Parents' role in emergent literacy

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Parents' Role in Emergent Literacy

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Abstract

This article reviews literature showing the influence of parents on their children's emergent literacy. Children who come from home environments in which they have received frequent and varied experiences with print material have a greater chance of success in school literacy programs.

Educators have an obligation to recognize the influence of the home environment when planning and implementing school language arts programs. Classroom teachers can support parents by helping them recognize and use many home literacy opportunities. Ideas are offered for establishing effective teacher/parent partnerships to support children in their emergent literacy.
Children's early encounters with print at home have a tremendous effect on later literacy development. When young children are exposed to print in the natural course of their everyday life, they develop a solid base of knowledge that will give them a considerable advantage when they begin school (Butler & Clay, 1979; Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Vukelich, 1984; Teale, 1981).

Family involvement should be viewed by the schools as one of the most important elements in children's literacy development and needs to be valued as part of the school program. Morrow and Paratore (1993) relate that educators need to recognize the influence of home environment when planning and implementing school language arts programs. If schools do not attend to the home's influence, whatever strategies they carry out in school will never be completely successful.

Parents can encourage their children's literacy by engaging frequently in developmentally appropriate activities with them and being sensitive to their interests and needs. All parents can learn to foster their children's literacy. Parents' support of their children's learning is more important to academic success than their economic status (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 1986).

Most parents are willing to help their children with their education but do not know how to go about it and are afraid of interfering or misguiding learning. Some parents believe they
could better help their children if teachers would tell them what
to do (Mavrogenes, 1990).

After reviewing current professional literature about
parents' involvement in children's early literacy, this article
offers ways parents can nurture their children's literacy and
suggests how effective teacher/parent partnerships can be
established.

Creating a Rich Home Environment

Children's literacy development depends to a great extent
on the language environment in the home. Children who are early
readers have parents who have read regularly to them and have
been responsive to their early attempts to read and write. Their
parents have talked and read to them from infancy and offered
literature experiences to them daily. These homes are places
where reading and writing are treasured and where the natural
functions of language are demonstrated daily (Strickland &
Morrow, 1989).

One of the most important aspects of creating a literate
environment within the home is the modeling of reading behavior
by parents and other care givers (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).
Parents observed reading books, newspapers, and magazines provide
a vital example for their children to copy. As children see
parents absorbed by a book, they come to believe that such an experience is worth engaging in.

In addition to observing parents read for enjoyment, children should also see adults involved with functional print, such as following a recipe to prepare dinner or to assemble a furniture piece or children's toys. Children need to see how reading serves adults as a natural part of their everyday lives (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

Parents should also help children be continually aware of the environmental print around them by pointing out familiar labels, information on food boxes or detergent containers, greeting cards, or magazines in the home, and while driving by signs on store fronts, streets, and billboards. Soon children will be able to read much of print in their environment (Butler & Clay, 1979).

Children who read early have had an abundance of books that were readily accessible to them. Books can be available to babies even before they are able to talk, by providing those made with cloth, plastic, or cardboard pages. Library corners can be organized for children in their bedrooms featuring a low shelf so that a child can independently browse. A shelf can be made inexpensively from two cinder blocks and a piece of wood. Books can often be found inexpensively at garage sales (Durkin, 1966).
Reading aloud to children is the single most important activity for building knowledge required for independent reading success. Parents should introduce their children to the world of books and reading from the very earliest of days as a pleasurable activity for both children and their care givers. When an adult reads even to an infant, the benefits include helping the baby's eyes focus, helping them recognize objects and develop sensory awareness, reinforcing basic concepts, and providing them with the opportunity for physical closeness so critical to young children's emotional, social, and intellectual development (Kupetz, 1993). The sound of a reader's voice gets infants' attention even before they can focus on pictures. "The warmth and security of being held and the melodic, soothing sound of an adult's voice make for a pleasurable combination" (Kupetz, 1993, p. 29).

Trelease (1985) states that parents should begin reading aloud to their children while still young enough to want to imitate what they are seeing and hearing. They should make sure their reading material is exciting and interesting enough to hold their children's attention while building upon their imaginations. He recommends that parents keep early readings short enough to fit childrens' attention span and then gradually lengthen the experiences. Taylor and Strickland (1986) suggest that after books have been read together, they can be made
available to children for independent literature experiences, such as story retelling, dramatics, or picture drawings.

Parents question why young children often request to hear favorite books repeated many times. Holdaway (1979) explains that a children's experiences with a favorite book passes through three phases. First, the child is introduced to the book and may participate as it is being read. Second, the child demands many repetitions of the book. Third, the child reads the book independently and may do other activities related to the book such as drawing and writing. Children who have these experiences develop a set of attitudes, concepts, and abilities that Holdaway refers to as the "literacy set." By having these background experiences the children are motivated to engage in further reading and writing activities.

Reading aloud to children familiarizes them with the language of books and develops vocabulary. Children learn that stories can create imaginative worlds and can show them how to use their imaginations (Taylor & Strickland, 1986).

Butler and Clay (1979) relate that children can learn much about the conventions of print from a parent casually pointing them out during read aloud sessions. For example, book print begins at the front and proceeds to the back of the book, print reads from left to right across a page and from top down, and spoken words are interpreted from black marks (print) on a page.
Children also can learn terms such as "word," "letter," "print," "sentence," "title," "author," and "illustrator" and can begin to understand how they apply to the entire reading process.

Klesius and Griffith (1996) offer these additional benefits of family storybook reading:

1. Children can acquire many concepts about the world outside of family and everyday life.

2. Children can develop a sense of story and its elements.

3. Children can have experiences with the meanings of words and language patterns that are not a part of their everyday speech.

4. Children can learn that language is symbolic and that the words and pictures in the book are not things but representations of ideas.

5. Children can learn the social behavior that accompanies reading instruction in school.

6. Children can observe and practice the comprehension strategies of readers.

During the time spent reading together with others, children will be drawing their own conclusions about how letters, words, and sentences fit together to tell an interesting or exciting story. Even though many reading abilities can be taught during this time in an informal manner, a parent should never
lose sight of the fact that the time spent reading together
should be a joyful one for both parent and child (Morrow, 1989).

Children need opportunities to be active participants in
read aloud sessions, such as engaging in discussions about the
ideas and experiences in stories, identifying letters and words,
and talking about the meaning of words (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott,
& Wilkinson, 1985). Children should be encouraged to retell
favorite stories. In such experiences, parents through
questioning can engage children in considering story settings,
characters, and plot. Parents can help even young children make
connections between a quality children's book and their own life
experiences.

In addition to parents reading aloud to their children,
many other opportunities for literacy development in the home can
be offered. Mavrogenes (1990) recommends giving books as birthday
and holiday presents so children view them as special and
pleasurable. She also recommends limiting television viewing,
watching together much of the selected programs and then
discussing the ideas presented.

Parents visiting with their children about what they have
done during the school day and responding with interest also
extends literacy development. Looking at school work brought home
and having children explain about it is also important. Even the
act of discussing what children do around the house, including
books they are reading, movies and television programs they have seen, and hobbies enjoyed extends literacy development (Salinger, 1996).

In homes where children read early books, writing supplies, such as paper, crayons, and pencils for scribbling, drawing, and writing, are accessible (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). Parents should provide a special writing area equipped with paper, pencils, crayons, felt pens, envelopes, tape, and staples so that children can explore writing at any time and then to read and share with adults. Adults can also scribe children's dictated stories which can be read together and then can be illustrated. Parents should always focus on the content of what children write (Salinger, 1996).

Another opportunity for a family to foster literacy with preschool children is to do letter writing. Children can be encouraged to send messages they have written themselves or ones they have dictated to adults. Writing letters and receiving responses from grandparents or other family members help children understand that messages are sent by written language with a computer or writing instrument on paper. Such an activity encourages children to send messages. Family letter writing also gives children information about envelopes, stamps, air letters, and postcards in a functional manner (Butler & Clay, 1979).
Another important interaction that encourages literacy is parents taking children weekly to a public library. Children should visit regularly and take part in the free special programs, such as summer reading activities or weekly story hours. Books should be selected by parents and children and taken home to read together (Kupetz, 1993).

Establishing Teacher/Parent Literacy Partnerships

Schools need to provide information to homes about the need for a rich literacy environment (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). Classroom teachers can support parents by helping them recognize and use many literacy opportunities (Christie, Enz, & Vukelich, in press).

Communication with parents can be done in many different ways. These are suggestions:

Booklets/Pamphlets and Newsletters

Information for parents can be shared in hand-outs at the conclusion of a parent meeting or workshop and in class or school newsletters. Topics can be related to reading aloud from infancy throughout the preschool years (Kupetz, 1993). Other opportunities for home literacy development (Salinger, 1996; Enz, 1976; Morrow, 1989), or age appropriate bibliographies for quality children's literature can be presented.
Progress Letters or Conferences

Time can be used during parent-teacher conferences to share with parents the importance of literacy activities at home. Reading aloud to children can be featured in hallway displays of quality children’s books and posters sharing read-aloud tips. Instructional videos on reading aloud to children can also be viewed by parents in the hallway as they wait for their conference time. As teachers report student progress to parents, information can also be shared about the home literacy activities.

Parent Courses/Workshops

Mavrogenes (1990) relates that parent workshops sponsored by the school staff is one of the most effective ways of supporting teacher-parent literary partnerships. In this type of setting, parents can experience firsthand what they can do to foster their children’s literacy. Workshops that feature demonstration, practice, participation, and discussion about how young children acquire literacy are meaningful to parents. Specific suggestions for supporting oral language (listening and speaking) and written language (reading and writing) need to be given to parents at a series of school-presented literacy workshops. Benefits of reading to their children also need to be explained and demonstrated to parents and a specific book list of appropriate titles can be helpful. Age appropriate bibliography
lists of recommended children's books can be shared with actual copies of many titles on hand for parents to review.

**Classroom Visits**

Parents should be encouraged to visit the classroom often to observe experiences with children's books used there and to observe teachers reading to children. Parents can also be encouraged to be regular "Celebrity Readers" in their children's classrooms and read to the entire class books they have chosen.

**Activity Calendars**

Schedules of events held at the local public library can be a part of the monthly activity calendars sent home to share with parents as well as any other community events that promote literacy.

**Lending Libraries**

Teachers can support children in borrowing books from the school library to insure frequent home reading (Enz, 1996). A lending library for parents can be established, either school-wide, or by an individual classroom teacher. For parent check-out, professional books written for parents about home literacy opportunities as well as video tapes modeling how to read to young children can be provided. Teachers can be videotaped reading aloud an exciting storybook while demonstrating oral fluency, enthusiasm, and using different voices for characters. Commercially-made videos on the importance
of parents reading aloud to their children are also available and can be purchased and loaned from the library (Enz, 1996).

**Home Learning Kits**

Enz (1996) states that a writing briefcase can be used by teachers to encourage further home literacy activities. Writing materials, such as paper, construction paper, markers, pens and pencils, glue, tape, scissors, stapler, and markers can be included in the carrying case that can be checked out nightly by children. A note of explanation to the family and suggestions for its use can be included.

**Reading/Shopping Lists**

Age appropriate bibliographies of quality children's books can be sent home to parents before the holidays with a note encouraging parents and other relatives to purchase quality books as gifts.

**Parent/Teacher Reading Advisory Councils**

A committee of parents and school staff can work together to explore ways to share information with families to promote home literacy opportunities and/or act as a fund-raising organization for the school library.

**Media**

Local newspapers, cable channels, and radio stations are often receptive to school coverage for events, such as Children's Book Week, Week of the Young Child, or National Education Week.
Public announcements, displays, and articles can be shared through these media with the community about the importance of literacy activities at home with young children.

Summary

Parents have the important job of being their children's first teachers of language. Not only are parents their children's first teachers, but they also should have the greatest interest in seeing their children's success in literacy development. Parents can show their children both the usefulness and pleasures of reading and writing by creating opportunities for literacy learning at home. Their children will naturally model what they see these parents value and enjoy.

Schools have an obligation to promote the importance of early literacy with parents and give them specific information on how to best support literacy at home. Although most parents wish to foster their children's literacy growth, many are unsure how to help with their education. Classroom teachers can use many of the ideas presented in this article to establish effective teacher/parent partnerships that will support children in their emerging literacy.
References


