

Informal Learning in Everyday Family Activities as Early Childhood Education

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Early Learning and A Whole Lot More

- This year's conference theme resonates with research and practice my colleagues and I have been engaged in for the past 25 years on the characteristics and importance of everyday child learning as a type of informal early childhood education
- My presentation focuses on what everyday child learning “looks like” and what types of everyday learning experiences are most likely to have development-enhancing consequences
- I also place emphasis on the fact that most informal child learning “takes place” in the context of everyday parent and child interactions where the consequences are mutually rewarding

Relationship Between Informal and Formal Early Childhood Learning

In the recently published FRP Canada policy paper *Family is the Foundation: Why Family Support and Early Childhood Education Must Be a Collaborative Effort*, the point is made that **early childhood education** and **family support** should complement each other and not be viewed as competing enterprises. I would add that **informal everyday learning** and **formal early childhood education** should not be considered substitutes for one another, but rather should be complementary as well.

What Is Informal Child Learning?

Informal child learning refers to learning that occurs in the context of everyday life where parents and other caregivers provide children the kinds of guidance and support that promote a child's acquisition of situationally specific and culturally meaningful behaviour

What Child Development Specialists Say About Informal Learning

“Everyday learning is pervasive in people’s lives and includes a range of experiences that [can] extend over a lifetime.” *Learning Science in Informal Environments*, 2009.

“Much of what people know about science is learned informally.” Editorial, *Nature*, 464, 813-814, 2010.

“Informal learning...needs to be seen as fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right.” *Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, 2008.

“As families move...between the backyard to museums, between car rides and book reading, between the dinner table and the computer, they trace [their] interests looking for [new] opportunities and experiences.” *Building Islands of Expertise in Everyday Family Activity*, 2002.

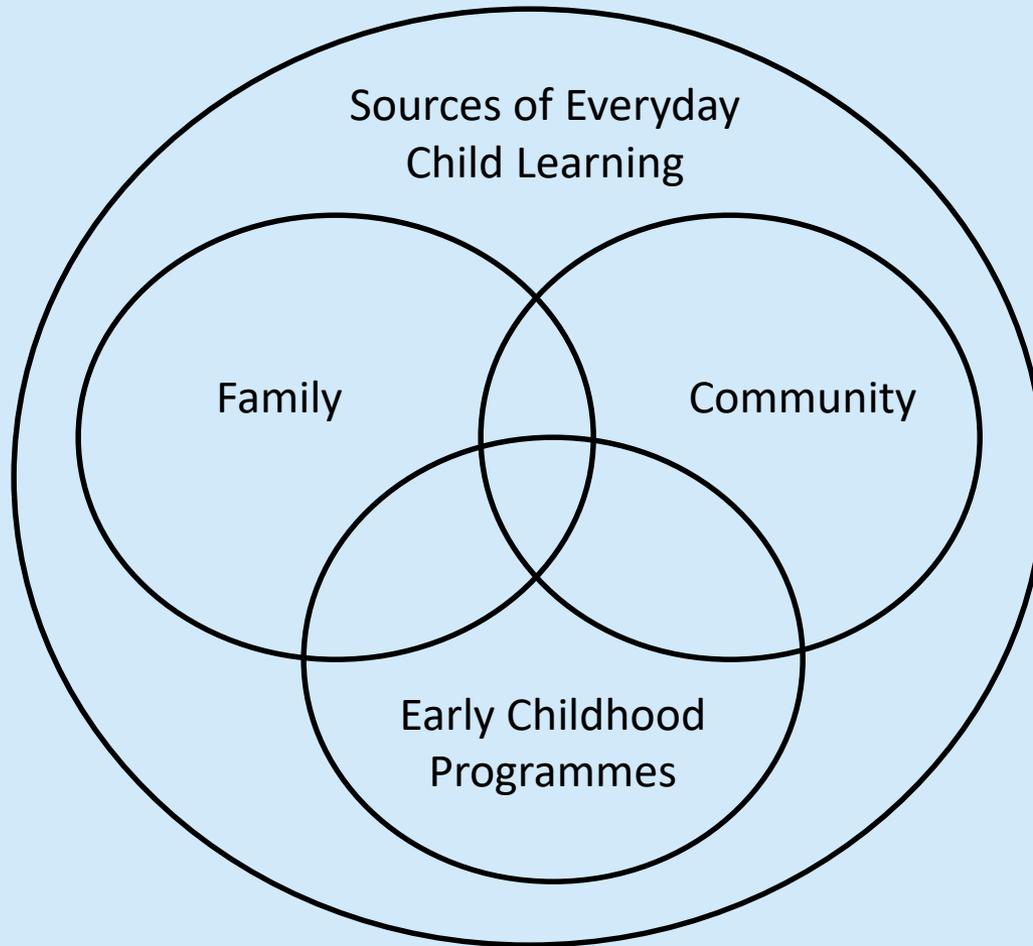
“Everyday experience is influenced by parenting...What children and parents [do] together in their casual interactions concentrates in children’s practicing and parents’ providing the experience that supports practice.” *Social World of Children*, 1999.

Development-in-Context Perspective of Everyday Child Learning

According to Urie Bronfenbrenner (1993), " The ***personal characteristics*** likely to be most potent in affecting the course...of development...(include) those that set in motion, sustain, and encourage processes of interaction between the [developing] person and two aspects of the ***proximal environment***: first, the people present in the setting; and second, the physical and symbolic features of the setting that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with an activity in the immediate environment." (p. 11, emphasis added)

Some Key Characteristics of Development-Instigating Everyday Child Learning Opportunities

- Active child participation in everyday activities where participation is the context of learning and development
- Child personal interests and situationally interesting people, material, and events that evoke and sustain participation
- Environmentally responsive materials (toys, objects) that permit a child to see the relationship between his/her actions and their consequences
- Adults who are responsive to child initiations and who encourage and support child exploration



The sources of everyday child learning happen in the contexts of family life, community participation, and different kinds of early childhood programs

Sources of Everyday Child Learning Opportunities

Family Activity (example)	Community Activity (example)
Family Routines (Cooking)	Family Excursions (Food shopping)
Parenting Routines (Child's bedtime)	Family Outings (Visiting friends/neighbours)
Child Routines (Dressing/undressing)	Play Activities (Playgrounds)
Literacy Activities (Telling child stories)	Community Activities (Library/book mobile)
Play Activities (Lap games, nursery rhymes)	Outdoor Activities (Nature trail walks)
Physical Play (Rough housing)	Recreation Activities (Swimming)
Entertainment Activities (Dancing/singing)	Children's Attractions (Petting zoos/animal farms)
Family Rituals (Saying grace at meals)	Arts/Entertainment Activities (Concerts/theatre)
Family Celebrations (Holiday dinners)	Church/Religious Activities (Sunday school)
Socialization Activities (Having friends "over")	Organisations and Groups (Children's groups)
Gardening Activities (Vegetable garden)	Sports Activities (Football)

Examples of Child Participation in Everyday Activities

























Child Engagement and a Sense of Mastery

An important characteristic of learning in general, and everyday child learning in particular, is a child's recognition that he or she was the person who produced interesting environmental effects and consequences. Interactions with material and people that permit a child to learn the relationship between his or her behaviour and its consequences are more likely to have development-enhancing characteristics and in turn enhance learning and promote child development.















Interest-Based Everyday Child Learning

One of the most important developing-instigating characteristics of everyday child learning is interest-based participation in everyday activities. Findings from three research syntheses of the relationship between children's interests and children's cognitive, social, adaptive, language, and early literacy behaviour and development indicated that there are value-added benefits of learning opportunities that have interest-based features and elements.

Types of Interests

- ***Personal Interests***

Personal interests are the likes, preferences, desires, etc. of a person that influence participation or engagement in desired activities, events, or behaviour.

- ***Situational Interests***

Situational interests refers to the “interestingness” of people, objects, events, etc. that gain and maintain a person’s attention, and “draw” the person into engagement or participation in activities.

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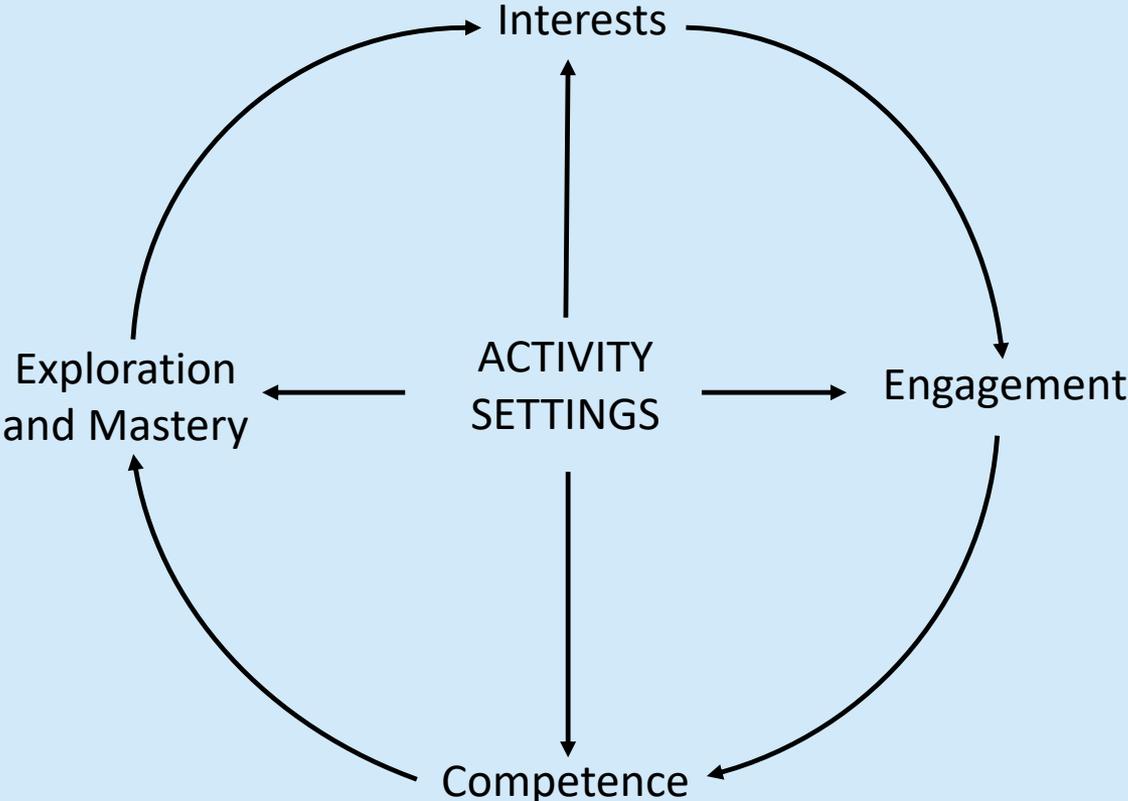
"I HAD A CHOICE BETWEEN STAYING CLEAN OR HAVIN' FUN."

Personal choice is one indicator of a personal interest



What a child finds situationally interesting is not necessarily the same thing that an adult thinks might be interesting to a child

Cycle of Interest-Based Everyday Child Learning





“Intense Engagement”



“Preferred Activities”



“Challenging Activities”



“Excitement”



“Exploration”



“Mutually Interesting Activity”

Role of Parents and Other Caregivers in Everyday Child Learning

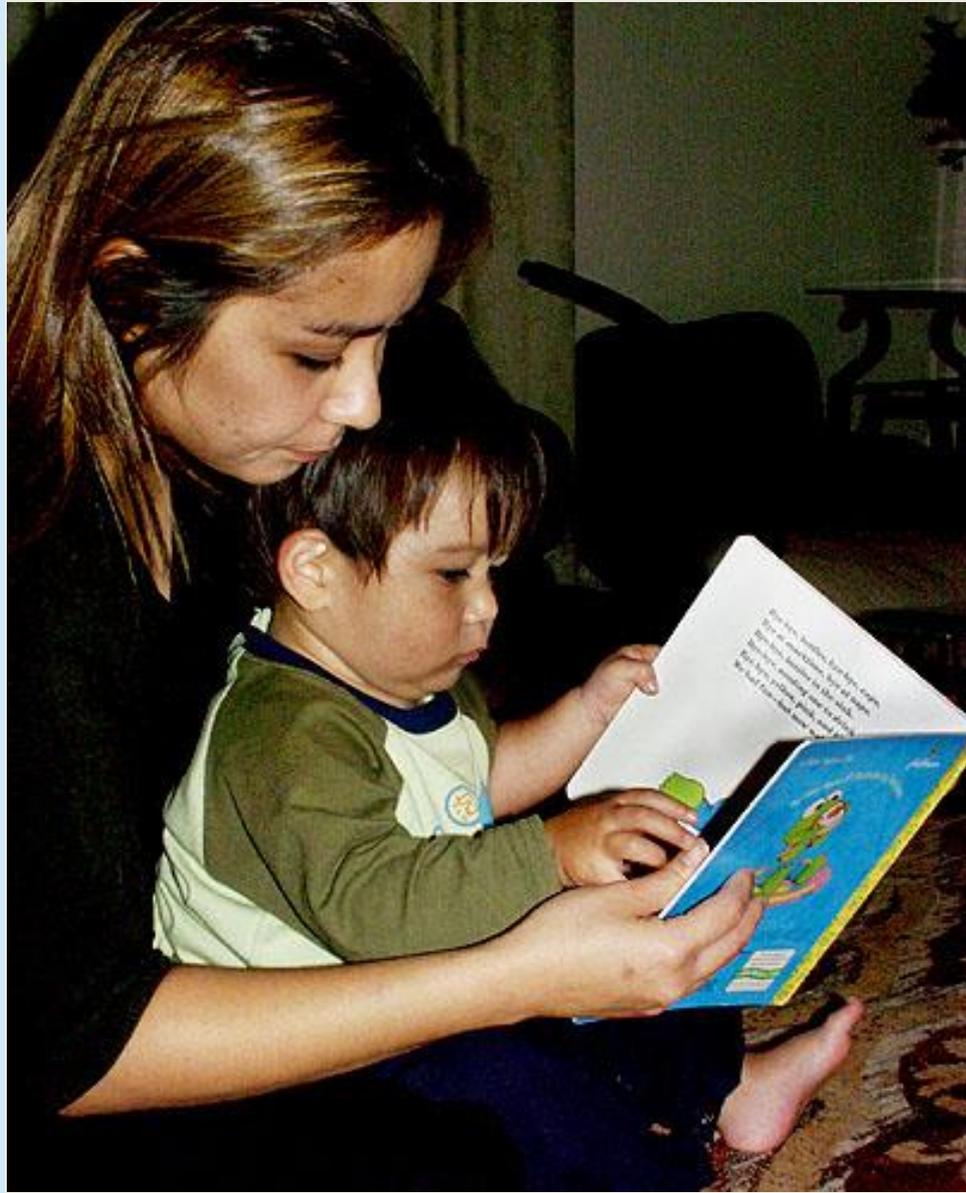
- The ways in which parents and other caregivers engage, encourage, and support child learning in everyday activities matters a great deal if participation is to have development-enhancing consequences.
- Parenting styles that are responsive to child behaviour, encourage child engagement and exploration, and which are supportive are more likely to have optimal child benefits.













Broader-Based Context of Everyday Child Learning and the Importance of Family Support

“Whether parents can perform effectively in their child-rearing roles within the family depends on the *role demands, stresses, and supports emanating from other settings*....Parents’ evaluations of their own capacity to function, as well as their view of their child, are related to such external factors as *flexibility of job schedules, adequacy of child care arrangements, [and] the presence of friends and neighbors who can help out in large and small emergencies*....The availability of supportive settings is, in turn, a function of their existence and frequency in a given culture or subculture.” (Urie Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 7, emphasis added)

Understanding, Acknowledging and Acting on the Relationships Between Family Support and Parenting Roles and Responsibilities

As stated in FRC Canada's policy paper *Family is the Foundation: Why Family Support and Early Childhood Education Must Be a Collaborative Effort*:

Essential supports for families with young children include: pre- and post-natal programs; basic necessities such as food and housing; employment programs; mental health services such as counselling and post partum depression programs; breastfeeding support; well-baby visits and immunizations; parenting groups; play groups; family literacy programs; settlement services for newcomer families; full-time, part-time and respite child care; early identification and programming for developmental delays; [and] early identification of speech and language problems; and intensive family intervention when child neglect or abuse is a concern. (p. 10)

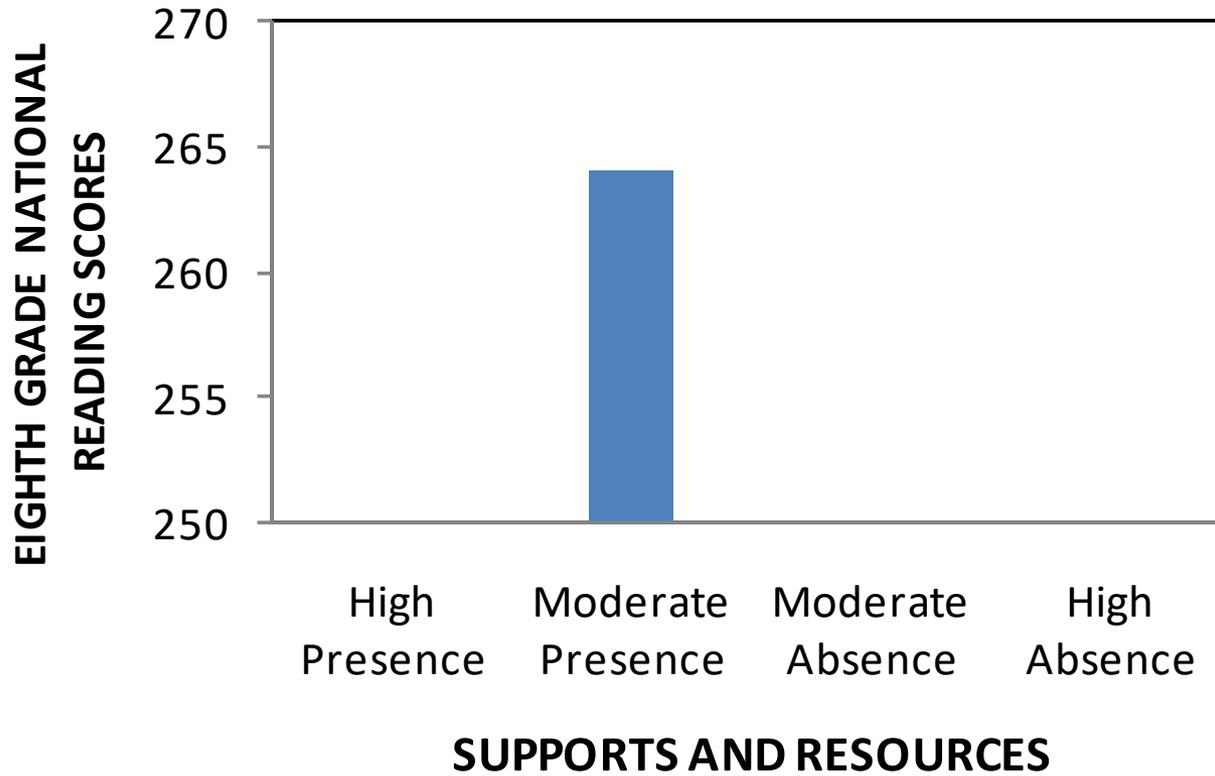
Effects of the Presence and Absence of Supports and Resources

- The **presence** of supports and resources are likely to **provide** parents the opportunities to engage their children in everyday activities where the consequences are **enhanced** child outcomes
- The **absence** of supports and resources are likely to **rob** parents of the opportunity to engage their children in everyday activities where the consequences are **attenuated** child outcomes

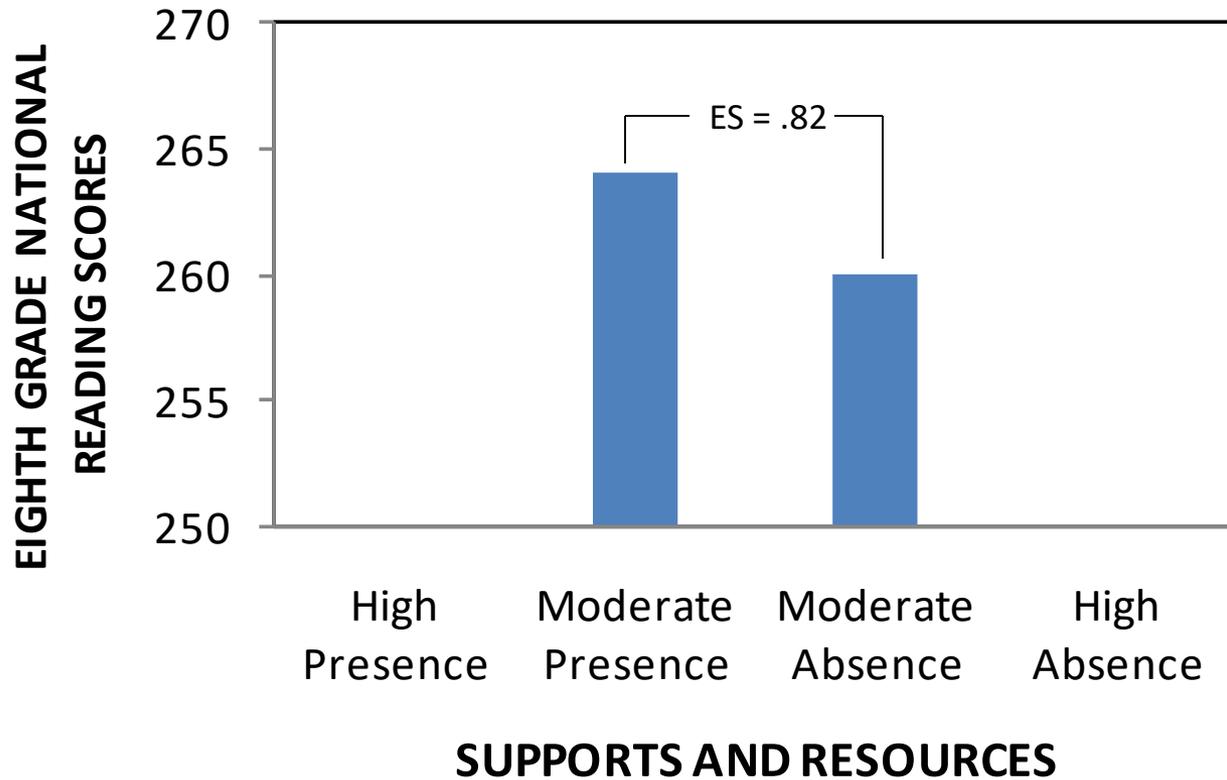
Evidence for the Support-Parenting-Child Outcome Hypotheses

- Secondary analyses of the relationship between household findings from the 2007 ***American Community Survey*** including more than 17,500,000 children birth to 18 years of age and the academic-related performance of American children in 1st, 4th, 8th, and 12th grades reported in other databases were conducted to test the support-parenting child outcome hypotheses
- I used the ***American Community Survey*** data to categorize the children along a continuum of the ***presence-to-absence*** of parent and family supports and resources and then examined the academic performance of children whose households differed in resources and supports
- Findings were identical for all academic outcome measures. I use the 8th grade national reading scores to illustrate why attention to family resources are critical for understanding the importance of family supports

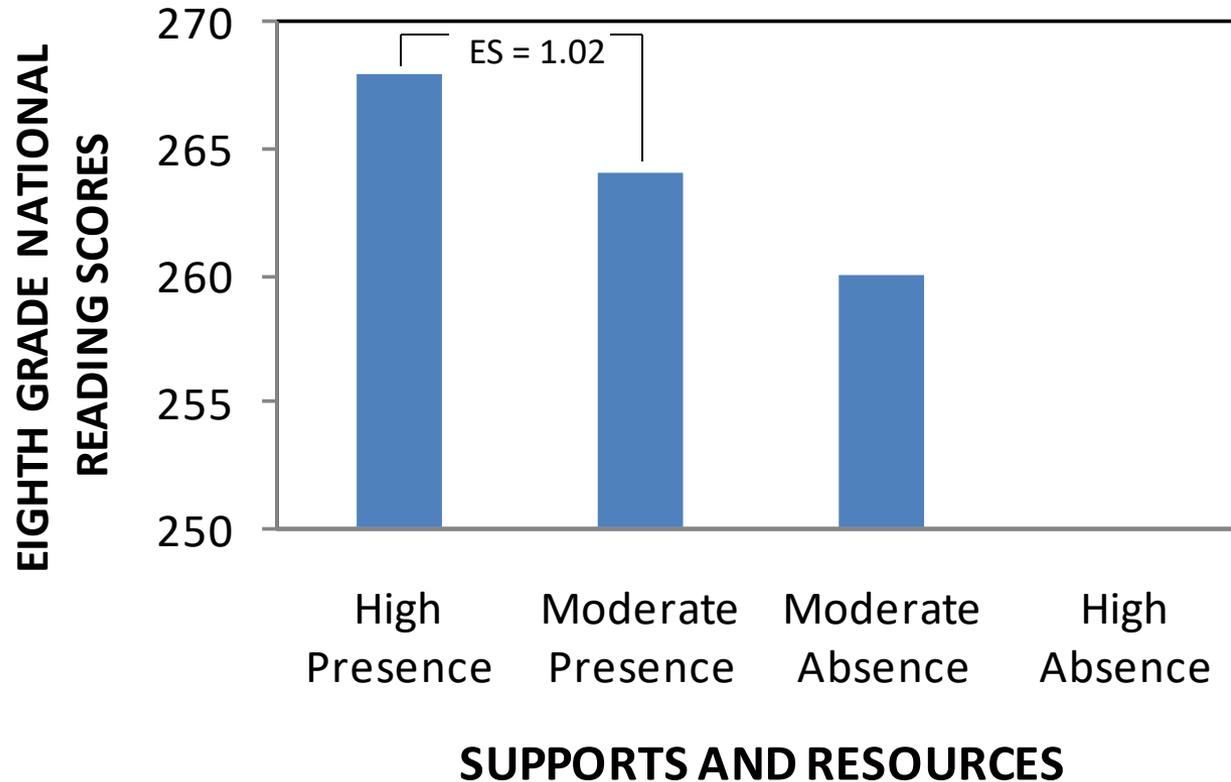
Relationship Between Family Resources and Child Performance



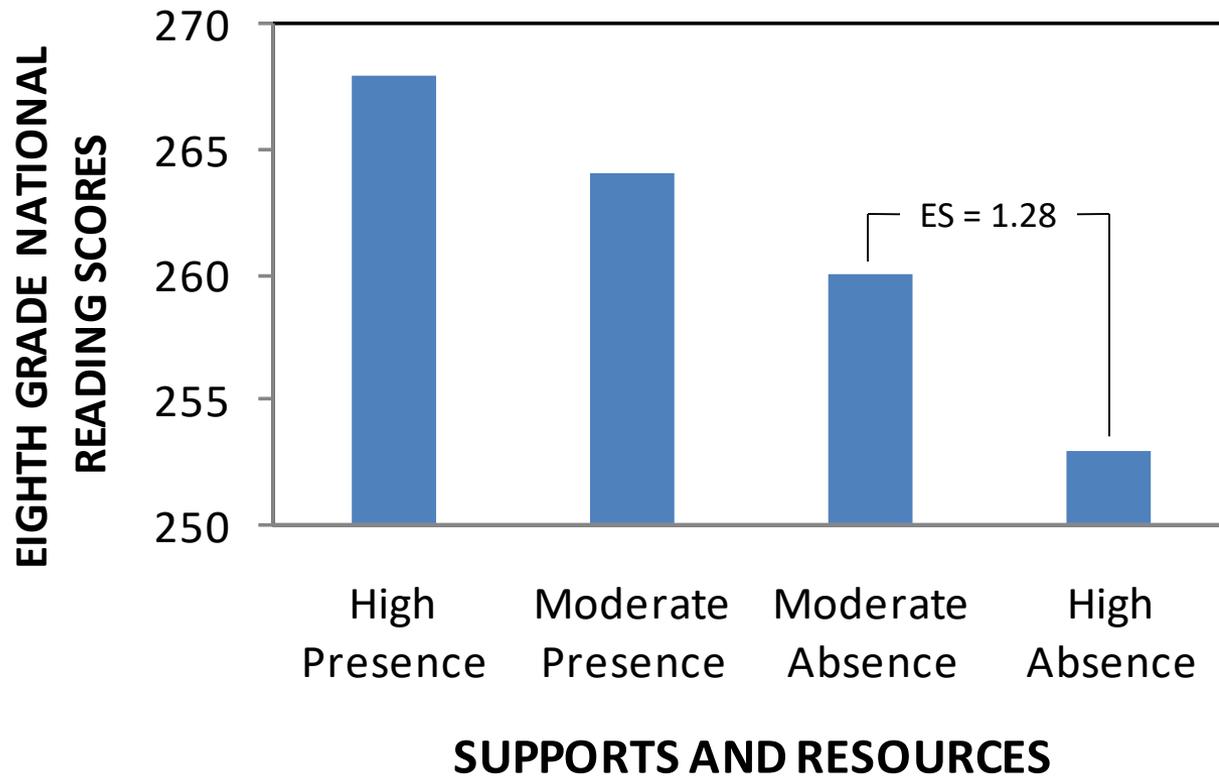
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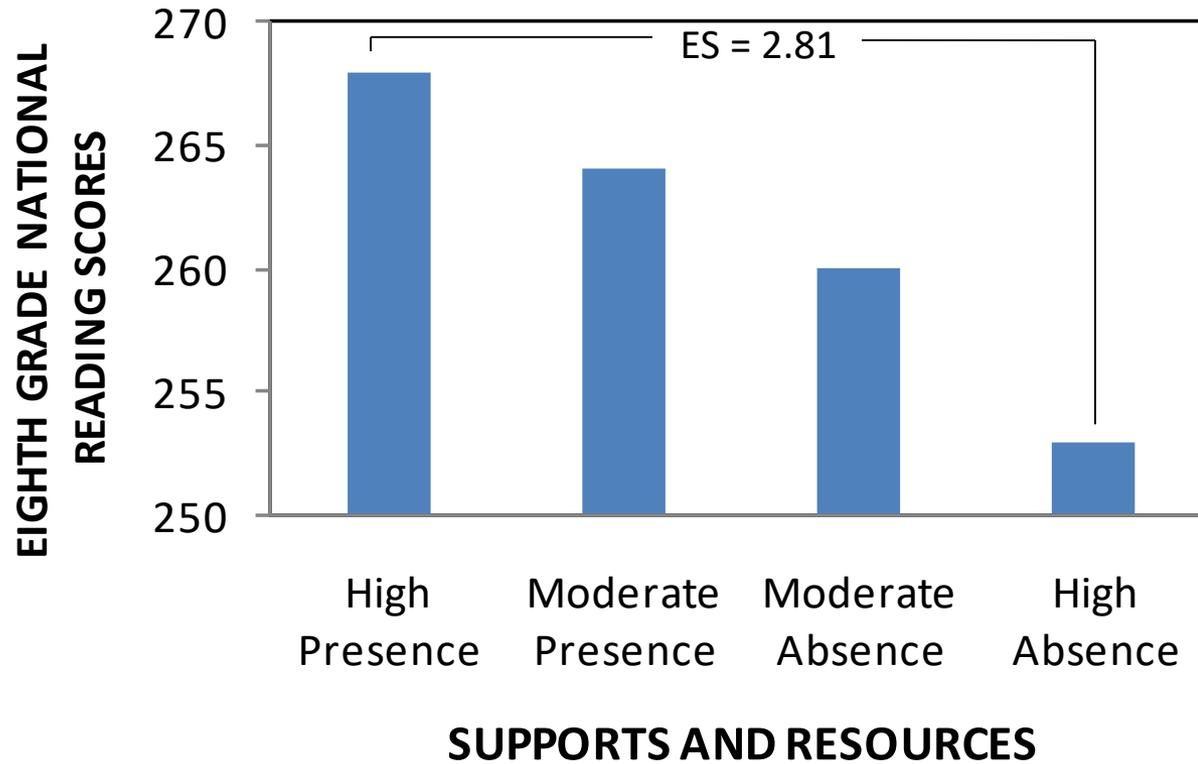
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Relationship Between Family Resources and Child Performance



Relationship Between Family Resources and Child Performance



Conclusion

I conclude with a painphased quote from FRC Canada's policy paper *Family is the Foundation*:

The development of children cannot be separated from the well-being of their families....It is the family (for better or worse) which has the greatest influence upon a child....A complete understanding of practices that influence child learning and development (both informal and formal) need to recognize the fact that a child's development is best understood in the context of the family and the family is best understood in the context of family and community support and resources.