

# Hebrew Reading Difficulties and Behavior Problems: Is There a Link?

Scott Goldberg presents findings of original research suggesting that there is a correlation between students with difficulties reading Hebrew and behavior problems in the classroom.

A group of mental health professionals and educators in the Orthodox Jewish community have gathered each year since 1999 to discuss the children in crisis in their community and to produce a manual to guide educators in dealing with the issue. The group identified three main areas of risk: child risk factors, family risk factors, and environmental risk factors (Russell & Blumenthal, 2000). These factors are closely connected to the risk factors for behavior problems in the general population that have been empirically identified by Rutter (2000): weak familial relationships, weak social cohesion, and weak cognitive/language skills.

In the general population, both disorganized parenting and family dysfunction represent a "substantial risk associated with a lack of ongoing, harmonious, selective committed relationships" (Rutter, 2000, p. 390). Weak social cohesion within the family, peer group, school, or community is another risk factor (Rutter, 2000). Indeed, isolation from a community has been shown to be a cause of aggression (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). Cognitive/language disabilities constitute a third risk factor for behavior problems in the general population.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological theory of development, which proposes that development occurs through the interaction between the individual and multiple contexts, and Bandura's social cognitive theory, which suggests that children actively interact with and learn from their environment, it would be appropriate to consider these various risk factors as interconnected. Not only does this process involve the child's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, but also the actions and perceptions of others (Bandura, 1989). Thus, a child's behaviors will be affected by his thoughts and feelings, as well as his community (Rogoff, 1992; Wertsch & Toma, 1995). Self-efficacy, the extent to which a person views himself as

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effective, develops through these interactions between the child and his environment. That is, children assess their own behavior, compare their actions with those of others, and are informed by others how their behavior rates according to certain

communal values (Bandura, 1997). In general, language plays a significant role in this process of social cognitive development (Nelson, 1996). Language is a "cultural tool" used by the child to gain an understanding of communal standards and to evaluate his own behavior (Vygotsky, 1978). Just as Dewey (1916) suggests that knowledge is a "mode of participation" (p. 393) for the individual in his world, language is a skill that furthers social cognition (Tomasello, 2002).

## ■ The Relationship Between Language, Reading, and Behavior

The association between reading and behavior problems has been well documented (e.g., Gellert & Elbro, 1999; Smart, Sanson, & Prior, 1996; Cornwall & Bawden, 1992; Hinshaw, 1992; Kellermann, Fuqua-Whitley, & Rivara, 1996; Lyytinen, Ahonen, Eklund, Guttorm, & Laasko, 2001). Whether this relationship in the general population is a causal one (i.e., reading disabilities cause behavior problems), and if so in what direction, is unclear from these studies.

The present study has made an attempt to rule out underlying variables that impact both reading and behavior. Concerning the influence of the home environment, both reading and behavior difficulties have been associated with poorer living standards (Williams & McGee, 1994; Silva, Williams, & McGee, 1987). In addition, Fergusson and Lynskey (1997) connect a punitive and less nurturing mother-child relationship with reading troubles for the child and

**S**cott Goldberg, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Education and Psychology at Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration. He holds a Ph.D. in Applied Psychology from New York University, an M.S.Ed. in Special Education from Bank Street College of Education in New York, and a B.A. in Jewish Studies from the University of Chicago. Dr. Goldberg is a licensed Reading Specialist and Learning Disabilities Teacher - Consultant.

link poorer living standards and attentional problems with both reading and behavior. Environmental factors such as exposure to print, parent and child attitudes towards literacy, and the modeling of literacy activities by parents that impact the development of emergent literacy skills (Galda & Cullinan, 2002) have been found to be associated with ADHD and related behaviors (Lonigan et al., 1999). Such underlying familial influences have been considered under the rubric of childhood stressors in the present study.

Delayed language development appears to be another risk factor for behavior problems (Richman, Stevenson, & Graham, 1982; Silva, Williams, and McGee, 1987). Richman et al. (1982) also concluded that these issues may not be apparent immediately as it is sustained school failure that leads to behavior problems. In a review of the relationship between reading disabilities, behavior problems and delinquency, Gellert and Elbro (1999) concur that underlying language issues appear to cause both reading and behavior problems.

However, Lindsay and Dockrell (2000) and Tomblin, Zhang, Buckwalter, and Catts (2000) challenge this conclusion. In a study of seven and eight year old students identified as having a speech and language disorder, Lindsay and Dockrell (2000) conclude that reading comprehension mediated the behavioral disposition of students already diagnosed with language impairment. Tomblin et al. (2000) also conclude that reading disability

mediates the link between language impairment and behavior disorder.

Tomblin and his colleagues conclude, based on the understanding of comorbidity by Caron and Rutter (1991), that comorbidity may not



accurately characterize the relationship between these three conditions. In the case of the three disorders, rather than consider them to be a combined incidence of independent issues, they suggest considering the relationship to be one of:

an association between two conditions where one served as a risk factor for the other...If RD [reading disability] serves as a mediating variable between LI [language impairment] and BD [behavior disorder], effective reading intervention should reduce the rates of BD [behavior disorder] among those children (p. 480).

Specific remediation techniques have indeed been found to reduce behavior problems (Barrera et al., 2002; Kellam, Mayer, Rebok, & Hawkins, 1998).

Accordingly, Lane et al. (2001) suggest that early interventions must consider the most effective means by which to provide reading disabled children with broad reading skills (i.e., decoding and comprehension skills) at a rate at which they can succeed along with their peers. Likewise, when early intervention programs such as the Reading Recovery program have been implemented in their entirety, the results have been quite positive in reducing reading difficulties (Wasik & Slavin, 1993; Shanahan & Barr, 1995; Herman & Stringfield, 1997) but when the entire program is not implemented, the effectiveness of Reading Recovery is compromised (Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2001).

■ **The Role of Hebrew Language in the Jewish Community**  
Jerome Bruner writes: "Culture is constituted of symbolic procedures, concepts, and distinctions that can only be made in language... Language, in consequence, cannot be understood save in its cultural setting" (Bruner, 1983, p. 134). For the child, the shared meanings attained from the larger community reshape the child's own meanings in his or her mind (Nelson, 1996). Thus, language plays a powerful role in community building and maintenance, as it connects or disconnects one to a group of people. It is not surprising, then, based on

the previous discussion of language and social functioning, that the Hebrew language is a major source of Jewish identity for the Jewish people (Schiff, 1997). Hence, "Jewish education has to find means of harnessing literacy and identity education, not separating them or treating them as conflicting goals" (London & Chazan, 1990, p. 20). While Hebrew language in general is a crucial aspect of Jewish identity and sense of belongingness, the

written word of Hebrew specifically has made a significant contribution to this cause. Schiff (1996) writes: "A major dimension, and for some the most important aspect, the essential vehicle of Hebrew language usage, is the broad, encompassing, variegated body of the Hebrew writing of the Jewish people" (p. 28). When considering the history of literacy in the Jewish community one must note that although "many, or even most of the Jews in

the various periods of Jewish history may not have been bi-lingual (at home in the language of their adopted lands and in Hebrew), they were, by and large, bi-literal having a reading or cultural knowledge of Hebrew as well as the language of their lands of residence" (Schiff, 1996, p. 17).

To understand the role of Hebrew literacy in forging identity and building community for Orthodox Jews, one must consider that specific community's value of

learning and living by its religious texts (Schiff, 1996). In discussing this important role of literacy in the culture of a community, Alexander (1999) explains, "Embedded in the language of a culture is the way in which that culture is communicated across the generations. Embedded in the syntax, style and literacy allusions of the language are a whole host of values and concepts and ideas that are lost in translation... literacy, language, and literature are the ways a learning community or culture is transmitted across the generations" (p. 61).

Indeed, "an important part of group identity is that which sets the group off from others" (Waxman, 1999). Unfortunately, those who do not gain reading proficiency in Hebrew may feel marginalized as a result of a lack of ability to participate fully in literacy-based community activities. Helmreich (2000) writes about just such

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Orthodox Jewish youths who feel marginalized:

They want to be part of the frum [Orthodox] world, but they do not feel wanted...they often feel rejected by the community and are responding to that. Their parents, fearful of confronting and even acknowledging such behavior by their offspring, will tell counselors that their children were not good students and that the yeshiva offers no acceptable self-respecting alternative for those who do not do well in school. Scorned by their more studious peers, they act out (p. xxiii).

## ■ Latency and Pathways: Models of Development

Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective of development, Keating and Hertzman (1999) discuss how social conditions systematically affect human development. In one explanation of this process, the "latency" model, "psychosocial and socioeconomic conditions very early in life will have a strong impact later in life independent of intervening experience" (Keating & Hertzman, 1999, p. 7). According to such an understanding, regardless of any intervention, a child having difficulty with the reading process or with behavior would suffer from the effects of the initial problem later in life. Likewise, childhood stress from child, familial, or environmental problems early in life may result in problem behavior later in life regardless of intercession.

Alternatively, the developmental "pathways" model (see Thelen and Smith, 1998 for a complete explanation of this theory) "emphasizes the cumulative effect of life events and the reinforcing effect of differing psychosocial and socioeconomic circumstances throughout the life cycle" (Keating & Hertzman, 1999, p. 8). In this way, the pathways model provides a framework with which to

understand the negative cumulative effects of chronic stress and other risk factors and the positive effects of intervention and prevention.

Concerning risk factors within the developmental pathways model, Rutter (2000) cautions us not to assume that the origins and mode of mediation of a risk factor are synonymous. When we consider reading within this model we must be careful not to associate reading disability directly with behavior problems. Rather, we must consider that it is the effects of a reading problem that may be associated

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However, if the reading difficulties are addressed, the child may begin to move towards a sense of inclusion and more prosocial behavior

directly with behavior problems. We must think about the effects of reading disability – such as poor academic achievement, lowered self-esteem, or, exclusion from the community – to understand the link between reading disability and behavior problems. Indeed, Pisecco, Wristers, Swank, Silva, and Baker (2001) found that poor academic self-concept directly promotes the development of behavior problems. Academic motivation may also be used to predict behavior problems in that it directly impacts skill-based performance (Oehler-Stinnett & Boykin, 2001).

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a sense of exclusion may lead to behavior problems. However, if the reading difficulties are addressed, the child may begin to move towards a sense of inclusion and more prosocial behavior. Accordingly, while the reading problems may lead to a sense of exclusion from the Orthodox Jewish community, it is this exclusion that would be the direct link to the behavior problems. The present study examined this link.

Results indicate that social exclusion perceived by the student moderates the relationship between Hebrew decoding and aggressive behavior problems. Indeed, this study found that the emergence of behavior problems in the Orthodox Jewish community may be associated with Orthodox Jewish students feeling isolated from the community due to poor literacy skills.

## ■ Conclusions

As expected, Hebrew decoding (and not comprehension) was found to be associated with student perceptions of social exclusion. Russell and Blumenthal (2000) discuss such exclusion:

The socially rejected child is at particular risk for later problems.

Social skills are among the most important predictors of later success in life. Children rejected by peers are, as adolescents, at particular risk for seeking acceptance among more marginal groups including those who rebel against their families, communities and/or religious practices (p. 2).

Such marginalization experienced by children may be a result of Hebrew decoding difficulties; this social exclusion may then lead to aggressive behavior problems. Indeed, Twenge et al. (2001) found that social isolation is a cause of aggression. Without an ability to participate fully in communal prayer services, Judaic classroom learning, and religious acts in the home, an individual unable to decode Hebrew may feel marginalized from

the community and the larger history of the Jewish people.

The practical ramifications of these findings relate directly to potential interventions. Currently, most Orthodox Jewish day schools have pull-out resource room interventions for students who have difficulty with early Hebrew literacy. Removing the student from a classroom for remedial reading instruction may be another source of social exclusion

of behavior difficulties by way of social exclusion, mandates a serious consideration of a differentiated instruction model within the classroom setting.

Lastly, we have seen the role that social interaction and reading play in behavioral outcomes for Modern Orthodox Jewish children. Without early intervention assessment tools, schools will be unable to properly diagnose reading difficulties and

be validated for effectiveness. Finally, interventions for struggling Hebrew readers that do not further exclude these children socially must be developed, tested for effectiveness, and implemented.

Given the obvious limitations of an individual study, the results of the current study still provide a foundation for changes in literacy assessment and instruction, intervention and remediation models

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in addition to the Hebrew decoding difficulty itself. Further, in Orthodox Jewish day schools, students who exhibit aggressive behavior or other externalizing behavior problems are often separated from their peers without practical recognition of the role that social exclusion plays in the problem behavior. Thus, school discipline and academic interventions may well exacerbate the behavior problems associated with Hebrew reading difficulties.

In contrast, Barrera et al. (2002) found a tertiary intervention, including parenting classes, social skills training for children, and supplementary reading instruction, to be successful in reducing students' (K - 3) aggressive behavior. Likewise, in the school setting, Sugai, Kame'enui, Horner, and Simmons (1998) suggest a school-wide systems approach to both behavior management and early literacy. Interventions for social skills and reading skills need not further isolate students from their peers. Rather, understanding the path involved in the manifestation

stave off the potential effects of these problems. When Sugai et al. (1998) discuss this problem for English reading in the general population, they suggest a school-wide behavioral program, as well as a

used in Jewish schools, and disciplinary procedures. Russell and Blumenthal (2000) write: "every interaction a parent or educator has with a child is an opportunity to promote his or her sense of being a

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school-wide literacy program. Included in such a literacy program would be dynamic (i.e., skill-based) assessments of indicators of early literacy, research based reading instruction for everyone, and research based customized interventions for children with reading issues in integrated learning environments. While dynamic assessments of Hebrew reading are being developed at the present time by this researcher, they are still only in a "pilot" stage of use. Further, Hebrew curriculum and instruction practices grounded in empirical studies of Hebrew reading and second language pedagogy need to

valuable member of our community" (p. 1). The community has largely misunderstood what the content and context of this interaction should be. The Jewish community must respond to the findings in this study by supporting the research and development of Hebrew reading assessments and pedagogical techniques to prevent reading difficulties for the beginning reader and intervene with the challenged reader in order to stave off potential social rejection and behavior problems in both populations. As these tools are developed, the goal should be to make intervention rare and prevention the norm.



An expanded version of this article, including statistical analysis of the data upon which this article is based, appears in the web-edition at [http://www.lookstein.org/online\\_journal/index.php?id=74](http://www.lookstein.org/online_journal/index.php?id=74) in an article entitled "Hebrew Reading Difficulties and Social Exclusion: A Path to Aggressive Behavior"

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