

USU Storytelling Program Improves Language Skills for At-Risk Children

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The SKILL program is designed to improve children's ability to tell and comprehend stories.

Funded by a \$3 million grant from the National Center for Education Research, researchers at Utah State University and the University of Texas at Austin have studied a promising solution to the decline of educational outcomes following the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study, conducted in 138 classrooms in 14 schools in Northern Utah and Central Texas, was designed to rigorously evaluate the efficacy of the Supporting Knowledge of Language and Literacy (SKILL) intervention program, which aims to improve children's ability to comprehend and tell stories.

School closures and online learning during the pandemic resulted in significant learning setbacks for many children, especially those who were already at risk for academic difficulties even before the pandemic. On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, given to a sample of about 15,000 third- and fourth-graders, reading performance fell below pre-pandemic levels. The drop in performance for low-achieving students was four times greater than the drop for high-achieving students. These trends mean that educators must find ways to make up for significant disparities in educational achievement after the pandemic.

Drs. Sandi and Ron Gillam, researchers in Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education and in the Emma Eccles Jones Early Childhood Education and Research Center, conducted a multi-year trial to evaluate SKILL, an instructional program to improve oral and written language skills in at-risk children in grades 1-4. They were joined in

this research by Drs. Sharon Vaughn and Greg Roberts at the University of Texas at Austin.

Statistical analyses revealed that students who received SKILL lessons significantly improved in their abilities to comprehend and tell stories when compared with students who did not receive the lessons. These children also remained significantly more advanced five months after the lessons ended and were able to apply their learning in writing and reading significantly better than the children in the control group. Children who received the SKILL lessons, regardless of severity, demonstrated measurable improvements in their oral and written language and reading skills.

In addition to these measurable improvements, students and their families have expressed the benefits they have seen from the SKILL program. One student, Clara, commented, "My favorite thing about that program was just being a part of it, or finally feeling like I got a chance. It helped me to know I could do hard things." Her mother added that she was extremely pleased with the SKILL program as she watched her daughter's test scores improve and her love of reading grow. "I attribute participation in the SKILL program as a crucial turning point for her," she said. "She is now in seventh grade and says that her favorite subjects are writing and science. As a mom, there is nothing more rewarding than watching your child gain the confidence you always knew they had inside. We just needed the right thing to bring it out."

The SKILL storytelling program is a promising development for school districts across the nation, which are faced with the challenge of helping at-risk children catch up to pre-pandemic levels of performance in language and reading. The results of this multi-site, randomized controlled trial indicate that the SKILL storytelling program leads to significant improvements in oral language, reading comprehension, and writing for the children who were at-risk for language and literacy difficulties that participated in the study. The intervention may be one solution for closing the gap between the students who suffered most from school closures and their higher performing peers.