabulary are taken into account (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Lonigan et al., 2000; Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010). Decoding or the ability to translate written symbols into the sounds of spoken language is also an important component of early literacy achievement with strong relations to later reading skills (Durand, Loe, Yeatman, & Feldman, 2013; Kendeou, Van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2009; Scarborough, Fletcher-Campbell, Soler, & Reid, 2009). A variety of sources including the home learning environment (HLE) and complex family factors relate to how children acquire early literacy skills (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Froyen, Skibbe, Bowles, Blow, & Gerde, 2013; Foster, Froyen, Skibbe, Bowles, & Decker, 2016). Research on the HLE often conceptualizes the family environment primarily from the mother's perspective and fails to consider the role of fathers (Hindman & Morrison, 2012). Taking a human ecological perspective, we recognize that families are complex

and dynamic systems affected by a variety of factors such as person (mothers and fathers), process (interactions between parents and children), and context (interaction between family functioning and school performance) (Ecological theory; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). We investigate the emotional environment that mothers and fathers provide for their children in addition to explicit home learning opportunities that they engage in and consider whether this mediates the relation between marital functioning and preschool-aged children's early literacy skills.

### 1.1. The role of the HLE on literacy

One important influence on children's emerging literacy skills is the HLE: the parenting practices that encourage children's development of academic skills such as literacy and mathematics (Anders et al., 2012; Phillips & Lonigan, 2009; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011; Skibbe, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty, 2008; Skwarchuk, Sowinski, & LeFevre, 2014; Son & Morrison, 2010). The HLE is operationalized in a variety of ways, including the parents' own literacy activities, materials available in the home (e.g., books, magazine subscriptions, and library cards), and specific parenting practices that are aimed at enhancing children's educational outcomes (Farver, Lonigan, Xu, & Eppe, 2013; Sénéchal, 2006; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Research shows that one of the most important assets for preschool-aged children is a home environment in which the parents are actively involved in engaging their child in

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activities aimed at academic enhancement (Bjorklund, Hubertz, & Reubens, 2004; Cannon & Ginsburg, 2008; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Foster et al., 2016; Morrison & Cooney, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

While much of this research focuses specifically on shared reading or an interactive reading activity supported by an experienced reader, there is evidence that a broad range of HLE activities promote children's early literacy skills (Baker, Vernon-Feagans, & The Family Life Project Investigations, 2015; Sénéchal, 2006; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). For example, deliberate teaching of letters and sounds during shared book reading and engagement in writing activities foster gains in letter knowledge and phonological awareness (Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Martini & Sénéchal, 2012). Despite the importance of literacy skills for young children's development, and research attesting to the significance of HLE-related parenting behaviors in developing these skills, the factors of family functioning that might influence HLE and children's literacy outcomes have not been explored (but see Froyen et al., 2013).

### 1.2. Link between the family emotional environment and child outcomes

The role of parental psychopathology and marital and family environments on children's social-emotional development has been well established (Calkins & Dollar, 2014; Cummings, Keller, & Davies, 2005; Fosco & Grych, 2007; Prenoveau et al., 2017). The marital relationship is considered the central aspect of family functioning in traditional two-parent households (Davies, Sturge-Apple, Woitach, & Cummings, 2009) and plays an important role in the emotional and relational foundation of the family (Davies, 2002, 2011; Davies, 2002, 2011). Numerous studies have shown the negative effect of marital conflict on children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors (El-Sheikh et al., 2009; Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash, & O'Connor, 2005; Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006). Research shows that marital conflict is associated with greater levels of ineffective parenting which also increases the likelihood of children engaging in externalizing behaviors (Kaczynski et al., 2006). Although an abundance of studies indicate that marital quality is critical for children's emotional, social, and behavioral development (Baker, 2013; Belsky & Fearon, 2004; Davies, 2002, 2011; Davies, 2002, 2011), the influence of the marital relationship on the HLE and children's academic development is not well understood (Baker & Iruka, 2013).

The few studies that have examined the influence of the marital relationship on child achievement have focused almost exclusively on divorced populations (Amato, 2010; Fagan, 2013), neglecting young children in intact families who may be experiencing normative levels of marital discord or dissatisfaction. This is significant given findings which suggest that even prior to divorce, children from families that subsequently dissolve perform worse academically than their peers whose parents remain married (Sun & Li, 2001). In addition, in community samples with relatively low levels of marital distress, child maladjustment and academic development has been linked to conflict in the marital relationship (Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000; Froyen et al., 2013).

### 1.3. Maternal emotional expressiveness may mediate the relation between the family emotional environment and child academic achievement

Emotional expressiveness, defined as the principal pattern of displaying verbal and nonverbal expressions of emotion, within the family as a whole (Halberstadt, Crisp, & Eaton, 1999) may be a key link between marital satisfaction, HLE, and child achievement. In the social-emotional domain, mothers who engage in more negative emotional expressiveness have children with greater problem behaviors (Hooper, Feng, Christian, & Slesnick, 2015) and poor self-regulation (Haskett, Stelter, Proffitt, & Nice, 2012). The emotional climate of the household appears to also influence the quality of parenting practices and home

learning activities, as parents who frequently exhibit negative emotional expressions often have access to fewer parenting resources (Pungello, Iruka, Dotterer, Mills-Koonce, & Reznick, 2009), discipline their children more harshly (Buehler & Gerard, 2002) or inconsistently (McCoy, George, Cummings, & Davies, 2013) and are often less involved with their children (Buehler & Gerard, 2002). Emotional expressiveness is related to some marital processes, such as marital satisfaction, and has implications for the ways in which mothers provide learning opportunities for their children as well as children's own skills (Froyen et al., 2013). The present study considers the role of marital conflict for emotional expressiveness, as parents experiencing high marital conflict are less likely to praise their children, read to them, play with them, and spend time with them engaging in relational and social activities (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006a).

### 1.4. Fathers' role on marital functioning and child achievement

Previous studies have also largely neglected the role of fathers on marital function and child achievement. While research indicates that fathers are taking on increased responsibilities at home (Cabrerá, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000), and the research community at large has begun to recognize the valuable and unique contributions fathers make to child outcomes (Baker, 2013; Baker et al., 2015; Downer, Campos, McWayne, & Gartner, 2008; McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001), the role of fathers in the family, in parenting, and in child outcomes, has received less attention (Lamb, 2010). Theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that it is important to include fathers when conducting research on the influence of family functioning on child development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000), yet the majority of studies rely solely on mother report (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Regarding the home learning environment specifically, Foster et al. (2016) found that fathers engaged with their children in a number of home learning activities and frequency of these activities predicted children's achievement in many families. Thus, we include fathers' viewpoints and practices in the present work.

There are reasons to hypothesize that maternal and paternal perspectives on marital functioning could differentially affect parenting and the family emotional environment (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006a), as well as outcomes for children (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006b). For example, for fathers, marital conflict is associated with more vague or confusing commands towards children, but this relationship does not hold for mothers (Jouriles & Farris, 1992). In addition, fathers' emotional unavailability more strongly predicts increases in child psychological issues than does mothers' emotional unavailability (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006b). In addition, although fathers make unique contributions to child outcomes with research consistently showing an effect of fathers above and beyond the contributions of mothers (Parke, 2002; Stolz et al., 2005), their parenting may also be more susceptible to marital dissatisfaction than is mothers' parenting (Nelson, O'Brien, Blankson, Calkins, & Kean, 2009). For example, fathers who are dissatisfied with their marriage appear to show increased power-assertive or coercive behaviors with their sons (Kaczynski et al., 2006).

However, findings regarding the differential influence of mothers and fathers in the literature are sometimes contradictory and these differences are not yet clear (Coiro & Emery, 1998; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006a). For example, Sturge-Apple et al. (2006b) found that mothers' emotional unavailability was impacted by both withdrawal and hostility in the marital relationship, whereas fathers' was only related to withdrawal, indicating a stronger influence of marital dysfunction on mothers. One reason for this inconsistency in the literature may be that many of these studies examine mothers and fathers in separate analyses, which fails to take into account the interdependent nature of these data (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). By

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