

Family and lifestyle factors affect child literacy

9 October 2014, by Rebecca Graham



Dr Heath says these results come at the end of several studies they have conducted in WA since 1995, and feels confident this new information could be very useful for schools. Credit: Phil Dowsing Creative

UWA researchers have demonstrated that accurately identifying children at risk of literacy problems before they begin to struggle at school requires an assessment approach which combines child, family and environmental factors.

The longitudinal study led by UWA's School of Psychology expert Dr Steve Heath followed 102 children (56 boys and 46 girls) from when they were approximately four years to six years of age.

"Literacy researchers now know a lot about things in [young children](#) that influence how well they will pick up [literacy](#), and also what [family](#) factors are important influences," she says

"[However] nobody had brought all this information together to see if they could achieve more accurate early identification of children at risk for literacy problems."

They used a range of oral language, phonological

awareness (PA; the way we process speech sounds), sentence recall, rapid naming of highly-familiar items, letter knowledge, and word reading measures to test children's pre-literacy and early literacy skills.

Children were assessed at the beginning of Preschool, the beginning and end of Kindergarten, and end of Year One.

The researchers then combined this information with family and [environmental factors](#)— including the parent's educational attainment level, the parents' own PA, and how able parents felt in supporting their child's literacy development— which was assessed through questionnaires taken by the parents.

Factors help pinpoint struggling students

"Combining [family factors](#) with what we knew about the children themselves did indeed help us to be more accurate in predicting which children would be likely to already be falling behind [85 per cent accurate], and who would not be struggling [90 per cent accurate], by the end of Year One" Dr Heath says.

"[In addition], on average, children at high risk for literacy problems—those with three or more family risk factors—started off significantly weaker at literacy than their low-risk peers.

"[They] did not reach the [literacy levels](#) of low-risk children even after a year of formal literacy instruction."

Dr Heath says these results come at the end of several studies they have conducted in WA since 1995, and feels confident this new information could be very useful for schools.

She suggests using speech sound awareness, naming speed and sentence memory tests, which

take between five to 10 minutes to conduct, to identify high-risk children as these tests provide reasonable estimates of literacy skills.

"These identified [children](#) could then receive evidence-based literacy instruction, such as structured synthetic phonics, and follow-up that includes best-practice intervention if required," she says.

More information: The complete study is available online: www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0095255#s4

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