

Making Books Matter

A SIEF-supported impact evaluation in Kenya



Photo provided by study team.

Problem. In many poor countries, children start school without the basic skills to learn and thrive. Often families don't have access to affordable, quality preschools; caregivers don't know how important playing and talking with children is for their development. Programs that rely on home visits to teach parents how to stimulate their children's development can be difficult and costly to implement successfully. Programs implemented through existing preschools may miss younger and more disadvantaged children. Researchers supported by SIEF set out to test whether providing storybooks to families in rural Kenya and giving short lessons on how to use the books to engage young children can improve children's developing pre-literary skills. The results will be useful for policymakers and development organizations seeking low-cost approaches to encouraging caregivers to positively interact with their children to build cognitive and other skills needed to start school right.

Intervention. With funding from the World Bank and the California-based Echidna Giving, the researchers partnered with a local publisher, Moran Publishers, to adapt culturally and linguistically appropriate children's books in English and Swahili, the two main languages of Kenya, and Luo, the dominant local language in the region where the study is taking place. Families with young children received two books in each language. The intervention also included a short training for caregivers on techniques for reading interactively with children, with a specific emphasis on how illiterate caregivers could use the books.

Evaluation Design. The study is taking place in predominantly Luo-speaking rural areas within three hours of Kisumu, the third-largest city in Kenya. For the short-term analysis of the impacts of the books, 357 households with a total of 510 children between the ages of two and six years were included in the study. Households were randomly assigned to be in the control group or to receive storybooks. Those receiving books were then randomly assigned to either receive books alone, or books with one of three types of training. The training consisted of either a single three-hour group training, or the single training and a follow-up trainings, or the two group meetings and a home visit that reinforced the messages from the trainings. Families assigned to receive training also were sent text messages encouraging them to read with their children. At baseline, child vocabulary, parent literacy, and a range of related measures were assessed. Six weeks after the intervention was launched, researchers returned to survey parents on reading behavior and to measure children's knowledge of books and vocabulary. The intervention was rolled out between March and October 2016.

Eligibility. Households with children between the ages of two and seven.

Results. A survey of participants five to six weeks after the books were distributed found improvements in the vocabulary of children whose parents received the books and training, as compared with those who were in the control group. Just receiving the books, with or without the training, increased the probability of children being read to in the previous three days, while receiving books with training resulted in children being read to more frequently. The increase in reading frequency was biggest among illiterate caregivers, who used the pictures to tell a story. Adding in a home visit did not change outcomes for the children or the reading frequency.

Next Steps. A longer-term evaluation also funded by SIEF is underway to examine if parents retain what they learned from the training and continue to practice interactive reading with their children and if children demonstrate lasting gains in their vocabulary. This part of the study includes a much bigger sample size of some 2,000 caregivers across 73 communities. Children and their caregivers will be tested about one year after the books were handed out.

Publications

“Enhancing young children’s language acquisition through parent–child book-sharing: A randomized trial in rural Kenya,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* (2019)

“Enhancing Young Children’s Language Acquisition through Parent-Child Book-Sharing: A Randomized Trial in Rural Kenya,” Working Paper 502, Center for Global Development, 2019; also available from the World Bank Policy Research Working Paper Series, number 8733, February 2019.

Emerge Baseline Report, 2018

SIEF supports scientifically rigorous research that tests the impact of innovative programs and policies that try to improve education, health, access to quality water and sanitation, and early childhood development in low and middle income countries. Evidence about programs’ impacts and cost effectiveness allows governments and others to better focus future efforts and investments. SIEF was launched with the support of the British government’s Department for International Development (DFID). Other donors include the London-based Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF), which seeks catalytic change for children, including promoting early childhood development and evidence-based solutions.



Strategic Impact
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