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## Early literacy experiences and their affect on children's literacy development

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## Early literacy experiences and their affect on children's literacy development

### Abstract

This paper is a review of literature relative to the importance of early literacy experiences for children. The primary focus this paper was to look at the benefits of early experiences with literature on children's literacy development.

The primary early literary experience investigated was children being read to by adults, and the benefits of this activity related to literacy development. Other components of a rich literacy environment and their potential benefits were discussed. All of the activities that were investigated were found to positively influence literacy development.

Potential problems parents may have when trying to provide literacy experiences for their children were identified. These problems included child's disinterest, and parent emotional involvement. Successful programs to help parents provide literary experiences to their children were reviewed. Guidelines for assisting parents were identified.

The conclusion of this paper offers suggestions to parents and educators on how to provide early literacy experiences for children. Recommendations for further research in the area are stated.

**EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES AND THEIR AFFECT  
ON CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**

**A Graduate Project**

**Submitted to the**

**Department of Curriculum and Instruction**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

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**BY**

**Jolene Miller**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

When America first became a free nation our early leaders identified the need for members of a democratic society to be literate. Ever since schools were first created, literacy has been the primary goal of instruction, for it has always been seen as essential for our nation, so that the people could govern themselves and compete with other nations.

Even though literacy has been a primary goal of American education, we have never been a country with a totally literate population. It is estimated that at least one third of the American population is functionally illiterate ( Newsweek, 1997). In a nation where education is required for all students through at least elementary school, many people are searching for a reason why we have the high level of illiteracy that we do.

Schools are seen by the public as the place where children should learn to read. Since their inception, schools have continually changed reading textbooks and methods of instruction in an effort to achieve the goal of making every child literate.

Beginning in 1960 with Durkins study of early readers, researchers began to question if schools were in fact solely responsible for a child's literacy. If schools were the only choice, then why are children who are given the same instruction not all able learn to read? This could be a result of intellectual ability, but it could also have something to do with the child's early experiences with literacy. Since 1960 numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the role the home environment plays in a child's literary development, any studies have focused on the effects of parents reading to their children.

## Historical Background

The first colonists in America taught their children at home to read, write, and do arithmetic. Reading was seen as a necessary skill to ensure that the Bible would be read and understood. Until the 1640s, the responsibility of educating children was the job of the family. In 1642 and in 1647, laws were passed in Massachusetts requiring some education for all of its inhabitants. These laws required that all children be instructed in reading, although it did not specify where this instruction was to be given. The Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647 required towns with fifty householders to hire a schoolmaster capable of teaching reading and writing. Even after these laws were in place, the home was still the primary place for reading instruction. Many town schools required students to know how to read before they could be enrolled, for education continued to be seen by many colonist as a private matter and the responsibility of parents. For the poorer class of parents teaching their children to read proved to be a difficult task. Most could not afford to buy books for their homes , and many were illiterate themselves.

When America became a free and democratic nation, our forefathers realized that all members of the society would need to be literate. As a result, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin called for free state sponsored education for all children. This was the beginning of the free public school systems of today (Good, 1953). It was also the beginning of the shift from parents being responsible for a child's literacy to schools being responsible.

When schools began to assume the responsibility of teaching children, reading to children in the home did not stop. Reading in the first century of our country was still a major form of entertainment and religious education in the home. Families continued to read together and the tradition of the bedtime story has endured.



At the turn of the century, the parent's role as reading teacher was again identified. In the book, The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading, Edmund Huey (1908) gave suggestions to parents on methods they could use to teach their child to read. He suggested that parents help interested children learn letter names and the printed names of things in their environment. He also suggested that parents read aloud to their children, for children developed an understanding of print from being read to by parents. "The secret of it all lies in parents' reading aloud to and with the child... at home there is scarcely a more commendable and useful practice than that of reading much of good things aloud to the children" (Huey, 1908, p.334).

By the middle of the twentieth century schools had taken over the role of reading teacher to the extent that many parents were worried about teaching their children too much before they began school. In a survey of parents in 1949, Almay reported that parents did help their children learn to read by asking them questions about books they read to them, or by having the child repeat what they read to him/her. Almay (1949) observed that parents were afraid to teach their child reading because it might interfere with the methods used to teach reading in school. She further stated some words of caution in her reporting of parent's efforts to teach their children to read.

Despite errors of retrospection about reading instruction described by parents and children, the fact that reading skills and attitudes as developed in the home may either conflict with or reinforce what is done at school must be considered. Whether the child receives instruction at home or at school, or both, his total readiness for such instruction ought not to be neglected. Anyone can try to teach a child to read, but whether the child is helped or hindered can only be decided in the context of his whole life pattern. ( p.89)

In 1958, Dolores Durkin began studying early readers. Durkin found that it was generally assumed that early readers would have trouble later. By beginning too soon they would become bored later ; also, learning from someone not

trained to teach, children would later become confused (Durkin 1960). In the beginning of the 1960s commercial materials for parents came on the market to teach reading at home. The research being done in child development began to dispute the notion that early learning could be harmful to children. When Durkin began her second study in 1961 she found new interest among middle-class parents in teaching their children to read.

Durkin's studies gave support for the idea that children could learn to read before school entry. These studies also highlighted the important role home environment plays in early literacy.

As early as 1963, emphasis began to be placed on teaching children more at a younger age. In 1963, Glenn Doman published his book How to Teach Your Baby to Read. In it, he advocates exposing infants to flash cards of words and phrases to teach them reading. In the 1980s, many parents became increasingly anxious to have their preschool children learn as much as they could, as quickly as they could. Preschools, such as Glenn Doman's Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential, whose goal it was to teach reading, writing, math, and even foreign language to toddlers, were developed. Parents began using flash cards with babies. This rush to create academic babies also began a new onset of research into the role parents play in a child's literacy development.

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze the literature that investigates the effects of parents reading to preschool aged children and to report on programs designed to aid parents in reading to their children. To achieve the purpose, the following questions will be addressed:

1. What aspects of children's home literacy environment affect their emergent literacy skills?
2. What are the problems parents might encounter when giving their child literary experiences?
3. What are some guidelines for helping parents provide an enriching home literacy environment for their young children?

### Need for the Study

There has always been concern in America that the most highly developed country in the world could not create a totally literate population. Over the years much research has been done to find a solution to this problem. Current research on brain development indicates that the majority of development occurs before children enter school ( Newsweek, 1997).

This new information makes it imperative that we look at the home environment of a child before entry to school if we are to understand why some children become literate, and others do not. When looking at early literacy it is logical to investigate the affects of early experiences with books and other experiences with literature in the home before school entry.

Research has shown positive effects of parents reading to their children ( Clark, 1984; Morrow, 1983; Teale 1984). Yet, in a survey in the spring/summer 1997 special edition of Newsweek only 53% of parents said they read to their child every day. This indicates that there is a need to investigate ways to help parents read to their children on a regular basis.

### Limitation of the Study

Literature explaining the benefits of reading to children is plentiful. No studies

were found that revealed negative outcomes of parents reading to their children. Research examining problems parents might have in reading to their children is sparse. This limited the information available to answer the second question of this study.

The research done on methods and programs to encourage parents to read to young children has primarily involved low income families. The programs reviewed in chapter three of this study were conducted with low income families. As a result some of the suggestions offered may not be generalized to all socioeconomic populations.

### Definition of Terms

Terms used in this study will be defined to mean the following:

Book Reading Episode- An interaction between a parent and child that involves printed material, usually in the form of a children's story book.

Early Reader - A child who begins to read before the first grade.

Emergent Literacy -The period of development between non-literacy and literacy characterized by a child's ability to identify some letters or words, understand that print conveys meaning, and the development of a sense of story.

Home Literacy Environment-An environment in which children are exposed to literary materials and interactions occur between literate family members and children that include parents reading for pleasure and parents reading to children.

Literacy Artifacts-Any materials related to literacy which include: books, magazines, newspapers, paper, pencils, crayons, and pens.

Mother-child Dyads-A group consisting of a mother and one child, either male or female.

Reading Readiness - The period of maturation when a child becomes ready to read.

**Sense of Story**-The understanding that stories consist of a predictable format, and include a beginning, middle and end.

**Shared Book Reading**- The reading of a book by an adult to a child.

**Storybook**- Any children's literature containing one or more stories, usually including pictures.

**Young Child**- A child between the ages of birth and six years.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Being literate is fundamental to a child's educational progress and achievement (Morrow, 1983), for it helps one to be successful in society. Despite the importance of literacy, not all children learn to read. Identifying why they do not learn to read has been a major focus of researchers.

It is a fact that some children come to school ready to learn to read and some do not. It is also a fact that when children are given the same reading instruction some children learn to read and some do not. Children's readiness to read when entering school has been seen as an issue of maturation. Teachers generally believe that all children will eventually be ready to read, and when they do learn to read, it will depend on their rate of maturation (Clay 1991). Differences in reading ability have normally been attributed to the intelligence level of the child. Research however has contradicted these popular assumptions (Clark, 1984; Durkin, 1966; Morrow, 1983 ).

Research findings reveal that intelligence level is not a determiner of early reading ability. The IQ scores of early readers range from low-average to well above average (Clark, 1984; Durkin, 1966; Morrow, 1983).

The idea that children who are not ready to read when they start school will eventually catch up has also been disputed. In studying 100 children who were behind in reading achievement their first year in school, Marie Clay found them to still be as far behind two years later (Clay, 1991). This suggests that children do not reach a point in maturation where their reading abilities will experience rapid growth, and they will catch up to their peers.

What then is the difference between children who learn to read with ease and those who have difficulty? Studies of early readers found a link between the

children's home environment and their early reading ability. The children came from homes where parents read to them and readily gave help with reading and writing. Also, these parents read themselves and reading was generally valued as an important activity. Their homes also contained an ample supply of books and writing materials (Durkin, 1966; Morrow, 1983). There has been a wealth of research conducted over the last two decades to investigate preschooler's literary experiences before entering school and their affect on reading achievement. This research will be the focus of this review.

Research conducted on the effects of a child's literary experiences at home before they start school, has revealed several factors in a child's home literacy environment that affect emergent literacy skills. The first one to be discussed is parents reading to their children.

It is accepted by researchers that reading to children contributes directly to their early literacy development (Teale, 1984). There has been a substantial amount of longitudinal and correlational studies conducted in home environments which suggest that frequency of picture book reading in the home during the preschool years has a positive effect on a child's later reading ability. Reading to young children has been shown to influence their literary knowledge in a number of ways.

Reading aloud to children has been found to have an impact on their later reading achievement in school (Morrow, 1983; Wells, 1985 ; Wienberger, 1996 ). Wells (1985) found that reading to children was associated with knowledge of literacy and reading comprehension at age seven.

Also, there is evidence that not being read to in the preschool years can cause later reading difficulties when a child enters school. Children who have had less experiences being read to before entry to school have a higher incidence of reading problems (Clay, 1991; , Scarborough, Dobrich, & Hager, 1991). They also show less

interest in reading activities (Morrow, 1983).

Reading to young children helps them to understand the language and functions of the printed word. As a result, it helps children develop emergent literacy skills which will aid them in becoming readers.

One of the most basic requirements for becoming literate is to understand that print has meaning. Reading to young children helps them develop a sense that printed words have meaning by connecting them with the oral language that they regularly hear. It helps them learn what reading is all about (Teale, 1984), and also to learn that reading is a form of communication.

Reading stories to young children helps them develop a sense of story (Clay, 1991; Shapiro, 1994; Teale 1983). It also helps children to learn how to retell stories that they have heard and to develop and to tell stories of their own (Clay, 1991; Shapiro, 1994; Teale, 1983; Wells, 1985). Clay (1991) stated that book reading gives children knowledge about stories that helps them understand stories and books.

In booksharing, children begin to become aware of the linguistic and visual features of books and texts but they do this within the wholeness of stories understood in their own way. Before they get to school they can be found retelling their favorite stories prompted by the sequence of pictures. (Clay, 1991, p. 40)

Being read to in the preschool years can also help children develop another emergent literacy skill, the ability to identify print. Using the Identification of Written Language Test (IWLT), Shapiro (1994) found a relationship between Children being read to and their abilities to identify print at age four.

Reading books to young children also helps them develop an understanding about the mechanics of reading and of the English language. When children are read to on a regular basis they are continually exposed to new words and sentences. From this they can increase their oral vocabulary. They also come to understand more about



language structures and how they are used. It helps them understand grammar and how sentences are formed (Clay, 1991; Teale, 1984). Reading to children also helps them to understand the directional restraints of reading. It teaches them the correct way to hold a book and turn the pages. In addition, it helps them follow the flow of text on the page and understand that reading is done top to bottom, and left to right (Clay, 1991).

Having been read to can also influence a child's language development, not just by teaching them new vocabulary words, but also by teaching them new ways of talking. "Just as we learn about the convention of print and the orthography of the language, we learn a way of talking from books" (Teale, 1984, p. 117). The language used in stories is often much different from the spoken language of children. By listening to stories children are exposed to new types of language that they can incorporate into their oral language.

Children who have been read to a great deal will already know, in some way, that the language of books is different from the language that they speak. They will be developing 'an ear' for bookish or literary forms of language. (Clay, 1991 p. 28)

Wells (1985) found a relationship between the language children learn from books and their ability to understand language used in the classroom. He found that book sharing experiences helped children to deal better with action oriented oral language demands that are made by teachers in the classroom.

Shared book reading has also been associated with the parent's language they use with children. Shirley Brice Heath (1984) did a case study in which she introduced book reading into the household of a toddler where it had not been occurring previously. The introduction of books not only increased the child's oral vocabulary, but it also changed the way adults in the family spoke to the child. Adults

made more of an attempt to engage the toddler in conversation. "Book-reading seemed to bring with it new ways of talking to the toddler, changed perceptions of the child and of caregiver roles, an increased consciousness of the child's language development, and altered patterns of talking about language" (Heath, 1984, p. 70). Similarly, Wells (1985) found that stories that were read in the home were often a spring board for extended conversation between parent and child in which details of stories were discussed or related to events in the child's life.

Perhaps the most important thing children can get from shared book reading experiences with parents is an enjoyment of reading. Studies have shown a connection between being read to and an enjoyment of reading activities. In this regard, Morrow (1983) observed that children with a high interest in reading had been read to more often than children with a low interest in reading activities. When studying children who read early, Clark (1984) observed that children who read early were reported by parents to enjoy shared reading experiences. Teale (1984) stated that storybook reading provides a child with the opportunity to develop his or her own response to literature which helps a child learn to read for enjoyment.

I believe that response is another of the learned parts (not an innate part) of aesthetic reading, a by-product of the social interaction of storybook-readings. Thus, story plays a special role in early literacy development in that only experiences with narratives can initiate the child's familiarization with his or her literacy heritage and that participation in story-readings is an almost necessary occurrence if a child is to learn to read aesthetically. (Teale, 1984, p.119)

The information from the literature presented thus far shows that reading to young children can be beneficial to their development of reading skills. Some researchers would suggest that it is not only how much a child is read to that is important, but how a child is read to. Teale has focused research on the behaviors of parents and children during book reading.

We should not be content merely to find out how much a child has been read to during his or her preschool years and then to relate the amount, or the presence or absence, of this type of experience to literacy development. We also need to attend carefully to the nature of the activity itself. (Teale, 1984)

There is evidence in the literature that suggests that it is not only the reading of the story that is beneficial to children, but that other factors take place during a book reading episode that are important to a child's development. Book reading episodes provide parents with unique opportunities for verbal interactions with their children. Some researchers believe that this interaction is directly related to language and reading success since it creates an environment which fosters language growth in children (Durkin, 1967). The language used during book reading episodes by both parent and child does seem to have an impact on children's development of related skills. Reading is often viewed as a social process (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1997: Teale, 1984) and therefore the language interactions in a book reading episode are crucial for the social aspect of reading.

As early as six months, the language interaction of book reading episodes become a part of some children's lives. In observing mother-child dyads, Bus and Van IJzendoorn (1997) found certain patterns in the way mothers used language while reading to their infants. The mothers primary use of language was to keep their children's attention focused on the book. The second most common use of language was to get children to take meaning from the book. Pointing at pictures and posing questions from mothers was found to be positively correlated with referencing by using verbal or nonverbal protosymbols, such as making sounds of an object or making movements that represent an object in a picture, and responding to mothers by looking, pointing, gesturing, or laughing by infants. The request for responses from the mothers

became more demanding as the children's ability levels grew. Other research has identified mother's primary language during book reading episodes with infants is related to keeping the child's focus on the book and having the child take meaning from the book by labeling pictures (Van Kleeck, Alexander, Vigil, & Templeton).

Other researchers have found parent and child questioning to be an important part of the reading episode for preschool age children. Parents asking probing questions about stories before, during, and after story reading episodes have been found to be related to children's prereading abilities (Flood, 1977). It has also been found to have a positive effect on a child's ability to answer questions in school (Teale, 1983). In addition, Flood found that children who asked questions about stories parents read to them and who received positive feedback for the answers they gave to parents questions, had their reading abilities positively effected.

Reading to children is perhaps the most important part of a home literacy environment, but there are other components that should be considered. Researchers have found relationships between and devices in the home with children interest in literacy and reading abilities (Clark, 1984; Durkin, 1966; Marrow 1983; Weinberger, 1996).

Parents acting as role models for reading is an important part of a home literacy environment. Children who see parents reading for enjoyment in the home have higher reading achievement in school (Durkin, 1966; Weinberger, 1996). Also, having parents who are reading role models can cause children to have more interest in reading (Clark, 1984; Marrow, 1983).

Use of the public library is another component of a home literacy environment that has been found to be related to children's literary development. Use of the public library by children and their family members has been associated with high reading ability upon entering school (Clark, 1984; Weinberger, 1996). It has also been related

to children's interest in reading activities. Morrow (1983) found that three-fourths of children with a high interest in reading visited the public library at least once every two weeks as compared to only one-third of children with low interest in reading activities.

The literary artifacts in the home also play a part in a child's literary development. Children who are exposed to a wide range of reading materials (Clark, 1984; Morrow, 1983) and writing materials (Morrow, 1983) are more likely to show interest in reading.

Children's behaviors during independent play also contribute to reading development. Children who independently choose to look at books on a daily basis, have higher reading achievement. Research reveals that children who look at books daily have higher reading readiness skills (Morrow, 1983) and tend to become good readers (Scarborough, Dobrich, & Hager, 1991). In addition, Morrow (1983) found that children with high interest in reading and high reading readiness skills chose crayons and paper as their favorite toy. They also watched less television than children with low interest in reading.

There are many reasons why parents should read to their children and provide them with literacy experiences and materials during their preschool years; however, some problems may interfere with parents' ability to provide literacy experiences for their children.

A family's socioeconomic status can affect its ability to provide literacy experiences. Low-income families may not be able to purchase as many reading materials to have in their homes. Lack of transportation may further hinder their attempts by making use of a public library prohibitive. In addition to not having as many reading materials in the home low-income, families may not be able to provide as many varied literacy experiences for their children as parents with more higher incomes.

A factor such as income can have a dramatic effect on the home literacy environment. ... families with greater amounts of spendable income can afford to buy more literacy materials for the home; but, also, more income generally means more purchasing of goods, services, and entertainment. The fact that one family can afford to buy or travel more than another can actually increase the literacy activity of the home because of the literacy associated with buying and traveling. (Teale 1986)

A child's interest in literacy may also be a factor in a parent attempt to provide literacy experiences to the child. Morrow (1983) studied children's interest in literacy activities. By examining preschooler's play preferences he found that some preschoolers had a high interest in literacy activities, and some showed very little interest. Children with low interest in literacy activities rarely chose reading or writing materials as a favorite play activity. Most of the children with high interest were read to daily; whereas, most of the children in the low interest group were read to once a week or less. The assumption could be made that children's low interest in literature is a result of being read to less. It could also be that children's lack of interest in books caused the parent to read to them less.

It should be noted, however, that some of the difference between the behaviors of the two groups (frequency of reading to the child, for example) could be a result of the child's already existing interest rather than the cause of that interest. (Morrow, 1983)

Most preschoolers enjoy being read to, but some do not. Wells (1985) found that 11% of mothers reported that their preschoolers enjoyed being read to *not at all* or *not much*. An important question is that if a parent is dealing with a child who has very little interest in being read to should they make the child participate in reading activities? By forcing children to read, will it lower their interest in reading even more? Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) caution parents of low interest children not to fall victim of the *broccoli effect*.

The prevailing wisdom provides little guidance as to what parents should do when a child is not enthusiastic about bookreading. Because it has been made

so clear to today's parents that reading to their children is practically compulsory... we have found that many parents dutifully incorporate bookreading into the child's daily routine no matter what the response to it.

Consider, however, a different familiar question: Will serving broccoli daily to a youngster who dislikes it make the child a broccoli eater... or will it serve to solidify the child's negative attitude? Most of us know instances in which insistence on a child's consuming a disliked substance, or engaging in a disliked activity, has not had the intended effect. This possibility, which we like to term a *broccoli effect*, must be raised with regard to joint parent-child reading." (Scarborough and Dobrich, 1994)

Until the reasons for a child's early likes or dislikes become better understood, it is difficult to know if parents of reluctant children should avoid shared reading activities or try to make them more enjoyable for the child. As reassurance for parents, Scarborough and Dobrich, (1994) stated that there is no clear indication that literacy development depends crucially on shared reading experiences in the preschool years.

When trying to provide early literary experiences for children there is also a risk of parents becoming too emotional or overzealous in their role as teacher. If a parent shows anxiety or frustration, a child's literacy development may suffer. Hope Leichter (1984) wrote that parents may unknowingly bring anxiety they experienced when learning to read into reading situations they share with their children. Parents who had negative experiences with formal reading instruction in school may try to compensate or counteract for their experiences by creating different experiences at home for their child, however, a parent's emotions, however, can make experience in the home difficult for a child, "...when experiences with literacy take place in family environments, the emotional reactions of the parents can affect the child's progress significantly" (Leichter, 1984).

Even parents who approach literary activities positively can negatively influence a child's literary development if they try to push instruction during the preschool

years "...a loud warning must be sounded to over-eager parents! It is folly to kill curiosity and interest with over-instruction" (Clay 1991, p.29).

Research has been done that indicates that children can learn to read during the preschool years(Durkin, 1966, Begg and Clay 1968); however, the quality of what is learned may however be different. When a three year old of superior intelligence was given the same reading instruction as average five year olds, the three year old did learn to read, but the three year old's general knowledge of print was lower than the five year olds, and three months after instruction, the three year old's loss of knowledge was almost total (Begg and Clay, 1968). Clay observed that the reading process and mother-child relationship became intermingled and thrived or suffered conjointly. Clay cautions parents that a negative experience with reading in the home during the preschool years can be more harmful than a negative experience at school.

If the preschool child who is taught by a parent at home is allowed to feel he is failing when his parent becomes irritated or comments negatively on his efforts, this is an earlier encounter with failure in a much more intense relationship with a much more fundamental person. (Clay, 1991)

Formal reading instruction by parents in the preschool years does not seem to offer proven long term benefits and can be an emotionally stressful situation. Parents should proceed with caution when providing literary experiences for preschool children. Following the lead of the child's interest may be the best way for parents to proceed.



## CHAPTER III

### LITERACY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Despite the research that has been published about the importance of early literacy experiences for children, particularly reading to children, some children are still entering school without having had rich literary experiences. There are still children entering Kindergarten who have never been read to by their parents or other adults. This has led to more research into developing programs and guidelines to encourage parents to provide early literacy experiences for their children.

To develop strategies to encourage parents to read to their children and provide them with a rich literacy environment, one must first look at why parents are not already doing so. One possible explanation is that parents don't understand the importance of early literacy experiences. Educators have a tendency to assume that parents understand their important role as a child's first teacher in the preschool year; however, this is not always true. Another reason parents may not read to their children is that they have low literacy levels themselves. Twenty-seven million Americans can't read a bedtime story to a child (Chall et al. ,1987). Access to reading materials and knowledge about how to effectively use them can also limit reading by parents.

Several programs have been developed to increase the amount of early literacy experiences parents provide for children. Many of these programs have been designed for low income and minority populations, who traditionally have come to school with less early literacy experience. Programs have been implemented in schools, and in housing projects and reveal positive results.

Goodwill Industries sponsored the "Read Me A Story" program in housing for homeless families in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In the program Mothers of homeless children attended six workshops. Each workshop focused on a different type of

children's book and exposed parents to a variety of ways to use the book with their children, including asking questions while reading and making predictions. Parents were also taught craft ideas to extend the story (Aaronson 1993 ). Also the program emphasized the importance of reading to children, and reserved part of each session as a time to read and talk about adult literature to help parents improve their literary skills. The program also encouraged public library use. At the end of six weeks the majority of participants stated that they were spending more time reading to their children.

Laurie Ullery (1992) conducted a study in which the goal was to increase the amount of read-aloud activities in the home for 90 kindergarten students from an at-risk school. Ullery chose seven solutions for improving the frequency of children being read to that were used in her program. The first solution was several training workshops for parents to help them learn to the importance of reading and other literacy experiences in the home. The second was to provide daily reading materials through a school lending library to support an eight week read aloud program. A third solution was to provide, in the same lending library, reading materials that could be used by adults at all literacy levels, so parents could model reading in the home. To assist parents with low literacy skills books with cassettes, wordless picture books, and volunteer tutors were offered as a fourth solution to help them in share books with their children. The fifth was a field trip by parents and children to the public library. Increasing student's access to the school library, allowing them to check out books daily, and during the summer, was the sixth solution. The seventh solution was a non traditional outreach program which was developed by the school to attract parents to the program.

Success of the program was determined by parent surveys and book circulation records. At the end of the program, parents reported reading more frequently to their

children and reading more themselves. Forty-seven out of 58 parents stated that they had an increased awareness of the importance of reading aloud to their children.

Patricia Edwards (1992) developed a program called Parents as Partners in Reading for low-income African-American families. Eighteen African-American mothers participated in the program. The program consisted of 23 two-hour sessions held in the school library. Sessions were divided into three phases: coaching, peer modeling, and parent-child interactions. The coaching phase was designed to teach parents the importance of reading to their children and to model effective reading strategies. During the second phase, parents practiced the skills they had learned by reading to each other. In the third phase, parents shared books with their children. In order for the program to work, the school library also had to change its policies and allow parents to check out books. Edwards reported that as a result of the program parents felt more welcome in the school. Also, they knew more about what to expect from their children in school and how they could help them to achieve these expectations.

All of the programs described had three common goals. The first was to inform parents of the importance of reading aloud to their children. The second was to provide parents with reading strategies to help parents feel comfortable when reading with their child, and the third goal was to increase parents' access to reading materials to increase the frequency with which they read to their children.

Although the programs described were all designed to help low-income parents, their goals could be applied universally. It is safe to assume that parents from all walks of life may not know the importance of reading to young children. Also, all parents could benefit by learning strategies to extend and enrich the read-aloud experience. Increasing the availability of reading materials in the home could increase the possibility that materials will be read to children. All of these goals could

be guidelines to help parents provide literary experiences for their child.

The Head Start Home-Based Reading Project was designed to teach parents reading strategies. "When parents learn specific read-aloud strategies, their children's success in literacy is facilitated" (Halsall & Green 1995). Halsall and Green offer some unique approaches to bring literacy training into the homes of parents who are unable to attend training sessions at school. One strategy is to establish a library of high-quality children's books that could be easily circulated to homes. Another technique is to send home fliers or classroom newsletters with children that highlight story-reading practices, share appropriate children's books, and provide extension activities that could be used with books. Using video tapes in which teachers describe book expansion activities, tell why they are important, and show parents reading aloud to their children using reading strategies you wish to teach can be a successful home training tool.

Expanding the definition of what types of activities in the home can provide literary experiences for young children could also help guide parents. Traditionally educators have considered reading books aloud to children the primary source of literacy development. This does not mean that other reading and writing activities that take place in the home should be discounted. Enz and Searfoss (1996) wrote that educators need to expand their view of family literacy. They think schools should offer lending libraries to provide books to the home. They also advocate having teachers make training videos of themselves reading to children using successful reading strategies as a home training tool for parents. They go on to offer other suggestions to help parents provide literacy opportunities for their children. As a way to bring something from the home literacy environment into the classroom and introduce parents to environmental print, they suggest a classroom coupon exchange. Children would bring to school coupons their family would not be using to exchange with

coupons they could use. Parents would be introduced to their child's ability to recognize environmental print as they sort through coupons to send to school.

In addition, Enz and Searfoss (1996) have developed a list of home literacy ideas to share with parents. The list is devised into six sections which reflect common household activities. Ideas are then given on how to expand the activity to make it a literary experience for children. The first section is "*let's go shopping*" and gives ideas for going to the grocery store like letting children read the shopping list and help find products. The second section is "*to and from*" and offers ideas for things to do in the car like reading signs. The third section is "*in the kitchen*" and suggest children help find products and follow recipes. Writing is the goal of the fourth section "*staying in touch*". It offers ideas like writing letters to relatives or making cards for special occasions. Making family entertainment a literary experience is the focus of the fifth section "*that's entertainment*" which suggest playing board games, singing songs from song books, and reading TV program guilds. The final section is called "*let's pretend*" and suggest parents provide props that encourage reading and writing for children's dramatic play. For example coupons for playing store or menus for playing restaurant. These ideas could be used to increase the amount of literary experiences parents provide their children. They also offer alternatives to busy parents who worry that they don't have enough time to spend reading with their child.

## CHAPTER IV

## SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to analyze the literature that investigates the effects of parents reading to preschool aged children and to report on programs designed to aid parents in reading to their children. Three questions were addressed and answered.

The first question was as follows: What aspects of a child's home literacy environment affect their emergent literacy skills?

Historically, parents reading to their children has always been a part of American culture. Before the establishment of schools it was a necessity for learning and later reading became a recreational activity. Reading activities in the home are an important determiner of a child's reading success. Early literacy experience are a better determiner of reading success than intelligence level (Durkin, 1966; Morrow, 1983).

There are many literary experiences given to children in the home. Reading to children has been the most studied. Reading aloud to children increases their knowledge of literacy and reading comprehension level (Wells, 1985). Also, reading aloud to children helps them understand the meaning of print, and develop a sense of story (Clay, 1991; Shapiro, 1994; Teale, 1983). Being read to helps children develop an understanding about reading mechanics and of the English language (Clay, 1991).

Children's vocabulary acquisition is enhanced by reading aloud to them during the preschool years. Reading to children can help them to learn new words and make them more familiar with the language used in the classroom. Perhaps the most important thing children gain from being read to is an enjoyment of reading.

Other components of a child's home literacy environment are related to a child's

interest in reading and reading abilities. Children who have parents who are role models for reading, or use the public library with their families, have higher reading achievement in school and more interest in reading. Children who are exposed to a wide variety of reading and writing materials in the home, or that choose looking at books as a play activity, are more likely to show interest in reading.

The second question was as follows: What are the problems parents might encounter when giving their children literacy experiences?

Despite the research that states the importance of early literary experiences for children, many children still enter school without having had them. One problem parents may have when trying to provide literacy experiences for their children is a lack of access to literacy materials. This is especially true for low income families who have less spendable income and access to public transportation. Another problem faced by parents is a child's lack of interest. Not all children enjoy being read to, nor do all children choose literary activities during play. There is not enough research to definitively tell parents whether or not to force literary experiences on a child who does not want to participate in them. A parent's emotional reactions while working with their child with literacy activities can hinder the process of learning, if the parent is overzealous and pushes the child, or if the parent brings negative feelings about their experience learning to read to the situation.

The third question was as follows: What are some guidelines for helping parents to provide an enriching home literacy environment for children?

Programs that have been developed to encourage parents to give their children early literacy experiences. The programs reviewed in this study have similar goals. These goals are: to increase parents understanding of the importance of reading aloud to children, to provide parents with strategies to help them feel comfortable when they read to their children, and to increase access to reading materials.

Educating parents about the importance of reading to their children, and helping them learn read aloud strategies are guidelines that can be used by all educators to encourage parents to provide literacy experiences for their children

Expanding the definition of what type of activities in the home can provide literacy experiences offers more options for parents. Several authors offer ideas for parents to provide literary experiences during everyday activities.

### Conclusions

The American democratic way of life is dependent on a literate population. Maintaining a literate population begins with teaching children to read, and teaching children to read begin before they enter school. Early literacy experiences play an important part in teaching children to read.

The information compiled in previous chapters indicates that children who receive early literacy activities in the home learn to read more easily and enjoy reading activities more than children who do not receive early literacy experiences. When reviewing the literature currently available, reading aloud to children seems to be the most important literacy experience that parents can provide for their children. Reading aloud to children positively effects their ability to learn to read and increases their vocabulary.

Considerable time and effort is required by parents to provide adequate early learning experiences for their children. Parents need to recognize their role as their children's first reading teacher, and strive to regularly provide their children with literary experiences. Schools and community organizations can aid parents in their role as their child's first reading teacher by developing programs to support parent-child book sharing. Programs should provide education for parents that stresses the importance of book reading with children, and offers them strategies to help them read to their



children. Providing books and other literary materials to parents and children, should be included in program goals.

### Recommendations

Having completed the study, several recommendations are suggested to increase the literary experiences for young children. Also recommendations are given for future research.

To increase children's early literacy experiences parents must come to understand the importance of a strong home literacy environment during the preschool years and their role as their children's first teacher. Parents need to seek out information on reading development. Such information needs to be made more available to parents in popular periodicals and newspapers.

Schools and educators need to begin working on developing a children's literacy before they enter school. Programs should be in place at every school to provide parents with information on children's literacy development, and provide parents with literacy materials. Schools need to go into the community and actively pursue parents before their children enter kindergarten, to ensure that parents are aware of programs that can help them. Schools can also directly provide early literacy experiences for preschoolers by increasing the number of school sponsored high quality early childhood programs that are offered to families.

After reviewing the literature currently available, three areas were found where additional research would be warranted. More information needs to be obtained to help parents who's children do not show an interest in reading activities. Studies need to be conducted to determine if forcing such children to participate in literacy activities will help them develop an appreciation for such activities or turn them off to them even more. Studies on the factors that motivate children may also be helpful.

Another topic for future research would be the significance of literacy activities other than shared book reading. The significance of sharing other forms of reading materials, including the following: magazines, newspapers and comic books could be explored. More studies on methods of incorporating literacy activities into daily household events, could offer parents with limited access to books with other proven alternatives.

A third area where further research needs to be conducted is early literacy development programs. Programs currently conducted only address the needs of low income families and families who's children are already in school. Additional programs need to be tested that would serve all types of families, and would reach families when their children are infants.

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