

# *Family Factors Affecting Children's Reading Ability*

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**Abstract:** Today, children's reading ability is seen as an increasingly important personal skill, helping individuals to absorb information and export it as well. While a large number of studies have analyzed the effects of a specific family factor on children's reading ability, few review-type articles have summarized and generalized multiple influences. Thus, this paper analyzes the literature in the past 30 years on family factors that influence children's reading ability from 3 major mediating roles--family socioeconomic status, family cultural environment, and family psychological atmosphere. On this basis, this paper proposes multidimensional practical suggestions, for the family and society regarding the development of children's reading ability, which includes separate advice for children in lower grades and children in higher grades. Effective parent-participate cultural activities may especially work on the development of younger children's reading comprehension, while the capability of independent reading is essential for children in higher grades. Finally, the author offers an outlook for future researchers.

**Keywords:** children, reading ability, SES, family cultural environment.

## **1. Introduction**

In today's rapidly developing society, an individual's reading ability is regarded as an essential and highly valued ability. Reading ability refers to the ability of readers to use their own knowledge and experience and skills to successfully complete the reading of an article, including specific reading activities such as perception, comprehension and appreciation of the article, as well as the normal motivation, interest, emotion, will and personality necessary to successfully complete the reading [1]. For students, reading ability is an important part of language literacy and the basis for learning all subjects well; for a social person, good reading ability is a fundamental ability for individuals to acquire information, enhance cognition, and think deeply [1]. Hecht found that even after several years of formal instruction in elementary school, early acquisition of reading-related skills largely influenced individual differences in later reading ability [2]. Whereas the family plays the most dominant role in the development of children's early reading skills, it is important to explore the influence of factors such as family environment and family socioeconomic status on children's reading ability in order to guide external forces such as the family in helping children to develop good reading skills. Since there are few review-type articles summarizing the role of each factor and mediator and its direct possible relationship, this paper will summarize previous studies on the influence of family on children's reading ability from three aspects: family socioeconomic status, family cultural environment, and family psychological atmosphere.

In this review, the author uses the Google Scholar and Knowledge to search the literature related to the topic from 1990 to 2020, most of which are research. This review summarizes selected domestic and international research over the past 30 years on family factors that influence children's reading ability and establishes a relatively complete model of the multi-pathway influence approach. In addition, on this basis, relevant suggestions are made for specific measures of the family on children's reading ability development, which are expected to provide practical help to parents and society.

## **2. Influencing Factors**

### **2.1. Family Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

SES refers to the social position of an individual or a group of individuals defined in society based on the social resources possessed by their families, and is usually measured objectively by parental occupation, parental education level, and family economic income, reflecting differences in individual access to actual or potential resources [3].

SES's considerable improvement in children's reading comprehension can be accounted for by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the family investment model [4, 5]. According to the ecosystem theory, a constant proximity environment, such as a family, can directly affect a child's development, including the development of reading skills. Direct impact on development Families with higher socioeconomic status can provide economic, human and social capital, creating a richer learning environment for children and promoting a more positive attitude towards reading. However, students from lower socioeconomic families often lack a range of physical and social resources to support their reading development [6].

Current research has focused on discussing the effects of family economic status on their reading ability through multiple mediating effects, rather than direct effects on reading ability. This is because the effect of family socioeconomic status on individual behavior is not direct, but acts through a series of mediating variables [3].

Among them, the discussion of mediating effects focuses on children's own characteristics, such as interest in reading. Influence Paths with Parental Characteristics as Mediating Variables Parental characteristics include parent-child reading, parenting expectations, parental encouragement, parental guidance for children's reading and writing, etc. [7-9].

For example, parents with higher SES tend to possess more positive attitudes toward reading and higher levels of interest in reading, and in this family reading atmosphere, children may subconsciously imitate and learn from their parents' reading behaviors and acquire higher reading engagement, which in turn affects the acquisition of reading ability [10]. At the same time, middle and upper-class families or parents with high education tend to have an encouraging attitude toward children's reading behavior, and through parent-child reading and model reading, they enhance their children's motivation to read and help them form good reading habits by the power of their own role models, which eventually positively influence their children's reading achievement [9]. In addition, parents with high socioeconomic status have more interaction with their children and provide more practical experiences, including reading experiences, which have a supportive effect on children's reading ability [11,12].

Although family socioeconomic status as reflected in parental characteristics and family cultural environment belong to different types of pathways, there is significant overlap in how and what the two affect children's reading ability, and prior researchers have rarely delineated a clearly defined categorization of the two.

### **2.1.1. Influence Paths with Individual Student Characteristics as Mediating Variables**

According to the social cognitive theory, environmental factors can influence human behavioral performance through internal human factors [1].

In recent years, the mediating variables between family economic status and students' reading achievement that researchers have focused on are no longer limited to parental characteristics, but have also begun to shift to individual students' characteristics, such as reading engagement, reading interest, reading motivation, reading activities, vocabulary level, and morpheme awareness.

#### **2.1.1.1. Reading Engagement and Reading Interest**

Reading interest in a broad sense refers to the reader's enjoyment of the whole reading process. In a narrow sense, it refers to a reader's tendency to consciously choose the content of certain subject literature or certain carrier literature. In reading practice, reading interest is an important expression of reading motivation, which is the most direct and active psychological factor of intention in reading activities, and has a positive role in sustaining attention, enhancing comprehension and memory, stimulating association and creative thinking, and evoking emotional experience [13].

Reading interest has an important role in the home environment and reading ability [3]. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) considers reading engagement as "the student characteristic that has the greatest correlation with reading literacy achievement" [1].

In a study addressing the mediating role of reading interest and reading engagement on the influence of home environment on secondary school students' reading ability [4], Wen Hongbo used student reading ability test papers and student reading status questionnaires and explored the mechanisms underlying the influence of home environment on reading ability using structural equation modeling. The conclusions indicated that (1) Family socioeconomic status influences reading interest through a fully mediating effect of reading input; reading interest influences reading achievement through a fully mediating effect of reading input; (2) The effect of family socioeconomic status on reading ability is achieved through the cyclical interaction of reading engagement and reading interest.

The more students invest in reading, the more they perceive themselves to be interested in reading, and reading out of interest leads to more engagement in reading [14].

#### **2.1.1.2. Reading Motivation and Reading Activity**

Reading motivation, as an important individual characteristic, plays an important role in the relationship between family socioeconomic status and reading achievement. First, students with higher family socioeconomic status have higher levels of reading motivation, which in turn directly affects various indicators of reading ability, such as text comprehension, word recognition, and reading skills. In addition, reading motivation also has an indirect effect on reading achievement through the mediation of reading activities (e.g., reading volume, reading frequency): the higher a student's motivation to read, the more likely he or she is to choose reading activities and invest more time and effort in reading, and thus the more likely he or she is to become a proficient reader [3].

Wang also found that students with higher family socioeconomic status were more inclined to devote themselves to reading activities out of intrinsic factors such as personal curiosity, preference for challenging texts, and enjoyment of reading itself, and that such extensive and widespread spontaneous reading ultimately led to the positive effect of enhancing reading achievement [3].

The specific intermediary path of reading engagement and reading activity is shown in Figure 1.

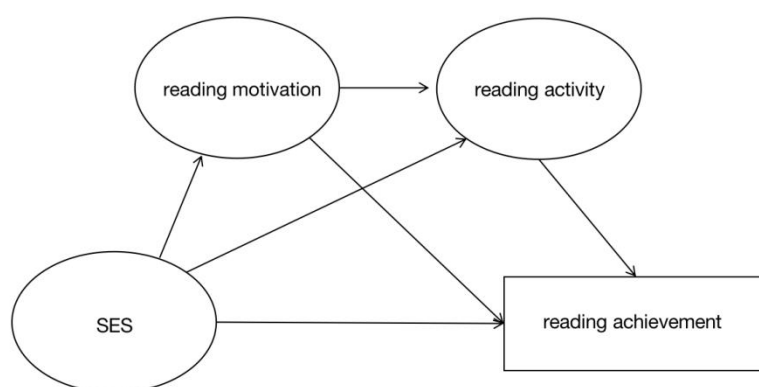


Figure1: A theoretical model of the relationship among family socioeconomic status, reading motivation, reading activity and reading achievement [3].

### 2.1.1.3. Vocabulary and Morphological Awareness

Many studies have explored the relationship between SES and children's early vocabulary development [15]. Findings show that the differential effects of SES on vocabulary begin at 36 months, extend to age 4, and then remain relatively stable until age 13 [16]. Since children's vocabulary is a predictor of reading comprehension, children's vocabulary knowledge may be a mediating variable that moderates the relationship between SES and reading comprehension [17].

Regarding the ways in which vocabulary influences reading comprehension, some studies have shown that vocabulary directly influences reading comprehension, while others have shown that vocabulary influences reading comprehension through other mediating variables such as phonological awareness, letter naming, and morphological awareness [18,19]. Specifically, morphological awareness has been defined as "the ability to think about and manipulate morphology, and the ability to form rules using words in the language" [20].

In this context, Wu investigated the simultaneous mediating role of lexical knowledge and morphological awareness in the relationship between SES and reading comprehension in his study on a mediation model of SES and Chinese reading comprehension [6].

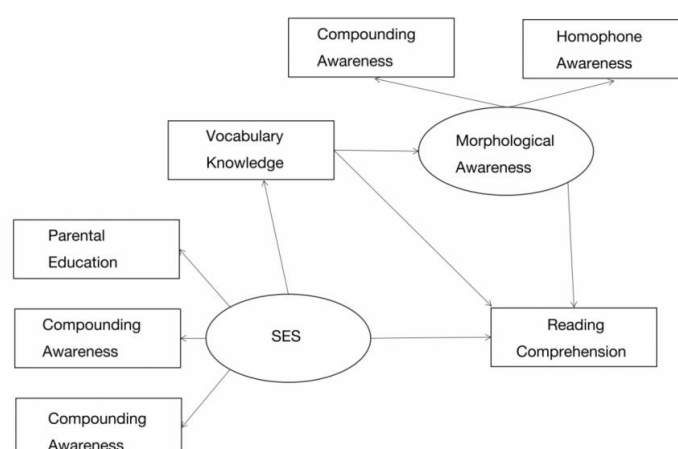


Figure 2: A hypothesized mediation model of vocabulary knowledge and morphological awareness in the relationship between socioeconomic and reading comprehension [6].

This study validates previous research showing a relationship between SES and children's reading comprehension and demonstrates the role that SES plays in reading comprehension. In addition, this study tests a hypothesized graphical path model as shown in Figure 2.

Morphological awareness mediates the relationship between SES and reading comprehension. This suggests that children from families with high SES have higher levels of morpheme awareness, i.e., greater awareness of word parts and homonyms, which contributes to reading comprehension.

SES influences morpheme recognition through vocabulary, and morpheme recognition acts as a mediator to influence reading comprehension. This pathway suggests that children with more educated and advantaged parents may have a stronger vocabulary that better utilizes their understanding of word meanings and facilitates morphological analysis, which may lead to higher reading comprehension [21, 22]. In other words, vocabulary plays a mediating role between SES and morphological awareness, and morphological awareness mediates between lexical knowledge and reading comprehension. These results suggest that SES has a beneficial impression on children's vocabulary development, which in turn supports the achievement of reading comprehension.

Furthermore, the mediating role of vocabulary and morphological awareness in the present study indicates that the influence of SES on the simultaneous variation in Chinese children's reading comprehension skills is reduced. In other words, the influences that vocabulary and morphological awareness make on reading comprehension are larger than those of SES, which explain the phenomenon of the paucity of studies on the direct influence of SES on children's reading comprehension.

### 2.1.2. Family Cultural Environment

Existing studies have different specific classifications for the family cultural environment, but the main elements are relatively similar in nature.

Niu divided family culture into family cultural capital and family cultural activities [23]. Family cultural capital refers to reading and writing tools such as books, stationery and computers. Family cultural activities include children's literacy activities with the main members of the family and contain all their family literacy experiences. Family cultural resources act on students through family cultural activities and exert their positive effects [24].

In a study on the role that the family cultural background plays in children's reading development, Shu et al. used regression models to examine the relationship between family cultural background and children's reading development in a more comprehensive way [25]. It explored the influence of family cultural background on children's reading development in the following four ways.

(a) Family cultural resources such as the number of magazines and books at home, other learning tools such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc.

(b) Parent-child cultural activities: e.g., the amount of time parents spend on reading each day, how often parents take children to bookstores and libraries, when parents begin to read stories to children and teach them word recognition;

(c) Independent cultural behaviors of the child, e.g., how often the child reads independently at home, how much time the child watches television each day;

(d) Parental education, including the educational level of the father and mother, e.g., university, high school, etc.

The path analysis data indicated that four aspects of family cultural background had different effects on children's reading achievement in grades 1 and 4.

The first-grade path analysis model indicated that parent-child cultural activities played the most important role in children's initial reading. Although family cultural resources and parental education did not show a direct contribution to children's initial reading, parental education contributed to family

cultural resources, which in turn contributed to parent-child cultural activities, and finally, parent-child cultural activities contributed to children's initial reading.

In the fourth-grade path analysis model, three aspects of family cultural background (parent-child cultural activity, child-independent cultural behavior, and parental education level) showed direct contributions to children's reading comprehension. Among the three influential factors, a child-independent cultural activity made a relatively large contribution to children's reading ability in grade

The findings suggest that different aspects of family cultural background affect children's early and later reading development differently, with important differences related to children's ability to move independently. In the early grades, cultural interactions between parents and children play the most important role in children's initial reading because their ability to read, study, and refer to materials independently is still very poor. As children in the upper grades become capable enough to read independently, consult materials, and organize their own activities, a more important factor in reading development is whether they read frequently and widely. At the same time, the availability of rich cultural resources at home and the sharing of rich cultural activities with parents also independently influence their reading development.

At the same time, Eva Myrberg et al., in their study on the influence of parents' education levels on children's reading ability, provided a more specific definition of "cultural capital" [26]. The author believes that "cultural capital" here can be equivalent to "cultural environment" in the aforementioned study.

According to Eva Mirberg et al, habits are defined as cultural capital in an embodied state, while books, dictionaries, etc. are cultural capital in an objectified state and academic degrees are cultural capital in an institutionalized state [27].

The transfer of cultural capital begins in early childhood and lasts for a long period. The cultural capital owned by a family can effectively contribute to the process of cultural occupation, which covers the entire socialization period. According to Bourdieu, this transfer of cultural capital is the most potential form of capital inheritance [27].

It has also been found that the education level of parents is not explained by the literary environment, nor is it related to literary activities at home. Therefore, it has been suggested that the direct influence of parents' education level on students' reading achievement may lie in their children's educational expectations [26]. This study involved 9–10-year-old fifth graders, which is consistent with the findings of Shu et al for 4th graders [25].

Early reading activities with children at home significantly mediated the impact of books, and early reading activities influenced early reading skills. The direct impact of the number of books in the home on academic achievement may reflect parents' own interest in reading and the importance they place on reading or printed materials. It is also possible that the number of books reflects the importance of cultural topics. However, since the number of books at home had no significant effect on children's early reading skills, this study suggests that having books at home alone is not enough to motivate children to read. This may be due to the fact that the concept of capital is closely related to the concept of field, which cannot be understood independently [26]. The efficiency of cultural capital depends on the social field where the subject is located, and the value of capital also depends on the existence of a field in which this ability is able to be utilized. Book collection as cultural capital should be valued in the appropriate cultural environment, that is, the reading environment created by parents and children, which contributes to the development of children's reading skills.

### 2.1.3. Family Psychological Atmosphere

Family psychological atmosphere refers to the sum of feelings, emotions and attitudes that family members gradually develop in their family life under a certain family physical and cultural environment.



The influence of the psychological atmosphere in the home on children's reading comprehension has not been well studied, but studies of kindergarten and home cultural environments have revealed that the psychological atmosphere in the home mediates or expresses the family's economic or cultural capital to some extent for children.

For example, more educated parents are more likely to attend cultural activities with their children in their daily lives. By reading books with parents, children can learn to pay attention to text features, be asked to anticipate events in a story, or be prompted to ask questions about the form and content of the books. In doing so, a set of values, attitudes, and expectations can be transmitted. As a result, children may gradually see themselves as readers even before they are actually able to read [28,29].

In an encouraging, positive family psychological atmosphere, a child's reading habits are more likely to be shaped in a direction that is conducive to further reading acquisition [26].

## **2.2. Suggestions**

Based on the summary and discussion of family factors that influence children's reading ability above, the writer offers the following suggestions to parents who expect to further improve their children's reading ability from the perspective of focusing on the different practical measures for children in lower grades.

### **2.2.1. For Children in Lower Grades**

For young children who are just beginning to read, the cultural activities that parents and children participate in together in the family are relatively more important, and both parental education and family cultural resources play an indirect role in children's reading through parent-child cultural activities. In other words, the level of parental education is ultimately influenced by parent-child cultural activities, or the richness of cultural activities between parents and children in the family plays the most important role in children's early reading [25]. Intervention programs focused on parent training, vocabulary knowledge, and morphological skills may mitigate the negative effects of low SES [6]. In addition, parents can use their knowledge base to participate in their children's reading activities, demonstrate positive attitudes toward reading, and use role models to stimulate their children's motivation and interest in reading [3].

### **2.2.2. For Children in Higher Grades**

In the higher grades, several aspects of the family's cultural background or SES influence children's reading relatively independently, with children's independent cultural activities being relatively more important for reading success in the higher grades. For instance, parental education is only one of the factors influencing children's reading success, and it is a relatively minor factor. Even in low-education households, parents can create a better home cultural environment for their children, which can effectively contribute to their reading development [25].

For children in higher grades, the ultimate effect of enhancing reading achievement can be achieved especially by increasing students' motivation to read and implementing diverse reading activities. For example, by guiding students to design and implement their own reading tasks to improve independent reading skills, they can feel more enjoyment in reading and further motivate internal motivation [30]. Additionally, a good reading environment and high-quality reading exposure such as a large number of books are quite important for the cultivation of children's reading habits and abilities, and parents should also expose their children to more comprehensive books and activities related to reading, so that children can develop good reading habits, which are especially essential for older children who are preparing for more independently reading activities.

### 3. Conclusion

From the process of reading and summarizing the relevant past studies, the author found that the definitions and connotations of some terms have not been particularly clear from existing studies. For instance, some researchers attribute parental education to the category of the family cultural environment, while some other researchers believe that SES includes the content of parental education. The reason behind it may be the relatively vague definitions of the SES and family cultural environment, or the specialty of some influencing factors such as parental education, which may determine a family's socioeconomic status and cultural environment at the same time. The phenomenon above suggests future researchers focus more on the definition of the terms, which may contribute to building a more authoritative and comprehensive framework of the whole influencing path.

Most of the current research is concerned with the unilateral influence of a specific influencing factor on children's reading ability or the interaction of several mediating pathways within this factor, but few studies have discussed the possible interactions between different influencing factors or the co-cyclical effects of their influence on children's reading ability. Thus, the field about the relationships or interactions between those main influencing factors, such as the potential relationship between the SES and the family cultural environment, is still remaining for further development, as well as the possible joint influencing action of the factors above.

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