Mentoring to foster children's emerging literacy

Janet K. Archer

University of Northern Iowa

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Mentoring to foster children's emerging literacy

Abstract
Many children benefit from additional association with supportive adults at school. Mentoring programs are one way of providing support. Mentors can assist in fostering children's personal-social and thinking-language abilities.

A brochure with basic guidelines for mentors has been developed. It is intended as a reference source with suggestions for mentoring procedures and language activities.
Mentoring to Foster Children’s Emerging Literacy

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by

Janet K. Archer

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Jeanne McLain Harms
Date Approved: 3/27/2000
Director of Research Project

Jeanne McLain Harms
Date Approved: 3/27/2000
Graduate Faculty Adviser

Rick Traw
Date Approved: 3/27/2000
Graduate Faculty Reader

Rick Traw
Date Approved: 3/27/2000
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Abstract

Many children benefit from additional association with supportive adults at school. Mentoring programs are one way of providing support. Mentors can assist in fostering children's personal-social and thinking-language abilities.

A brochure with basic guidelines for mentors has been developed. It is intended as a reference source with suggestions for mentoring procedures and language activities.
An ideal school world would be that all children came from homes with a rich-print environment and many opportunities to witness models of language and to engage in an array of language functions. Most children with this background of experiences successfully make the transition from home to school (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

Unfortunately, in too many cases, children’s home environments have not prepared them for school experiences and do not support them as they progress through school. Many of these children need more attention than the classroom teacher has time to give them (Smith, 1991). Schools can respond to these children’s learning needs in many ways, one of which is a well organized mentoring program with carefully selected volunteers who are concerned about the welfare of children and are well informed about appropriate mentoring activities (Hood, 1992). Such a program can offer children additional support and can be a part of a school compensation program for children who have an inadequate home background (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1992).

Mentoring can be beneficial to students’ social development and can improve their attitude and attendance. Such programs have been found to motivate students by changing the classroom routine and by providing opportunities to socialize with supportive adults. Mentors, by developing positive relationships with assigned students, can serve
as role models who can foster their abilities (Hood, 1992).

Mentors can contribute a great deal to children’s emerging literacy. When students encounter a nurturing adult who enjoys reading and writing, their interest in language activities can be fostered (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). When children have opportunities to engage in the reading and writing processes and then share the ideas they have generated through these processes, their language abilities will emerge naturally (Cambourne, 1988). Taylor and Strickland (1986) believe that the informal language learning that can take place in a literature-based mentoring cannot be improved upon by formal activities.

Organizing a Supportive Mentoring Program

The goals of the mentoring program need to be carefully defined and discussed by the teachers with their students, parents, and mentors. Fehr (1993) suggests these goals:

To create a supportive learning environment to encourage reading and writing.

To provide a mentor that will allow children the freedom to take risks and explore language.

To provide extra time to target children in language arts exploration.
Finding Mentors

Volunteers for the mentoring program can be sought through advertisements in the school newsletter and from recommendations of school personnel. When the program progresses, mentors may recommend potential volunteers. (If a prospective mentor's motives appear suspect, the principal can be asked to inquire of the person's past.) It may be advantageous to start a mentoring program with a few volunteers and then expand it as the procedures that create a successful program are in place (Fehr, 1993).

Introducing the Program to Prospective Mentors

The prospective mentors need to meet with the children's teachers or the school's coordinator of mentoring before they are assigned children. This contact can be a meeting or an individual conference or both. After the program is established, an experienced, enthusiastic mentor can be a part of the introductory meeting to help explain the program and the mentor's role (Fehr, 1993).

The introductory meeting to the mentoring program needs to include a clear presentation of the program's goals, the mentor's role, and suggestions for activities during the mentoring sessions. The faculty person conducting the meeting needs to explain to the prospective mentors what support the school will give them and what
responsibilities the mentor needs to assume. For example, the volunteers need to attend the mentoring sessions regularly (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1992). The mentors need to contact the school when they cannot attend. Also, they need to be advised to not come when they have a contagious disease.

The mentors may be counseled that their contact with their assigned children needs to be, for the most part, at school. If they seek involvement with a child from an unfamiliar family outside of school, they need to discuss the activity with the school personnel. Also, the mentors should not, at first, distribute their addresses and telephone numbers. As the mentoring sessions progress, the school and the mentors may find that out-of-school activities are desirable.

Language activities appropriate for mentoring can be discussed at the first meeting. It may be beneficial to touch base with the group as the mentoring progresses. Then, volunteers can share successful activities and discuss problems.

A leaflet of suggested mentoring procedures and language activities can be the basis of the introductory meeting. (The references and comments in parentheses are not included in the leaflet.) The leaflet will be printed on both sides of a sheet of paper and will be folded so it can fit into a jacket pocket or purse. It has been developed to serve as a
reference for the mentor. The leaflet is presented in the next section.

WELCOME TO MENTORING IN ________________

Address of the school _________________________

Telephone number of the school ________________

The teachers and children appreciate your volunteering in our mentoring program. The program will focus on reading and related expressive activity, primarily discussing and writing.

Goals of the Mentoring Program

To create a supportive learning environment to encourage reading and writing.

To provide a mentor that will allow children the freedom to take risks and explore language.

To provide extra time to target children in language arts exploration.

Procedures of the Mentoring Program

Many types of language activities can be experienced in a mentoring session. The time length of these sessions depends on the age and attention span of the children.
Getting Acquainted

Children for many different reasons vary with their openness to adults, whether known or strangers. You can select a conversation-starter from the envelope of ideas. [An envelope with these ideas for getting acquainted will be given to each mentor. Each idea is printed on one by five inch strips of poster board.] Examples are:

- My favorite play activity is .
- My favorite television program is .
- My favorite school activity is .
- The members of my family are .
- I help at home by .
- I like to read .
- An exciting experience for me was .

Conversing

- You as a mentor need to be a good listener and convey confidence through responses to your child's contributions. Many children find conversing with an adult who will give them his/her individual attention is very supportive. As the mentoring sessions progress, ideas from the ice-breaker packet as well as experiences important to the children and events in the school and community can be talked about.
Occasionally, much of the period can be taken up with conversation. If a concern emerges during the conversation that relates to the child's well-being, you should notify the school personnel. It is important to remember that the mentoring sessions are not for counseling. As a mentor, you have important functions: helping children have rewarding language experiences and sometimes assisting them in interpreting their life's experiences.

**Reading and Discussing**

**Reading aloud.** Educators strongly recommend reading aloud to children of all ages. [Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1977; Trelease, 1995; Routman, 1991] Usually, sitting next to the child provides a comfortable experience. The reading experience may involve a picture book or a section of a full-length work.

- The first goal of reading aloud should be for pleasure. Almost every mentoring session should include a pleasurable listening experience as the child relaxes and enjoys the story. The teacher of your child can give you a list of assigned read aloud books and, in some cases, can supply these books. The child may have checked out such a book from the library for you to read aloud.

- A second goal of a reading aloud session is to offer models of language, or how language is written. Reading to children
different kinds of stories can help meet this goal. [Bosma, 1995]

- A third goal of a reading aloud session is to supply content for
discussion and other activity. [Routman, 1991] After a story is
read aloud, children benefit from talking about the ideas they
have gained from listening to it. Discussion can greatly benefit
children's understanding of reading experiences (Almasi in
Gmbrell & Almasi, 1994). Sometimes, the story can prompt
children to recall a similar experience from their background. A
story may even prompt you as a mentor to share a story from your
past experience. Children often enjoy talking about their favorite
part or character of the story. Children, especially a beginning
reader, can retell the story, sometimes using flannelboard
pieces supplied by the teacher.

Reading aloud together. You may read aloud with your child,
especially if the child is limited in reading ability and needs practice
in recognizing the patterns in language. The teacher can supply easy
to read books for you to use in this activity. As you read with the
child, guide the child's tracking across each line with a business-
size envelope. You may pause a bit more at the natural places created
by commas and the punctuation at the end of sentences. You can
keep reading even though the child is unable to supply all the words.
Discussion can follow as suggested in the previous section on reading aloud.

**Reading aloud by the child.**

- A more advanced reader may read aloud a picture book or a section from a full length book that he/she has chosen before the mentoring session and then discuss his/her meaning of the work with the mentor.

- If a child has limited reading ability and comes upon an unknown word or is hesitant about a word while reading aloud, you can quietly say the word so there is little interruption in the flow of the story.

- Again, at the end of this experience, you and the child may want to talk about the story.

**Reading silently by the child.** The child may come to the mentoring session with a book to read silently, either a picture book or a full length. Then, a discussion can follow the silent reading time. If the child is reading a section from a full length, you may want to read from another copy of the same volume or read another volume on the same topic or theme [usually supplied by the teacher]. Such shared reading activity can extend the child's insight into a book or theme or interest the child in reading other works.
Writing Activity

- After reading a story with the child, he/she can write about a related experience from his/her life or about his/her favorite character or part of the story. You may want to write with the child. The child may wish to read his/her story to you and to listen to your story. In this way, the child is creating reading. [Graves, 1977]

- A child who has limited writing ability may wish to dictate his/her ideas to you. Do not be surprised if the child will be able to read it back to you, perhaps with some assistance, even though the difficulty level seems above the child’s reading level.

- A child with reading-writing difficulties may enjoy using a strictly patterned picture book as the basis for a story. The teacher can supply such a source.

- As the child encounters words he/she cannot spell, write the word on a piece of paper, and then the child can copy it into the story. If the child brings his/her personal spelling book to the mentoring session, he/she can refer to the book for the correct spelling. If it is not in the book, the word can be added to the book.

Other Expressive Activity [Harms & Lettow, 1998]

- The child can draw a picture of an interesting part of a reading experience or of a meaningful experience in his life. The picture
can be titled or captioned.

- Simple books with a great deal of dialogue can be great fun to read aloud together, especially for beginning readers. The teacher can supply such books.

- A child can make puppets to retell a story. Stories that have two main characters for each scene make manageable puppet experiences for a mentoring experience. Each of you can take a part.

**IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

*** Name of your child

*** Times of the mentoring sessions

Selecting the Mentoring Partners

A mentor may be assigned a child or a small group of children. Children with moderate needs usually have the most potential for success in a mentoring program (Fehr, 1993). Teachers need to carefully observe children for their individual needs that can be met in a mentoring program. Then, these children need to be matched with mentors who have had opportunities to discuss the children’s personal-social and literacy needs with their teachers. The matching of children with adults who understand their needs and can bond with them is most important (Sloan, 1984).
Summary

Children can find community members who are not frustrated or fatigued by the daily demands of the classroom refreshing. Older citizens can offer interesting perspectives and experiences to children. Many of them are a vast resource of historical events that are not only interesting to children but can help them identify more closely with their community. As a result of the mentoring experience, children can find support that can direct them to focus on meaningful language experiences. They can find reading and related experiences pleasurable. As they engage in the language processes, their thinking-language abilities are fostered.
Bibliography


