

EFFECTIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN CHILDREN'S LITERACY SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

New Zealand - The Best Evidence

This material has been adapted from a 2003 publication by the New Zealand Ministry of Education:

“The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children’s Achievement in New Zealand: Best Evidence Synthesis”.

The complete document can be accessed at:

http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl8646_v1/families-and-communities-bes.pdf

Each of these important New Zealand Government “Best Evidence Synthesis” publications seeks to assemble and review the findings of New Zealand research in relation to significant issues in education, and to consider these findings against the wider context of international research in ways that can inform education policy and practice.

This adaptation has been prepared by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) to provide a general introduction to the issues for parents and families.

July 2005

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Introduction:

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Each of the reports in this series of Best Evidence Syntheses seeks to assemble and review the findings of New Zealand research in relation to a significant range of issues, and to consider these findings against the wider context of international research in ways that can inform education policy and practice.

This adaptation has been undertaken by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) to provide a general introduction for parents and families to the issues raised relating to effective family engagement in children’s literacy skills development. For this purpose the information extracted from the publication is presented in a direct continuous narrative format.

Researchers wishing to consult the complete text and its scholarly apparatus of references and footnotes, can access and download the Report at the URL shown. The material presented in this introductory summary has been drawn from pages 123-128 and further information on the Haringey study presented at pages 157-158 of the full Report.

Asking and responding to questions is a principal aspect of parent-child interactions about text. The frequency and manner of responding to children’s questions is therefore an important parental influence on early reading ability. Studies of children’s early language development indicate that parent-child influences are reciprocal: children influence the ways that adults behave towards them, and adults influence children’s learning experiences and opportunities. Parents help children to develop oral language which serves as a basis for later literacy learning.

Research has also shown that family practices of literacy have a major impact on children’s achievement at school. The impact can result from both direct and indirect practices. For example, direct practices include frequently reading books to preschool children in ways which focus on meanings and which extend children’s book language; indirect practices include supporting reading at home. Such practices have been found to be associated with children’s higher achievement.

Evidence suggests that children need parents to assist them to establish social literacy practices as a functional and important part of their lives, and to model literacy as useful for solving problems. Children learn from parents how to use literacy to engage in problem-solving activities, and various studies have demonstrated *the effectiveness of parent coaching in holding children’s attention, asking questions, interacting with text-relevant comments, and providing feedback to their children.*

Aspects of literacy likely to be influenced by the family and home environment include print awareness, concepts and function; knowledge of narrative structure; literacy as a source of enjoyment; and vocabulary and discourse patterns. Research in New Zealand has demonstrated the importance of this knowledge for children's literacy learning.

Literacy events may include bedtime stories, listening to school children's oral reading and providing assistance as needed; reading cereal boxes, stop signs and television ads; and interpreting instructions for commercial games and toys. However, literacy experiences provided in the home may need to change and evolve as children get older and progress through school, because the opportunities provided in the home for literacy acquisition during the preschool years may contribute primarily to the child's acquisition of attitudes towards literacy, of knowledge about the purpose and mechanics of reading, and of skills (such as vocabulary growth and letter knowledge) that may facilitate learning when school instruction begins.

Once the child has begun to attend school and has started to learn to read, the contributions of home and parents may be somewhat different: *assistance with homework, listening to the child's efforts in reading aloud, the availability of resources, such as a dictionary and an encyclopaedia, and so forth, may be particularly important for fostering high achievement in school.*

Reading a diverse range of books, including seeking out library books, and enjoying selecting relevant and challenging material (as opposed to material that is too difficult) are both important. This is consistent with findings about the value of rich text activities in literacy development, and also with those that report that children who read only assigned homework reading do less well than others. Generally, the amount of voluntary out-of-school book reading that children report, is positively related to their achievement levels.

Some researchers have found that parents who believe that reading is a source of entertainment have children with a more positive view about reading than do parents who emphasise the skills aspect of reading development. Children in the Wellington Competent Children study who enjoyed reading, or who enjoyed it sometimes, tended to score higher than those who did not. Reported studies show that children who are more fluent and positive about reading came from parent-child pairs who viewed reading as fun, kept stories moving with a "semantic" rather than a strict "decoding" operation, and encouraged questions and humour while reading. Children who learn from their parents that literacy is a source of enjoyment may be more motivated to persist in their efforts to learn to read, despite difficulties they may encounter during the early years.

Further studies also recorded gains in children's skills when their parents were shown how to become more responsive and "dialogic" (that is, asking and responding to questions) during shared reading. One study of parental involvement, which was based on a model of children reading to parents, found that children who read to their parents on a regular basis made greater gains than children receiving an equivalent amount of extra reading instruction by reading specialists at school. (This will be considered in more detail later in this summary – see Haringey Project)

With regard to writing, the Competent Children Study found that all the writing activities, except copying, were positively associated with children's competency scores. Limiting writing activity to copying "narrows the experience and limits developing capabilities as habits". As with reading, enjoyment of writing was also found to be positively associated with children's competency scores.

Research noted that young children from low socio-economic families were likely to be exposed only to low levels of print, and to print used primarily for entertainment and day-to-day activities. Children from families where parents used print in more elaborate ways found learning to read at school easier than did children from home environments with less print exposure. Some studies have also found that families and children from low-income background tend to engage in fewer literacy related activities than families from middle and upper-income backgrounds. One study concluded that: “...*the likelihood that a child will succeed in the first grade depends, most of all, on how much she or he has already learned about reading before getting there.*”

Other studies reported that, with respect to verbal interaction at home, the number of interactions matters. “*A lower quantity of verbal interactions constitutes a risk factor primarily in that it relates closely to lowered child vocabulary scores.*”

International studies have demonstrated that the home environment plays a significant role in the development of language ability in young children. One study analysed how mainstream school-oriented children come to learn to “take” from books at home, and found that such children learn not only how to take meaning from books, but also how to talk about it. In doing so, they repeatedly practice routines which parallel those of classroom interaction. By the time they enter school, these children have had continuous experience as information-givers; they have learned how to perform in those interactions which surround literate activities throughout school. They have had years of experiences of the interactions that are at the heart of reading – both learning to read and reading to learn in school. They have developed habits which enable them to access knowledge about a literate source, and the skills needed to show knowledge of the subject – and the knowledge gained from their experiences.

The Haringey Project

One study has pointed out that dramatic changes in children’s academic progress can be realised through establishing a pattern of “collaboration”. An example of such an initiative is the Haringey project in Britain in 1982. Those researchers sought to assess the effects of parental involvement in the teaching of reading by establishing a project in which all children in two primary-level experimental classes in two different schools read to their parents at home on a regular basis.

The reading progress of these children was compared with that of children in two classes in two different schools who were given extra reading instruction in small groups by an experienced and qualified teacher who worked four half-days at each school every week for the two years of the intervention. Both groups were also compared with a control group that received no treatment.

All the schools were in multi-ethnic areas, and there were many parents who did not read English or use it at home. It was found, nevertheless, to be both feasible and practicable to involve nearly all the parents in educational activities such as listening to their children read, even when the parents were non-literate and largely non-English speaking. It was also found that, almost without exception, parents welcomed the project, agreed to hear their children read, and completed a record card showing what had been read.

The Haringey project researchers reported that parental involvement had a pronounced effect on the children's success in school. Children who read to their parents, made significantly greater progress in reading than those who did not engage in this type of literacy sharing. Small-group instruction in reading, given by a highly competent specialist, did not produce improvements comparable to those obtained from the collaboration with parents.

In contrast to the home collaboration program, the benefits of extra reading instruction were **least** apparent for initially low-achieving children.

In addition, the collaboration between teachers and parents was effective for children of all initial levels of performance, including those who, at the beginning of the study, were failing in learning to read. Teachers reported that the children showed an increased interest in school learning and were better behaved.

Those teachers involved in the home collaboration found the work with parents worthwhile, and they continued to involve parents with subsequent classes after the experiment was concluded. It is interesting to note that teachers of the control classes also adopted the home collaboration program after the two-year experimental period.

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