

Reallocate funds and alter policy to ensure programs are delivered with sufficient intensity and effective implementation tactics—producing measurable success in children’s language and reading.

There is clear evidence that programs designed to support children’s early environments and experiences—especially in the domains of reading and language—can have positive impacts that extend into adulthood, enhancing life for individuals and communities.²³ Unfortunately, despite great promise and significant effort in design and execution, most interventions have been shown to produce negligible effects. Stakeholders are thus left discouraged: Funders and providers feel the sting of wasted time and money; families and communities lose sight of their children’s promise.²⁴ Therefore, it is critical to develop a new approach to promoting language and reading in early childhood that ensures programs and children reach their potential.

One might wonder—why a new approach and not necessarily new programs? Many of our current programs and supports don’t necessarily lack in good design—what they most often lack is heft and longevity, and/or high quality implementation to impact outcomes. For example, weekly tutoring for struggling students or a one-time parent education event on shared home reading practices may be appropriate in design, but not intensive enough to make a difference.²⁵ As we aim to promote and support children’s language and reading development, we must be sure that, above all, we’re focused on the *quality* and *impact* of our efforts. Across the day and across the years, we need a precise understanding of whether we are promoting children’s language and reading skills, and how we are doing it.

To achieve this goal, we need to think about our programs and services in a more nuanced way. We need to be guided by the understanding that it is not the services or the programs themselves that are impacting children’s skills specifically, but rather it is the resulting changes in behavior for both the child and the adults in his environment that are having an impact. For example, giving a book to a child is only a step toward improving literacy outcomes. Working in partnership with early educators or parents on how to use the book as a resource—that is our imperative.²⁶ There are fairly precise techniques for inciting rich conversations, fueling the imagination and building a love of reading that can propel the child toward the book shelf the next day and the day after. If we execute our programs appropriately, we may even propel the child to hand his book to the

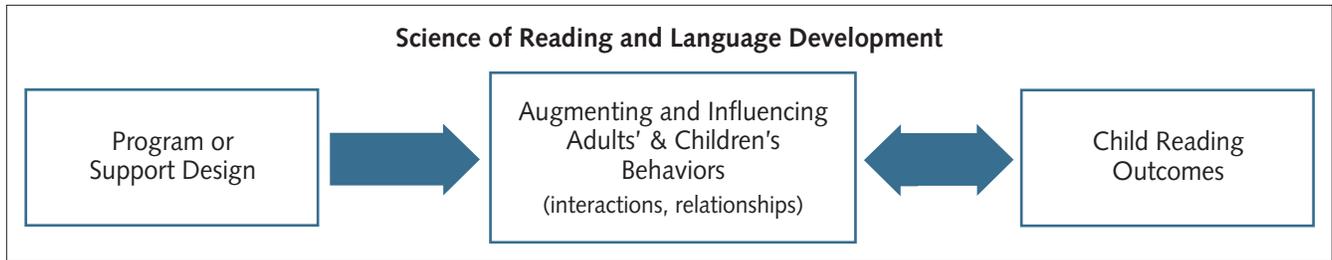
nearest adult to engage in shared reading, or cue the adult to engage the child. Together, it is these behaviors and interactions that begin to build a foundation of early literacy skills, and promote the cognitive development that makes way for sophisticated, speculative thought. So while the book may be a necessary ingredient, the key ingredient for the child is the style and technique of the intervention.²⁷ When it works, when adult and child behaviors evolve as desired, everyday experiences in this child’s life are increasingly rich in language and text.

Catching Our Kids Early: Boosting Language for Later Reading Success

Simone was connected to Early Intervention (EI)—a statewide, family-centered, developmental service—by her daughter’s pediatrician. Now, a typical Wednesday morning for Simone and daughter Talita begins with a visit from Rebecca, an early-childhood specialist. On one particular visit, before their circle time routine, Simone pages through an old photo album, engaging Talita and Rebecca in a conversation about her family. Next, the three sing and act out Talita’s new favorite nursery rhymes, read a children’s book the family will borrow for the week, and make plans for future activities that would interest the family while also building Talita’s language. Before Rebecca leaves for her next home-visit, she answers a few parenting questions that had been troubling Simone. Rebecca departs, leaving Simone a flier with the library’s summer programs. Like 94 percent of her peers who also entered the program lagging behind on expected developmental milestones, Talita’s rate of growth on measures of language development is likely to increase following participation in the program, which promotes increased language and reading activities between parents and child.⁸

So what kinds of programs and services have an impact on behaviors? The most effective build two things, supportive relationships—after all, it’s hard to change behaviors without creating strong relationships—and stimulating environments. And, of course, as the behavior changes, as the child becomes interested in books and takes part in conversations about big ideas, as his language grows and reading skills develop, he will become an influencer of behaviors and relationships. This reciprocal nature of

Conceptualizing for Impact



human interactions means that behavior change in one person can spark behavior change in another. For example, a child with a stronger vocabulary is easier to converse with and will inspire those around him to initiate discussions or pose questions. A child who enjoys reading will more likely ask an adult to read to him. It is understood what a vital and powerful moment it is when a child asks to be read to, but its effects run well beyond the moment because those shared reading experiences help the adult gain confidence and enthusiasm.²⁸ They lead to subsequent shared readings and the important conversations that naturally flow from them. In turn, children's language development gets a boost and the adult-child relationship is strengthened, too.

ACTION STEP

Self-Study for Impact

When assessing a program or service to decide if it substantially improves children's language and reading outcomes, we must ask *what* specifically it is that is influencing and/or augmenting behaviors to improve reading and language outcomes.²⁹

The policymakers, funders, program leaders and educators whose efforts focus on improving reading outcomes should thus recalibrate their approach. Data-driven answers to the four questions outlined below are imperative for meaningful and lasting change. Undertaking this self-study may result in reallocating resources, it may mean eliminating components of programs deemed ineffectual, or it may mean revamping the model after a couple of iterations—all in the name of maximizing resources and improving our children's reading outcomes.³⁰

Key Ingredients for Impact: What's Working?

Many of our supports and programs are well designed and involve positive activities. And with good reason, many of our policies and funding mechanisms focus on "reach"—serving as many children and/or families as possible as

well as to try and maximize return on the dollars spent. Unfortunately, we can satisfy those two priorities without effecting actual improvements in our children's language and reading outcomes. Research nationwide, combined with our data on Massachusetts' children—the impetus for this report—would suggest that our existing efforts are not working for a large percentage of our children. We have favored reach over impact, and in many cases, the number of clients served has become our indicator of impact instead of effects on children's skills. In other words, we consider a program a success if it reaches lots of children and if the participating children, families, and/or providers like it, instead of measuring success by how much it influences children's behaviors and competencies around reading and ultimately their reading outcomes.

To understand whether a program or support is working—and for whom it works and under what conditions—we must commit to ongoing evaluation, formative and summative, informal and formal.³¹ We don't need large-scale evaluation on a regular basis, but we do need at least one indicator, at the child level, on the targeted outcome. Those data must then become part of an embedded routine of analysis and response, at the program level (see recommendations 2 and 3). Once key ingredients of successful programs are identified, then possible scaling-up across different contexts makes sense. However, this necessarily requires having planned for scaling-up at the design stage. And in the realm of formal evaluation, when we do evaluate, it's often a small pilot study involving maximum implementation, even with considerable support from the research team—conditions that we aren't able to take to scale. Discovering what works for Massachusetts' children at scale also requires larger samples as part of a field trial.

Sufficient Dosage for Impact: Are We Augmenting Behaviors Enough to Make a Difference?

Reaching the tipping point for changing behaviors so as

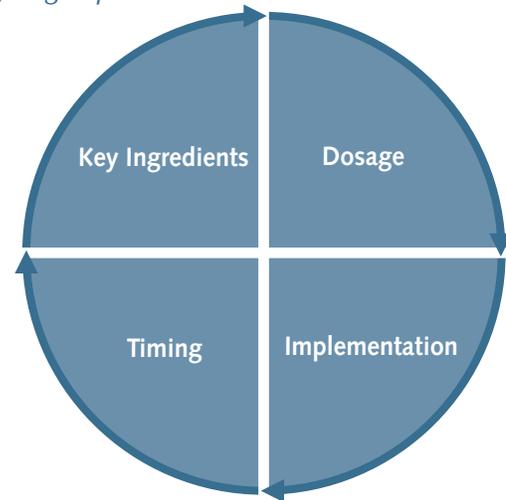
to improve children's reading outcomes requires a deep, sustained investment of time and effort. Yet the dosage levels, intensity and depth of services, matter—such as how much time is spent in the program, how often it happens, or the frequency of contact with participants. For many language and reading supports, these increments are too small; consider the weekly tutoring session or the periodic parent education night that never gains enough traction to influence behaviors and, in turn, make a difference to reading outcomes.³² Often, the basic elements of the program are theoretically sound, research-based, and practically feasible—they make good sense for the population and fit the context. However, the design with respect to depth and intensity is under-powered, or not sufficient to make a difference.

So we may think we need more or new programs when in fact what we may need to do is to increase the intensity and depth of our existing ones and see if that works. When we successfully solve the dosage problem, we may be left with the (good) problem of how to bring the program to scale. With a proven remedy for moving students' reading outcomes, there should be many viable opportunities to build political will and even pool limited resources to get programs to scale. Investing in these remedies does not necessarily require an increase in spending; it involves recapturing monies we are currently spending on less effective programming, as well as on the individual and societal costs associated with reading failure.

Implementation Characteristics for Impact: Are We Really Delivering the Program or Support?

Quality of implementation is a major barrier to impact on children's reading outcomes; even our model programs quickly lose their impact if not implemented correctly. Yet our research finds widespread examples of program implementation that differed greatly from the original program design, especially when taking a program to scale.³³ The problems noted include issues of funding and other logistics, lack of sustained leadership, lack of sustained effort and attention to the initiative or practice, lack of adequately skilled staff, insufficient training provided, and a truncated program, whether in duration and or in the components of the program implemented. Ultimately, any one of these issues, but especially two or more in combination, make any given program very different from what was initially conceived, drifting too far from the design for impact.³⁴ To ensure the ongoing effectiveness of large-scale programs, leaders should

Analyzing Impact



commit to rigorous standards, providing ongoing training and technical assistance by appropriate professionals, and to engaging in continual quality assessment, which might inform mid-course corrections (for further on this, see recommendation 3). If a program's evaluation indicates that reading outcomes improved, then the reality of the services implemented must match the characteristics of the tested program design.

Timing for Impact: Are We Focused on Prevention and Early Identification of Reading Difficulties?

In the pursuit of better reading outcomes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of remediation. And prevention has been estimated at a mere fraction of the costs, on multiple levels. Therefore, at scale, we need to be much more focused on our children as readers *before* they are in grade 3. In turn, funding mechanisms for reading support programs in communities, across early education and care settings, and even in the primary grades, should be tied to data on language and reading *risk*, rather than focused on responding to entrenched reading difficulties.³⁵

In our research across the state, we found that obtaining grant money and other funds for struggling readers is, appropriately, tied to student data. However, at scale, the only data collected and available on early reading is the third grade MCAS. Yet long before grade 3, and even before children enter preschool, they display differences in language skills—differences strongly related to later outcomes—that could serve to trigger services that would be preventive rather than remedial. We must remember that *every new competency is built upon competencies that came before*, and likewise, every difficulty fuels future

ones. Therefore, if we want to promote the accumulation of strengths, rather than permit weaknesses, our focus should be early identification and supports. Not only are preventive approaches to early language and risk significantly more effective than are remedial services for entrenched reading difficulties, but with our youngest children, preventive approaches are really enrichment—they are good for *all* children. They readily match children's developmental stages and are easily embedded into their daily settings. Furthermore, they are enjoyed rather than resented. Appropriately timed supports and programs, matched to a child's developmental stage, necessarily require ongoing assessment data to inform our understanding of a child's language and reading development, the subject of our next recommendation.³⁶

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