

Parents, Children and Emergent Literacy: Strategies that Work

by Kristy Anderson, Kara Henry, Emily Roundy, and Melissa Johnson

ENG 252 801

Professor Carly Paul

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Literacy Crisis in America

The literacy level of American children and adults is currently an enormous societal problem. In 2004, approximately 90 million Americans lacked the ability to read adequately, and two-thirds of children in the United States had below grade level reading skills (Weitzman, et al.1248). This lack of sufficient reading skills disproportionately affects children from socially and economically disadvantaged families. Studies have shown that the failure to read at grade level leads to frustration and low self-esteem. These studies have also shown that the failure to read at grade level may contribute to school drop-out, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and generational poverty (M. Weitzman and Siegel 55).

In a study in the year 2000, the National Research Council concluded that most of the reading problems faced by today's adolescents and adults might have been avoided or resolved in their early childhood years. The National Research Council found that "reading is typically acquired relatively predictably by children who . . . have had experiences in early childhood that fostered motivation and provided exposure to literacy in use." Since early childhood experiences with literacy are vital, parents must help foster this exposure to literacy while children are young, especially before they start school. Parents can foster literacy in their children in many ways: drawing, teaching letters and words, attending the library, reading books together, and literary programs.

Drawing: The Beginning of Literacy

Parents who want to teach their children literacy need to start with the basics. Before children can read and write, they draw. Even as soon as they can grasp a crayon, children can scribble, and eventually they learn to draw pictures. In this way, children communicate and express their inner feelings and imagination. Though scribbles are unintelligible, they have meaning to the child. If parents respond to scribbles by saying, “Tell me about your picture,” instead of saying, “What is it?” this will encourage language, interpretation, and story-telling in their children.

Dr. Susan Sheridan, artist and educator, has studied the relationship between drawing and a child's literacy abilities. She claims that scribbling is a deeply important event in a child's life, as important as beginning to walk or talk (Sheridan 5). Referring to how parents can help encourage children's scribbles, she states:

Currently, some modes of parenting and many methods of education prevent the development of most of the marks a child could generate during its mental life. If parents and teachers let children scribble and talk about scribbling, draw and talk about their drawings, write about their own drawings, and talk about their writing, asked only to ready their own drawings and writings, first, before they are asked to read anyone else's, children will move more naturally into writing and reading. Learning delays and disabilities, short attention spans and a host of behavioral problems may clarify themselves as what happens when children are separated from what their brains have evolved to do in the course of the normal, natural developmental unfolding of a marks-based intelligence (5).

Dr. Sheridan and other scholars adopt Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory. Vygotsky viewed drawing as a particular kind of speech and emphasized the critical role of drawing in a young child's concept development. He concluded that the drawing event engages children in language use and provides an opportunity for children to create stories (Kendrick and McKay 47).

Vygotsky said:

Only one thing is certain – that written language of children develops in this fashion, shifting from drawings of things to drawings of words. The entire secret of teaching written language is to prepare and organize this natural transition appropriately...Make believe play, drawing and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified program of development of written language (115).

Therefore, by encouraging children to draw, responding positively to their creativity, and talking about their drawings, parents can facilitate literacy early in a child's life.

Teaching Phonics and Whole Words

There are a variety of methods for teaching children about letters and words, and just as many different opinions about which are the best. Some experts believe phonics should be used exclusively to teach literacy. There are other experts who feel that the study of phonics hinders the ability for children to understand words as units, and that children should learn to read by memorizing whole words. While these methods may seem diametrically opposed (and indeed, many proponents can get quite heated in their support or defense), it seems, however, that a synthesis of both methods produces the best readers. Parents are, of course, excited to see their

child start to understand and read words, so a careful incorporation of phonics and whole words will achieve the best results in their literary teaching moments.

Teaching children phonics is a necessary step in helping them acquire literacy. Simply put, the study of phonics is the study of the letters in the alphabet, what sounds they make individually, and what sounds they make when they are combined together. It is obviously important that children develop phonetic skills in order to decode the many words they will encounter as they seek to obtain literacy. As stated by Lynn Melby Gordon, “Phonics unlocks word identification and a cascade of associated benefits, including fluency, spelling improvement, and comprehension” (1996). Comprehension is the goal for parents seeking to teach their children literacy, and phonics has been proven to improve it.

Parents can begin to teach their children phonics very early in life, as early as the child shows an interest. While most children will not be able to hear and separate the sounds in a word until approximately age four, children can learn to recognize the letters in the alphabet at a much younger age. Children are immersed in a world of print, and parents should take every opportunity to point that out to their children, focusing on helping them see and recognize letters (Gordon 1997). There are many alphabet books and songs available for parents to share with their children, and multitudes of engaging letter-play activities. It is important to remember to teach children both upper- and lower- case letters, even from the beginning, as they will need to be able to recognize both. Another important activity in learning letters is to begin practicing writing each letter. Children will progressively discover that they recognize letters and will delight in pointing out their discoveries to their parents and parents should take care to mirror their delight, which will promote further learning in their children.

The next step in the study of phonics is to teach children the various sounds letters make. Consonant, short vowel, and long vowel sounds can be taught in many ways. This teaching can simply become an extension of what parents already do. When they point out letters to their child, they can also explain to their child what sound it makes. Parents can also use letter-sound pictures, they can say a word and direct their child to listen to the beginning or end sound, or they can have a child repeat a letter and its sound back to them. If parents make this fun and silly to appeal to their children, most won't even realize they have begun to acquire skills they use throughout their formal academic life.

As children grow older, they will develop the phonemic awareness they need to begin segmenting sounds, or pulling apart the pieces of the words they hear. Once they have reached this step they will be well prepared to begin reading. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 86% of full-day (and 79% of half-day) kindergarten classes worked on phonics during their school day ("Reading" 1). If parents can give their children a head-start in this important area of their education, their children will be able to be leaders in their kindergarten classrooms, inspiring confidence, and they will have the skills they need to move on to more advanced phonetic techniques.

Often, children's ability to grasp concepts parents think are too advanced for them is underestimated. Emily, a contributing author of this paper, discovered she had done just that with her children in relation to the subject of phonetics. She has three children, one of them a four-year old daughter that she enjoys teaching letters and letter sounds. One day, to her great surprise, she discovered her then one-and-a-half year-old son at the fridge playing with alphabet magnets, correctly naming the letters and pronouncing their sounds. He had learned some basic phonetic skills, before he could even speak more than ten words, simply by paying attention to

his mother and older sister. Children are by nature intelligent and curious and parents have a wonderful opportunity in tapping into those qualities to help them learn, even before schooling starts.

Aside from phonics, it's important for parents to have an understanding of the whole-language or whole-word method of teaching literacy. According to Lawrence O. Picus, the whole-language method believes learning to read should work similarly to learning to speak. Using whole-language philosophy children learn words by reading books and memorizing words bit by bit until they develop a strong vocabulary (1). It is easy to see why this method is important. Phonics is not infallible. In the English language, letters do not always make the same sound. Anyone who has studied the quirky English language knows there are exceptions to every rule. This is why the use of the whole-word philosophy is important; there are many words that simply don't work with the phonics method and therefore must be memorized.

Parents can make teaching whole-words fun. The entire concept of this method is that "learning to read should be natural, playful, easy, and meaningful" (Gordon 1323). Instead of constantly laboring over the phonetic details of the word, children should be encouraged to imagine or guess what the word is. Some fun activities for this method are to have a child tell the story in a book based on the illustrations, affix labels to everyday objects, and memorize short stories, songs and rhymes. When teaching this method, it is important to focus on the pure enjoyment that can be received by studying literature.

Parents have a great advantage over the school-system when it comes to deciding how to teach their child to read: they know their child and know exactly which methods he or she will respond best to. Teachers are well-trained and educated, and most children benefit from a

teacher's literacy instruction, but the ideal situation for any child to learn phonics and whole words is from a loving and concerned parent.

Visiting the Library

The library is a place where parents and children can be immersed in language and reading. By taking their children to the library in their preschool years, parents expose their children and themselves to the many services offered by libraries and help their children gain literacy skills. The library provides parents and children access to books, magazines, newspaper articles, encyclopedias and much more. By using the many different texts available at the library, parents can teach their children how to study, find information, and gain new knowledge (Barr 9). It also gives parents the opportunity for parents to model literary behavior and impart to their children a sense that the literature and reading are important, worthwhile, and pleasurable activities (Barr 9).

Libraries provide information to parents and children on many different topics from geography, history, culture, and society, to almost any other topic of interest. Very few families can afford to have the sheer amount or variety of texts in their home that a library provides. It has been proven that "providing a print-rich environment is essential for reading development" (Barr 12). It is also important for parents to share this experience with their child at a young age, because children who have early contact with literature have been proven to be more successful in obtaining literacy (Asche 1).

Most libraries offer literacy programs, summer reading programs, out-reach programs and preschool programs. When parents engage themselves and their children in these services and programs they take advantage of the opportunity to learn, model, and teach literacy skills to

their children. It is just as important for parents to engage in these programs as it is to encourage their children to engage in them because illiteracy tends to be passed on throughout generations (Schamber 1).

Children are motivated to learn and read by their parents. If parents are not literate and do not participate in becoming literate, it limits their ability to teach and motivate their children to read or be interested in books. Adult literacy programs are offered to remedy any deficits parents might have in this area. Some focus on the single parent, some on both parents, and some focus on the family as a whole unit. No matter who they serve, these programs focus on the necessity of parental involvement. These programs emphasize that parents are their children's first significant source of learning (Celano and Neuman 14).

Literacy can not and should not end with childhood or adulthood; it is a lifelong process. Library programs offer help to parents, whether they are illiterate or are expanding their literacy skills, knowledge and ability (Celano and Neuman 16). It is important for parents to learn, teach their children, and keep the cycle repeating to provide fully literate future generations, because "by modeling, parents teach their children valuable concepts necessary for reading"(Barr 7).

This parental involvement and modeling is best when children are young. Research has shown that exposing preschool-aged children to programs offered by libraries yields a greater amount of literacy and pre-reading skills (Celano and Neuman 11). Early educational success for children is most pronounced when they have been introduced to books and have been read to prior to starting school (Asche 1). This is where the libraries' preschool programs can work hand in hand with parents to target children from pre-school to elementary school, teaching parents how to help their children become literate and working with the children one on one as well.

When parents delay their children's literacy development, they delay their children's ability to learn. Parents sometimes feel that education begins too soon, when in reality, research proves quite the opposite. Most research shows that getting a child off to a slow start with their literacy can make them fall further behind in school achievement. Worse yet, it can have a cumulative effect, with children spiraling downward academically if their start is not strong and not supported by their parents' behavior (Celano and Neuman 9).

Most libraries offer preschool programs in which children are read to, encouraged to read and tell stories, and are even provided with books to borrow to further their learning and sharing at home. They also offer summer reading programs to help children continue to learn and read during the times these skills typically decline in children (Celano and Neuman 3). One survey found that children who participate in these summer programs benefit from the literacy-related activities, aiding significantly in their literacy development (Celano and Neuman 4).

One of the main goals of the summer reading programs is to help parents motivate their children to learn and read (Celano and Neuman 10). It may seem more fun to children to play video games and watch TV, which is exactly why parents need help from libraries. For example, the Carnegie Library of McKeesport, Pennsylvania invites parents and children to attend their summer reading classes. These classes begin when local schools dismiss for the summer and continue until school resumes. During this period, parents can take their children to these summer reading classes to learn and grow with their child. Here they are read to, encouraged to read, and participate in role play as well ("Patron Services"). Utilizing these summer reading programs helps parents to occupy their child's free time, motivate their child to develop literacy skills, and help their child grow academically. It has also been shown that these programs provide early reading experiences that encourage parents to play a greater role in their child's

literacy development (Celano and Neuman 4). One trip to the library to take advantage of these programs supports more trips and a richer literary environment for the child.

Many families have the opportunity to enjoy the various programs offered by libraries, but some families cannot. Libraries have out-reach programs to help these families gain their literacy skills. In some cases there are families in which both parents are required to work, single parents are raising a family, the income is not enough to pay for trips to the library, or parents are unaware of library assistance altogether. Libraries have tried to address many of the issues families lacking literacy skills and involvement face by using government assistance and out-reach programs.

With these out-reach programs, libraries have tried to collaborate with other community agencies such as universities, schools, daycares, and more to help families obtain literacy skills. They work together to try to give these families access to books in the home and ways to enjoy the many services offered by the libraries (Celano and Neuman 15). These out-reach programs as well as libraries each have the same goal: to provide literacy for all and assist parents in helping their children become successful and knowledgeable.

Reading Aloud

As a toddler, Kara, one of the contributing authors of this paper, pestered and begged her mother to read aloud to her. Kara's family did not own a television. Instead, Kara developed a love of books. She loved the language, the sounds, the pictures, the rich emotional stories, and the way she felt loved when her mother read to her. Growing a bit weary of the persistent badgering, one day her mother decided to put aside her chores and read to Kara until Kara was sick of it. She was determined to finally satisfy Kara's desire for books. Two hours later, Kara's

mother gave up. She had (rightly) decided that her daughter was never going to be satisfied. By reading aloud she had ignited in her daughter a love of literature and had set the groundwork for a life-long love of reading. Such an achievement is important in each child's educational life, and is imperative for helping every child succeed in every area of education.

The most essential activity that parents can do to help children gain emergent literary skills is reading aloud together (National Institute for Literacy). In understanding the importance of reading aloud, parents may ask why is it important, why are parents so critical in the process, and what can parents do to maximize the use of the time they spend.

First, in order to read aloud at home, parents and children need access to books. While libraries can support parents by offering a great variety of books, the importance of owning books cannot be overstated. Jeff McQuillan's book, *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions*, which examines 275 literary studies, concludes:

The only behavior measure that correlates significantly with reading scores is the number of books in the home. . . . The availability of books to read – and the subsequent amount of reading done, appears to be as critical, and certainly not less so, in determining success in reading as the classroom instructional methods.

McQuillan maintains that owning books is more important than the style of teaching or any other of the myriad of variables in each child's educational experience. In addition, as McQuillan points out, it can be very difficult to read when there is no reading material available.

In addition to having book available to them, children also benefit from the pride of book ownership. Mem Fox, a university professor who educates language arts teachers and an author of over 30 children's books, describes the importance of book ownership:

[An] essential factor in the making of eager, competent readers is that the children have books, and *bookshelves* of their own so that favourite books can be owned and read over and over again. Ownership is important. I know of a child who read a particular favourite book until it was in tatters. His parents replaced it not once, but three times. Being able to own, and therefore able to re-read the book for years made that child into a reader.

Without the support and commitment of parents, children have little chance of having their own books and living in a literary environment. Parents can purchase books or suggest them as birthday and holiday gifts from relatives and friends. If that is not feasible, there are many programs, such as the Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy, discussed at the end of this paper, which will help parents and children obtain books for their home.

Once children have access to books, parents need to read to their children. Reading with children is vital because it helps them “learn new words, learn more about the world, learn about written language and see the connection between words that are spoken and words that are written” (National Institute for Literacy). These are all skills that are vital for literacy and build a foundation for learning in school and beyond.

Children start building vocabulary and grammatical structure by hearing speech, but conversational speaking can only take children so far in this learning process. The next step is hearing books read aloud because it “exposes children to grammatical forms of written language

and displays literate discourse rules for them in ways that conversation typically does not” (Bus, van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini 2). Without frequent and quality exposure to books, children cannot gain knowledge of language beyond that which is spoken in day to day life. Parents are critical in beginning this process of learning, since they are there from the moment of birth, ready to begin loving, teaching, and reading to their children.

Perhaps the key ingredient in fostering literature is developing a love for books through association. As Mem Fox explains, children from a warm literary environment are:

Caught up in a bookish world. At bedtime, they are warm and safe with a big, loving, protective parent beside the bed reading them stories night after night. In the daytime, they squeeze onto a comforting lap and in the security of a parent’s loving warmth listen to all manner of horrors and joys coming out of books. The relationship between parent and child during the stories is one of warmth and love, which makes the child associate books with warmth and love and pleasure and security. How attractive books become! (Fox 100).

Studies have been done that prove she is quite right. Andrea Bus and Marinus van Ijzendoorn in particular did several studies that demonstrated that if the parent and child do not already have a firm attachment that the pleasure of reading a book out loud is low. If that is the case, then it can actually harm literacy skills (Bus and van Ijzendoorn 988). Purely reading aloud with no interaction and no “warmth and love” does not make readers. Parents need to read to their children, but making it a positive experience is paramount to creating achievement in literacy (Bus and van Ijzendoorn 1009).

Assuming that the parent and child relationship is secure and healthy, parents should start early to make the most of their reading aloud time. Babies love the rhythms, repetitions and cadences of language. Even though they may not understand the words (and indeed, many nursery rhymes and lullabies are nonsensical), they will respond to the sounds, building a foundation for later growth. Reading to infants does not always feel rewarding for parents, and too few start early (de Groot and Bus). Indeed, I. de Groot and Andrea Bus found that reading to infants may be the key factor in showing the family's commitment and passion for literature, and in establishing a literary family culture (de Groot and Bus).

Touch is another important tool. Research shows that when children are touched, they form firmer attachments, stress decreases and it is easier for them to learn (Leo). Reading sessions can start with snuggling or the child can sit on the parent's lap. Because touching is not accepted in most school settings, it is all the more important for parents to provide this in their home environment.

Talking about what has been read is also a key point in developing understanding and in advancing literacy skills. Research done by Isabel Beck and Margaret G. McKeown suggests that asking questions, particularly "generic probes that prompt [children] to explain," such as "What's that all about?" or "What's that mean?", helps children give answers that expound beyond one word. Beck and McKeown also suggest that "when children had difficulty responding to a probe, it was useful to reread the relevant portion of the text and repeat the initial question" (Beck and McKeown 16). This type of discussion will help children make connections and construct meaning. Of course, as was demonstrated earlier, it is important to not get frustrated and to make this as pleasant and fun as possible.

And thus we come to the most important thing parents can do while reading to their child—get excited! Parents should *not* read things they don't find interesting. They need to read with passion, enthusiasm and drama (Fox). Jim Trelease points out that reading too quickly is the most common mistake made by parents, and he advises to “read slowly enough for the child to build mental pictures of what he just heard you read. Slow down enough for the children to see the pictures in the book without feeling hurried.” Parents should keep in mind that how many books a child has been read or how many pages are read is utterly unimportant compared to basking in an atmosphere of learning, sharing and growing.

Literary Programs Support Parents

Thankfully, parents are not on their own in helping their children. A variety of children's literacy programs exist across the nation. One such program is Reach Out and Read. In 1989, this program was founded at Boston City hospital, when a group of doctors and nurses realized the impact they could have on children's literacy due to their frequent visits with young children. Reach Out and Read works with hospitals, health centers, and pediatric clinics and currently serves 3.8 million children nationwide (Reach Out and Read 8). Doctors and nurses are trained to advise parents about the importance of reading aloud and to give books to children at pediatric checkups from 6 months to 5 years. This program has a special focus on reaching out to children growing up in poverty, and helps to ensure they have books in their home. Reach Out and Read helps families to encourage early literary skills, so children can enter school prepared for success in reading. Regarding this program, United States Senator Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) has said:

We've seen the tremendous impact that Reach Out and Read has on kids in Iowa and across the country, who are in danger of falling behind even before they reach school age.

Reach Out and Read is an investment in the future and helps ensure that more children have a greater chance at success (Reach out and Read).

Another literacy program is the Ferst Foundation, located in the state of Georgia. Founded in 2002, this foundation provides enrolled children, ages 0-5, one free book per month until their 5th birthday, along with a literacy guide for parents each month which contains guided steps for the parents to review the book with the child and a coloring page for the children which matches the theme of the book. This non-profit foundation has sought to improve literacy in the lives of tens of thousands of young children, with parents as the facilitators at home. Their goal is to ensure that as many children as possible have their own collection of books, which we have seen is a significant predictor of academic and reading success. Currently, it serves 61 counties in the state of Georgia, and in 2008, the monthly registration level reached 41,906 children.

Gina B. Thomason, a graduate student at Liberty University, had recently studied the effects of the Ferst Foundation in her doctoral dissertation. Her findings confirmed an increase in home literacy scores among children who have been participating in the program. Morgan County, Georgia was the first to participate in the Ferst Foundation program, starting in the year 2000. Targeting kindergarten readiness as a means of measuring the effectiveness of the program, the county administered readiness tests in the fall of 2001. 45% of the children passed the test that year. Three years later, the percentage of children passing the kindergarten readiness test went up to 80% for all children who had been enrolled in the Ferst Foundation program (Thomason 55). Clearly, the children who were read to at home were more prepared for school.

On a personal note, Kristy's children have benefited from this program for the past 5 years. Each month, her girls have looked forward to receiving their own books in the mail and

are always anxious read them. Some of these hardbound books have become family favorites including Llama Llama, Red Pajama by Anne Dewdney and My Lucky Day by Keiko Kasza. Kristy has seen first hand the positive impact of this program and how it has helped facilitate of love of books and reading in her children.

These programs, and programs like them all across the country, help parents to build a literary home for their children. With a little searching, parents can find many supports in their communities and the local library is the perfect place to start looking for these programs.

Parents Have the Key

Parents are essential to developing literacy in their children. No one is better suited to read to their children, to take them to the library, or to involve them in all the other activities and programs discussed in this paper that will help them acquire literacy. If all parents, no matter their economic circumstances or educational backgrounds, would take an active part in their child's literacy, educational outcomes in this country would improve. Children would also grow up with the confidence and literary background they need to succeed in every avenue of life. If parents teach their children to read and promote literacy, their children will be more likely to pass on the gift of literacy to their children, and so on, leaving the future of this planet in very good hands. Parents have the key to unlocking this future.

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