



## The Importance of Family Literacy

**Family Literacy** programs are designed to improve the language and literacy skills of both parents and children. The majority are designed for parents with preschool or early school-age children and aimed at improving children's school readiness and success, while simultaneously supporting the language/literacy development of parents. Most federal programs, such as Even Start, have adopted a specific definition for family literacy that addresses four program components. Most federally funded programs must include all four components:

1. **Early Childhood Education** programs for children that are age-appropriate and help prepare children for success in school and life.
2. **Adult Education**, specifically, parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
3. **Parenting Education**, training that helps parents become teachers of their children and full partners in educational systems.
4. **Parent and Child Together (PACT)** programming that enhances the interaction of parents and their children around language and literacy.

### **Need for Literacy and Language Programs well documented.**

- 1991 - in the Carnegie Foundation report, Ready to Learn: A mandate for the nation, teachers reported that 35% of kindergarten children were not ready for school. The area in which children were reported to be most lacking was in literacy and language skills ( Boyer, 1991).
- 1998 - the Annie E. Casey Foundation reported that 39% of fourth-grade students scored below the basic reading level nationwide.

- Children for whom English is a second language are of particular concern because their numbers are increasing and they often have difficulty in school (Rossi & Stringfield, 1995).
- Studies show that children who start Kindergarten without basic language and literacy skills have difficulty learning to read, and they continue to experience reading problems throughout school (Snow, et al, 1998).
- Research on brain development helps explain why early home and child care experiences are critical to language development.
- By the time babies are a year and a half old, the bottom 10% will understand around 90 different words while the top 10% will understand more than 300 words.
- Research indicates that children who have books and other reading materials at home, as well as writing materials, do better than children who have none.
- Children who see their parents reading and writing do better than children who do not see such models.
- Children who have many opportunities to **talk** and **listen**, practice eye-hand coordination activities that will help develop the foundation skills for **writing**, and "**read**" books," gain invaluable experience with language.
- Working with parents to enrich home environments, through family or intergenerational literacy programs, increases the chance that preschoolers will succeed once they reach school (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Edwards, 1995; Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000; Neuman, 1996; Whitehurst, et al., 1988).

**The foundation for literacy skills** is set during the preschool years, and it is during this time that young children develop the skills that will help them be successful (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). Whereas it was once thought that children learned to speak and listen during their early years and later learned to read and write at school age, we now know that they develop literacy related abilities simultaneously from infancy. Emergent literacy is the term used to describe young children's developing literacy skills before formal schooling and encompasses the constellation of speaking, listening, reading and writing skills young children acquire (Teale & Sulzby, 1989).

There is increasing interest in teaching parents how to help children build essential literacy skills (Nickse, 1989). Research has shown that parents can

create supportive home literacy environments, express positive attitudes about literacy, and share literacy activities such as joint book reading (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst & Epstein, 1994; DeBaryshe & Binder, 1994; Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994).

**Reading aloud with children** is probably the single most important activity for building early literacy skills and understanding in preschool age children (Wells, 1985; Bus & van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Bus et al.; 1997; Whitehurst et al., 1994)

**when:**

- children feel emotionally secure
- are active participants in reading
- parents and caregivers engage the child - for example, asking children to predict what will happen next
- naming and talking about the pictures
- rereading the story many times
- helping children link what is in the book with what is in their own lives
- giving the child many age-appropriate opportunities to build on book reading with activities that encourage an understanding of "reading," "writing," listening and speaking.

**In addition to reading aloud**, parents also can:

- improve the quality and quantity of verbal interaction with their children
- show interest, valuing, and encouragement of reading and language
- provide access to a wide range of reading, writing, and drawing materials
- show their own interest in literature and modeling of reading and writing in the home
- provide opportunities for literacy experiences within routine family interactions and activities.

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