

## **Let's Read the Story Again: An Insight into Employed and Unemployed Mother's Interactions After Story Reading**

**Malavika Anakkathil Anil<sup>1)</sup>**

Western Sydney University  
Manipal Academy of Higher  
Education

**Bindu S**

1SpecialPlace

**Jayashree S Bhat**

JS Speech and Hearing Clinic

### **Abstract**

Maternal interactions that follow after story reading provides critical learning opportunities; however, the differences in maternal employment on interactions after reading a story are not well-understood. The study aimed to profile employed and unemployed mothers' interaction after a story-reading task in typically developing children between two to five years. The study followed a cross-sectional design with a total of 60 participants in three age groups. Maternal behaviors after a story reading were documented using the formulated checklist, and the responses were descriptively analyzed. The results revealed that employed and unemployed mothers had majorly similar interactive behaviors with some differences in certain behaviors. Some of the most commonly occurring interactive behaviors among employed and unemployed mothers were answering the child's questions and story summarization; while the least commonly occurring, behaviors were rewarding the child for the correct answer or for attempting to answer and retelling the story on the child's request. Though most interactive behaviors are practiced among employed and unemployed mothers, a small percentage fail to do so, indicating the need to educate and create awareness among mothers on the significance of interactions post a book reading session.

**Keywords:** Child, Interactions, Mother, Stories

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Corresponding author, <sup>1)</sup> aa.malvika@gmail.com

## **Introduction**

One of the most frequently occurring early literacy practices is the interactions in shared storybook reading, which revolve around three significant components: a book, an adult, and a child (Hammer et al., 2016; van Kleeck, 2003). Several emotional, social, and cognitive benefits of shared book reading have been associated with early literacy development. Studies have reported improvements in the acquisition of vocabulary, communication skills, comprehension, and knowledge (de Temple & Snow, 2003; Fletcher et al., 2008). Literature also provides evidence that the quality of the rich interactions that occur between the mother and child is a strong indicator of the mother-child bond and the development of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills (Landry et al., 2006; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001).

During storybook reading, maternal guidance and support involve several interaction strategies such as questioning, prompting, elaboration, praising, and scaffolding to better understand stories. These interaction strategies align with parental interaction styles. A study by Melzi and Caspe, in 2005 reported two dimensions of maternal narrative styles: story tellers and story builders. Story tellers focused on ensuring the child's attention to the story and staying on the storyline, whereas story builders made child-directed requests, involved the child in the narration, and discussed topics related to the story. It was observed that the story teller style engaged in interactions more during book reading activities as the focus was to provide narrative information with minor deviation from the storyline (Melzi et al., 2011); however, the story builder style maintained the story coherence during and after book reading to relate the story to the real world (Melzi & Caspe, 2005). Interactions that follow story reading are often associated with a story builder's style, which encourages recall of story content, responses to a child's comments, and summarizations of the story with the child (Kim & Park, 2015).

Despite interactions being present during story reading, the interactions that follow a story reading provide critical opportunities for better comprehension of the content. A study by Kim and Park in 2015 reported that most of the interactions which occur during story reading are predominantly low-level activities with parents asking closed-ended questions and focusing on comprehension of the text at hand to build local coherences (Kim & Park, 2015).

However, interactions that follow story reading were largely high-level activities that focused on integrating different components of the story into a coherent construct that helps a child comprehend the story better (van den Broek & Espin, 2012), clearly highlighting how the interactions vary across a shared reading activity. They also reported that the interactions that occur after a story reading also have the potential to contribute to a child's development of narrative skills (Kim & Park, 2015; Zevenbergen et al., 2003), however, such interactions occur less during interactions, emphasizing the need to observe mother-child interactions after story reading.

While considering mother-child interactions, several factors are known to influence the quality of interaction with maternal employment being a crucial component to consider. The past few years have witnessed a transition in the labor markets with a good percentage of women entering employment. Studies report high time pressures and difficulties in balancing family and work responsibilities among American working families (Bianchi, 2011; Nomaguchi, 2009), with a reduction in the time spent with their children (Galinsky et al., 2011). Though the time constraints affect both parents, it is noticed that working mothers experience it more due to the uneven demands of caregiving (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). India is also one of the nations which have seen a shift in women taking up professional responsibilities in addition to the traditional role of the homemaker (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011). Indian culture often emphasizes the woman's commitment to family roles (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2001), with motherhood making it difficult for them to balance the career and management of a child and home (Parikh, 1998). However, studies in the USA by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) revealed that the quality and not quantity of maternal interaction is crucial for preventing problem behaviors, increasing pro-social behaviors, and child's linguistic skills (NICHD, 2001, 2002). The findings are bidirectional suggesting that maternal employment can positively and negatively influence child development. As the extent of maternal employment and its influence on mother-child interaction is not well-understood, the present study aimed to analyze the employed and unemployed mother's interactive behaviors after story-reading in typically developing children between the age of two to five years using a formulated checklist.

## Method

The study followed a cross-sectional design, and samples were selected through convenient, non-random sampling. The study protocol obtained ethical clearance from the Institutional Ethical Board. The sample size was estimated to be 60, based on the formula,  $n = (z\alpha + z\beta)^2 / c^2 + 3$ , where,  $c = 0.5 * \log[1 + r / 1 - r]$ ;  $r$  = correlation coefficient;  $Z\alpha$  = 95% confidence (1.96);  $Z\beta$  = power (0.84), with  $p < 0.05$  considered as significant with respect to study by (Melzi & Caspe, 2005). The participants were typically developing children between two to five years and mothers within the age range of 25-35 years, grouped into employed and unemployed categories with graduation as a minimum level of qualification. The inclusion of mothers belonging to middle socio-economic status was ascertained by Kuppuswamy's Socio-Economic Status Scale (Gadhawe & Nagarkar, 2015). The selection criteria for employed mothers were those working full-time jobs that did not regularly mandate a strong focus on mass media communication with limited human interaction (non-technical employment). Mothers and children with any complaints of speech, language, hearing, neurological, developmental, and intellectual disorders were excluded from the study. As it was a preliminary study to explore the study objectives the authors used the general flat rule, of a minimum of 30 participants or greater to estimate the study's parameter (Browne, 1995). Keeping the general flat rule, the authors included 60 participants as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. *Age range of child, mother, and number of participants in each group*

| Groups    | Age range of the child (years) | Age range of mothers | No. of participants (Unemployed Mothers) | No. of participants (Employed Mothers) |
|-----------|--------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Group I   | 2- 3                           | 25-35                | 10                                       | 10                                     |
| Group II  | 3.1-4                          | 25-35                | 10                                       | 10                                     |
| Group III | 4.1- 5                         | 25-35                | 10                                       | 10                                     |
|           | Total                          |                      | 30                                       | 30                                     |

The initial phase of the study focused on the selection of storybooks and the formulation of the checklist. Three storybooks were selected with one visual illustration on each page, written text was large and consisted of not more than two to three sentences per page. The

stories selected conformed to the developmental characteristics of children and the child's artistic perception and interpretation (Yu & Nagai, 2020). Following the content validation by three subject experts, the finalized story was an adaptation of Steven Kellogg's Jack and the Beanstalk Story Book for the data collection. The checklist consisted of nine interactive behaviors exhibited by mothers after story reading. The checklist was formulated to document the behaviors exhibited by the mothers after a story-reading task. A focus group discussion was conducted to elicit the behaviors exhibited by mothers after story reading. The literature review guided the researcher to compile various behaviors exhibited by

Table 2. *Target Behaviors and their description*

| Sl No | Target Behaviors                                                       | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.    | Encouraging to look at the storybook                                   | Reinforcing behaviors and looking and recognizing behaviors are related to how a child begins to understand pictures and text in books by paying attention, gazing, pointing, and laughing with the mother. |
| 2.    | Reviewing story contents                                               | Story comprehension behaviors are related to reviewing different content in the story. Simplified statements of content which are directly observable in the book.                                          |
| 3.    | Asking questions from the story                                        | Story comprehension behaviors where the mother asks relevant 'Wh' questions to assess the comprehension of the story.                                                                                       |
| 4.    | Rewarding the child for the correct answer or for attempting to answer | Reinforcing behaviors are any actions or processes of strengthening the child's responses to correctly answering the questions or attempting to answer the question.                                        |
| 5.    | Answering the child's questions                                        | Story comprehension behaviors where the mother enhances the child's comprehension of the unclear portion of the story by answering the child's questions                                                    |
| 6.    | Responding to a child's comments                                       | Story comprehension behaviors are where the mother expands and elaborates on the child's comments from the story.                                                                                           |
| 7.    | Retelling the story at the child's request                             | Story comprehension behaviors where the mother retells the most significant components of the story, such as the characters, settings, rising action, climax, and resolution                                |
| 8.    | Story summarization by mother                                          | Story comprehension behaviors distinguish the critical content from the unimportant information by restating the story in a few words.                                                                      |
| 9.    | Encouraging story summarization by the child                           | Reinforcing behaviors that support and confidence the child to summarize the story.                                                                                                                         |

mothers for a story-reading activity (Kim et al., 2011; Kim & Park, 2015; White & Low, 2002). The target behaviors analyzed during the interactions after story reading are given in Table 2.

The checklist was validated by three Speech-Language Pathologists with a minimum of five years of clinical experience in Child Language Disorders. For each of the items in the checklist, experts were instructed to provide a Likert-style rating on a 5-point scale where '1' indicated extremely irrelevant and '5' as extremely relevant. The formula used for the calculation of the content validity index is given below.

$$\text{Content Validity} = \frac{\text{Number of Speech-Language Pathologists who rated the item as '4' or '5'}}{\text{Total number of Speech-Language Pathologists involved in Validation}}$$

Any question which obtained a content validity score of greater than 0.8 was considered in the final version of the checklist. The content validity for item (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8) was 1.0 and for item (2, 6, 9) was 0.88. The inter-rater reliability revealed perfect agreement between the raters,  $\kappa = 0.857$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

The next phase of the study involved data collection, which was carried out in the child's home, and observation/recording was done under semi-naturalistic conditions. Demographic details on age, ethnicity, language spoken, level of education, and work experience was collected and the purpose of the audio-video recording was explained to the mother and written consent was obtained. The physical location for the observation of mother-child interaction was based on the comfort of the mother and child in the house. The mother-child interaction was observed when the child was less distressed, well-fed, and awake. The mothers were asked to narrate the story using the storybook. The researcher did not place a time limit on the length of the story reading. Each observation/recording lasted up to a minimum of 30 minutes of duration, in a relatively noise-free environment with minimum distractions. The observer was not present during the video recording session and the interactions are recorded using a video Recorder (Sony camera, 14 megapixels) for recording the sample. The collected audio-video recording sample of mother-child interaction was analyzed using the formulated checklist. A code '1' was given if the behavior was present, and a code '0' if the mother did not exhibit the particular behavior. SPSS version 25 was used

to obtain the frequency measures for the behaviors.

## Results

The study focused on analyzing the interaction between employed and unemployed mothers of typically developing children between 2 to 5 years (Group I: 2-3years; Group II: 3.1-4 years; Group III: 4.1-5years). It was observed that among employed and unemployed mothers, the older age groups (Group II and Group III) had a higher percentage of mothers engaging in interactive behaviors after story reading than mothers in Group I. Some of the most commonly occurring interactive behaviors among employed and unemployed mothers were answering the child's questions and story summarization; while the least commonly occurring, behaviors were rewarding the child for the correct answer or for attempting to answer and retelling the story on the child's request. The frequency distribution is given in table 3.

Table 3. *Frequency distribution of interactive behaviors among employed and unemployed mothers after story reading across the age groups*

| Sl No | Interactive Behaviors                                                  | Employed Mother |          |           | Unemployed Mothers |          |           |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------|-----------|--------------------|----------|-----------|
|       |                                                                        | Group I         | Group II | Group III | Group I            | Group II | Group III |
| 1.    | Encouraging to look at the Story Book                                  | 20%             | 50%      | 60%       | 40%                | 60%      | 60%       |
| 2.    | Reviewing story content                                                | 30%             | 40%      | 30%       | 30%                | 40%      | 40%       |
| 3.    | Asking questions from the story                                        | 50%             | 50%      | 50%       | 40%                | 50%      | 50%       |
| 4.    | Rewarding the child for the correct answer or for attempting to answer | 50%             | 50%      | 50%       | 20%                | 30%      | 40%       |
| 5.    | Answering the child's questions                                        | 50%             | 60%      | 80%       | 30%                | 40%      | 60%       |
| 6.    | Responding to a child's comments                                       | 50%             | 50%      | 50%       | 40%                | 50%      | 50%       |
| 7.    | Retelling the story at the child's request                             | 40%             | 50%      | 50%       | 30%                | 50%      | 50%       |
| 8.    | Story Summarization by mother                                          | 50%             | 60%      | 60%       | 30%                | 50%      | 50%       |
| 9.    | Encouraging Story Summarization by the child                           | 30%             | 50%      | 60%       | 30%                | 50%      | 60%       |

## **Discussion**

The study aimed to analyze the employed and unemployed mother's interactive behaviors after story-reading in typically developing children between the age of two to five years using a formulated checklist. The results revealed that employed and unemployed mothers had majorly similar interactive behaviors with some differences in certain behaviors. For instance, looking at the storybook and reviewing the story contents were higher among unemployed mothers; however, reinforcement behaviors and behaviors that enhance story comprehension were better among employed mothers. Some of the most commonly occurring interactive behaviors among employed and unemployed mothers were answering the child's questions and story summarization; while the least commonly occurring, behaviors were rewarding the child for the correct answer or for attempting to answer and retelling the story on the child's request. Though findings of maternal employment are often mixed and bidirectional, the current study highlights similarities in the interaction patterns among employed and unemployed mothers. As indicated by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) the quality and not quantity of maternal interaction was crucial for preventing problem behaviors, increasing pro-social behaviors, and the child's linguistic skills (NICHD, 2001, 2002). Though similar studies are not carried out, the study by Hsin and Felfe, in 2014 reported no significant effect of maternal employment on the time they spent with the child in structured and educational activities which required involvement and verbal exchanges (Hsin & Felfe, 2014). The study findings could be further supported by the growing changes in societal norms and perspectives towards maternal employment such as an increase in childcare centers, paternal involvement in family care, maternal employment benefits that support the family financially as well as psychologically, exposure to modern trends, and positive changes in the attitude of the society towards employed mothers. Employment among mothers has become a norm in modern families (Wills & Brauer, 2012). Though a significant difference was not observed, the percentage of mothers in each age group engaging in interactive behaviors revealed several interesting findings, as discussed below.

### **Encouraging to Look at the Story Book**

A high percentage of employed mothers encouraged their children to explore the book compared to unemployed mothers, and the interactive behavior was lesser among Groups I and II (20%-40%) in comparison to Group III (60%). Encouraging to look at the storybook is a reinforcing behavior that facilitates an understanding of the pictures and text in books. Researchers and educators have emphasized the importance of establishing emergent literacy skills in the early years as it can impact later reading abilities (Duncan et al., 2007). These emergent literacy skills develop much before school entry through rich socio-cultural exposures to print (Bowman & Treiman, 2010). Shared book-reading activities encourage and expose young children to print, contributing to the development of print literacy (Justice & Ezell, 2002). In the present study, attempts are made by employed and unemployed mothers to encourage their children to explore the book.

### **Reviewing Story Contents**

In the study, a similar percentage (30%-40%) of employed and unemployed mothers reviewed the story contents across all the age groups. Reviewing story contents was part of story comprehension behaviors that used simplified statements of things directly observable in the books. Reviewing story components provided an opportunity for the child to link and integrate several parts. Encouraging mothers to engage in reviewing story content is essential as it is more favorable in re-examining and connecting to the various story components (Kim & Park, 2015). Reviewing story contents helps children to make better inferences about the story, which can help to build the overall coherence of the story. In the present study, reviewing the story component was less practiced behavior among employed and unemployed mothers, emphasizing the need to create awareness of the benefits of reviewing the story content.

### **Asking questions from the story**

Asking questions from the story is part of story comprehension behaviors which helps the

child to think about the story and connect the story to their own lives. A growing body of evidence suggests that toddlers who are frequently exposed to questions during mothers-toddlers' shared book-reading activities have better vocabularies (Blake et al., 2006; Fletcher et al., 2008). A similar increase in vocabulary is reported in children during book-reading activities (Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2012). However, in the present study, it was observed that 40-50% of employed and unemployed mothers practiced these behaviors after the story reading activity. Encouraging mothers to engage in these interactive behaviors is crucial as it can help the child to connect various parts of the story and build inferences (Kim & Park, 2015).

#### **Rewarding the child for the correct answer or for attempting to answer**

Rewarding the child for the correct answer or for attempting to answer was the least occurring interactive behavior. Though 50% of employed mothers across the age groups rewarded the child for correctly answering or attempting to answer a question, only 20-40% of unemployed mothers engaged in reinforcing the child. Rewarding is a reinforcing behavior, where any actions or responses of the mother can help strengthen the responses the child provides for correctly answering the questions or attempting to answer the question. Rewarding is considered a facilitative behavior in a story reading task along with praise, expansion, asking open-ended questions, and providing opportunities for conversations. It helps children develop rituals and routines that are very much important for their everyday life. Rewarding can create a pleasant environment for the child and the parent by making story reading pleasurable. It is often identified as one of the ten interactive reading behaviors that positively impact children's learning (Morrow et al., 2016).

#### **Answering the child's questions**

Answering the child's question was the highest occurring interactive behavior and was more among employed mothers than unemployed mothers across the age groups. Children asking questions is an essential component of the book reading milestones, indicative of the advancement in story comprehension. Questioning serves several purposes; it clarifies the

concepts, explores more in-depth knowledge, and facilitates vocabulary learning, all of which are the embedded benefits of story reading. Studies have emphasized the effectiveness of storybook reading when parents actively involve the child in the story reading by making it as interactive as possible (Raikes et al., 2006; van Kleeck et al., 2003). Huebner and Meltzoff stated that story reading would benefit the child the most, when it involved an active verbal exchange of questioning, answering, and interacting (Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005), which was also seen in the present study among employed and unemployed mothers.

### **Responding to a child's comments**

A similar percentage of employed and unemployed mothers (40-50%), responded to the child's comments in the present study. Responding to a child's comments are story comprehension behaviors that help to expand and elaborate the child's comments about the story. On listening to stories, children respond to them in various ways by seeking clarifications or comments on a story by analyzing its plot, characters, or theme. They may compare and contrast real-life experiences. The comments reflect the child's intent, curiosity, imagination, wonder, fascination, and surprise that they experience as the story unfolds. Studies have emphasized the importance of actively involving the child by interacting with the child when reading aloud (Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005). It is assumed to be more beneficial for the child when the child responds to book reading than purely listening to parents read, as it encourages a productive interaction between the parent and child (Raikes et al., 2006; van Kleeck et al., 2003), emphasizing the need to encourage mothers to use this story comprehension behavior more frequently.

### **Retells the story on request of the child**

Retelling the story at the child's request is story comprehension behavior, which includes telling the most significant components of the story, such as the characters, settings, rising action, climax, and resolution. In the present study, it was observed that employed and unemployed mothers less frequently engaged in retelling the story (30-50%). Retelling is often used in curriculum assessment as a strategy to determine the extent of story

comprehension by the children. It is widely used as a valuable tool for improving story comprehension and assessing it (Jennings et al., 2006). Besides, encouraging story retelling is crucial for academic success and later literacy development (Graesser et al., 1996; Snow & Dickinson, 1990).

### **Story Summarization by mother**

In the present study, story summarization by mother was present at higher frequency with more than 50% of employed mothers engaged in story summarization than unemployed mothers. Summarizing is an essential practice following story reading tasks as it permits a comprehensive and concise understanding of the story content. It helps the child understand the story's organization and focuses on content worth remembering. It was also interesting to observe that a significant percentage of employed mothers concluded the stories with the storybook than unemployed mothers. A small percentage of mothers did attempt to conclude a story without a storybook.

### **Encouraging Story Summarization by the child**

Encouraging story summarization by the child reinforces behavior that provides support and confidence to summarize the story. It is one of the techniques used in academic setups as it increases the in-depth processing of information. The summarization process helps one select the main ideas, reject unnecessary information, and restate the content in their own words. These interactive behaviors were observed to increase from 30% to 60% among employed and unemployed mothers across the age group. Summarization is also a reflection of story retelling skills. Parents and teachers often use summarizing or retelling the story to promote story comprehension and expression (Gambrell & Dromsky, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

The study profiled the interactions between employed and unemployed mothers after the

story reading activity, where the findings revealed that employed and unemployed mothers had majorly similar interactive behaviors with some differences in certain behaviors. Some of the least commonly occurring behaviors were rewarding the child for the correct answer or for attempting to answer and retelling the story at the child's request. Though most interactive behaviors are practiced among employed and unemployed mothers, a small percentage fail to do so. These interactive behaviors between an adult and a child are critical as they can promote early literacy, indicating the need to educate and create awareness among mothers on the significance of interactions even after story reading. Future studies can focus on tapping into the qualitative analysis of the communicative interaction between the mother and the child.

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