

Early Words

Language and literacy
training initiative

Snuggle Up and Read
Working with Families
on Language and Literacy

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Contributors to Curriculum Development

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Objectives for this session are:

The participants will:

- Understand the importance of language and literacy development for later school achievement.
- Understand the role parents play in children's language and literacy acquisition.
- Understand the barriers parents encounter when trying to maintain involvement in their children's care and education.
- Understand ways of encouraging parent participation and partnering with parents to foster children's language and literacy development.
- Learn simple activities that can help to build parent involvement.

Reflective Activity:

What are some of your goals for the children under your supervision?

What do you think are some of the goals that the parents in your program have for their children?

How are your goals similar to those of the parents in your program? How are they different?

Why do you think it might be important for parents to take an active role in their children's language and literacy development?

What are some of the things you have seen or heard parents doing with their children that might facilitate this development?

Parents and their Children's Language and Literacy Development

Parents are ideal partners in efforts to foster children's language and literacy development.

- Parents know their children's interests
- They know their children's preferences
- They can best read and manage their children's signals (Tizard & Hughes, 1984)
- The language environment provided at home is the strongest and best predictor of children's language development and skill (Educational Research Service, 1998)

Most parents have "the message" that children should know their alphabet letters by the time that children enter elementary school. Some parents believe that encouraging their children to learn letters and letter sounds is the most important thing they can do to help their children learn.

There are other things that parents do with children that have a positive impact on their language and literacy development.

When parents read to their children on a regular basis, their children show better literacy awareness at the start of school and better reading comprehension during elementary school (Wells, 1985).

The more often parents read to their children, the more engaged children are during the reading sessions (Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1992) and parents who read to their children at very young ages are more likely to read to their children more frequently as the children grow older (DeBaryshe, 1993).

When parents include their children in conversations (asking open ended questions, providing and asking for information), their children better understand and are able to produce verbal narratives (McCabe & Peterson, 1991, Beals et al., 1994). Understanding narrative structure (how “stories” are produced and communicated) is an Early Literacy Skill that will help children learn to read when they get into elementary school.

When parents discuss words and word meanings with their children, the children demonstrate vocabulary knowledge that is broader and more in-depth than children whose parents do not involve them in such discussions (Watson, 1989). Vocabulary (word and world knowledge) is another Early Literacy Skill.

When children are exposed to how literacy is used by adults on a regular basis (reading books, the newspaper, and magazines, making shopping lists, following recipes or directions, etc.), they know more about how print works compared to children who are not exposed to a “print-rich” environment (Purcell-Gates, 1996). Print Awareness is also an Early Literacy Skill.

Where Did the Time Go?

How much time do parents have with their children each evening? Please check off the following typical activities that go on at home when children are with their families each evening, then put how long you feel it will take in the blank.

- | | | | |
|---|-------|---|-------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drive through rush hour traffic | _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Take older kids to classes, school functions, etc. | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stop at the store | _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare dinner | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Help older kids with homework | _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Throw in a load of laundry | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clean the house (i.e. pick up toys, clothes, etc.) | _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Throw in another load of laundry | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Play with children | _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Get kids in pajamas | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vacuum | _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Read stories | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pay bills | _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Put kids to bed | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Eat dinner | _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Put kids to bed again | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Give kids a bath | _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Return phone calls | _____ |

Now go back and figure out about how much time each activity takes and total the time up. **TOTAL:** _____

Name 5 things you think parents do that is not listed above in the evenings.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Overcoming Barriers To Parent Involvement

While many parents are aware of the importance of early literacy experiences, it can be difficult for parents to make early literacy experiences a regular part of family life. Additionally, not all parents are aware of the importance of fostering their child's language development or of the relationship between language development, literacy, and later school achievement. Finally, it has been pointed out that the language and literacy demands of the modern American school system fit better with some cultural patterns of language and literacy than with others.

Most parents do not intentionally avoid involvement in their child's care or education program. The majority of parents do not intentionally refuse to read to their children on a regular basis or refuse to engage their children in the types of conversations known to foster language development.

Parenting and managing a family is a difficult job for all types of parents. Typically, the routines and interactions that you see between the parents and children in your program (whether positive or negative) have evolved over time and allow each individual (parent and child) to get their needs met as best they can within the family structure.

Fostering relationships with the parents and families in your program and encouraging involvement can be a time consuming and energy intensive effort. It can be difficult not to feel disappointed or resentful when parents and families do not participate as you would like. However, the rewards of your continued efforts are great for your program, for yourself, for the children in the program, and for the families.

- What are some barriers to parent involvement? What are some things (factors) that prevent parents from participating in your program or in the activities you have planned for their children?
- What have you done to try and overcome those barriers?

Principles of Parent Involvement Activities

Parent Involvement Activities that work well ...

- o Recognize that parents lead busy lives and are juggling multiple tasks and demands (in addition to the demands of raising children).
- o Recognize that parents will be more likely to participate in efforts to foster their child's language and literacy development if it can be fit easily or seamlessly into their lives.
- o Recognize parents as the primary teacher or advocate for their children and their children's development. Some parents may not have the same language or literacy goals for their children as you do. Some parents may expect their children to acquire language or literacy skills before you believe they are developmentally ready.
- o Are founded on a relationship of trust and mutual collaboration in facilitating the development of their child(ren).
- o Respect the ways in which parents (and families) interact with their children and respect the ways in which parents (and families) interact with others in social settings.

Common Barriers To Parent Involvement

Time

- Managing a family can be very time consuming. Some parents work long hours. Other parents must coordinate schedules and transportation for multiple children. Parents struggling with personal or employment issues may not have energy for anything that goes beyond what is required. Groceries must still be purchased, houses cleaned, medical doctor's appointments attended, with maybe a tiny bit of time leftover for personal time. It is likely that you struggle with the same kinds of time management issues.
- When do you offer family activities or request parent involvement? Are there a variety of times available (mornings, daytimes, and evenings)?
- How much time will it take for parents to participate? What are some "quickie" things that parents or families could do? Try to develop a mix of both quick and easy and more intensive involvement opportunities.

Money or other Resources

- Often parent-related activities involve some sort of cost to the parent (i.e. bring in a dollar, purchase a store bought treat, support a program fundraiser). For some parents even attending a parent involvement activity has a financial impact (use of gas or bus fare, time away from work).
- How do you try to minimize the financial impact of your parent involvement activities?
- What are some "no cost" activities that a parent could do to participate in his/her child's care and education?

Relationships

- Parents are the primary teacher for their children. They are the people that love their children and will be there for them long after they have moved to another class. Be sure to respect that bond and to acknowledge that bond with the parents in your program.
- Most likely, the parents who participate in the activities you have planned seem to be the parents you know best or who you are most comfortable with. There are some parents you struggle to connect with. You may see them only at drop-off and pick-up times.
- How well do you know the families in your program? Reflect for a moment ... who are the families you feel most comfortable with? Who are the families who you are least comfortable with or who are difficult to talk to? Why do you think such difficulties exist?
- Parents are very aware of you and your feelings about them and their children. Most parents want to be seen and thought of as good parents. The ways in which parents interact with you or interact with their children in front of you likely reflect what parents feel they should be doing to demonstrate they are a good parent. When parents avoid you, they may be feeling that they don't measure up to what they believe are your expectations (sometimes their own ideas or expectations) for good parents.
- Get to know the parents and families in your program. The more you can connect with ALL the parents and families in your program or classroom, the more likely parents will be willing to participate in activities you propose. Ask the children what they did over the weekend in front of parents so that parents can help fill in the information. Later in the day you can talk some more about certain things the child did while they were with their parents.

- Try to learn parents' first and last names as quickly as you learn their child's name.
- Post information about yourself and your interests (sometimes called a bio board). Invite families to create their own bio boards reflecting the members of their family and some of their interests.
- Consider a short survey for parents when their child joins the program so that you can learn more about their interests and their time constraints.
- Listen to the parents. What are their ideas about the program? Although it can be difficult to positively respond to a parent's idea when you don't agree with it, think about things you could do that would show that parent you have heard them.

Language and Culture

- Respect language differences. Support parents' use of the family's primary or home language with their children.
- Show awareness of and respect for differences in interactional style. In some families, children do not generally converse with adults as equals. They are not considered to be conversational partners for adults.
- Show awareness of and respect for differences in literacy use in families. In some families, literacy materials in the home relate to adult matters or are used only for business or in the practice of religion.
- Be aware that the uses of print vary in other languages (i.e. reading back to front, up to down or right to left). The goal is to help children see that there are conventions (consistent routines) for interacting with books. Those conventions may vary depending on the language being read.
- Be sensitive to parents' reading abilities. Some parents may not feel comfortable about their own reading abilities or may not feel comfortable reading out loud.

What have you done to try to encourage parent involvement?

What has been successful? What has not worked well?

What have you done or what are your ideas of things you could do with parents or in your program to specifically encourage parent involvement to support children's language and literacy development?

Let's Give Them Something to Talk About.

- Keep parents informed about what is happening in your program.

What have been the recent experiences or discoveries. What will you be talking about in the coming weeks? What will you be reading to the children?

- Post “reports” of classroom activities around the room.

Many teachers and child care providers post children’s art work or accomplishments around the room. To turn those displays into a report, post a summary of the activity. What did you do? Why did you do it? Who helped? Include a few photos of the children at work. Ask children for a quote about their project to post with the photos and the art work. Call parents’ attention to the display if it includes a photo or quote from their child.

Be certain to post some of the reports near the door, sign-in area, or the area in which children store their things when arriving or gather them up when leaving. This may help to capture the attention of some of those hard-to-reach parents. Post the reports at parents’ eye level, but also at a level where children might be able to talk to their parents about what they did in the room.

- Point out favorite books or interests.

Mention to a parent when a child really enjoys a particular book and mention something about why you think the child liked the book or how they interacted with the book. If possible, invite the parent to borrow the book for the night or week.

- Publish a monthly newsletter.

Keep parents informed of upcoming activities. Provide suggestions of “conversation starters” that relate to the upcoming topics or events. Provide a list of books that relate to the experiences the children may be having or books that they have enjoyed recently in story time. Include suggestions of easily accessed field trips or other “at home” activities.

- Have a video dinner night.

Take videos of the children playing in the classroom including singing favorite songs and having storytimes. Invite parents for an evening event with kids. Show the video while they are enjoying some dinner together.

- Enjoy yearly performances by the children.

Older children can sing songs they have learned all year. Perhaps act out simple stories like *Where the Wild Things Are*. Have an evening storytime for parents and toddlers helping parents explore ways sing and tell stories with children. Be sure to include the words to the songs you are singing so that parents can continue to sing at home.

Read With Us

- Encourage parents to use books as transition activities.

Keep a collection of short, easy to read “goodbye” books near the door. Consider placing an adult chair or soft seating place near the door. Be ready to support the parent and child through the goodbye transition once the book is finished.

- Display wordless picture books, books with few words, or other “easy to read” books in your reading area.
 - Boy, Dog, and Frog
 - Goodnight Gorilla
 - 10 Minutes Until Bedtime
 - You Can’t Take a Balloon Into the Metropolitan Museum.

- Keep it small.

Reading to a big group can be intimidating. Invite parents to read a book to individuals or small groups of children.

- Welcome all languages.

If the parents’ speak a language other than English, invite the parents to read a book to children in their first language. Invite the parents to help you read a book in another language; i.e. you read the book in English and the parent either reads or translates into the second language.

- Give them a “cue.”

To encourage willing volunteers to hold “book talks” with the children, create index cards with a few reading suggestions or open-ended questions for some of the popular reading books. Give parents the “cue cards” before they read the book. Assure them that they can make up their own questions and comments as they wish.

Take It Home

- Create “Zip Kits”

Using ziplock bags and index cards (and occasionally a crayon or pen and a piece of paper), create language and literacy zip-kits. The goal of the zip-kit activity is to provide children and parents with a quick language and literacy activity they can do at home.

These activities will build on the six Early Literacy Skills and the results of the activity can be used with the large group of children to further encourage language and literacy development.

The ziplock bags can be used to store the results of the activity. “Freezer” bags can generally be used over and over again for individual children.

For instance ...

- On the back of the card, write down with your child the favorite foods of each person at home.
 - On the back of this card, write down with your child the favorite color of each person at home.
 - Bring in something that fits in this bag that starts with the letter “M.”
 - Bring in something that fits in this bag that rhymes with “Socks.”
 - On the back of this card write down with your child the things at home that show your “reflection.”
- A book of one’s own

Does your program have a book order program (Scholastic, etc.)? Typically, teachers can earn points or dividends that correspond to the number of books ordered by families (or the amount of money spent). These points can be cashed in for teachers resources and occasionally book packs (10 copies of the same simple book). Consider using your points for book packs and sending children home with their own books to keep.

- Develop a lending library.

Develop a collection of lending books. Purchase gently used books at Tidal Wave, garage/yard sales, or second-hand stores. Try to identify one or two parents to manage the library. Or, invent a “kid friendly” check out system so that the children can check out and check in their own books with minimal guidance from you.

Make Connections

- Sponsor a library night.

Invite parents to meet at a local library branch. Ask parents and children to each pick out a book that they would like to check out for your program. When all the books have been selected, you can check out the books to bring back to your house or the center. Invite families back to your home or classroom for a potluck supper and sharing of the selected books.

- Create books of many languages

If you have families who speak a language other than English, work with family members to “create” books in their home language. Using existing children’s books, stick file labels on each page with the translated phrases.

- My child, the author

After involving children in writing their own books, sponsor an “author’s tea” where parents can come to hear their children “read” from their books while enjoying tea and cookies.

When Time Is Short, But Money Is Not

- Sponsor a book fair.

Rather than organizing a car wash or bake sale to support your program, work with a local book store to sponsor a book fair. Some book stores will run the fair at your program or will identify a specific day during which a percentage of the proceeds from the sale of books will go to your program. Distribute a list of good books for children (as suggestions for parents making gift purchases). Also, distribute a list of “wish” books – books that parents or families could purchase and give to your program.

Be A Parental Role Model

- Model language support

Model, through your interactions with children, ways of supporting children’s language development. Make open-ended statements or ask open-ended questions (“Tell me about your picture.”). Get down at the child’s level. Provide a young child with the language needed to solve a problem (tell Susie, “that’s my toy”) or a vocabulary word (“Sometimes a crown is also called a tiara”).

- Model literacy support

Model through your book-reading with children, ways of supporting children’s literacy development.

Be A Resource

- Post interesting information related to language and literacy

Post copies of articles about the importance of talking to and reading to children. Have “take home” copies available. The library publishes many such brochures and booklists which are available for free at library branches. Other free and low cost print resources are available from the government (U.S. Department of Education or www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC or naeyc.org).

- Suggest a parent training in the community

The library has a series of Early Words sessions designed just for parents – post announcements for these sessions near the sign-in/sign-out sheet.