

Hands-on

Learning from our implementing partners

Stellenbosch University

Mother-infant booksharing: Stellenbosch University shares their implementation experience

Peter Cooper, Lynne Murray, Zahir Vally and Mark Tomlinson

Research from economically developed countries suggests that book sharing between a caregiver and an infant may be especially effective as a means of promoting infant cognitive and language development. This research, generally with children aged 9 months to 2 years, has consistently found that book-sharing is quite naturally treated by parents as a 'language acquisition device'. Periods of prolonged joint attending between a caregiver and infant more commonly occur when sharing picture books than in other situations; further, during these times, more than in any other context, caregivers name objects for the infant, and they more often acknowledge, extend, and elaborate on the focus of the infant's interests or on the sounds they make. Talking about people's thoughts, feelings, and intentions has also been found to occur more commonly in the context of sharing picture books than in other kind of conversation with young children, and this kind of talk has been found, in turn, to predict how well children understand other people's experience. Significantly, training studies that have aimed to improve the quality of book sharing have consistently shown that, compared to other kinds of parent training, book-sharing programmes are associated with greater gains in infants' language skills. There has, however, been little work on the impact of promoting booksharing with infants in low and middle income settings (LMIC).

We have developed a booksharing training programme for delivery to isiXhosa speaking families. This involves caregivers meeting in groups (usually between three and five caregivers and infants) with a trainer on a weekly basis over six to eight weeks. The trainer's role is to convey didactic information, to model key skills, and to facilitate and encourage caretakers in good practice. This is achieved using a power point presentation together with attached exemplar video material. Following the presentation, each carer-infant pair has a brief period of sharing a book during which the trainer makes suggestions and provides support.

We piloted this training programme in Khayelitsha¹. We compared two groups of mothers and infants, one which received book-sharing training, and the other a comparison group which received support with general play (as a control for contact time). We recruited four trainers who enthusiastically engaged in the process of acquiring the necessary skills. We were impressed by how, following a week of instruction, these women had grasped the essentials of what was necessary to be effective trainers and had developed the confidence to take

¹ Cooper, P.J., Vally, Z, Cooper, H, Sharples, A, Radford, T, Tomlinson, M. & Murray, L. (2013) Promoting mother-infant book-sharing and child cognitive development in an impoverished South African population: a pilot study. *Early Childhood Education*. DOI10.1007/s10643-013-0591-8



on the role of trainer. Certainly, they were able to present the material to the women and children involved in the pilot study with, to a greater or lesser degree, fluency, confidence, and authority. (Two of the women were especially adept in the role). Many of the mothers who received book-sharing support, when initially presented with the idea of booksharing, expressed amazement that this was even possible; but they were utterly convinced by the video material shown of the process in action. Certainly, throughout the training the presentations of videos was compelling and of enormous use to the trainers in illustrating to the mothers the points they wished to make. The mothers engaged well with the book sharing training. They also benefited from it. Thus, compared to the comparison mothers, in the assessment of book sharing, the mothers who received the training became more sensitive, more facilitating, and more elaborative with their infants; and in a play assessment, they also became more sensitive. Notably, there appeared to be general benefits from the training for both infant attention and language.

These preliminary findings have now been confirmed in an RCT (supported by the DG Murray Foundation and a Felix Foundation Fellowship). In particular, significant and substantial benefits were found for those receiving the booksharing training compared to a comparison group, both in terms of maternal behaviours (in the booksharing situation and beyond) and child attention and language development. Below is a brief synopsis of the training programme.

The Training Programme

The book sharing training course described below involves eight training sessions, although it can probably be delivered effectively in some contexts in fewer sessions. The sessions can be run on a one to one basis or in small groups. Each session begins with a PowerPoint presentation which is accompanied by brief illustrative video clips. The PowerPoint sessions typically last for about half an hour and are then followed by a 10 to 15 minute session of individual attention, where the trainer sits with a caretaker and infant while they share a book. This is an opportunity for the trainer to

support and encourage the caretaker in what they are doing, as well as to model optimal behaviours. Typically, during these individual sessions, the trainer will take the opportunity to share the book with the infant herself, modeling the sorts of behaviours that have been discussed in the powerpoint presentation.

Session 1: The first session is an introductory one. It is used to explain the nature and the purpose of the training programme. The central point is made early that although babies obviously cannot read, if they regularly share books with a caretaker, this can be enormously helpful to their development in general and to their preparation for beginning school in particular. The first powerpoint is as follows:

Book-Sharing helps your baby:

- Concentrate
- Learn new words
- Learn to use books
- Feel closer to you



Book-sharing will prepare your baby for starting school

It is stressed that children who have had regular book-sharing adapt to school much quicker than other babies, they learn much faster, and they generally do much better at school. The trainer emphasizes to the caretaker that it would therefore be very helpful to the development of their baby if they learned how to do good book-sharing. The rest of the introductory session is devoted to practical issues such as when to share books with their baby (i.e. when it is quiet, when they are not busy, when their baby is not hungry or very tired, and when the baby seems keen to engage in the activity with the caretaker), where to do booksharing (i.e. somewhere quiet and comfortable), and how to sit with their baby while booksharing. Different approaches – such as sitting with the baby on the caretaker's lap or sitting side by side on the floor – are shown in brief video clips. These video clips are



especially powerful, as they show young babies engaged with a carer in the booksharing process, something about which the carer at that point may well feel skeptical. Indeed, it is very common after the first session for a caretaker to say something like "I never knew that a baby could share a book with his carer. Until I saw this on the video I would have said it was not possible".

Starting to Book-Share

- Always follow what your baby is doing
- Don't go too fast
- Give your baby freedom with the book:
 - Biting the book
 - Turning the pages
 - Going backwards
 - Holding the book

Babies learn most when they are having fun

There are several core principles of booksharing that are emphasized from the start, as shown in the powerpoint above. This powerpoint is repeated at all the sessions, as a reminder of these principles. Critical amongst these is the idea of 'following the baby's lead'. That is, mothers are discouraged from trying to make the baby do something, and, instead, encouraged to take note of what the baby is doing and use this to engage the baby in the booksharing. So they are told to allow the baby to explore the book in any way they wish (including biting it if this is what they want to do), holding it and turning pages in any way they like. The mothers are told, as shown in the powerpoint

below, that they should talk about whatever it is the baby is doing with the book and looking at in the book.

Above all, it is emphasized that children learn most when they are having fun, so booksharing should be something the baby enjoys. For this reason caretakers are advised to make a ritual of booksharing, making it something special that takes place between the mother and child, in a special place at a set time. For each point made in the powerpoints, brief video clips are shown of caretakers (usually mothers) and babies which illustrate the point made. The trainer talks to the group during these clips, highlighting the important aspects of the video. (These clips come from a library of videos we have made of caretakers from Khayelitsha booksharing with their infants). At the end of each session, there is a summary powerpoint which reviews the key aspects of that session, as shown below:

SUMMARY

- Book sharing should always be FUN for your baby
- Book sharing is an opportunity for you and your baby to be close
- Always follow your baby's lead
 - let your baby set the pace
 - give your baby time to explore the pictures
- Notice what your baby is looking at and talk about it with him/her
- Stop when your baby is tired or has lost interest

Follow your baby's interest

Talk about what interests your baby
When your baby shows interest in a picture or a particular part of a picture (by pointing, or patting, or just looking), you should use this interest as a chance to talk about what has attracted your baby's interest.



The group session ends with a discussion of 'the book of the week'. This is the book the caretaker will be given to take home with them to share with their baby. The trainer goes through the book, highlighting its interesting features, suggesting what aspects might attract their baby's attention. The caretakers are encouraged to join in and make their own suggestions about what the book might stimulate them to talk about with their baby.



Finally, each caretaker and baby has a 10 to 15 minutes session of sharing the book of the week, with the individual attention of the trainer. The trainers support the mother in good practice; and, where judged necessary, they will put the baby in their own lap and demonstrate some important principle. Mothers then leave, with a 'take home card of the week', shown below, summarizing the important messages from that session. (At all future sessions, this summary card contains a picture, extracted from videos we take, of the caretaker sharing a book with her own baby).

Take home card for session 1

- Have a period of book sharing with your baby every day
- Make this a special time for just the two of you
- Book sharing should always be fun for your baby
- Gently help your baby learn how to handle the book
- Follow your baby and encourage him/her in his/her interests

All subsequent sessions review what has gone before but add some important new feature. Thus session 2 focuses on 'pointing and naming'. Session 3 elaborates on this, for example, adding the process of 'making links', shown below:

Making links

Connect words in the book to familiar things: Pointing at a mouth in the book, and say 'baby's mouth'; then point at baby's mouth, and say 'your mouth'; then point at your mouth and say mummy's mouth'.

Video clips are shown which provide clear examples of mothers making links with their infants. The take home card for that week emphasizes the two critical learning points for session 2 and 3, as shown below:

Take Home card for Session 3

- Point and name things to help your baby learn new words
- When your baby knows a word, ask him/her to show it to you:

- e.g. 'where is the dog' – 'can you show me the dog' – 'point at the dog'?
- Link what is in the book to your baby's experience:
 - e.g. 'Where's the dog's nose? And where is your nose? And where is mummy's nose?'

Session 4 builds on the linking principle and shows how the material the child is focusing on in the book can be elaborated on and linked to the baby's wider experience. Session 5, following the usual recapitulation of what has gone before, introduces the idea of using the material in the book to talk to the baby about feelings, those of characters in the book, and, through linking and elaboration, the baby's own feelings. Session six uses the five previous summary powerpoints to review all that has gone before and makes extensive use of video material to illustrate the points made. Each of the 10 to 15 minutes sessions of the caretaker sharing the book of the week with her baby are video recorded. In session six, where videos are shown to illustrate particular good practices, these come from these recordings of the caretakers themselves. So, within each group, the illustrations of good practice largely come from the members of that group. (Of course, care is taken to ensure that at least one piece of illustrated good practice is included from each of the caretakers in that group). This has a particularly powerful effect on the caretakers as it is a public endorsement of how well they are caring for their baby.

Where possible, two further sessions are held which review the entire programme. There is no set agenda for these sessions and trainers use them to highlight particular aspects of booksharing on which they feel members of that group require more guidance. Where they judge it necessary, they spend extended individual time with particular caretakers.

Conclusion

From our experience running the pilot study and the RCT we believe that there is now good evidence that:

1. Women from a community like Khayelitsha can be identified who, with instruction, can become effective trainers in booksharing for



their local community;

2. Mothers (and other carers – like fathers and grandparents) are receptive to the idea of booksharing as a novel way in which they can facilitate their child's development, and they are keen to obtain training;
3. Mothers who do receive the training programme significantly improve their booksharing skills and generally become more sensitive and responsive to their infants; and
4. Children whose mothers have receive booksharing training show marked improvements in attention and in language development.

We believe that the booksharing programme we have developed could be widely delivered within South Africa, and that if there were such delivery this could have a profound impact on the cognitive development of the country's children.

This learning brief tells of the hands-on experience of:



Stellenbosch University

Postal address:

Private Bag X1, Matieland
Cape Town
Stellenbosch
Western Cape
South Africa

Tel: +27 21 808 3446

Web: www.sun.ac.za

Email: p.j.cooper@reading.ac.uk

Email: markt@sun.ac.za