The Benefits of Family Literacy

EDUC 340

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This paper provides you with an insight into the advantages of family literacy. I strongly believe that learning begins before a child ever sets foot in a school; therefore, family literacy remains a crucial element of a child's education. In today's rapidly evolving society, one thing has stayed the same- the eminent significance on education. As a result, creating a stimulating home environment is important; however, parents and/or caregivers must receive guidance in establishing this setting. Once they have obtained some direction, they can then begin to implement reading and writing within their home. In turn, the children within these homes will reap many benefits due to their additional exposure.

Family literacy is a crucial element of a child's life; however, the question of what constitutes family literacy has remained controversial for years. For example, the United States Congress considers family literacy to include "services of sufficient intensity and duration," (Achieving, 2007) yet the National Center for Family Literacy focuses on the differing approaches and not the extent of the programs. Due to these conflicting definitions, educators disagree about the structuring of family literacy programs and this leaves parents and/or caregivers stuck in the middle of the dispute. Furthermore, the reality that the traditional "nuclear" family does not exist anymore presents another reason for confusion. All the while, the research concerning family literacy programs has yielded positive results; therefore, its prominence has not faded with the ever-changing society. Parents and/or caregivers must understand these constructive outcomes, so that they can give their children a better prospect of succeeding in school and ultimately life.

First of all, it is important to know how schools successfully form family literacy programs. However, one should note that not only educators at school, but also librarians and other community members can implement these programs, even though the most likely of sources to provide such programs lies within the schools. Educators can introduce these types of programs by holding meetings that embrace the name of "Family Reading Night" or "Family Fun Night," although other measures do exist (Johnson, 2009, p. 34). Teachers or guest speakers at these family events can provide information to those in attendance through several means, such as giving tours of the library, organizing book swaps, explaining classroom procedures, setting up reading and/or writing activities, and so much more (Elish-Piper, 2008, p. 54). Some strategies that teachers can relate to

adults, which might already have a mark in their classrooms, consists of creating reading rituals, such as reading together everyday for a set amount of time; using sound effects while reading because different voices keep children interested, but also allows them to develop listening skills; and making connections with various kinds of print helps children to become familiar with the letters of the alphabet (National Center, 2008). Not every school will arrange their family literacy night in the same fashion, but one goal happens to unite these types of gatherings: “to encourage families to read together at home” (Johnson, 2009, p. 34). Even when schools form a family literacy night, one should anticipate the question of: what if some parents cannot make it to the meeting? This scenario will likely happen, so educators will need to institute a back-up plan, that way these parents still obtain the information dispensed at the meeting.

Several different obstacles can prevent parents from attending school meetings, so teachers will need to have multiple plans of actions that they can apply to any such barrier. Some of these difficulties that concern parents, as well as their children, may include their work schedules and their native language. However, educators can do quite a few things to ease these problems. For instance, sending newsletters or classroom calendars home with all students allows for the parents to understand the practices occurring in the classroom and, at the very least, they can try to appropriately apply a few of the reading strategies mentioned within the informational sheets (Many Ways). Similarly, a study conducted by Indiana University confirmed that parents found newsletters to be “a useful source of information” (Many Ways). These letters can contain a plethora of information, although they should not exceed two pages, both front and back, in length (Many Ways). If the newsletter exceeds two pages, then the teacher

risks overloading parents with information; for that reason, teachers should only focus on the most important points because that will allow for triumph in the long run. For instance, when compiling a newsletter, one important thing to consider includes "the descriptions of study units and suggestions of ways parents can supplement the material at home" (Many Ways). This reaching out, initiated on the educator's part, to parents and/or caregivers opens the door for school-to-home communication, a crucial element within education. Therefore, sending home weekly or even monthly updates would bring those parents who could not attend school meetings up-to-date. Along with the newsletters, the teacher's contact information should be included so that if questions or concerns arise, caregivers may get in touch. If teachers would expend more effort to keep caregivers informed, then the likelihood of a child's home instituting literacy would increase (National Center, 2008); however other barriers present themselves in different forms and they too need consideration.

Another barrier concerns that of English Language Learners (ELL), comprising of those students who speak English as a second language. These students can exhibit an array of problems; for example, they may have a limited vocabulary, which can include both their native language and their knowledge of the English language. In fact, one specific case study, conducted in 2001, involves a Chinese ELL student, Mei (Li & Zhang, 2004, p. 92). At age 12, Mei came to the United States with her parents, both of whom decided to place her in 4th grade due to her limited English. Then when she entered 6th grade she still continued struggling with her learning of English; however, her teachers remained at fault for this because they did not know how to handle such a student. In fact, her classroom and ELL teachers said that they felt "they were not

adequately prepared to teach Mei" (Li & Zhang, 2004, p. 96). Even thought these ELL instructors provided Mei with one-on-one English instruction, she still did not learn a great deal. A different approach that her ELL instructors might have considered involves ELL students first learning to read a book in their mother tongue (Machet & Pretorius, 2004, p. 42). This reinforces the idea that students, who do not readily speak English, should not involuntarily have to learn to read in an unfamiliar language; otherwise, those students will not gain much knowledge, such as Mei. Even though this requires the use of an aid who speaks the child's foreign language, the student's achievement rate would most likely rise, further enhancing their confidence and attitude toward school.

Not only did Mei suffer from the language barrier, but so did her father. When asked about the communication between the classroom teacher and himself, he said the following, but in Chinese: "I want to help, but I don't know how because I don't understand English. I cannot even recognize the 26 letters of the alphabet. Besides, we have to work from 10 o'clock in the morning till 10 o'clock in the evening. Mei is a good kid and never makes trouble. I don't speak with the teachers because I don't understand English" (Li & Zhang, 2004, p. 96). Since Mei's father could not help her with homework, he most likely experienced the feeling of uselessness. To alleviate this outlook among parents, educators should make an effort to include those who do not proficiently speak English, those with demanding work schedules, and those struggling with other barriers. A few ways to help these people include offering classes to help them improve their language skills, providing translation books, and/or having a translator interpret at a school meeting. If these parents opt to learn English, then it might also help

them to learn the importance of literacy and in due course, they may begin to stress literacy within their home.

Once educators have overcome these barriers and the parents and/or caregivers have instituted some form of literacy in the home, they, along with their children, can reap from a number of benefits. In all likelihood, the children will profit the most from these experiences in the home. To begin, they could strengthen their relationship with their caregiver by increasing the amount of time they spend together (National Center, 2008). In order for this to occur, a special reading period ought to be set aside every day, in which both individuals could read with one another (National Center, 2008). This is especially crucial for emergent readers and writers, but before obtaining the label of emergent, children must have had some experience with literacy (Tompkins, 2006, p. 86). Normally, this experience happens before the child goes to school; therefore, parents and other caregivers should introduce children to written language at an early age, so that they will enter school with some understanding of literacy.

Through experiences in the home and the community, children can learn concepts about print. Firstly, parents and/or caregivers need to know that their children look to them, as well as their older siblings if they have any, for direction (Steward, 2008, p. 40). As a result, parents should involve all of their children in the reading process at home. Opportunities for parents and/or caregivers to carry this out include having them read the ingredients in a recipe, as well as reading the newspaper, menus in a restaurant, labels on commonly used household items, and, in due course, trade books (Tompkins, 2006, p. 87). Presenting these reading options to children may allow for their recognition of the letters to tremendously improve (National Center, 2008). In fact, by repeatedly hearing

the sounds of familiar words, as well as seeing the words in the books, children are more inclined to distinguish between certain letters (Connor, 2006, p. 667). When children begin to recognize letters of the alphabet they can experiment with them through various activities. Implicit activities, such as playing with letter blocks, pretending to write birthday invitations, and other such measures help to reinforce the learning of the letters (Connor, 2006, p. 667). Parents and/or caregivers can institute any of the aforementioned activities before their child enters school; in fact, teachers often encourage this. Consequently, if caregivers choose to carry out any such activities, then their child's exposure to reading will most likely enable them to affluently build upon their language skills.

When putting oral language, in addition to written language, into practice it will provide children with much needed developmental exercises. In order to tie both oral and written language together, parents and other caregivers could use the Language Experience Approach (LEA), in which children dictate words and sentences about an experience and an adult, or other capable writer, writes down what they verbalized (Tompkins, 2006, p. 101). Children can generally read this text easily because they dictated the story in the first place and it pertained to something that they experienced, so that personally connects them to the writing piece. This activity, along with others, will allow for bonding to occur between the children and their parents. When parents integrate oral language and written language in the home, they do not have to intertwine the two. However, when parents bring oral language into play, they need be made aware that they can have an impact on their children's language development, so monitoring what they say and how it comes across remains extremely important. According to Haney and Hill,

by age four children learn about five new words per day (2004, p. 218). Tompkins then adds to that idea by saying that "students' vocabularies grow at an astonishing rate- about 3,000 words a year, or roughly 7 to 10 new words every day" (2006, p. 191). Furthermore, children learn many of these new words incidentally, through the means of family activities, such as acting out a story, similar to readers theatre; reading a book as a family, while incorporating the ideas of buddy reading and/or choral reading; and grand conversations can occur after reading a book (Tompkins, 2006, p. 192). Parents should also make these activities appealing and engaging, otherwise their children will lose interest and think of reading as a tedious task. Therefore, the children's input remains a crucial element in the integration of education fun. For example, a caregiver could say they want to play the "Name that Scene" game and then they could have their child choose the book for the activity. Both the parent and child could read the book together and afterwards, they would choose different events to act out, in which the other one would try and decipher that scene. Several other ways to integrate oral language activities in the home exist and as long as the language is supervised, then a child's vocabulary will mature.

For children to become interested in literacy, they must possess some motivational factors, which brings about one question: why do teachers, as well as other caregivers, stress over the process of reading? One rationale, from Sanacore, states that "learning is connected to a lifetime of literacy efforts" (2002, p. 163) and children are in a better position to effectively learn when they have developed a love for knowledge. First of all, children should read books that interest them, but at the same time they should connect with their reading level. This situation establishes the stage for the "learning and

applying of phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and study skills" (Sanacore, 2002, p. 166). Of all the different reading methods, one that teachers may use and relate to parents is that of Castle's six step approach (Sanacore, 2002, p. 166). This technique, comparable to guided reading, allows for students to evaluate themselves. The process also involves an adult, who can lend assistance with difficult words and perhaps in choosing a less difficult or even a more advanced book. The first steps in Castle's approach involve choosing a book that suits their interest level and opening to a middle page, which should be read aloud by the child. When the reader encounters an unfamiliar, or problematic, word, they should hold up one finger for each such word. Classifying the book as too difficult comes about if five or more fingers remain holding up, but not before repeating this step a second time. For difficult books, parents or other capable readers could review the vocabulary terms by explaining their meaning. Another useful method includes reviewing word identification strategies, in case those words become encountered again. Students must comprehend what they read, otherwise will lose interest and obtain no significant value from the reading.

Not only children benefit from family literacy, but so do the parents and/or caregivers. Most of the benefits that these adults gain typically give support to their children, which helps improve their literacy skills. One profitable activity centers upon volunteering in a classroom, in which parents and/or caregivers could become better acquainted with innovative knowledge (Wasik, 2004, p. 280). Often, teachers will accept outside help, even to the degree of personally asking the parents for assistance with a project. No matter the reason for volunteering, this experience allows parents to see what happens in their children's classroom, such as seeing the procedures and strategies being

taught and applied. Perhaps the teacher would allow these adults to help prepare the instructional materials for a lesson or even manage a small group of students, which might improve their stance on education (Wasik, 2004, p. 280). Other advantages include the children seeing this as a positive experience, in which they will see their parents and/or caregivers take an interest in their learning and perhaps they will view that person as a role model. If this results, then the children will take notice of the importance of education.

As mentioned before, educators should consider whether or not a parent can speak English. If they cannot, then this may inhibit their involvement in educational matters. As in the example discussed earlier, Mei's father could not speak much English; therefore, he felt as thought he could not help his daughter with her schooling. Sometimes children, in addition to their parents, cannot speak much English either. This raises the question of how teachers can help students and their parents and/or caregivers who come from another culture. For example, the culture of a school in Mexico varies from that of a school in the United States (Daniel & Hoelting, 2008, p. 3). Additionally, the language instruction greatly differs, as does the way individuals express their ideas (Daniel & Hoelting, 2008, p. 4). Children who attend schools in Mexico typically do not work in small groups; therefore, explicit instruction will yield the best results when trying to teach an idea or concept. The move to implicit instruction will be slow, but eventually students will "catch on". Another concern for parents includes whether or not they know how to conduct themselves in a parent-teacher conference. English Language Learners from Mexico may ask questions concerning their "children's behavior rather than on their academic progress" (Daniel & Hoelting, 2008, p. 4). This does not mean that these

parents do not care; it just shows that each culture expresses their views differently. A beneficial route that these parents could make use of involves studying literacy in a program, similar to their child's arrangement in school. In turn, the family could practice their literacy skills together, such as a support system.

Overall, family literacy has many benefits for the parents and/or caregivers, as well as their children. Given today's society and all the changes that have occurred within the last few decades, family literacy has maintained its importance within the school and many home environments. However, the responsibility of relaying this information rests solely in the hands of the educators, otherwise caregivers will not even begin to comprehend the significance of literacy. Once parents and/or caregivers understand its vitality, then they will surely want to implement such a program in their household. Therefore, they ought to know that they do not have to confine their implementation of literacy to just one method because there remains a plethora of means to draw upon and making an effort to institute a few of these will show the value of reading and writing.

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This article discusses various approaches that teachers, and the schools as a whole, can take to involve parents in the students' literacy learning and overall success in school. The author, a former teacher and now parent, provides numerous suggestions as to how Open Houses, Family Literacy Events, and other programs can be used to provide information to parents. It is important that these programs provide relevant information and allow time for the parents to ask questions. In turn, productive communications should be built between the parents and the teacher, that way the student is able to seek all possible means of success.

Johnson, B. (2009, Feb.) Family reading night makes reading fun. *Reading Today, 26* (4), 34. Retrieved on March 27, 2009, from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=10&hid=101&sid=73199680-0301-4c48-92ac-539f38437768%40sessionmgr102

This article explains how to set up a "Family Reading Night." The author even suggests having the children attend the event with their parents, that way they can participate in the reading-related activities. Examples of these reading-related activities are provided, in which they suggest setting up three different classrooms for these activities and rotating every 20 minutes. Overall, such an event should convey the importance of literacy in the home.

Li, X., & Zhang, M. (2004, October). Why Mei still cannot read and what can be done. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 48* (2), 92-101. Retrieved on March 29, 2009, from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=8&hid=101&sid= 73199680-0301-4c48-92ac-539f38437768%40sessionmgr102

This article presents a case study on a 14-year-old Chinese student, Mei. The authors explored several means as to why she had difficulty reading. For example, they examined her family background, her teachers and their instructional approaches, and the school setting. Their findings indicated that Mei's teachers were not adequately prepared to teach English as a second language; therefore, Mei's inability to read directly relates to those educators.

Sanacore, J. (2002, Jan.) Questions often asked about promoting lifetime literacy efforts. *Intervention in School & Clinic, 37* (3), 163-167. Retrieved on April 16, 2009, from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=67&hid=116&sid=0c076036-dd14-45ad-b01d-c6c5898f15ee%40sessionmgr103

This article discusses how educators can relate the importance of reading to parents. To become lifelong readers, individuals must come to love books, but first they will need encouragement from their parents for this to happen. The author then explains what parents can do once reading has taken root in the home. They recommend instituting "Castle's six step approach" when reading with children. This approach will allow for the children to monitor their reading, in addition to the parents providing any necessary guidance.

Steward, F. & Goff, D. (2008). Parent involvement in reading. *Illinois Reading Council Journal, 36* (1), 40-43. Retrieved on April 18, 2009, from http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=59&hid=105&sid=0c076036-dd14-45ad-b01d-c6c5898f15ee%40sessionmgr103

This article centers upon emergent readers and how they can learn literacy skills before entering school. Their every day surroundings greatly impact their literacy development. For example, some of these influences include their every day conversations with parents and siblings, watching television, listening to the radio, and so much more. Of all the influences mentioned in the article, the authors stress conversation the most, mainly because those people involved can monitor their words, unlike television and the radio.

Summary:

- Family literacy does not have one set definition, but educators agree upon on one set goal “to encourage families to read together at home.”
- Educators can relay several different means as to how they think family literacy should be instituted in the home.
    - How to provide this information to parents:
        - Family literacy nights
        - Tour of school library
        - Incorporate book swap
        - Newsletter/calendars sent home
- Barriers to overcome when initiating family literacy programs
    - Parents work schedules
    - Not proficient in English
    - Not familiar with English behaviorisms
- Both parents and children benefit from family literacy:
    - Children’s benefits:
        - Develop recognition of the letters in the alphabet
        - Learn concepts of print
        - Strengthen listening skills
        - ELL (English Language Learner) children’s English advance with effort on both teacher’s and child’s part
        - Oral language skills improve
            - Read with expression

    - Motivation to read increases
    - Relationship with their caregiver is made stronger
- Parents and/or caregiver's benefits:
    - Attitudes about education, specifically literacy, improves
    - Relationship with child is built/strengthened
    - If also an ELL, then options can be presented to them, so that they can learn to communicate with their children in English