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Promoting parent academic expectations predicts improved school outcomes for low-income children entering kindergarten☆

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ABSTRACT

This study explored patterns of change in the REDI (Research-based Developmentally Informed) Parent program (REDI-P), designed to help parents support child learning at the transition into kindergarten. Participants were 200 prekindergarten children attending Head Start (55% European-American, 26% African American, 19% Latino, 56% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 4.45$ years, $SD = 0.29$) and their primary caregivers, who were randomized to a 16-session home-visiting intervention (REDI-P) or a control group. Extending beyond a prior study documenting intervention effects on parenting behaviors and child kindergarten outcomes, this study assessed the impact of REDI-P on parent academic expectations, and then explored the degree to which intervention gains in three areas of parenting (parent-child interactive reading, parent-child conversations, parent academic expectations) predicted child outcomes in kindergarten (controlling for baseline values and a set of child and family characteristics). Results showed that REDI-P promoted significant gains in parent academic expectations, which in turn mediated intervention gains in child emergent literacy skills and self-directed learning. Results suggest a need to attend to the beliefs parents hold about their child's academic potential, as well as their behavioral support for child learning, when designing interventions to enhance the school success of children in low-income families.

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1. Introduction

Children from socioeconomically-disadvantaged families are particularly likely to start school with inadequate readiness for the academic and behavioral demands (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000), setting them on a trajectory of underachievement associated with poor educational and behavioral outcomes (Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). High-quality preschool programs, such as Head Start, significantly boost school readiness skills in preschool, but positive effects typically dissipate at the transition into elementary school (Administration for Children and Families, 2010).

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Recently, the REDI (Research-based Developmentally Informed) Parent program (REDI-P) demonstrated that providing Head Start parents with home learning materials and support at the elementary school transition improved child outcomes in areas of kindergarten literacy skills, $d = 0.25$; teacher-rated academic performance, $d = 0.28$; self-directed learning, $d = 0.29$; and social competence, $d = 0.28$ (Bierman, Welsh, Heinrichs, Nix, & Mathis, 2015). The present study examined the impact of REDI-P on the beliefs parents had about their children's future academic potential (their academic expectations) and explored the degree to which gains in those expectations and other key parenting behaviors mediated intervention effects on child outcomes.

1.1. Promoting parent support for learning to enhance kindergarten adaptation

REDI-P was designed to supplement an existing classroom version of the same intervention (Head Start REDI; Bierman et al., 2008). In the classroom, the REDI program included four components. Teachers implemented the Preschool PATHS curriculum (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007), which included classroom lessons and activities designed to promote child social-emotional skills (e.g., prosocial behavior, emotional understanding, self-regulation, social problem-solving skills). Teachers also delivered three other components – an interactive reading program aligned with the PATHS themes, a sound games program, and print center activities – in order to boost language and emergent literacy skills (e.g., vocabulary, phonological awareness, print awareness; see Bierman et al., 2008 for more details).

REDI-P was designed to target the same skill domains during home visits. To support language and literacy skill development, parents were provided with a variety of parent-child games and activities designed to foster emergent literacy skills. Several prior studies suggest that parents can boost child letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, and reading readiness by using these types of games and learning activities at home (Ford, McDougall, & Evans, 2009; Haney & Hill, 2004; Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). In addition, home visitors coached parents in interactive reading strategies, showing them how to ask questions and talk with children about the story characters and story events during parent-child reading sessions (e.g., Justice & Ezell, 2000; Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). A meta-analysis by Mol et al. (2008) found that interactive reading interventions promoted gains in measures of children's expressive and receptive vocabulary ($d = 0.59$ and 0.22 , respectively), and additional studies suggested that coaching parents to use interactive reading strategies enhanced the effects of classroom reading interventions (Anthony, Williams, Zhang, Landry, & Dunkelberger, 2014; Jordan et al., 2000). REDI-P also encouraged parent-child conversations, by providing games with embedded questions, and by providing ideas for interactive dramatic play (Madden, O'Hara, & Levenstein, 1984). The focus on increasing high-quality parent-child conversations was based on research demonstrating the importance of parent-child conversations to language development (Zimmerman et al., 2009), and evidence that parent use of open-ended questions promotes academic school readiness (Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2012). In order to support child social-emotional learning, the content of REDI-P stories and parent-child activities featured the characters and social-emotional skills introduced in the Preschool PATHS Curriculum at school, emphasizing cooperation, caring, compliments, emotional understanding, and self-control (Domitrovich et al., 2007). REDI-P provided books with embedded questions that helped parents discuss feeling words and social lessons within the stories, and also included feeling card games and compliment cards drawn from the classroom PATHS Curriculum for parents to use at home with their children (for more details, see Bierman et al., 2015).

Prior analyses demonstrated that REDI-P was successful in promoting increases in parent's use of interactive reading strategies, $d = 0.28$, and the frequency and length of parent-child conversations, $d = 0.27$, based on parent report (Bierman et al., 2015). This study expanded on those findings in two important ways. First, this study examined whether the REDI-P intervention also had a significant impact on parent academic expectations for their children. Second, this study examined the degree to which intervention-produced changes in parenting behaviors or parent academic expectations mediated intervention effects on child outcomes in kindergarten, controlling for child baseline skills.

1.2. Why study parent academic expectations as well as parenting behaviors?

REDI-P was similar to other parenting programs designed to promote child school readiness in that it coached parents to engage in parenting behaviors that are correlated with positive child cognitive and social-emotional development, such as interactive reading, rich language use, and positive interpersonal support (see reviews by Reese, Sparks, & Leyva, 2010; Welsh, Bierman, & Mathis, 2014). However, from a conceptual standpoint, inextricably tied to parent language use and teaching behaviors are the underlying beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and motivations that compel and modulate parent efforts to promote their children's school readiness (Jones & Prinz, 2005). Indeed, longitudinal studies suggest that parent beliefs about their child's future academic and career success are significant predictors of subsequent child academic performance (Davis-Kean, 2005). Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that parent academic expectations make unique contributions to children's school readiness and academic success in ways that are independent from the parent teaching efforts they motivate (Martini & Sénéchal, 2012).

Sy and Schulenberg (2005) found that parent academic expectations at kindergarten entry predicted child reading and math achievement, both concurrently and into first grade. Similarly, Gut, Reimann, and Grob (2013) demonstrated that parent academic expectations at school entry predicted children's grade point averages three years later. Parents with lower incomes and less education typically have lower academic expectations for their children and feel less efficacious in their capacity to help them succeed than do more economically-advantaged parents (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001). However, high parent academic expectations for kindergarten children attenuate the link between family socio-economic status [SES] and child academic attainment at sixth grade (De Civita, Pagani, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2004). As children grow up, this attenuating effect continues, with high parent expectations even buffering children from the effects of low teacher expectations (Benner & Mistry, 2007). Consistent with this research, Sénéchal

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