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Family Literacy: Strategies for Engaging Parents in Home Support of Reading Acquisition

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Source: *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 58, No. 5 (Feb., 2005), pp. 476-479

Published by: International Literacy Association and Wiley

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20205509>

Accessed: 29-04-2020 21:53 UTC

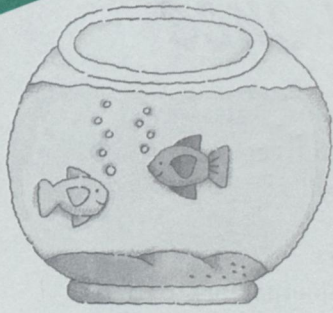
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Strategies for engaging parents in home support of reading acquisition

Sharon Darling

In their report, the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) identified five key areas of reading instruction for children from kindergarten to grade 3: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Other studies show that understanding how print is used, as well as having knowledge of letters, affects children's reading ability in primary grades (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In their synthesis of the scientific research on early literacy development, the National Early Literacy Panel (National Institute for Literacy, 2004) determined that print concepts, writing, and invented spelling among others, are key predictors for reading at school age.

Evidence suggests that when teachers and parents partner to support children's reading and academic achievement, at-risk children exhibit demonstrable gains. The U.S. Department of Education's (2001) *Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance in Title I Schools* followed the progress of students as they moved from third to fifth grade in 71 high-poverty schools. Growth in reading scores between third and fifth grades was 50% higher for those students whose teachers and schools reported high levels of early parental outreach than for those students whose teachers and schools reported low levels of parent outreach activities for the third grade. According to Livingston and Wirt (2003), children with richer home literacy environments demonstrate higher levels of reading skills and knowledge when they enter kindergarten than do children with less literacy-rich environments. A Teacher Report on

Student Performance Survey was developed by the National Center for Family Literacy to gather opinions about children participating in the Toyota Families in Schools (TFS) program, as well as a comparison group of classmates whose parents did not participate in family literacy. Teachers were asked to assess students on nine domains, including overall academic performance, motivation to learn, support from family, and likelihood of future school success. TFS children were rated significantly higher by their teachers in all nine domains than the randomly selected comparison children (Hill, 2003).

Children benefit when teachers and parents reinforce the same concepts and ideas. For this to happen, teachers and parents must have some knowledge of what happens in the classroom and what happens at home that support reading acquisition. The following are strategies teachers can share with parents to help them support reading instruction.

Phonemic awareness

In the classroom

Phonemic awareness improves children's word reading, reading comprehension, and spelling. There are a number of strategies teachers can employ in the classroom, such as using songs, rhymes, poems, and chants; working with syllables; concentrating on the beginning sounds of words; and playing word games.

At home

To support their child's phonemic awareness, parents can

- Sing alphabet songs with their child;
- Read stories that their child chooses;
- Help their child clap the beats or syllables in words;
- Point out letters, especially letters in their child's name;
- Play with language and rhymes; and
- Sing songs that manipulate phonemes, such as The Name Game.

Phonics

In the classroom

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction improves students' word recognition, spelling, and comprehension. Some strategies teachers can use include helping children relate letters to sounds and decode words in stories, providing opportunities for children to spell words and write stories using letter-sound relationships, and practicing word families.

At home

To support phonics instruction, parents can

- Talk with the teacher about their child's phonics progress,
- Encourage children to point to words and say them out loud when writing,
- Listen to their child read,
- Help children sort words by long- and short-vowel sounds,
- Help children define larger words by breaking them into smaller chunks, and
- Play spelling and word games like Scrabble and Hang Man.

Fluency

In the classroom

Fluency can be developed by modeling fluent reading and having students engage in repeated

oral reading. Oral reading strategies for teachers include student-adult reading one on one, choral reading, tape-assisted reading, partner reading, and Readers Theatre.

At home

To support the development of fluency, parents can

- Read aloud often, encouraging their child to read aloud;
- Let their child choose books to read and reread favorite books;
- Model reading for fun and pleasure;
- Act out a book or story;
- Read aloud a sentence and then invite their child to read the same sentence (i.e., echo reading);
- Help their child read new words and talk about the meaning; and
- Talk with their child when they go to the library about how to pick out books of interest at an appropriate reading level.

Vocabulary

In the classroom

Vocabulary can be developed indirectly when students engage daily in oral language, listen to adults read, and read extensively on their own. It can also be developed directly when students are taught individual words and word-learning strategies. Teachers promote vocabulary development by adding new words into meaningful conversations, teaching specific words before reading, and providing new and different experiences for children to research and talk about.

At home

To support the development of vocabulary, parents can

- Read aloud a variety of genres,
- Talk with their child about daily events and about books they read together,
- Talk about how the illustrations and text in a book support each other,

- Use word lists provided by their child's teacher in natural conversation,
- Search for new words in texts with their child and look them up in the dictionary, and
- Help their child learn new vocabulary based on hobbies or interests.

Text comprehension

In the classroom

Comprehension is the reason for reading. When good readers comprehend what they have read, they understand it and can communicate it to others. Teachers can support comprehension by using graphic and semantic organizers, asking and answering questions about the text, asking students to summarize important ideas in a text, and helping students draw on prior knowledge about a subject.

At home

To support comprehension, parents can

- Ask their child to predict what might happen next in a story;
- Ask who, what, where, when, and why questions about a book;
- Ask their child questions about the topic of a book before reading it;
- Ask their child about books being read at school and be familiar with them in order to extend conversations; and
- Ask their child what the main idea or message of a book might be.

Print concepts

In the classroom

Print concepts are a set of understandings about the conventions of literacy, such as directionality, use of blank spaces and letters, and multiple genres (Snow et al., 1998). To increase students' print awareness, teachers can create a print-rich classroom environment, help students track print while listening to a text or reading themselves, and encourage students to use different kinds of print in their schoolwork for a variety of purposes.

At home

To support print concepts, parents can

- Point out the title and author's name to their child when reading together;
- Talk about where reading begins on the page and show how the words flow left to right;
- Play games to match lowercase and uppercase letters;
- Talk about how types of texts have similarities and differences;
- Expose their child to many types of print; and
- Make a book with their child, using large print and illustrations.

Writing

In the classroom

Writing allows readers to think about and analyze what they have read. In the classroom, teachers can provide materials and activities for students to build the fine-motor muscles in their hands and fingers. Focus first on helping children learn to write their own first and last names. Then encourage children to write their ideas down on paper and share their words with others. Help children link phonemic awareness and letter knowledge to spell words independently.

At home

To support writing, parents can

- Provide multiple writing materials and tools;
- Encourage their child to write his or her name and the names of family members;
- Let their child see them writing for various purposes;
- Ask their child to say words out loud as he or she writes;
- Respond to the ideas their child has written;
- Encourage their child to write the way he or she talks, and then ask the child to read the writing aloud; and
- Plan a time and place for their child to write every day.

Engaging parents in their children's reading acquisition, particularly by focusing their attention on the skill areas outlined in this column, can help children find greater success in school.

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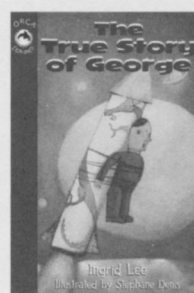
Erratum

The Children's Books column in the December 2004/January 2005 issue of *The Reading Teacher* erroneously states on p. 401 that the Orbis Pictus Award is given by the National Science Teachers Association for the outstanding nonfiction book of the year. The Orbis Pictus award is actually presented by the National Council of Teachers of English. *The Reading Teacher* regrets the error.

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