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**STUDY LINKS HOME LITERACY ENVIRONMENT AND HOUSEHOLD ORDER
TO CHILDREN'S EARLY READING ABILITIES**

-- Results suggest potential for new approaches to encouraging literacy in the home --

NEW YORK, February 16, 2009 – New research suggests that the degree of household order and certain child-focused home literacy characteristics (such as the number of books a child owns or brings home, and how often a child amuses herself alone with books) are positively associated with measures of early reading ability. The findings, from researchers at Teachers College, Columbia University and Ohio State University, are published in the October 2008 issue of Merrill-Palmer Quarterly.

Although there have been previous studies evaluating the effects of household chaos and the home literacy environment (HLE)¹ on child and family wellbeing, this study is the first to test the association between household chaos (defined here as the degree of order and the degree of quiet) and early reading development in young school-aged children, and the first to examine whether maternal reading ability moderates the association between early reading and either household chaos or the HLE.

The researchers examined data from 455 kindergarten/first-grade children enrolled in the Western Reserve Reading Project, including identical and same-sex fraternal twin pairs from several areas of Ohio and Western Pennsylvania. All analyses controlled for family socioeconomic status, measured as maternal education level following past studies of early reading.

From an analysis of the results, the study indicates that household order (but not household quiet) is associated with early reading skills among children whose mothers are of *above-average*

¹ The term **home literacy environment** (HLE) typically refers to a subset of environmental factors thought to be most relevant for literacy growth, including but not limited to: frequency with which a parent reads to child (i.e. shared or joint reading), age when reading with child began, time spent reading to child, number of books child owns, frequency with which child asks to be read to, frequency with which child looks at books by self, frequency of trips to library with child, frequency with which caregiver reads to self, child's hours of television viewing per day.

reading ability. By contrast, the HLE is primarily associated with early reading skills among children whose mothers are of *average* reading ability. Specifically, HLE characteristics that were child- rather than parent-driven (such as whether child owns more than 30 books, how often child amuses self with books, and the number of books child brings home) are significantly associated with early reading ability for children of average readers. How often the child amuses herself with books was actually the only HLE characteristic associated with early reading among *all* children, *regardless* of maternal reading ability.

The finding that household order but not household quiet is associated with early reading development is especially interesting, since other research has found connections between environmental noise, children's reading comprehension, and school achievement. The researchers suggest that maybe their sample was better able to withstand household noise than household disorder. "Perhaps because all children in the current study have a twin and thus have always been exposed to a certain level of background noise, they are more habituated to household noise and are therefore less vulnerable to its effects," noted Anna Johnson, research fellow at the National Center for Children and Families (NCCF) at Columbia University, and first author of the study.

Surprisingly, while the single most touted aspect of the HLE in prior research has been shared book reading, the current study found no association between how often the child is read to and early reading skill. The researchers note that most previous studies on the topic were done with preschoolers (not kindergartners/first graders), suggesting perhaps that shared reading impacts the reading skills of preschool-aged children, which may then contribute to later interest in reading.

The implications of this study in helping to advance early reading development are significant. From a reading promotion perspective, these findings are encouraging in that they may provide parents who are weaker readers, who do not enjoy reading, or who lack the time for shared reading a set of alternatives for improving the reading outcomes of their young children based on different strategies that best fit their family's needs.

"Our results highlight the potential promise of approaches for enhancing early literacy growth in the home beyond shared reading, which until now has been favored to the exclusion of other possible strategies," says Anne Martin, Dr.PH, NCCF research scientist. "Encouraging child-directed activities such as making books available in the home and allowing children to amuse themselves with books may be equally important and effective approaches to improving early reading." "Furthermore," Martin adds, "for mothers who are above-average readers but may not

have the time or inclination to read aloud, there may be a new strategy that has been overlooked until now: keeping an orderly home."

The authors caution that there are limitations to the study. Among other factors, the generalizability of the sample is limited both geographically and socio-economically, and families with twins differ from families with singletons.

Full Article: Johnson, A., Martin, A., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Petrill, S. (2008). Order in the house! Associations among household chaos, the home literacy environment, maternal reading ability, and children's early reading. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, October 2008, Vol. 54, No.4, pp. 445-472. View article online at: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/merrill-palmer_quarterly/v054/54.4.johnson.pdf

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