12-2017

Understanding Parents' Attitudes Towards Complexity in Children's Books

Dorit Aram
Tel Aviv University, dorita@post.tau.ac.il

Deborah Bergman Deitcher
Tel Aviv University, deb@deitcher.net

Gali Adar
Tel Aviv University

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic
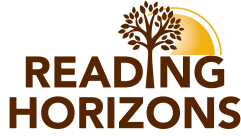
Understanding Parents' Attitudes Toward Complexity in Children's Books

Dorit Aram, *Tel Aviv University*

Deborah Bergman Deitcher, *Tel Aviv University*

Gali Adar, *Tel Aviv University*

──────────── Abstract ────────────

Experts in children's literature and child development value complexity in the language, socioemotional content, and structure of books, yet little is known regarding parents' attitudes toward these aspects. This study thus examined how parents' gender, education, and profession; children's age and gender; and frequency of parent–child reading interactions predict parents' support for complexity in children's books. Participants were 104 parents to children ages 4–7. Parents completed questionnaires measuring frequency of shared book reading and levels of support for complexity of children's narrative books in three areas: language, socioemotional content, and structure. Results show that parents supported complexity of socioemotional content most, followed by language, and structural complexity least. Only parents' profession and frequency of shared book reading interactions predicted support for complexity in books. Parents who read more to their children and parents in social professions showed greater support for complexity. The study stresses the importance of guiding parents to consider a variety of aspects when selecting books to read with their children.

Keywords: selecting books, book choice, quality children's literature, home literacy environment, shared book reading

Parents play a central role in the selection of books for their children. They accept or reject their children's suggestions, influence their children's choices, and permit or don't permit the borrowing or buying of specific books (Švab, & Žumer, 2015). Every year, many children's books are published around the world. In light of this substantial availability, the importance of being able to effectively select books to read to children becomes more meaningful. Experts in children's literature and child development describe the attributes of good children's literature (e.g., Hoffman, Teale, & Yokota, 2015), but what do parents think about these recommendations? The current study explores the importance that parents ascribe to the complexity of major elements of books when thinking about selecting books to read to their 4- to 7-year-old children. Specifically, we studied how parents' characteristics (gender, education, and profession), their children's characteristics (age and gender), and the frequency of their shared reading interactions predict parents' support for complexity of language, socioemotional content, and structure when selecting books to read to their young children.

Selecting Books to Read to Young Children

In Western cultures, adult–child shared book reading is considered a natural and frequent activity, primarily during the preschool and early school years (Bus, 2003). Young children thus usually encounter books both at home and in preschool settings. There is evidence that teachers' book selection is guided by librarians, through the special projects of organizations such as the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council's Children's Choices; by journals that highlight reviews of children's books; and by media specialists (Hoffman et al., 2015; Jipson & Paley, 1991; Stone & Twardosz, 2001; Williams & Bauer, 2006). Overall, it seems that preschool teachers prefer to read storybooks to children rather than information books (Price, Bradley, & Smith, 2012). Stone and Twardosz (2001) studied preschool teachers' use of children's books in 21 child care centers in the United States and found that teachers used the most popular storybooks (such as Dr. Seuss books). Reasons for selecting these books related to children's preferences, the teaching function of the books, and their literary qualities.

There is limited research on parents' reasons for selecting books to read to their child. Evidence suggests that parents also prefer storybooks over other genres, such as poetry or information books (Anderson, Anderson, Shapiro, & Lynch, 2001; Saracho & Spodek, 2010). When parents of preschoolers were asked what they looked for when choosing a book for their children, the predominant response was children's interest in or understanding of topics (Anderson et al., 2001; Owens, 1992; Tekin & Tekin, 2006; Wilkinson, 2003). Beyond addressing their children's interest, in this study we aimed to explore parents' opinions regarding particular criteria of good children's storybooks.

Select Attributes of Quality Children's Storybooks

Children who are exposed to frequent storybook reading consistently surpass their counterparts on vocabulary (Justice & Ezell, 2000), early literacy skills and rate of literacy acquisition (Mol, Bus, De Jong, & Smeets, 2008; Sénéchal, 2006), and socioemotional adjustment (Aram, Bergman Deitcher, Sabag-Shushan, & Ziv, 2017; Aram & Shapira, 2012). However, the contribution of storybook reading to children's development depends on the adults' reading style, which engages the child in discourse surrounding the text (Mol et al., 2008). Some books help stimulate discourse and higher level thinking more than others. As Hoffman and colleagues (2015) note, high-quality narrative literature supports read-aloud discussions. Experts in children's literature agree that children's literature should be evaluated using the same criteria used to evaluate any other type of literature (Bloem & Padak, 1996; Darr, 2002; Shavit, 1996). Darr (2009) notes that educators emphasize the language aspect of books, psychologists relate to the socioemotional aspect of books, and literacy professionals focus on the literary aspect. In our study, we therefore focused on these various aspects of complexity in children's books: language, content (socioemotional), and structure.

Language complexity. Researchers stress the value of language complexity in children's books, including new vocabulary, varied language elements such as metaphors and analogies, rhythm, and grammatical elements such as homonyms and homophones (Chovav, 1997; Darr, 2009; Dwyer & Neuman, 2008). Quality narrative literature includes rich language, words and phrases that develop complex meaning, and imagery for the reader. These books use unfamiliar words as well as familiar words in new ways (e.g., figurative language; Hoffman et al., 2015). Researchers suggest that books that contain complex language elements may promote references to these aspects during shared reading interactions (Pentimonti, Zucker, & Justice, 2011).

Complexity of socioemotional content. Storybooks frequently relate to children's feelings and experiences (Schickedanz, & Collins, 2012) and offer opportunities to expose children to social situations. There is a gradual development in children's social understanding and ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others (theory of mind; Bradmetz & Schneider, 1999; Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). Interpersonal relationships and references to the motives underlying characters' behaviors are an integral part of children's books (Dyer, Shatz, & Wellman, 2000). Quality narrative literature presents genuine, dynamic characters that are responsive to the events and to other characters in the story, and it refers frequently to the characters' emotions, thoughts, intentions, beliefs, and desires (Dyer et al., 2000; Hoffman et al., 2015). Books with this type of complexity can help stimulate conversations surrounding socioemotional issues (Garner, Dunsmore, & Southam-Gerrow, 2008; Thompson, Laible, & Ontai, 2003).

Structural complexity. High-quality children's storybooks contain broad themes, and the overarching idea of the book is communicated implicitly through features of the narrative (Hoffman et al., 2015). The book should contain a unique and original plot, detailed and believable conversations, authentic characters (Teale, Yokota, & Martinez, 2008), and it should encourage the readers to make inferences about the characters' and the plot's development (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Hamilton (2009) notes that the conclusion of a book should not be stated clearly, but rather should be open to the reader's interpretation. Good children's books are realistic and not necessarily educational or overly sentimental (Makover Bleikov, 2005). Structural complexity can promote greater adult–child discourse surrounding the book (Darr, 2009; Sipe, 1998).

Our discussion regarding the merits of children's books' complexity is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) ideas regarding development via experiences with more competent persons within the child's zone of proximal development. During shared reading adults can challenge children sensitively toward their potential development. To do so effectively, it is important that adults consider the book's characteristics along with the children's development. Teachers are instructed in ways to select children's books that are carefully crafted in the areas that we described above and to use them to support richer interactions surrounding book reading (Roser, Martinez, Yokota, & O'Neal, 2005). To date, however, little is known about how parents view these book characteristics.

Measures Related to Parents' Criteria in Book Selection

There is evidence that parents' education is related to the frequency and nature of their shared book reading with their children (e.g., Korat, Klein, & Segal-Drori, 2007). Owens (1992) found that more educated mothers choose more nonfiction books, such as information and instruction books, to read to their children. Nevertheless, there is little research examining the relationship between parents' education and criteria for choosing books. We explored whether more educated parents would support greater complexity in children's books.

Beyond education, it is reasonable to assume that parents' professions are related to their thoughts and ideas about children's books. Parents in education and helping professions who may encounter books or have been exposed to their use in professional development may be better able to evaluate children's books (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). There is also some evidence supporting the relation between working in social professions (education, social work, etc.) and prosocial tendencies (Mlcák, & Záskodná, 2008). As such, we considered whether parents who work in social professions would appreciate children's books with greater complexity.

Aside from education and profession, some studies have shown that the gender of the parent and the child can impact book selection. Anderson et al. (2001) found few differences between fathers' and mothers' choices of books, though fathers tended to select more information books than mothers. However, they found differences in parents' book selection that related to the child's gender. Parents frequently selected books to read to sons that were reflective of topics considered "typical" for males, such as books about construction, tools, trucks, and trains. Supporting this, some storytellers in libraries have suggested that gender may be a modifying factor in the book selection process, with boys preferring books on trucks and planes and girls preferring books about fairies and animals (Carroll, 2015). We wondered how parents' and children's gender would relate to parents' preferences regarding complexity in children's books.

Child's age can be a mediating factor when choosing books for shared reading (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 1996). Jalongo (2004) stressed that in order to maximize children's engagement, adults should select books that suit the age and developmental level of the child. Supporting this, Carroll (2015) found that storytellers in libraries recognized the importance of book complexity, and their main consideration when selecting a book was to find the optimal complexity that will fit the age of the children attending the story time sessions. We aimed to study whether children's age is related to parents' attitudes toward books' complexity.

Lastly, it is conceivable that the frequency of parents' shared book reading interactions with their children is linked to their knowledge in the domain of children's literature. Indeed, Aram and Aviram (2009) found that compared to parents who read less frequently to their children, parents who read more frequently to their children more closely resembled experts in children's literature when considering which books to read. Based on this study, we hypothesized that frequency of shared book reading would predict parents' support for books' complexity.

The current study thus explored parents' support for children's books' complexity in three areas: language complexity, complexity of socioemotional content, and structural complexity. We asked the following research questions:

• When selecting books to read to their children, to what extent do parents support the language complexity, socioemotional complexity, and complexity of structure and content in the books, and do parents who favor complexity in one area also favor complexity in the other areas?

• What is the relationship between parents' and children's characteristics (parents' gender, education, and profession; children's gender and age) and parents' support for books' complexity?

• How frequently do parents read to their children, and what is the relationship between frequency of shared book reading and parents' support for books' complexity?

• How do parents' and children's characteristics and frequency of shared book reading predict parents' support for books' complexity?

Method

Participants

Participants were 104 parents with a child whose age ranged from 44 to 82 months (M = 61.26, SD = 9.52). Children in Israel usually begin first grade between the ages of 6 and 7 (the period between age 3 and first grade is termed preschool). Some children remain

in preschool for an extra year, mainly because of lack of maturity. Of the children (51 boys and 53 girls), 42 (40.4%) were first born, 36 (34.6%) were second, 18 (17.3%) were third, and eight (7.7%) were fourth. Of the parents, 84 were mothers (80.8%) and 20 were fathers (19.2%). Mothers' age ranged from 25 to 46 years ($M = 36.57$, $SD = 4.13$), and fathers' age ranged from 33 to 49 years ($M = 36.67$, $SD = 3.78$). All the fathers were married, and of the mothers, 94.1% were married, 3.6% divorced, and 2.4% were single mothers. Most of the participating parents (78.6% of mothers and 80.0% of fathers) were secular, and the rest referred to their families as traditional (not religious). Parents' education ranged from high school (6.7%) and post–high school diploma (12.5%) to BA (54.8%), MA (20.2%), and PhD (5.8%). Based on Holland's (1985a, 1985b) theory of vocational choice, we divided parents' professions into social vocations that help or serve others and nonsocial vocations. Nearly half of the participating parents (43.3%) worked in social professions such as teachers, social workers, psychologists, educational counselors, speech therapists, and occupational therapists. The remaining parents (56.7%) worked in other professions such as secretaries, lawyers, salespeople, computer engineers, and programmers.

Measures

Attitude toward complexity in children's books. Based on questionnaires from prior studies on criteria for book selection (Aram & Aviram, 2009; Stone & Twardosz, 2001), we decided to focus on three major aspects of book complexity: language, socioemotional content, and structure. We expanded a previous questionnaire (Aram & Aviram, 2009) into a 30-item measure (see the Appendix). Parents were asked to rate their response to each statement on a 5-point scale: (1) *disagree completely*, (2) *disagree*, (3) *somewhat agree*, (4) *agree*, (5) *agree completely*. The statements relate to books' complexity in the three previously mentioned areas: Eight statements (1, 4, 5, 11, 13, 17, 26, 29) relate to language elements such as rich vocabulary, use of synonyms, metaphors, and less familiar words (e.g., "In a good children's book, the words written are familiar to my child"; "A good children's book contains imagery such as 'Noa was as busy as an ant'"). Eight statements (3, 6, 7, 8, 12, 20, 23, 27) relate to socioemotional content by referring to emotional situations like a failure or a friendship, varied mental states, and a prevalence of complex emotions like jealousy (e.g., "A good children's book has fairly complex characters. For example, the princess leads bravely but also shows fear"; "A good children's book expresses primarily positive emotions. That is, the book primarily focuses on situations of happiness, friendship, love, etc."). Fourteen statements (2, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 28, 30) focus on aspects of structure such as an open-ended story, a plot that raises questions, character development throughout the story, and complex characters (e.g., "In a good children's book, the moral has to be interpreted by the reader. That is, the reader needs to 'read between the lines' and deduce it from the text and illustrations"; "A good children's book has a clear structure of problem–solution. For example, it specifically states that the problem is that the child is afraid to go to sleep alone and the plot leads to the solution of this problem"). All the statements are positively framed; six statements (4, 9, 18, 21, 23, 27) support simpler structural elements, and the others support more complex structural elements. A higher score (after reversing scores for statements supporting simpler books) in each area demonstrates stronger support for greater complexity in children's books in that area.

The adapted questionnaire was revalidated by two experts in children's literature (researchers from the Yemima Center for Children's Literature–Beit Berl Academic College) and 10 experts in child development from departments of school counseling and special education in Tel Aviv University. These literature and education experts noted that

the statements are clear, and they agreed among themselves regarding the relevance of each statement to books' language, socioemotional content, and structure.

In a pilot study, we presented the questionnaire to 20 mothers of preschoolers in their homes. We asked them to complete it and discussed the statements with them afterward. We verified with them that the statements were clear. Furthermore, we ensured variability between the statements (language 2.50 to 4.80, $M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.60$; socioemotional content 2.80 to 4.80, $M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.60$; and structure 2.40 to 4.00, $M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.50$).

Frequency of book reading. Both direct and indirect methods have been used in previous research to evaluate frequency of joint book reading (Araújo & Costa, 2015; Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008). Parent-report questionnaires (direct evaluation), which generally ask parents to rate how frequently they read to their children, are susceptible to social desirability and, consequently, to inflated responses. Alternatively, an indirect method of evaluating frequency of joint book reading uses a tool based on the work of Stanovich and colleagues (Allen, Cipielewski, & Stanovich, 1992; Stanovich & West, 1989). This measure, the Title Recognition Test (TRT), presents parents with a list of actual and invented book titles and asks parents to mark those books with which they are familiar. The assumption behind this measure is that increased knowledge of book titles is reflective of greater frequency of joint book reading. Frijters, Barron, and Brunello (2000) found that using both direct and indirect book reading measures together is more effective in predicting children's early literacy than using each of them separately. In the present study, frequency of book reading was assessed via a direct question and via the indirect TRT.

Direct question. We asked the parents how frequently they read to their children. The answer was presented on a five-point scale: (1) *approximately once every 2 weeks,* (2) *about once or twice a week*, (3) *about three times a week*, (4) *about four to five times a week*, (5) *daily*. This question appeared at the end of the demographic questionnaire (see below).

Title Recognition Test. The TRT comprises 60 Hebrew children's book titles, of which 40 were legitimate book titles and 20 were foils. The legitimate titles were culled from titles of books advertised and sold in local bookstores and included both older, more well-known books as well as those published in the 2 years prior to data collection. In contrast, the titles of the foils were invented for the purposes of the measure and were checked in a database to ensure that they were not legitimate book titles. Parents were asked to mark the titles that they recognized. Parents received one point for recognition of a correct title and lost two points for each false-positive response. A higher score indicated a higher frequency of shared book reading.

Demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire solicited demographic information including age of parents and children as well as parents' profession, level of education, marital status, and level of religiosity. It also included the direct question regarding frequency of shared book reading interactions.

Procedure

The researcher made contact with parents via flyers handed out by four preschool teachers that explained the purpose of the study. The researcher met the parents at their homes in the evening when children were asleep. She asked the parents to fill out the questionnaires in the following order: frequency of shared book reading (TRT and direct question), demographic questionnaire, and the attitude toward complexity of children's

literature questionnaire. Then she answered their questions and talked with them about the importance of reading good literature to children.

Data Analysis

We first explored the nature of parents' support of complexity of children's books. We studied their support for each of the complexity aspects (language, socioemotional content, and structure), compared the three aspects, and assessed the correlations between them. Second, we studied the relations between parents' and children's characteristics and parents' support for complexity in children's literature. Third, we studied the frequency of parent–child shared book reading and its relation with parents' support for complexity in children's literature. Finally, we assessed how parents' and children's characteristics and frequency of shared book reading predict parents' attitude toward books' complexity.

Results

Attitude Toward Complexity of Children's Books

The 30 statements in the parents' questionnaire referred to three aspects of complexity in children's literature: language, socioemotional content, and structure. To learn how parents favor complexity in each aspect, we verified the accepted reliability between the relevant statements for each aspect and averaged them.

Language complexity. The reliability between the statements that referred to language complexity (without statement 5, which was less related) was Cronbach's α = .70. The average of these statements served as the support for language complexity score. Parents' responses regarding language complexity ranged between (2) *disagree* and (5) *agree completely* ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.54$).

Socioemotional complexity. The reliability between the statements that referred to socioemotional complexity (without statements 23 and 27, which were less related) was Cronbach's α = .74. The average of these statements served as the support for socioemotional complexity score. Parents' responses regarding socioemotional complexity ranged between (3) *somewhat agree* and (5) *agree completely* ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.57$).

Structural complexity. The reliability between the statements that related to socioemotional complexity was Cronbach's α = .81. The average of these statements served as the support for structure complexity score. Parents' responses regarding structure complexity ranged between (2) *disagree* and (5) *agree completely* ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.52$).

To investigate within-subject differences in parents' support for complexity between the three aspects, we used the General Linear Model (GLM) method, which revealed significant differences between the aspects ($F= 39.62$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared = 0.31). Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction revealed that parents showed significantly stronger support for complexity of socioemotional content compared to language and structural complexity, and significantly stronger support for language complexity compared to structural complexity (see Appendix).

Aiming to learn whether parents who support complexity in one aspect also support complexity in the other aspects, we assessed the correlations between the three aspects. We found a significant correlation between support for language complexity and socioemotional complexity, $r = .36$, $p < .01$; a significant correlation between support for language complexity and structural complexity, $r = .33$, $p < .01$; and a significant correlation between support for socioemotional content complexity and structural complexity $r = .39$, $p < .01$. These significant correlations indicate that greater support for complexity in one

area was associated with greater support for complexity in all the areas.

After exploring the nature of parents' support for complexity of language, socioemotional content, and structure in children's literature, we wanted to create a general score reflecting parents' overall attitude toward complexity in children's books. The reliability between all the statements was Cronbach's α = .84, and we averaged parents' scores to created a combined score for complexity in children's books (M = 3.52, SD = 0.40).

Parents' and Children's Characteristics and Parents' Support for Books' Complexity

Parents. We studied how parents' gender, education, and profession relate to their support for books' complexity. We did not find significant correlations between parents' level of education and their support for complexity (r = .09, –.07, .18, and .09, p > .05 for correlations with language, socioemotional content, structure, and overall complexity, respectively). Additionally, t-test analyses did not reveal significant differences between mothers' and fathers' support for books' complexity across the three areas (t(102) = 1.25, –0.13, –0.46, and –0.17, p > .05 for support of complexity in language, socioemotional content, structure, and overall complexity, respectively). Regarding parents' professions, t-tests revealed significant differences (see Table 1). Parents in social professions demonstrated significantly stronger overall support for complexity in children's books, particularly support for complexity of socioemotional content and structural complexity.

Table 1
Parents' Profession and Support for Complexity in Children's Books (N = 104)

	Social professions (n=45)	Nonsocial professions (n=59)	
	M (SD)	M (SD)	t (df = 102)
Language	3.72 (0.57)	3.68 (0.52)	–0.35
Socioemotional content	4.05 (0.59)	3.76 (0.53)	–2.59*
Structure	3.55 (0.55)	3.14 (0.43)	–4.19**
Overall complexity	3.68 (0.42)	3.40 (0.34)	–3.78**

*p < .01. **p < .001.

Children. We assessed the relationship between children's age and gender and parents' support for books' complexity. Interestingly, children's age correlated negatively with parents' support of complex structure in children's books (r = –.20, p < .05). That is, the older their children, the less the parents supported structural complexity in children's books. Children's age did not correlate significantly with parents' support of language, socioemotional, or overall complexity in children's books (r = –.16, –.00. and –.19, p > .05 respectively). The t-test analyses did not reveal differences between parents of boys and girls in their support for books' complexity across the areas of language, socioemotional, structure, and overall complexity (t(102) = –0.29, –0.93, –0.96, and –1.03, p > .05, respectively).

Frequency of Parent–Child Book Reading

The direct assessment of parents' reported frequency of shared book reading revealed that, on average, parents read to their children four times per week (M = 3.52, SD =1.35). The indirect assessment of familiarity with children's book tittles showed that parents' scores ranged between 6 and 30 (M = 16.64, SD = 5.98). On average, parents marked only 0.71 titles of fictitious books, less than one title per parent. This supports the

validity of the instrument in that parents marked only titles with which they were familiar. A positive correlation ($r = .24$, $p < .01$) was found between the direct and indirect measures of frequency of book reading. That is, the more a parent was familiar with children's books, the more frequently he or she reported reading to his or her child.

Frequency of Book Reading and Support for Books' Complexity

We assessed the correlation between the two measures of frequency of shared book reading and parents' support for books' complexity (see Table 2). Results reveal significant correlations between parents' direct report of frequency of shared reading and their support of complex language and structure in books as well as their overall support for books' complexity. The indirect (TRT) measure of frequency of book reading also correlated significantly with parents' support of structure and their overall support for books' complexity. Thus, parents who read more to their children demonstrated greater support for complexity in children's books.

Table 2
Correlations Between Frequency of Shared Book Reading and Parents' Support for Complexity in Books ($N = 104$)

	Language complexity	Socioemotional content complexity	Structural complexity	Overall complexity
Parents' report	.20*	.08	.19*	.23**
TRT	.03	.01	.20*	.18*

*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

TRT = Title Recognition Test.

Predicting Parents' Support for Complexity in Children's Books

To examine the particular link between each of the predicting measures and parents' support for complexity in children's books, we carried out a regression analysis with parents' overall support for complexity as the criterion (see Table 3). The predicting variables were the measures that related significantly (in the above-described analyses) to parents' support for books complexity: children's age, parents' profession, and frequency of shared book reading. To reduce the number of variables, the mean Z score of parents' direct and indirect (TRT) assessments of shared book reading served as the frequency of shared reading measure.

Table 3
Regression Analysis Predicting Parents' Overall Support for Complexity in Children's Books ($N = 104$)

	B	SE	β	t	R^2
					.20***
Children's age	.001	.00	−.14	1.52	
Frequency of shared book reading	.11	.05	.22*	2.40	
Parents' profession	.27	.07	.34***	3.77	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Together, the three predicting measures explained 20% ($p < .001$) of the variance in parents' support for overall complexity in children's books. Parents' profession (social vs. nonsocial professions) and frequency of shared book reading showed a unique positive

contribution to parents' support for complexity in children's books. That is, working in a social profession and reading more frequently to their children predicted parents' support for books' complexity.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how parents evaluate the complexity of language, socioemotional content, and structure of children's literature when selecting books to read to their 4- to 7-year-old children. We examined how parents' education, gender, and profession (social vs. nonsocial professions); children's age and gender; and the frequency of parent–child book reading are related to parents' support for complexity in books. Results showed that when thinking about children's literature, parents supported complexity of socioemotional content most, followed by language complexity, and structural complexity least. We found that although parents' education and gender did not relate to their support of books' complexity, their profession did relate. Parents in social professions showed greater support for complexity in books. Children's gender did not relate to their parents' attitude toward books' complexity, whereas children's age slightly related to parents' preference for books with a simpler structure. Parents who read more to their children showed greater support for complexity in children's books. We found that parents' profession and the frequency of shared reading interactions were the two variables that contributed uniquely to parents' support for books' complexity.

Parents' Support for Complexity in Children's Literature

Experts in children's literature and child development recognize the importance of complexity in the language, socioemotional content, and structure of books. Further, studies have shown that complexity in these areas can stimulate greater discourse during shared parent–child reading. However, most parents do not receive advice or guidance when selecting books to read with their children. They usually browse the shelves of shops and libraries, often without consulting the librarian (Ahmetoğlu & Ceylan, 2011). Websites provide lists of good children's literature but usually do not explain how the books were selected or what makes them good (Huisman & Catapano, 2009). In our study, parents varied in how much they supported complexity in the three areas examined. Specifically, parents seemed to strongly support the need for more complex socioemotional content. However, they less strongly supported the need for complexity of structure. Parents who showed greater support in one area demonstrated greater support across the other areas.

The average scores of parents across the three areas demonstrate that the parents tended to agree at least to some extent with experts in children's literature and child development. Like experts, parents in our study saw the importance of books that relate to emotions and social situations. Therapists and educators acknowledge that books have the potential to encourage caring, prosocial behavior in children (Zeece, 2004). It appears that parents also see books as a potential tool for discussing emotions and social situations with their children and consider it important. Grazzani and Ornaghi (2011) suggested that by encouraging children to focus on the feelings of the characters, adults may be teaching them about effective reactions to such socioemotional scenarios. Peskin and Astington (2004) proposed that active construction of books' mental aspects is important to children's comprehension of mental terms. Indeed, there is evidence that parental talk about the social situations in books and the characters' emotions predicts children's social understanding (Aram, Fine, & Ziv, 2013).

Like the experts, parents in our study also supported higher level language in children's books. We think that parents who view joint book reading as an opportunity

to enrich their children's language aim to challenge the children by selecting books that expose them to unfamiliar vocabulary, antonyms, synonyms, and other features. In line with our results, almost all the parents (19 of 20) in Tekin and Tekin's (2006) study believed that shared book reading is a good way to promote children's language and begin their journey with literacy. Similarly, Aram and Aviram (2009) found that mothers of preschoolers reported that the language in the books was one of the most important elements that parents consider when selecting books to read to their children.

Of the three areas explored, parents showed the least support for complexity of the book's structure. They seem disinclined to read books with indirect presentation of the characters' dilemmas, stories that can be interpreted in different ways, open-ended stories, and so on. This may reflect parents' suspicions that their child won't understand the story when a book is complicated. Beyond this, parents may also prefer more simply structured books that are easier for them to read and discuss with their children. When offering less support for structural complexity, parents may be thinking of the time when they read to their children—often prior to putting the child to bed. Parents may not want to read a book that is complex in its structure (e.g., has an open ending) when trying to encourage their child to get to sleep. We also think that educators discuss the importance of language and socioemotional development, and parents therefore may be more aware of those elements and less aware of the importance of structural complexity and its potential to evoke conversations that will contribute to children's development.

Predicting Parents' Support for Complexity in Children's Books

Results showed that parents' support for books' complexity is predicted by their profession (not their education) and by the frequency of their shared reading with their children but is not related to their children's gender. Further, we found one low negative correlation between children's age and parents' support for complexity of structure, but the children's age did not predict parents' support for complexity in the regression analysis when entered with parents' profession and frequency of shared reading. We think that this negative correlation can be explained by the fact that books for older children tend to be longer. Parents who may not know the benefits of structural complexity may be reluctant or feel uncomfortable reading books that are both longer and more structurally complex. Alternatively, it may be that the older children in our sample were children who remained in preschool because of immaturity or attention/behavior difficulties and their parents found more structurally complex books to be too challenging. Perhaps these parents preferred to read simpler books to their children.

Parents' profession uniquely predicted parents' support for complexity. Most of the parents in this sample had at least a Bachelor's level degree. Within this sample, it was interesting to learn that parents' profession, and not their education, made the difference. Parents who worked in social professions resembled the experts more closely and showed significantly greater support for books' complexity. Books can help children strengthen life skills, practice thinking, enrich language, consider socioemotional issues, and so on (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2014; Ziv, Smadja, & Aram, 2015). It seems that parents in social professions, which focus on education and helping, recognized the potential of more complex books for discussing relationships, motives, thoughts, and feelings. They saw the benefits of complex structure as a chance for learning at a higher level. It may also be that these parents went through courses or professional development that made them more aware of quality children's books and related characteristics. It appears that for parents in these professions, their professional life is more closely intertwined with their parenting.

In line with our hypothesis, frequency of shared book reading uniquely predicted parents' support for books' complexity. We think that parents who often read to their children have stronger beliefs in books' potential to enrich the child's world, develop the child's thinking, and strengthen the child's ability to deal with various areas of life. They are more familiar with a greater number and more varied selection of books. These parents are less afraid to read more complexly challenging books to their children.

Limitations and Future Research

We think that a more varied sample in terms of level of education and number of participating fathers would enable greater generalization of the results of this study. In light of the results that reveal a negative correlation between children's age and parents' support of complex structure in children's books, we believe that future research should also explore whether parents' support for books' complexity relates in any way to children's abilities. Specifically, children whose parents show greater support for books' complexity in language, socioemotional content, or structure can be compared on their cognitive (including language and literacy) and socioemotional skills to children whose parents show lower levels of support in the same areas. In our results, we found that parents who reported greater frequency of shared reading showed greater support for language complexity, even while no significant correlation was found between the familiarity with children's book measure (TRT) and support for language complexity. It may be that the source of this difference between the book reading measures and support for language complexity stems from parents' awareness. Parents who report greater frequency of shared reading may be aware of the importance of shared reading and are therefore more aware of the importance of language complexity. Future studies should examine this issue in greater depth. Lastly, it is important to note that there are other elements of children's books, such as illustrations, that may impact book selection. Future research can explore how parents view these aspects and their relationship with their selections.

Practical Implications

The current study can help provide tools for parents to enable them to reflect on the way that they select books to read to their children. When parents choose books to share with their children, they probably consider a variety of issues such as the child's interest, their own interest, and the books' aesthetics. Yet books' complexity in language, socioemotional content, and structure has the potential to promote richer adult–child discourse, which has been associated with improved learning outcomes. Raising parents' awareness, particularly for parents who are not in social professions, may help inform their book selection practices and enrich the shared book reading experience and, perhaps, children's outcomes as well.

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Appendix

Questionnaire: Parental Attitudes Toward Characteristics of Children's Books

Children's books have varied characteristics. There is no book that includes all these characteristics, and the quality of a book is not determined solely on the basis of a single characteristic, but on a variety of them. This questionnaire attempts to determine your view on the independent contribution of each of these characteristics to the quality of a children's book for preschoolers. For instance, there is a statement that relates to the use of metaphors. Clearly, not every book that contains metaphors is a good book, nor does every good book contain metaphors. The question solicits your opinion on how much the use of metaphors contributes to the quality of the book.

Check your response to the statements below on this 5-point scale:

1 – disagree completely; 2 – disagree; 3 – somewhat agree; 4 – agree; 5 – agree completely

	1	2	3	4	5
1. A good children's book contains imagery such as "Noa was as busy as an ant."					
2. In a good children's book, the moral has to be interpreted by the reader. That is, the reader needs to "read between the lines" and deduce it from the text and illustrations.					
3. In a good children's book, the characters express complex emotions like envy or yearning					
4. In a good children's book, the words written are familiar to my child.					
5. A good children's book includes humor that relies on plays on words. For example, "draw the curtains" (to make a picture of them) vs. "draw the curtains" (to close them).					
6. In a good children's book, the characters express various and sometimes opposing emotions. For example, fear, anger and happiness, or hope and hopelessness.					
7. In a good children's book, the characters encourage my child to identify with them.					
8. A good children's book includes emotional content. For example, separation, disagreements.					
9. A good children's book has a clear ending that the child is able to understand.					
10. In a good children's book, the connection between the text and the illustration raises questions. For example, the text says, "A visitor came to the house," and the illustration shows that it is the mother in a costume.					
11. A good children's book includes many words that are less common in a child's daily language. For example, pondered, wept, miserable.					
12. A good children's book raises a variety of emotions in my child.					
13. A good children's book includes metaphors. For example, "Ron the fox" can be a hint that Ron is sly.					
14. A good children's book has an implied moral. For example, the book has a moral about gender equality, but these words are not written explicitly in the text itself. It is possible to understand the moral but the message is not clearly stated.					
15. A good children's book has fairly complex characters. For example, the princess leads bravely but also shows fear.					
16. In a good children's book, the illustrations add to the text and help complete it.					
17. A good children's book contains new words that are not familiar to my child.					

	1	2	3	4	5
18. A good children's book has a clear structure of problem–solution. For example, it specifically states that the problem is that the child is afraid to go to sleep alone and the plot leads to a solution to this problem.					
19. In a good children's book, the characters develop and change throughout the story. That is, their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in the beginning of the story are different from those at the end of the story.					
20. In a good children's book, the illustrations raise emotions in the reader. For example, an illustration with many shadows can raise fear in the child versus an illustration with soft colors that can make the child feel calm.					
21. A good children's book does not directly express the moral message. For example, in a book about friendship between two friends, it won't explicitly say that you need to behave respectfully toward one another.					
22. In a good children's book, the child should be able to understand, on his or her own, the characteristics of the character. For example, it doesn't say explicitly that the character is shy, but one can understand it based on the description of the character and the illustrations in the book.					
23. A good children's book expresses primarily positive emotions. That is, the book primarily focuses on situations of happiness, friendship, love, etc.					
24. A good children's book relates in an indirect manner to the problem presented. For example, in a book where the central problem is a child's jealousy of his younger sister, it doesn't explicitly say that he is jealous; rather it is expected that the reader will understand this on his or her own.					
25. A good children's book contains various ways to interpret the text. E.g., It says that the book's hero prefers to be at home. It could be that he is shy or it could be that he likes the activities at home.					
26. A good children's book includes a larger vocabulary than that of my child.					
27. In a good children's book, the characters primarily express basic emotions that are familiar to young children. For example, happy, sad.					
28. A good children's book does not always present a solution to the problem raised in the story. For example, a girl contends with loneliness but the solution isn't presented clearly; rather the child has to consider it on his or her own.					
29. A good children's book includes synonyms or idioms. For example, whirl and spin.					
30. The end of a good children's book should be open-ended. That is, the book doesn't have to have a happy or sad ending, but it can be open to the child's interpretation.					

About the Authors

Dorit Aram is a full professor and the head of the School Counseling Program at Tel Aviv University. She investigates adult–child literacy interactions and studies their implications on early literacy and socio-emotional development. Prof. Aram has conducted early interventions aimed at improving kindergarten and preschool teachers' as well as parents' scaffolding and children's early literacy and socio-emotional development.

Deborah Bergman Deitcher is a lecturer at Tel Aviv University. Her research focuses on shared adult–child reading interactions. Dr. Bergman Deitcher focuses particularly on the importance of different book genres, including informational books and alphabet books, and how they impact shared reading interactions.

Gali Adar graduated with an MA in school counseling from Tel Aviv University. She is studying toward her certification in cognitive behavioral psychotherapy for children. She is a counselor in a high school and is the coordinator of a program for at-risk youth within the framework of the National Program for At-Risk Children and Youth.