Children's reading success and parental involvement

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Children's reading success and parental involvement

Abstract
The influence of parents is an important factor in children's success in reading instruction. Many parents want to facilitate their children's reading growth but do not know how to instruct them and therefore turn to the educator for guidance. "Schools need to continually remind parents that the best way to prepare for their children's success in school is to involve themselves in their children's language experiences," relates Harms (1982, p. 3). The attention given to the beginnings of literacy has drawn attention to the role parents play in teaching children to read prior to school enrollment. Parents are the child's primary teachers. Mothers and fathers who regularly read magazines, newspapers and books communicate to their children that reading is valuable, and as a result children, emulating their parents, engage in viewing reading experiences. Children are eager to have parents share the books that are a treasure to them.
CHILDREN'S READING SUCCESS
AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Why is Parental Involvement Important?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What Can Educators Do to Assist Parents in Supporting Their Children's Reading Development?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ways to Communicate Activities</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Selection Guides for Quality Literature</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Library Facilities for Parents</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ways to Use Television Experiences</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Programs to Involve Parents</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHILDREN'S READING SUCCESS AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

INTRODUCTION

The influence of parents is an important factor in children's success in reading instruction. Many parents want to facilitate their children's reading growth but do not know how to instruct them and therefore turn to the educator for guidance. "Schools need to continually remind parents that the best way to prepare for their children's success in school is to involve themselves in their children's language experiences," relates Harms (1982, p. 3).

The attention given to the beginnings of literacy has drawn attention to the role parents play in teaching children to read prior to school enrollment. Parents are the child's primary teachers. Mothers and fathers who regularly read magazines, newspapers and books communicate to their children that reading is valuable, and as a result children, emulating their parents, engage in viewing reading experiences. Children are eager to have parents share the books that are a treasure to them.

The questions that will be addressed in this review of literature are:
1. Why is parental involvement important?
2. How can parents help their children in the process of learning to read?
3. What can educators do to assist parents in supporting their children's reading development?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Why Is Parental Involvement Important?

Parents and teachers should work together to support children in learning to read. There is a growing awareness that parents and school need to form a partnership to stimulate reading experiences with their children. Educators recognize the parental component as a key to implementing a successful reading program. Frank Smith (1983) comments on the role of the parents in their children acquiring reading ability.

Children do not learn by instruction, they learn by example, and they learn by making sense of what are essentially meaningful situations. Children have been learning since birth . . . . Always they learn in order to make sense of something and especially when there is an example, a model, to be copied. (p. 9)
Schreier (1980) says "the failure of many parents to become involved in the academic lives of their children serves as the schools' number one handicap in providing the quality education society wants and children so richly deserve" (p. 285).

Emery (1975) states "a positive force for encouraging reading by preschoolers is a parent who capitalizes on the natural presence of words in many places during the normal day with the child" (p. 83). Parents do not need to be knowledgeable of reading methodology but do need to understand the type of climate that fosters children's involvement in the language processes" (p. 93).

"Children learn language by being engaged in it, by using it," states McKenzie (1977, p. 316). "They learn from adults, particularly their mothers, who pay attention to the meanings intended more than to the language itself" (p. 316). Cazden (1972) contends "all language learning that takes place before the child goes to school . . . takes place in a nonsequenced, whole task basis. The child is surrounded by examples of mature speech behavior and is encouraged to participate as best he can from the very beginning" (p. 138).
Emery (1975) states "a word cannot be read unless a child knows the meaning of that word when presented orally. A speaking vocabulary is an essential prerequisite for learning to read" (p. 32). "Reading is introduced naturally in the home. Children learn through exposure of speech by others. The verbal environment of the child is all important. The parent is the primary creator and shaper of the word world of the child" (p. 34). Language can be developed only in response to the verbal environment surrounding the child. Language in a global sense rather than in an individual-word sense is the nature of early learning of the young child.

Butler (1982) believes that parents who understand the idea that books are tools will seek to establish a parent-child relationship focused on language development (p. 7). "Youngsters need people, constantly drawing them into their lives. Give them books to parallel experiences, books where language and illustrations activate the senses" (p. 13).

Children are natural learners; parents are natural teachers. Together they can share and enjoy reading. Meek (1982) states that parents must offer children the kinds of readings done for pleasure and opportunities to extend these ideas through different expressive forms. She relates:
Children will learn that stories in books bring pleasure and delight, a way of looking at the world. All else in literacy will follow because they will want to be part of the process so as to prolong what they enjoy. Once they have found how stories work, they will know that print on page unfolds as a living event. (p. 23)

Lamme, Cox, Matanzo, and Olson (1980) state these experiences may determine children's reading attitudes and habits for the rest of their lives because they see literature as part of their parents' lives. Repeated experiences with books will give children critical information in language awareness and literary awareness. These experiences are a pleasurable sharing and should be a natural part of the family's activity.

They relate these conclusions: "If a child grows up in a home where adults read and share literature when a quiet time is provided for reading together that is not in competition with television and other distractions, the child too will learn to love literature" (p. 174). "If the child is in a home environment and has been encouraged to enjoy books, by the time he has learned how to read he will already be
addicted and the child when called to dinner will say, 'Wait till I read one more page--please!'" (p. 176).

Forester (1977) concludes from her study of reading experiences in first grade that learning strategies used by children to learn to read at home may be equally effective in the classroom setting. Huey (1968) relates that the natural reading experiences provided by the home produces better results in learning to read. The children read to create meaning and did not read for reading's sake (p. 305). They grew into reading as they learned to talk, with no special instruction or method. Usually such readers were the best and most natural readers of all in the early school years (p. 330).

Young children who learned to read and speak without formal instruction before they entered school also learned to write (Forester, 1977). Durkin's (1961) study of young children who learned to read before first grade indicated that they learned to read at an early age by being exposed to a variety of books and oral reading. The home environment provided a model, either an adult or a sibling, who demonstrated what reading is all about. Durkin observed more importantly that children learn about reading when parents or siblings are willing to answer questions about this process.
She states high intelligence is not closely related to learning to read but attitude, personality, exposure to reading material, and listening to oral reading are more significant.

Torrey (1973) investigated the factors related to a preschool boy's success in learning to read on his own. The study revealed that books were available in the home and the child had opportunities to ask questions which were answered.

Trelease (1982) discusses the importance of the child-parent reading experience. He cited the case of a first-grade girl who pretended that she could not read for fear her mother would stop reading to her. It was the only time she had her mother all to herself; it was a time she treasured. This example is a strong message to parents.

Research indicates that parent involvement is directly related to children's school achievement. Parents with training or teacher support can influence their children's reading skills (Shuck, Ulsh and Platt, 1983).

Studies done in innercity schools (Grimmett and McCoy, 1980; and Shuck, Ulsh and Platt, 1983) show that parental involvement has a direct effect on children's
reading growth in school. Not only does reading improve but children sense the importance their parents placed on school and strive to improve and better their reading skills.

Kimmel and Segel (1983) relate the importance of parents reading aloud to school-age children. Such experiences promote the desire to read independently, improve independent reading skills, and help children enjoy books that are too difficult to read. Some children can grasp materials better when they hear them rather than read them. Reading aloud broadens their reading interests and tastes. Literature presented for enjoyment will increase the chances for reading after high school. Seeing adults read with enjoyment increases the likelihood that children will become lifelong readers.

A study reported by Grimmett and McCoy (1980) suggests that parent involvement can influence the child's reading when parents receive information about the reading program.

How Can Parents Help Their Children
In The Process Of Learning To Read?

Vukelich (1984) relates that "educators know that parental involvement in the reading process begins long
before children begin school and should continue throughout their school years" (p. 472). This implies that educators need to offer parents suggestions about how they can become involved with their children's reading instruction. "Read to your children" was recommended most often in the professional literature. Teachers involved in beginning reading have observed that children read to in their preschool years were more prepared for formal reading instruction and were more successful in learning to read than were children who were not read to early in life. Teale (1981) states "children who are read to tend also to be children who are above average in the preceding aspects of language and literacy development" (p. 903). Smith (1978) and Clay (1979) observe that a child learns when read to, that print is meaningful, that print can be turned into sound, and that written language is different from oral language.

Noonan (1978) offers suggestions for parents to help children develop the love for reading. Talk to children from a very early age. Babies are stimulated by oral communication and as they grow begin to associate sounds to speech. When children begin to respond to sounds, parents should begin to talk with
them by repeating words they say, showing pleasure in their speaking, providing interesting and stimulating experiences at the children's level of development, listening to children's contribution to the conversation and interacting with them, and selecting books regularly to read. Parents should show an interest in their children's school and library experiences and encourage children to read wherever reading occurs in their lives. Children also should be given opportunities to read their own written work to their parents. Parents can provide time and places for children to study and give them help when it is needed.

Parents can use the visual language in the home and community environment to assist children in learning to read (Goodall, 1984). Children learn to read words from cereal boxes, billboards, T.V. commercials, street signs, household products, and toys. "Considerable emphasis has been put on the importance of print in the environment as part of the child's emerging competence in reading," relates Goodall (1984, p. 478).

Stranix (1978) offers this list of suggestions to assist parents in supporting their children in learning to read:

2. Listening and talking with children.

4. Providing structure in the family life so a schedule can be maintained.

5. Attending school regularly knowing how children are progressing in school.

6. Providing meaningful mealtimes that involve positive interactions among family members.

7. Supporting the selection of appropriate television programs.

8. Reading to children and children reading to parents.


10. Giving children books and magazine subscriptions as gifts.

11. Interesting them in newspapers.


13. Encouraging wide variety of reading experiences. (pp. 89-90)

Emery (1975) contributes a check list for parents for stimulating reading in the home.
1. Create and maintain a reading-favorable environment in the home.

2. Read to the child regularly, starting at as early an age as he shows interest in looking at books and listening to parents read to them.

3. Be alert to the quality of speech articulation and visual acuity.

4. Take child on short trips into the neighborhood noticing printed signs and talking about them.

5. Control own expectations, exercise patience, and dispense praise.

6. Provide plenty of writing and drawing materials and encourage drawing.

7. Be natural in your attitude and work with child. (pp. 94-95)

Kimmel and Segel (1983, p. 26) suggest reading should be arranged at regular special times, as well as taking a book along to the dentist or doctor's office to read while waiting for the session and reading to children when they are sick but well enough to enjoy a story or on vacations. Parents can tape stories for children to listen to when they are away from the home.
What Can Educators Do To Assist Parents In Supporting Their Children's Reading Development?

Nicholson's (1980) survey of parents' opinions on reading at home indicated that many differed in how they helped their children but most parents were more than willing to be involved with their children's reading activities at home. Their study suggests that parents are interested in reading and feel they can help; may be anxious about their children's progress; and may need to know that schools use different methods to teach different from their own; need to know what teachers are doing so they can reinforce that teaching; and teachers need to know what problems parents are having in helping their children.

Ways to Communicate Activities

Noonan (1978) emphasizes that communication is an important way to stimulate parental involvement at home. Vukelich (1984) suggests that teachers communicate with parents in various forms such as using booklets and handouts that provide parents with activities to enhance interest in reading. These items can show parents how to develop the senses through observation of nature, to use oral reading experiences, to offer experiences to extend children's concepts such as trips.
to different environments, to provide activities and
games to build specific reading skills and to select
quality children's books for the parent to read to the
child.

Sittig (1982) compiled this list of home activities
to promote reading.

1. Silent reading - Read silently as an entire
   family for ten to twenty minutes with no
distractions.
2. Sequence - Cut comic strips into sections
   for children to arrange in the correct
   order. Encourage children to elaborate
   on the story.
3. Library - Visit local library and get
   children their own library card.
4. Shopping - Let children read labels on
   packages.
5. Driving - Read road signs with parental
   help in identifying new ones.
6. Oral reading - Share books aloud both
   parents and children. Ask children to
   share their feelings about what they read.
7. Television - Select and watch television
   programs as a family and then discuss the
   ideas and experiences presented.
8. Games - Read directions together and then play.

9. Newspapers - Choose a part of the newspaper that would interest the children, read together and discuss the information.

10. Writing - Exchange letters with children and vice versa.

11. Directions - Hide an object in the house and give children written directions for finding it.

12. Drama - Act out a simple fairy tale using costumes or puppets.

13. Dinner table - Let everyone share one piece of information that was learned through reading.

14. Poetry - Read poetry and make up limericks about family members.

Vukelich (1984) suggests that brochures or pamphlets can aid in answering questions about reading and give parents topics of interest for special projects to do with their children. Activity sheets that supplement the school's reading program can be informative to the parents as well as helpful to the child. Progress letters, notes and conferences are
other suggestions for extending parents' abilities in supporting their children's language growth. Progress letters can indicate the child's reading level and interests in reading.

**Selection Guides for Quality Literature**

According to Meek (1982) choosing books for children should be the ones families can enjoy together. Choosing a book is a subtle business so it is important that there should be plenty of books to choose from. There is no need for any one to tolerate poor reading materials. The wealth of books for children is vast. Children should have a wide range of books, including picture books, rhymes, and stories.

Huck (1979) relates:

Many parents provide their children with personal libraries, but many of the books have been purchased at supermarkets and drugstores. A child may be fortunate to have a family that reads to him, takes him to the library and provides fine magazines. With the many reading materials available today, selecting from the vast array is a challenge for parents, teachers and librarians. (pp. 82-83)
Harms (1982) states:
Teachers and parents should be aware of children's viewing, listening, and reading choices and give them opportunities to discuss their comprehension experiences. When students express an interest in records, television programs, and books, teachers can present works of high literary value that are related to the students' interest. Then they will have an opportunity to develop appreciation and a taste for good literature. The quickest way to encourage students to read works of poor quality is to disapprove of them. The best advertising that authors and publishing houses can obtain is to have their works published on a list of banned books. (p. 50)

**Library Facilities for Parents**

Swibold (1982) states that children need to use the library regularly. She found that through parental involvement with selection of books, children were delighted to see parents reading their books. This shared reading gave families new found subjects to discuss at home.
According to Monson and McClenathan (1979), children should be taken to the library to explore. They can find books on many subjects to arouse their curiosity to discover. Through these experiences, children will find that a library is a good place to go if one wants to find out information, not merely a place to check out a book to take home. By using the library, reading horizons are broadened and children begin to develop reading habits and habits of using the library. Many things happen at a library; storytelling, story hours, short skits and simple puppet plays. Summer school programs are a part of the library's functions.

The Children's Book Council (1979) suggests different ways to involve parents in the reading process. They relate that one public library distributes packets of materials to new mothers in hospital maternity wards. Each packet contains lists of books for very young children, lists of books on parenting, child care and children's reading, small collection of finger plays, directions for making simple puppets, a cover letter on the importance of early and continuing language exchanges with infants, an invitation to enroll babies 18-36 months in the library's Toddler Story Hour, a brochure on obtaining
books from the library by mail without a library card, and an invitation to attend the library's program "You, Your New Baby and the Library."

Another library initiated a program directed to fathers of a community who meet monthly at the library for a discussion of books that can be read by fathers to their children.

Another library provides workshops for parents with such topics as introducing books to children during the early years, selecting appropriate books to read to and with children, motivating children to read, building an inexpensive collection of children's books for the home, sharing library use experiences, and using parents as reading guiders (Children's Book Council, 1979).

Ways to Use Television Experiences

Durkin (1966) relates that out of school environment has changed. Children are spending more time in front of a television longer than they spend in the classroom. That is the time children should spend reading. Durkin believes parents are spending as much time as the children watching television.

Kimmel and Segel (1983) state "television watching is less personal and more passive than listening to a
family member read a story. Children create mental pictures of scenes and activities described in books" (pp. 23-24). With television, children cannot use their imaginations, the visual picture is already there for them to see. Read-aloud sessions involving literature can lengthen attention spans and offer a shared experience. Television has the opposite effect because of short segments. Frequently the viewer is not involved with others in the viewing task.

Neuman (1980) relates "some educators feel that television can act as a stimulus to reading, others say it fosters a need for quick paced entertainment which adversely affects the slower enjoyment of reading" (p. 805). She found in her studies that reading and its relationship to television is more complex than simply analyzing the amount of hours viewed and achievement test scores. She says "more sophisticated measures of viewing and reading behavior need to be carried out before conclusions regarding the relationship between television and reading are made" (p. 805).

Norton (1983) relates that although some groups feel students waste too much time watching television, a point of view stressed by educators is that television can have positive effects on children if they are
provided opportunities to interact with others. She states:

There is not clear evidence of effects television has on literature reading and appreciation. It may be the quality of the television programs and the quality of interaction that is essential if television is going to have a positive effect on reading. (p. 281)

Elkind (1981) believes that with television "many of the conceptual and logical barriers to extending children's experiences posed by other media are swept away" (p. 72).

There are several viewpoints on how parents should use television with their children. Doman (1964) discusses that environment can teach a child to read just as the child's environment teaches a child to understand spoken language. Television has become a standard part of the environment of children. By watching television commercials, which show big clear words, accompanied by loud clear pronunciations, children are unconsciously beginning to learn to read. By asking key questions of adults, this ability to read has been expanded.
Winn (1985) has a different outlook. She says the evidence mounts that television viewing by children does not lead to significant learning gains (p. 41). Many children do not understand what they watch, as a result their mental activity is thwarted. In contrast, people engaged in the reading process utilize their most unique human ability, verbal thinking. Readers venture beyond a printed page. Television watching does not necessarily encourage children to participate with other human beings. There is a period of time when children are receptive to language and learn to talk with adult interaction. Television plays a profoundly negative role in children's intellectual development. Wilkinson (1971) says only from literature experiences can children begin to learn about the nature of language.

Parents need to be aware of how to use the television in a positive way with their children. Limited amounts of viewing time is one way to eliminate the use of television viewing, freeing time for reading. Parents must also limit their viewing time. Parents can facilitate better use of children's time by practicing selective television viewing and providing activities closely associated with the content of programs (Winn, 1985).
Programs to Involve Parents

Sittig (1982, p. 166) reports on a program to involve an entire community in reading for pleasure every day. It was to demonstrate to children that reading is an enjoyable pastime and as a result they would experience success in reading. Parents received packets of ideas for sharing reading activities in the home, including a review of recent research on reading at home with children, a list of suggested family reading activities, a list of recommended children's books, and a pamphlet on tips for parents. From this project evolved a Sustained Silent Reading every Thursday and Friday, a parent newsletter which is sent home monthly with suggested family activities, and community members periodically going into the classroom to share a book with younger children.

Courses and workshops can assist parents in encouraging children's reading development. Various writers have described different kinds of courses for parents. Baker (1975) describes a university non-credit course for parents on children's literature which introduced parents to good books to share with their children. Trezise (1975) developed a series of meetings, lasting for six weeks which exposed parents
to storybooks and ways to share them with their children. Each parent kept a card file of books read and their responses and their children's responses to the books.

Brubaker and Keiser (1982) showed fathers how to help their children develop skills in reading. The results indicated that both the fathers and their children enjoyed the reading experience. Flood (1977) describes how parents should read to their children. He believes the best style is one of verbal interaction between parents and child which includes using warm-up questions that prepare the child for reading, discussing during reading that relates story content to the child's experiences, providing positive reinforcement, and evaluating the story.

Goldstein (1980) proposes using bumper stickers to publicize significant reading thoughts. Stickers could say "Reading Begins at Home, Have You Read to Your Child Today?" and "Read to Your Children 15 Minutes a Day."

Reading Advisory Councils can provide aids to parents. Crisculo (1980) describes how principals established reading advisory councils, composed of parents and teachers, to review the reading program and make suggestions for linking home and school.
Breiling (1976) relates how parents were involved as full-fledged partners in the education process by initiating a special program to help Title I children with reading. The program helped parents become more comfortable in school, gave them a sense of importance in their role they played with their children, and gave them specific materials and ideas for helping their children read at home. Many parents reported that their children's interest in reading increased merely by the parents showing interest in their children's reading progress. A spirit of excitement for reading grew in the schools involved. Breiling's conclusions were:

Investing a regular portion of time for involving parents as teaching partners in reading can reap benefits far greater and more long-lasting than trying to work solely with the children. Parents can be invaluable teaching partners. When parents are sensitized as to how they can provide motivation, practice and exposure to reading at home, the repercussions can sometimes be seen with an entire family. (p. 192)
The writer, a Chapter I teacher, developed an after-school reading program for parents and their children to assist parents in understanding the type of home climate that they need to create for their children and knowing about activities which will foster growth in reading. This program materialized after an investigation of research indicating that daily reading enhanced the interest in literature and broadened the children's experiences and the importance of parental involvement in promoting children's interest in reading.

The program was developed to provide the parents of children in the Chapter I program, grades one to five, the opportunity to play a significant role in modeling involvement in the reading process for their children and an appreciation for reading. These students had been identified as remedial in terms of reading achievement. Parents were offered the opportunity to come daily after school to read with their children. The principal of the school was informed of the project and his support was requested. The librarian was asked to assist in selecting quality children's literature for the program. A journal was kept to monitor and record the responses of parents, children, teachers, the librarian and the principal.
A letter describing the program was sent to the parents. They were invited to an orientation meeting. The program was eagerly accepted by many parents though some parents did not respond. Many of the cooperating parents came daily to read silently with their children, to read orally to their children, and to listen to their children read orally. In some cases, parents came less frequently. As the year progressed, the interest in reading to their children did not falter. Some parents found it difficult to make daily visits to the school but because the program was carried home by their enthusiastic children, these parents were able to carry out the ideas learned through the after-school reading program in their homes. Many parents expressed the desire to read books at home to their children and checked out books to take home and read during the evening hours.

The students were exposed to quality literature and were eager to read books with their Chapter I teacher and parents. The classroom teachers became interested in the program after their Chapter I students came back to the classroom excited about books. Some volunteered after school to read to their students.
Parents learned to enjoy reading and how to share reading experiences with their children by observing the Chapter I teacher, classroom teachers and principal present a lesson on how to read a book and how to use the ideas gained from the experience. Parents also learned how the teacher and students selected books. Children were encouraged to read to parents, grandparents, little brothers and sisters, or neighbor children at home.

Many of the Chapter I students enjoyed sharing with classmates in the regular classroom the stories they had read in the after-school project. Many of the students expressed their eagerness to return daily to the after-school sessions. Many wanted to reread books they found stimulating and were beginning to identify authors. Comments promoted the program for those students who were reluctant to participate.

At the onset of the program, rewards were distributed in order to stimulate interest and encourage Chapter I reading students to participate. The rewards were funded by a mini-grant applied for and granted by the school system. The rewards consisted of certificates that could be redeemed for merchandise in local stores. As the program proceeded through the
school year, the intrinsic reward of enjoying quality literature eclipsed the extrinsic system. They found that they enjoyed the reading time spent in the school library and came for the love of reading quality literature.

Many of the children arrived after school with comments such as: "What book are we going to read today?" "I'm coming in after school to read with you." "My mom says she can come today." "My mom can't come today but I can stay after school and read with you." "Can I take a book home?" "My mom says she will read with me tonight." "I can stay for a little while, the baby-sitter is waiting for me."

Teachers observed growth in reading scores of students who participated in the program on a regular basis. They also observed growth in their interest of books. Teachers often encouraged their Chapter I students to participate in the after-school reading program and would also remind parents of the program during conference time.

Including parents in this after-school reading program helped parents to provide more reading materials in the home and tended to motivate them to read with their children on a regular basis. Comments from
parents who were involved in the after-school reading program included the following: "My child wants to be read to every day." "We are using the public library more." "We went to the library and checked out the book you read yesterday at school." "Where can I buy good books for my child?" "Do you have a list of quality literature so I know what to buy or choose?"

CONCLUSION

Teachers are recognizing that parents are a source of help to their reading program. Parents' contributions in fostering their children's language growth have been overlooked too long. Their collaboration with the school can provide children with much support and motivation to extend reading abilities. Teachers can provide much assistance in helping parents understand how children learn language and what activities are appropriate in fostering children's reading growth.

The after-school reading program developed by this writer verified the importance of the role of parents and children's learning as stated in research and professional literature.
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