

For Parents Particularly

More Than Just Storybooks: Promoting Emergent Literacy Skills in the Home

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The home environment provides children with their first literacy experiences. Parents are thus well-placed to facilitate the development of *emergent* literacy skills in their children before formal reading and writing begins at school. These emergent literacy skills include print awareness, motivation to explore print, shaping and writing skills, alphabet knowledge, and phonological awareness; the latter two being the strongest predictors of future reading ability (Adams, 1990). Parents would benefit greatly from an evidenced-based approach to the use of methods that promote emergent literacy skills in their preschool-age children.

Parent-child Literacy Interactions

Two schools of thought dominate the question of how parents should interact with their preschool children to promote early literacy skills (Aram & Biron, 2004). In previous years, the emphasis has been on free, spontaneous, and natural literacy experiences. More recently, the focus has been on encouraging parents to use a more guided approach, recognizing that certain activities promote specific skills. In support of this approach, Weigel, Martin, and Bennett (2006) found that the more parents initiated literacy activities in the home, the better the preschool child's print knowledge was and the more interested he or she was in reading. Longitudinal

research also shows that children will develop better emergent literacy skills, such as alphabet knowledge, and beginning reading skills when their parents teach them about printed letters (Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008). Interestingly, young children who are more secure in their relationships with their mothers will engage in more joint reading activities (like pointing and labeling) than children in less secure relationships (Bus, Belsky, van IJzendoorn, & Crnic, 1997).

Although research indicates the benefits of parents guiding their child's literacy learning, care must be taken in how this research is translated into practice. There is a danger that an excessively educational approach will lead parents to feel pressured to teach their children, otherwise they will feel guilty if they do not turn every interaction into a learning experience. Partly for this reason, some educators believe that parents should *not* become teachers, but that general literacy skills should develop only through free and spontaneous experiences. However, a middle ground can be reached if parents are made aware of the benefits of using everyday opportunities, or *teachable moments*, to engage with their children in a relaxed and meaningful way. Moreover, parents do not need to teach formally, but rather scaffold their children's experiences. The parent gives the child enough help as necessary so that he can accom-

plish literacy-related activities that would otherwise be beyond his level of ability. In this way, the child remains engaged, builds confidence, and enjoys the shared experience with the parent. Aram and Levin (2002) showed that a scaffolding approach can assist a child's learning of alphabet letters, as well as writing during joint writing activities.

Literacy Activities in the Home

Reading is not the only literacy activity with which parents can engage their children. Parents also can use joint writing (Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005), storytelling, reciting rhymes and literacy based-play interactions (Weigel et al., 2006), literacy teaching activities (Hood et al., 2008), and interactions with environmental print (Gerard, 2004).

Joint Reading Activities. The way a parent reads to her child can influence the development of literacy skills. In *shared reading*, the parent simply reads aloud a story book without purposefully engaging with the print or in conversations about the story. Shared reading is simple and its most significant benefit is to strengthen the parent-child relationship (Bus et al., 1997). The frequency of shared reading is also associated with such language skills as vocabulary (Hood et al., 2008). The second form of reading, *dialogic reading*, is more interactive. It engages the child's interest through open-ended questions (e.g., "What do you think will happen next?")

“What would you do if you were this girl/boy?”), repeating and elaborating on the child’s answers, and providing enthusiasm, praise, and encouragement (Whitehurst et al., 1988). Finally, *print referencing* differs by focusing on letters and words to increase a child’s awareness of print (Justice & Pullen, 2003). The parent encourages the child to attend to oral and written language by using strategies that are both verbal (e.g., “Where should I begin reading?” “We know that letter; it’s a T”) and nonverbal (e.g., pointing to print and tracking print when reading). Print referencing builds on emergent literacy skills, such as print awareness, word concepts, and alphabet knowledge (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

Parents and their children may benefit from using a balanced combination of dialogic and print-referencing activities during their shared reading experiences. One way to facilitate this process is shown by the following interaction between a parent and child when discussing a page from the story *Mr. Cat’s Whiskers* (Neumann, 2007).

Parent: What can you see on this page?

Child: A pussycat.

Parent: Yes! A pussycat—“meow, meow.” What does he look like?

Child: He’s black and he has big whiskers.

Parent: That’s right. [The parent runs a finger under the print while reading.] *Mr. Cat had beautiful long whiskers.* Can you find the letter “M” for your name?

Child: [Points to the M.] There’s my M!

Parent: Great work! I wonder what will happen to Mr. Cat; what do you think?

Child: Maybe he likes some milk.

Parent: Yes, that’s right, cats do like milk. Let’s turn the page to see what happens to Mr. Cat!

Joint Writing Activities. Increasing parental awareness of the ben-

efits to be gained from joint writing activities has a positive effect on the frequency of, and opportunities for, these types of interactions; consequently, literacy outcomes improve (Aram & Levin, 2002). Early writing experiences and attention to print also are important for developing a child’s visual scanning and memory strategies, which are essential for early reading development (Clay, 1975). Children increase their awareness of print when parents encourage them to scribble, draw, and write. Focusing on the shapes and other visual features of letters also helps to reinforce letter recognition (Ritchey, 2008). For these reasons, it is recommended that parents engage their child in early “writing” activities by scribbling or actively forming letter shapes. Joint writing activities can be even more effective than joint reading activities in enhancing children’s emergent literacy skills (Aram & Biron, 2004).

The parent and child do not need to limit their joint writing activities to paper and pencils. Letters can be formed in a variety of fun ways. For example, during a cookie-making activity, a parent and child can talk about what letters they could make out of the dough. If the child has a short name, all the letters could be formed from the dough. If the name is long, the first few letters of the child’s name can be formed. String can be used to form simple letters, such as “O” and “I.” Other common objects, such as modeling clay, cooked spaghetti, straws, sticks, and toy blocks, also can be used. Parents can further guide their child’s learning with simple activities and questions. For example, the parent and child can use cookie dough or modeling clay to roll out a long, long snake. Then, they can form letters and trace them with their fingers. The letter “M” can be traced while saying “up, down, up, down” and the letter “O” can be traced “round and round, like the wheels of a car.” These simple directional cues can

later be transferred to other objects or to forming letter shapes on paper with a crayon.

Environmental Print Activities. Print on food packaging, product labels, clothing, road signs, and posters offers abundant opportunities for children to develop their literacy skills in a meaningful way (Gerard, 2004). It could be suggested that a child’s early reading skills are enhanced by simply being exposed to environmental print. However, environmental print awareness is a weak predictor of future reading ability (see Kassow, 2006, for a review). It appears that children rely too much on such contextual cues as colors, logos, and pictures in which the print is embedded; and so they do not notice the print. To help the child attend to the print, the parent should explicitly point out the letters during spontaneous interactions in the home (Gerard, 2004). In this way, children will learn to decontextualize the print and increase their knowledge about letter shapes, names, and sounds.

The Up Downs home-based strategy (Neumann, 2007) provides an example framework that parents can follow. The parent interacts with the child by employing a multisensory approach: visual (point to and see environmental print—e.g., looking and pointing at the M for “milk” on a milk carton label); auditory (the parent describes the letter name and sound—e.g., “That’s an M for milk; it makes an MMM sound. Let’s say it together”); kinesthetic (using body movements to physically form letter shapes in the air—e.g., “M goes up, down, up, down”); and tactile (tracing the letter shape on environmental print—e.g., tracing the letter M with your finger while saying “up, down, up, down”). The strategy is simple, and the parent mediation promotes development of print awareness, alphabet knowledge, and emergent writing skills, and increases print motivation in the child (Neumann, Hood, & Neumann, 2009).

Literacy Play-based Settings.

Children's literacy learning can be facilitated through the social context of play settings, and it has been established that young children engage in early reading and writing activities through play (Saracho & Spodek, 2006). These literacy-related play environments at home provide children with meaningful opportunities to explore and interact with literacy-related materials. It is recommended that parents integrate literacy play materials, dramatized storytelling, and writing activities in play settings to enhance children's literacy behaviors and their understanding of the purposes of print. Low-cost household props, materials, environmental printed products, and logo signs may be used to create various literacy-rich play settings. For example, the parent could help the child create a pretend toy shop or grocery store, complete with a sign, labels, and prices for the items. In addition, a cardboard box could be used to represent a television. The parent and child can write funny news stories that the child could pretend to read like a news reporter, using a hair brush as a microphone. Homemade advertisements could be flashed up in between the news stories.

Phonological Awareness Activities. Phonological awareness is one of the strongest predictors of reading ability (Adams, 1990). Parents should help young children explore sounds in words and language when interacting with them during daily activities or when reading story books that contain words that rhyme or show alliteration. Singing nursery rhymes, such as "Old McDonald Had a Farm," is fun for both parent and child and also promotes development of phonological awareness. It is not always necessary to use traditional rhymes. Parents can make up their own simple rhymes with a focus on letter sounds in the words. The rhymes can be sung with physical actions, as shown in

the following example.

Octopus, Octopus, "Oh," "Oh," "Oh."
Wiggle your arms and down you go.
Octopus, Octopus, "Oh," "Oh," "Oh."
Wiggle your arms and up you go.
[A new letter sound could be added to the beginning of "Octopus," such as "Roctopus, Roctopus, 'Ro,' 'Ro,' 'Ro,' " or "Soctopus, Soctopus, 'So,' 'So,' 'So.' " Alternatively, a different rhyming word could be used, such as "Snake slides in the sun, 'sss,' 'sss,' 'sss,' Snake slides having fun, 'fff,' 'fff,' 'fff.' "]

Conclusion

It is critically important to provide parents with evidence-based literacy strategies to engage their children in a variety of interactive and informal literacy-based activities in their home environments. The activities can be enjoyable, simple, practical, play-based, and low-cost. No special educational materials are required for the parent and child to share library books together, scribble and draw, form letters out of objects (e.g., making letters out of string), point out and trace letters on environmental print, and sing rhyming songs.

Educating parents about the advantages of introducing literacy activities in the home could be done through workshops that illustrate the wide range of literacy activities that could benefit their children (Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005). Using their imagination, the parent and child together can create their own literacy-based play settings at home by, for example, making a grocery shop complete with a homemade shop sign, favorite products, and advertisement posters made from print in newspapers and magazines. By thoughtfully engaging in a rich variety of simple, informal literacy-based activities in the home environment, parents will discover that learning about literacy is fun.

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