

The Power of Family Literacy

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Second in a series of nine fact sheets developed through a national research project — StoryQUEST — through the California Institute on Human Services, Sonoma State University.

StoryQUEST’s Vision

High-quality early relationships and experiences throughout their daily routines provide each infant and toddler with the tools and skills to build a strong foundation for future school readiness. Families, caregivers and communities as a whole collaborate to enable all children to become highly competent in language and literacy.

Virtually all families want their children to learn to read and write, and to succeed in school, and are eager to provide any support necessary.

Family involvement in everyday language- and literacy-related activities has a significant impact on children’s language development and acquisition of early literacy skills. Early language and literacy activities at home contribute to differences when children enter school.

Parental attitudes and activities convey messages about schooling, work, the joy of learning and the value of education. Children who see literacy as a family value and learn early on that reading and writing are pleasurable, important and meaningful are more successful in school.

Hart and Risley (1995) found that children who had fewer language experiences in their homes in the first years of life entered school behind their peers who had richer language experiences. This gap continued until age 9 when the study was concluded.

Family Activities That Prepare Young Children for School

- Adults talking with children
- Adults reading books with children
- Adults reading books for their own enjoyment
- Families accessing community resources, including libraries and museums
- Adults and children using reading and writing in everyday activities

Parental Involvement

Father involvement at home and school may be linked to higher literacy achievement of boys.

Factors outside the home that contribute to challenges children experience in school include lack of social, political and economic support for families in dealing with housing, health and other social problems.

Research shows that the more education the parent has, the better the child tends to do in school (Sticht & Armstrong, 1994).

How Families View Literacy

Numerous issues affect how families view and deal with literacy. Many factors impact families’ willingness and ability to engage in literacy-related activities, such as reading to children or pursuing their own education.

Adults’ own experiences with school:

- their own reading ability
- their self-confidence
- daily economic struggles

Some families use literacy differently than it is used in the traditional school culture.

- storytelling or popular literacy activities (TV viewing, cartoons, video games) versus reading books, writing and using educational materials.

Some families may view literacy as “work” rather than an activity to engage in for personal enjoyment and pleasure. They may focus on mechanical skills (e.g., letter naming, decoding) rather than engaging in playful communication or meaningful interactions around print and oral language. As a result, they may think literacy activities are inappropriate for infants and toddlers.

Tips for Building a House of Literacy for All Families

Establish Trust. “If you tell me that the way my Momma raised me was wrong, I’m probably not going to listen to you. If I learn to trust you and find other things you tell me to be useful, I might just think about what you have to say about raising children.” (Miller cited in Mikulecky, 1996).

Families and professionals should build collaborative partnerships based on explicit dialogue and collaboration that stress reciprocal understanding between them.

Collaborative Relationships

Families

- Share your thoughts, beliefs and practices about language, literacy and learning honestly.
- Talk about the role that literacy plays in their daily lives.
- Remember that children with disabilities are children first.
- Think about how they could make a difference in a child’s success at school.
- Start by working just one new thing into what they already do each day.
- Identify mutual goals and specific practices to reach these goals in the home, in socialization and/or in child care.

Professionals

- Reflect on your own thoughts, beliefs and practices about literacy and learning.
- Listen to the family.
- Recognize your own thoughts, beliefs and practices, and respect the families’ views — even if you disagree with them.
- Acknowledge, honor and respect the family’s beliefs and practices.
- Honor the time it takes families to trust a new person in their lives.
- Build trust slowly and don’t demand a lot before everyone is ready.
- Talk about the role that literacy plays in their daily lives.
- Consider the unique issues faced by families of children with disabilities and find ways to address language and literacy activities in that context.
- Share information with families about exactly how they can make a difference in their child’s future school success.
- Make concrete suggestions that are compatible with what they already do.
- Identify mutual goals and specific practices to reach these goals in the home, in socialization and/or in child care.

StoryQUEST

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