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Influence of parents on their children's emerging literacy

Marcia A. Miller
University of Northern Iowa

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Influence of parents on their children's emerging literacy

Abstract

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Influence of Parents on their Children's
Emerging Literacy

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
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by
Marcia A. Miller
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This Project by: Marcia A. Miller

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Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms

~~Director of Research Paper~~

5/24/96
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms

~~Graduate Faculty Adviser~~

5/29/96
Date Approved

Dale D. Johnson

~~Graduate Faculty Reader~~

5/24/96
Date Approved

Peggy Ishler

~~Head, Department of Curriculum
and Instruction~~

Abstract

The purpose of this project was to develop a series of classes for young parents that will help them understand their children's emerging literacy and their role in nurturing their children's language abilities. The participants in this project were students from an alternative high school's child development class. The three class sessions presented to the students established that literacy emerges early in children's lives, confirmed that parents can have a positive effect on their children's literacy, and encouraged these students to offer literacy activities to their children. During each session, a picture book was presented to model strategies to use with young children to nurture their emerging literacy. Other works and related expressive activities were also discussed. The students received copies of the books to practice the new strategies and activities with their children. They kept journal reports on their shared home literacy activities. By the end of the sessions, the students became more aware of their effect on their children's emerging literacy.

Educators and parents consider learning to read an important goal of school programs. Yet, despite this high priority and the considerable effort given in school programs to achieve this goal, a significant number of children still have difficulty learning to read (Becher, 1985). As a result, much criticism has been leveled at schools for some children's lack of achievement even though time and money have been poured into correcting the problem. Could there be an easier, less expensive way to tackle illiteracy?

E. B. Huey may have said it best in 1908 when he wrote that the secret of literacy lies in parents' reading aloud to and with their children (Teale, 1981). Parents are their children's first and most important teachers. They will probably have the greatest impact on their children's reading development (Potter, 1989). Parents are uniquely qualified to pass on the riches of literacy through a variety of shared literacy experiences (Nuckolls, 1991).

Educators and parents appear to have come full circle in teaching children to read. In the distant past, before public schools became well established, parents often assumed the role of the teacher, instructing their children at home. In more recent times, parents have been encouraged to leave the teaching of reading to the schools. Educators now recognize that parental involvement in children's literacy begins long before they arrive

at school (Vukelich, 1984). Because of this parent involvement, a number of children have begun to read before entering kindergarten, and many are entering school ready to respond to reading and writing opportunities in school programs (Mavrogenes, 1990).

Home Factors that Support Children's Emerging Literacy

The potential of parents' influence on children's emerging reading is tremendous. Home factors contribute substantially to reading achievement (Greaney, 1986). Given the proper guidance, parents can be effective in supporting their children's learning that takes place in schools. Dolores Durkin's landmark study indicates that children who learned to read early had parents who played a critical role in preparing their children for reading instruction at school (cited in Rasinski & Fredericks, 1989). Children who live in a home environment containing books, newspapers, and magazines usually make substantial progress in acquiring language abilities. Parents can introduce children to the printed word by providing space, materials, and encouragement (Friedberg, 1989).

Before children can become readers, they must be given a reason to read and must know why people read. Parents can provide this print awareness. They can model that reading is used for enjoyment and for utilitarian purposes (Kontos, 1986).

Children's experiences with literature can support their emerging reading abilities. Regular story times at home can nurture children's literacy and their appreciation of reading activities (Friedberg, 1989). From family literature experiences, children's listening and speaking vocabulary is increased, their letter and symbol recognition is strengthened, their spoken sentences become longer, and their literal and inferential comprehension abilities emerge (Becher, 1985; Teale, 1981).

During reading times, family closeness is fostered by enjoyable relationships and family togetherness. As families read more together, the more they want to learn together. During these times, adults discover ways to work with children and become role models for them (Handel, 1992).

Parents need to approach storybook reading as a pleasurable family activity, not as a lesson but as an experience in which language is learned naturally. During this time, parents can use their children's prior knowledge to expand experiences with stories in a meaningful way. If family reading is a positive experience, everyone gains. When literacy becomes a family affair, the rewards are immeasurable (Nuckolls, 1991).

Factors associated with children's home environment have a greater impact on achievement than do school-related factors (Becher, 1985). Children who come from families that read have an advantage over those that do not (Greaney, 1986). Strickland and

Taylor (1989) found that parents of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds share certain universal conditions at family reading times: The parents provided a warm rewarding atmosphere of success in which language is acquired. The child's methods of learning were not challenged. The language experiences were child-centered. They were provided in a meaningful context as a part of the family's total life. The researchers noted that none of these conditions need to have a standard form to be successful. According to Greaney (1986), more specific aspects of the home environment that assist children's reading development are verbal interaction in which the parent helps develop thinking-language abilities important for reading, a parental interest in reading that leads to leisure time reading, access or exposure to reading materials at a preschool age, opportunities to read, and parent-child reading times.

Children who are living in a print poor environment have limited literacy models and assistance and may blame themselves, as do abuse victims, for their inadequacies (Strickland & Taylor, 1989). To break this intergenerational cycle and keep children from becoming the next generation of illiterates, schools must intervene and provide literacy experiences for all family members. Schools can help parents understand how to nurture their children's emerging language abilities (Friedberg, 1989). A factor that needs to be stressed to parents is that nurturing

their children's literacy is not dependent on money but attention and sensitivity (Greaney, 1986).

Reasons for Parents' Lack of Support

If family literacy is so important to children's success in their learning to read, why are all parents not involved? Lack of family participation may be related to several reasons: Some parents are still under the assumption that children do not need to read books until they are of school age. Frequently, these parents are not identified until their children are of school age which is almost too late (Handel, 1992).

Parents may not feel competent and may not understand how they can help their children (Mavrogenes, 1990). Many parents who are not helping their children have had no models for reading in their own background. They may only have marginal abilities so that even reading a book to a toddler is a scary experience. They may be unaware of the importance of family interaction in the development of reading. When talking, these parents may engage in commands instead of conversations (Friedberg, 1989).

Some parents are hesitant to become involved with reading in the home because they believe that reading is like driving a car: A child must first master the mechanical skills of reading in a sequence prior to learning to read. They do not know that

this view of learning to read is a myth, for there is no recognized correct sequence of skills (McMackin, 1993).

Some parents are dealing with survival pressures and family maintenance which leaves them with little energy to nurture their children's emerging literacy. These parents may have too many personal problems and may have to have their own needs met first before they can help their children (Potter, 1989). In some cases, parents may need to overcome their own negative feelings about reading and school (Friedberg, 1989).

Ways Teachers Can Foster Parents' Support of Their Children's Literacy

Illiteracy does run in families, but teachers can help end this problem. As teachers continue to experience pressure to increase children's reading achievement, they should give particular attention to the involvement and education of the parents (Becher, 1985). Parents who are able to support their children's reading can contribute both to their children's confidence and interest in reading (Greaney, 1986).

Through their classroom programs, teachers can provide parents with examples of print-rich environments containing many different examples of literature (Rosow, 1991). Teachers can invite parents to story times in the classroom to model strategies, such as using finger pointing, picture clues, and

related writing experiences. Also, the school can supply parents with books and lists of books for reading experiences with their children (McMackin, 1993).

Teachers can help parents learn to talk with their children, not at them. The most beneficial reading style for children is one in which there is verbal interaction between the parent and the children about ideas they have generated from their reading experiences (Teale, 1981). Parents should be assured that book binging, or repeated readings, of a particular story strengthens the children's sense of story structure (Strickland & Taylor, 1989).

Parents can be encouraged to help their children learn to read by letting them see and hear adults reading, writing, and conversing every day. The children need to know why people read and what people do when they read (Kontos, 1986). Such experiences help children develop positive attitudes about books, which in turn leads to knowledge that print carries messages and that stories have structures that create meaning (Strickland & Taylor, 1989).

Programs to Support Home Literacy

Many community programs have been organized to reach parents so that they might in turn help their children to avoid becoming the next generation of illiterates. Handel (1992), the

director of the Partnership for Family Reading, states that family literacy has become a national movement with more than 500 family literacy programs across the nation. She explains that family literacy programs are dealing with complex problems. Therefore, the program leaders must know and be sensitive to adult and child strengths and needs. They are parent educators and therefore need to know about adult learning and how to deal with adult problems, which are often related to the problems these adults had from their own schooling.

To be successful, the programs that teach parents how to present literature experiences to their children need to be participatory. Parents need to be more than told what to do but engaged in the reading process. The parent sessions can include reading aloud experiences, book loaning, and other strategy instructions (Handel, 1992).

Friedberg and Segel, the co-directors of Beginning with Books, began their program as a two-year pilot project with 1,000 low income families in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The program was an outgrowth of a growing awareness that early exposure to books was the best way to start children reading. It was also known that most books, articles, and parent talks tended to reach those who were doing adequate parenting but not to those in need (Friedberg, 1989). These problems were recognized: how to get quality children's books to parents who had few financial

resources or little desire to obtain books for their children and how to get them to use the library (Segel & Friedberg, 1991).

Other models of family literacy programs are as diverse as the participants. Some are home-based; others are located in schools, prisons, libraries, and storefronts. They all share the same view of family literacy: The best way to nurture children's literacy is to get the parents involved with their own literacy. This simple principle is that children model what they experience at home (Nuckolls, 1991).

McMackin (1993) sums it all up by saying that reading is a developmental task. The more children read, the more efficient they become. Beginning readers need encouragement and support from caring adults. Parents need to feel comfortable in their attempts to foster reading at home and to be able to confidently participate in this exciting stage of their child's development.

Young Parents Literacy Involvement Project

In an attempt to involve young parents more actively in their children's emerging literacy, the writer designed a program for a local alternative high school. The students' needs, for many different reasons, are not being met by the conventional high school experience. They attend school four days a week, progressing through their course work at their own rate. Nearly 40 percent of the students are parents or are pregnant.

Because so many of these students have children, there is an on-site day care center. All student parents must devote some of their day to working in the center. Others may opt in as an elective. At any given time, several students are in the day care center actively participating with the children. The students receive guidance from two certified directors and several classified assistants.

A series of three class presentations was developed for these alternative high school students to promote reading to young children. These classes were given during the day within the students' regular class schedules. Using a different children's book each session, literacy goals for both the parents and their young children were presented. An expressive activity and other children's books related to the goals of the specific sessions were also shared with the students.

The major goals of this project were:

- * to establish that literacy emerges early in children's lives;
- * to confirm that parents can have a positive effect on their children's literacy;
- * to encourage the student to offer literacy activities to their children;
- * to model strategies beneficial in reading to children.

Session One

The students that attended this session were either from a child development class or the day care center. All were female. Although hard looking, with heavy make-up and teased hair, the four students from the child development class seemed more receptive of the presenter than those invited from the day care. Two of the four from the day care appeared aloof and were ready to challenge why they were there. They begrudgingly sat at the table as introductions were made. Four of the eight students had young children, and one was pregnant.

When the students were asked how they used reading in their lives, they were slow to answer. In fact, they appeared embarrassed as they related that they had done little reading. One mentioned she had read a poem; another related she had read her social studies assignment recently. With prompting, they were able to list several ways they engaged in reading, such as using the weather channel maps, menus, recipes, signs, and schedules. Several commented that they had never thought of those activities as reading. They began to relax and contribute more freely to the group.

The group discussed emotional responses to reading. One girl commented that she would never read a certain book again because it was so sad. Several others had books they liked to read because they fantasized they were part of the book. It was

discussed how books affect children and what connections they can make with them.

Besides the overall goals previously listed, the goals for this session were:

- * to establish that reading provides education and enrichment;
- * to confirm that reading happens all day in many different forms and ways;
- * to relate that children need to make sensory connections to literacy.

For this session, the picture book, Chicka Chicka Boom Boom, by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault, was read to the class. Then, its value in fostering young children's language was discussed. These ideas were presented: It could assist children in becoming familiar with the sequence of the letters, in feeling the rhythm of words, and in predicting the next lines through the repetition of the story.

As the book was read aloud a second time, the presenter modeled how it could be read to children. Before the story was completely reread, several of the students had forgotten themselves and were chiming in on the repeated lines. By now the group had become more relaxed, and several students surprisingly contributed ways this book could nurture children's language learning. A late arriving student was familiar with the book and

had read it to her nieces and nephews. Several other books dealing with the alphabet, rhythms, or repetitions were then shared with the class to show how learning can be extended with companion books. They were: Eating the Alphabet: Fruits and Vegetables from A to Z, by Lois Ehlert; Alison's Zinnia, by Anita Lobel; All Butterflies, by Marcia Brown; Going on a Bear Hunt, by Michael Rosen; On Market Street, by Anita Lobel; and Chicken Soup With Rice, by Maurice Sendak.

The class was given sets of laminated alphabet letters to use when reading Chicka Chicka Boom Boom. The class discussed how these letters could be used after reading the book. After being told they could decorate the letters with their children, they volunteered other activities for the use of the letters, such as spelling the children's names, spelling simple words, and matching the letters from each page of the book. The class also discussed ways to act out the story as it is being read.

Four students were given copies of the book to use with the letters. They were to keep a journal about the reading sessions with their children and report back about them the next session. One of the more reluctant students of the class was the first to ask to take a book. She works in the day care after school hours and planned to use it as an activity with the children. She left the room commenting that she was glad she came to class.

Session Two

Most of the students who attended this session also had been present at the first one. Before the session started, they spoke freely, stopping just short of direct conversation with the presenter. One new member, a male, sat facing away from the group making as little eye contact as possible. When prompted, he shared he had a son, but he did not enter into the group's later discussions.

The session began with students discussing their reading journals and the extended literacy activities that accompanied the reading of Chicka Chicka Boom Boom. One student shared that her children liked to act out the book as it was being reread. She commented that she had thought children needed to sit still while listening to a book. She was amazed how well the children could retell the story while acting it out.

The student who used the book and related activities in the day care center discussed her children's abilities to match letters and spell names. One child could spell her name and identify the initial letter of the other children's names. Most of the children could match the letters with those in the book. The children also sang and chanted with the story as it was being reread.

The goals for this session were:

- * to establish that print is meaningful and has a purpose for children;
- * to model the use of questioning when reading a book;
- * to present several examples of predictable picture books;
- * to provide books and activities corresponding to a concept--specific areas of a house.

The class was shown a large cut-away model of a house.

Books and related activities from a list which was distributed to the students were presented for specific areas in the house. The books were: Amazing Grace, by Mary Hoffman; Chicken Little, by Steven Kellogg; The Popcorn Book, by Tomie de Paola; Gregory, The Terrible Eater, by Mitchell Sharmat; The Napping House, by Audrey Wood; The Wednesday Surprise, by Eve Bunting; Song and Dance Man, by Karen Ackerman; I Hate To Take A Bath, by Judi Barrett; and The Rose In My Garden, by Arnold Lobel.

Predictable story books representing each room were presented as examples of repetition of words or phrases, familiar sequences, and cumulative tales. These books were: The Very Busy Spider, by Eric Carle; Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? by Bill Martin; The Very Hungry Caterpillar, by Eric Carle; Chicken Soup With Rice, by Maurice Sendak; The Little Red Hen, by Paul Galdone; and The Napping House, by Audrey Wood.

The picture book, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, by Eric Carle, was the focus of the read aloud segment. The values of this book which were presented were: It could assist children in becoming familiar with the days of the week, in learning the numbers 1 through 5, in identifying pictures of fruits and vegetables, and in learning the stages of a butterfly's life.

Before the book was read, the presenter modeled these questions that could be asked before reading the story: Have you seen a caterpillar, what did it do, and what would a hungry caterpillar eat? During the reading of the story, the presenter asked these questions: Why are there holes in the pages, who made them, can you count them, and why does the caterpillar have a stomachache? After the story was read, the presenter asked these questions: Where will the butterfly go, have you seen a real butterfly, and can you pretend to be a butterfly?

The class was given packets of cotton balls, pipe cleaners, and markers to use with children after reading The Very Hungry Caterpillar. The class discussed how these materials could be used to teach the numbers between 1 and 5, to create a caterpillar or butterfly, or to show the life cycle of the butterfly. The class also discussed ways to retell the story using the materials.

Five students were given copies of the book and packets of materials. They were asked to keep a journal of their reading

activities and report back the next session. One student who did not initially ask for a book asked if she could share a book with someone if she used her own materials for the activity. Several students commented they felt lucky to be receiving books. One told that her boyfriend has her read the books to him.

Session Three

The students felt more acquainted with the presenter and asked questions about the session. They brought food to the session that had been prepared in the previous class. At the beginning of class, one girl was called to the phone. She returned to explain that it might be necessary for her to leave to check her house, but she wanted to wait until after the session was over. The one male from the last session returned and this time he sat facing the group.

The session began with the students sharing their children's reactions to last session's book, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, and related activities. Most of the children used the cotton balls to make caterpillars. One student showed how her child had made several sizes of caterpillars to help retell the story. She had also made a pipe cleaner butterfly. Another student and her child used the cotton balls to represent groups of numbers from 1 to 5. Most of the students commented that they had been able to ask questions during the reading of the story. Several also related that their children began to ask questions

about the story. One student shared that at the grocery store her child was able to identify some of the fruit from the book.

The goals for this session were:

- * to present samples of different picture book genres;
- * to model the strategy of prediction while reading;
- * to retell a story through bookmaking;
- * to encourage the students to use various community book sources.

The students were given a list which gave cursive explanations of different picture books and their genres. Several picture books were shown as examples of these genres. The books presented were: You Be Good and I'll Be Night, by Eve Merriam (poetry); Guess How Much I Love You, by Sam McBratney (fantasy); The Biggest Boy, by Kevin Henkes (realism); The Wee Little Woman, by Byron Barton (folklore); and Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf, by Lois Ehlert (informational).

The focus of this session was on Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf. After an initial reading of this book, these book values were discussed: It could assist children in learning the seasons, in becoming familiar with the life cycle and needs of a tree, and in using real materials to make illustrations.

As the book was being reread, the class discussed questions that could be asked to assist the children in predicting what would happen next in the story. Before reading the book, children

could be asked about trees, seeds, leaves, and seasons. During the reading of the book, the children could predict what might happen to the seed or what season might come next. Their predictions could be compared to what really happened in the book. After finishing the story, the children could predict ways the family could use their tree.

The class was given directions on how to make a small 8-paged picture book from one sheet of paper. Each student made a book while discussing ways to use the book. These ideas were discussed: It could be used in drawing the seasons, in showing the life cycle of a tree, in depicting how trees are enjoyed, and in retelling the story. It was also discussed that different media could be used in the illustrations.

To end the final session, the presenter encouraged the students to use the various libraries in the community. Many students had not been to the public library for books for their children. Several said they would be willing to go now that they had more information about children's literature.

The class also discussed used book sales and summer library hours at neighborhood elementary schools. Some students were aware of a summer neighborhood book mobile. One student commented that she could now recognize the difference between good children's literature and grocery store books. The students related an awareness that literacy emerges early in childhood and

that as parents they can have a positive effect on their children's literacy.

Summary

Parents are their children's most important teachers. A print rich home environment offers children many opportunities to become involved with the functions of language and to view parents modeling that reading is used for enjoyment and for education. Children who come from homes that value literacy have a distinct advantage over those who do not.

The writer believes that many positive things occurred because of her collaboration with the students in her sessions. They realize that they have an early effect on nurturing their children's literacy, recognize the need for extended literacy activities, and understand several reading strategies can be used while reading with their children. They are also aware of community sources for quality children's literature.

It is hoped that these sessions can be continued. Many positive comments were received from the students. They not only know more about their children's emerging literacy, but they also know more about their own literacy development. With support, these students can break the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy in their families.

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