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Predictors of Child Engagement in Shared Book Reading: The Role of Parental Talk

Shuyan Sun, Susan Sonnenschein, & Rebecca Dowling
Department of Psychology
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

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Quantitative Methods Lab @ Psychology
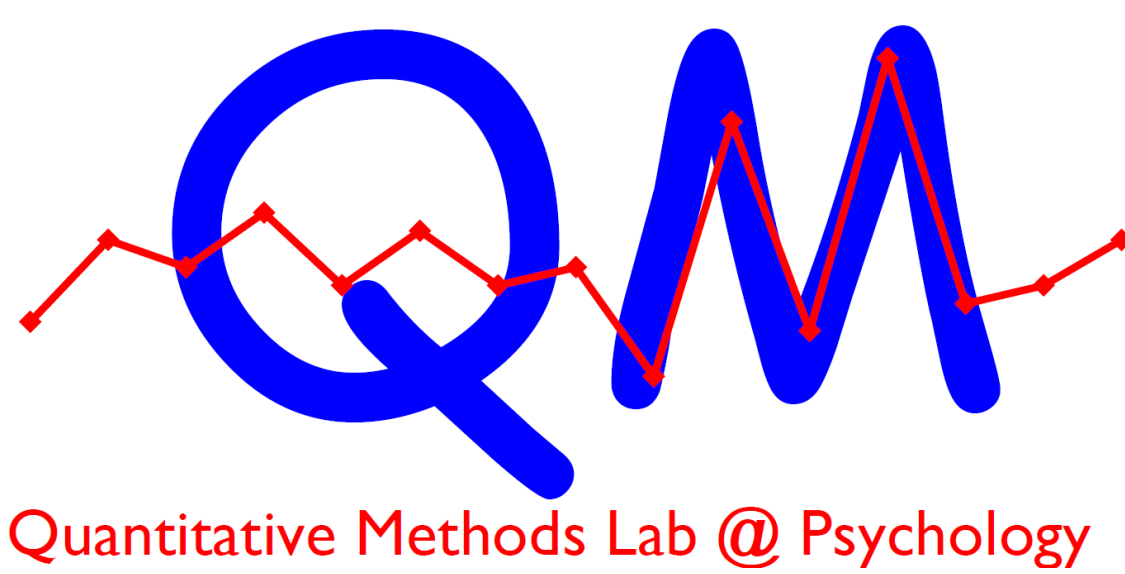
Introduction

- Children's reading activities in preschool are important predictors of subsequent reading frequency and later reading skills (Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005).

- Shared book reading is a culturally appealing and theoretically plausible context in which parents may foster children's emergent literacy (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). It may cultivate children's motivation for investing in reading-related pursuits (Baker et al., 2001; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Clingenpeel & Pianta, 2007).

- Prior research has shown that shared book reading is positively associated with many language learning outcomes (Milburn et al., 2014), later reading achievement and frequency of recreational reading (Lesemen & de Jong, 1998).

- Shared book reading may be most effective when parents seek to involve the child actively in verbal exchanges (Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005).

- However, research on parent-child interactions in shared book reading has often focused on the link between parents' behaviors and children's early literacy skills (e.g., Anderson et al., 2012; Blewitt et al., 2013; Cline, 2010; Evans & Shaw, 2008; Sparks & Reese, 2009). It is not yet clear what parental behaviors promote children's affective and cognitive engagement in shared book reading.

- Moreover, what occurs before or after reading has not been examined. Documenting what occurs before, during and after reading allows a deeper understanding of the process.

- Accordingly, this study investigates:
  - (1) What is the nature of parent behavior before, during, and after a shared book reading activity?
  - (2) What parent behaviors predict child affective and cognitive engagement before, during, and after reading?

Method

- Data (*N* = 800) came from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study- Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) preschool wave.

- Major sample characteristics:
  - Child: 50% girls; 46% White, 15% Black, 18% Latino, 9% Asian; mean age 52 months (SD=3.75).
  - Mothers: 12% didn't complete high school; 36% high school diploma, 32% some college, 17% college degree, 15% graduate degree.
  - Family: 20% live in poverty

- Each mother–child dyad was given two bags, with Bag 1 including the book Corduroy (Freeman, 1968), available in English or in Spanish, and Bag 2 including Play-Doh, a rolling pin, and cookie cutters. Each dyad played with both of the bags, beginning with the book and ending with the Play-Doh, for a total of 10 minutes.

- Mother-child dyads were video-taped and their book-reading-related discussion was coded by using the Reading Aloud Profile – Together (RAPT) scheme.

Measures

- Based on previous research (e.g., Hindman, Skibbe, & Foster, 2014; Landry et al., 2012; Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008), RAPT parent variables were categorized into four dimensions to capture both affective-emotional (i.e., sensitivity) and cognitive-linguistic (i.e., code, meaning, and evocative) behaviors.

Parent Behavior

Parental Sensitivity
- Makes child comfortable
- Captures child attention

Code Talk
- Highlights letters
- Tracks print

Meaning Talk
- Expands on story
- Relates book to child's experience

Use of Evocative Techniques
- Asks open or close-ended questions
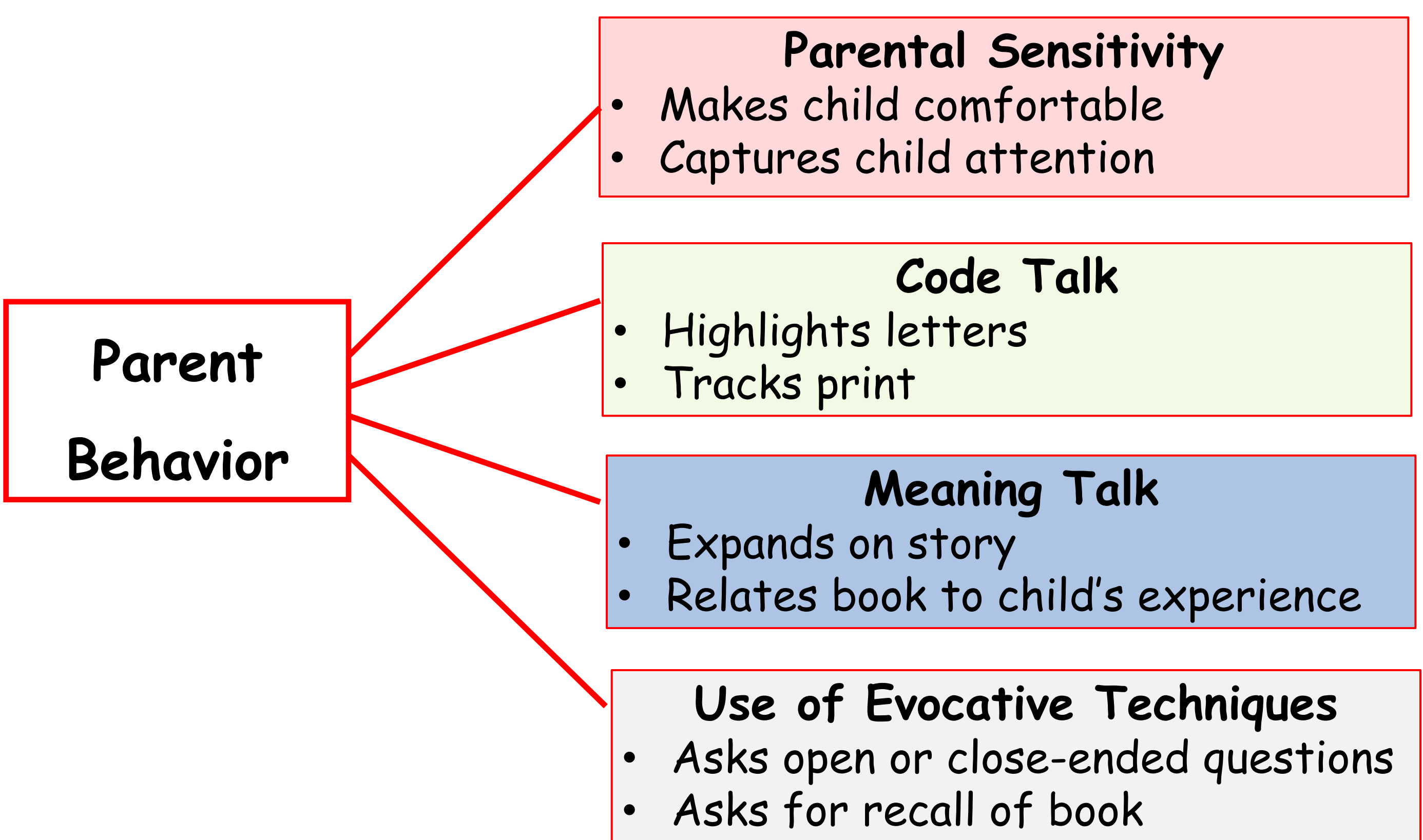- Asks for recall of book

Figure 1: Categorization of parent behavior and sample items.

- Based on Snow et al (2007), RAPT child variables were also categorized into four dimensions to capture both affective engagement (i.e., interest) and cognitive engagement (i.e., engagement with print, comprehension building through questioning, and use of oral language to communicate thinking) before, during, and after book reading.

Interests
(e.g., shows interest in book)

Engagement with Print
(e.g., points to pictures/text)

Child Engagement

Comprehension through Questioning
(e.g., asks questions)

Use Oral Language to Communicate Thinking
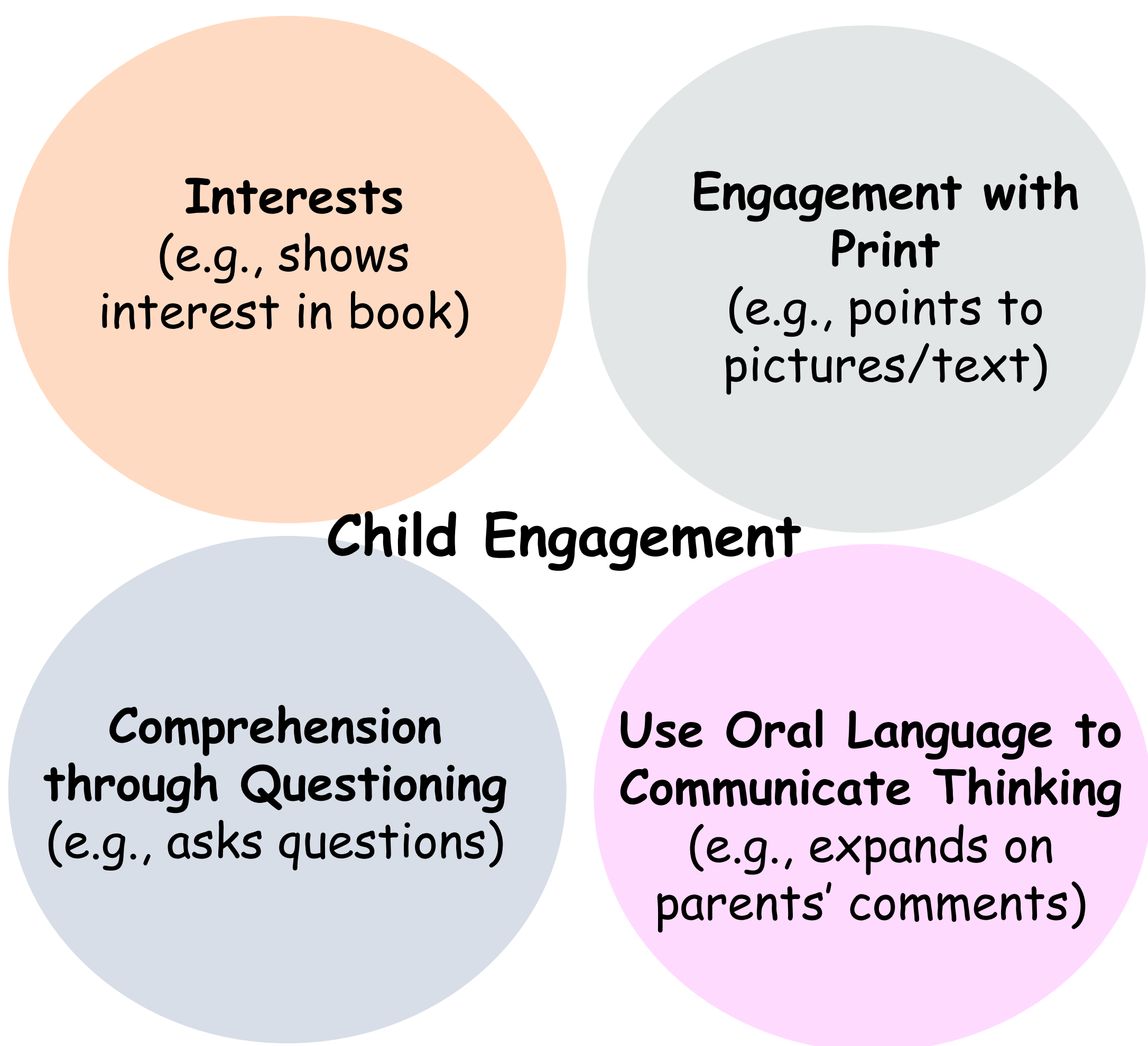(e.g., expands on parents' comments)

Figure 2: Categorization of child engagement and sample items.

- Control variables collected at the ECLS-B preschool wave:
  - Child age in months.
  - Parent-report frequency of reading per week (Not at all, once or twice, 3-6 times, or everyday).
  - Family socioeconomic status, a continuous index computed from household income, parental occupation and education.

Results

- **Description of Parent Behavior**

  - Before reading, only 1% of the parents engaged in code talk, 16% meaning talk, 43% evocative techniques.

  - During reading, 48% code talk; 91% meaning talk; 80% used evocative techniques.

  - After reading, parent behaviors were very rare. 53% show sensitivity; 32% used evocative techniques.

- **Predictors of Each Dimension of Engagement**

  - **Before Reading**

    - Parental sensitivity and meaning talk significantly predicted child interest and whether child asked questions to build comprehension.

    - Parental sensitivity and use of evocative techniques predicted children's use of oral language to communicate thinking.

  - **During Reading**

    - Meaning talk was the only significant predictor of child interest. Parental sensitivity predicted whether child asked questions and engaged with print.

    - Parental sensitivity and the use of evocative techniques predicted children's use of oral language to communicate thinking.

  - **After Reading**

    - Parental sensitivity and use of evocative techniques predicted child's interest, used oral language to communicate thinking, and if child asked questions.

- **Predictors of Overall Engagement**

  - Parental sensitivity and use of evocative techniques significantly predicted children's overall engagement.

  - Children's engagement before reading significantly predicted their engagement during and after reading.

Discussion

- Fostering children's engagement in reading is associated with their motivation to read, the frequency of reading, and the development of reading skills (Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005; S & M, 2002, Baker et al., 2001).

- This study extends prior research by considering (1) what went on before discussing the actual story and after the story ended and (2) different dimensions of child engagement in shared book reading.

- Parental sensitivity, use of evocative techniques, and meaning talk positively predict child engagement.

- Child engagement before reading starts is a significant predictor of subsequent engagement in reading, suggesting that it is very important for parents to purposely engage children before they start reading the book.