

The Role of Parents in Literacy

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Introduction

Webster's Dictionary defines literacy as "the quality or state of being literate, especially the ability to read and write; possession of education." In the Information Age where the Internet, the Information Super Highway, is becoming pervasive, literacy is an essential requirement for all citizens that wish to participate in this global society. This paper will explore the ways parents can facilitate their children's growth as readers and writers, in order to increase their opportunity to become productive and informed citizens of the world. Parents have a unique opportunity to provide a nurturing and motivating atmosphere that fosters their children's intrinsic desires to read and write in an informal setting.

The first section includes research and suggestions that are applicable to children of all age groups. They include techniques such as reading aloud and creating a literacy-rich environment. Parents who provide an environment saturated with print give their children the opportunity to learn to read and write in a loving and stress-free environment, thereby raising children who have positive attitudes towards reading and writing. As children's first teachers, parents also have an advantage to show their children that reading and writing are important and worthwhile activities.

The second section focuses on the toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarteners who have not begun to read. Songs, predictable books, and rhymes encourage young children to develop their language skills while having fun and playing games. These activities prepare children for reading by exposing them to various aspects of spoken and written language with the message that the purpose of language is to communicate with others.

The third section focuses on school age children who are developing readers. These students need more exposure to print in order to become fluent. As children reach the third and fourth grade, more emphasis is placed on reading in the content areas such as social studies and science, requiring children to implement new strategies to derive meaning from text.

The fourth section focuses on how teachers can encourage parental involvement. Parents should not discontinue teaching their children when they reach school age. On the contrary, parents should become co-teachers, supporting their children's teachers by giving the teachers insight on how their children learn and supplying additional instruction as needed.

General Suggestions

Research has shown that children benefit from their parents reading them stories. Not only do they hear an enjoyable story, they learn how their parents feel about reading. When parents read a story, their “accompanying verbal and nonverbal behaviors convey important instructional and affective messages about reading” (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997, p. 74). When parents read expressing enthusiasm and enjoyment while reading or discussing literature, their children build positive attitudes about reading. In fact, the motivation children have towards reading is strongly affected by the beliefs, values, attitudes, and expectations their parents have about literacy and schooling (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997, p. 76).

Parents need to realize the power they possess in shaping their children’s views toward literacy and education in general. Parents who utilize entertaining methods to facilitate learning raise children who enjoy learning. Therefore, activities such as storytelling, discussing books, singing songs, writing and receiving letters, planning and preparing meals, and making books can be learning opportunities, even when children are unaware they are learning. Parents who model reading and writing as essential activities in everyday life and give their children opportunities to interact with print give their children an advantage when they enter school (Clay, 1991, p. 10). Investing in a home library and scheduling regular family reading times and times to visit the library also teach children the value of reading.

Parents can best serve their children's reading and writing development in the same way they fostered their spoken language development, by immersing their children in language. When their children were infants, they constantly talked to their children. As their children began to attempt to speak, they continued to model speech and encouraged their children to continue trying, even when they may have made some errors. In the same way, immersing children in a print-rich environment can encourage written language development. Parents who provide and use many sources of written information, including story books, magazines, newspapers, and reference books and give their children opportunities to share what they have read, teach their children that reading and writing are valuable activities as well as some of their applications in daily life.

Pre-Readers

Just as children gathered information about oral language before speaking, they also need to gather information about written language before reading. Parents can best facilitate their children's development in a nurturing environment. When their children are a few months old, they can look at pictures, listen to their parent's voice, and point to objects (The Children's Book Council, 1995). During this stage of development, parents can build vocabulary by pointing to pictures in books and say their names. During storybook time, children learn the social aspect of books as they interact with both their parents and the books they are sharing with their parents.

Apart from books, preschoolers are exploring the detail of print in their environment. They see print everywhere, including on signs, cereal packages, television commercials and make hypotheses as to what they mean. They may even ask a parent if their hypotheses are correct. They also imitate what they see by writing notes to parents or other family members. Although their writing at this stage may be pictures or scribbles on paper, they are developing concepts about print and its purpose as communication (Clay, 1991, p. 28).

As children grow older, they need to learn that there is a difference between words and pictures. Although the pictures may give a context to the story, the words are the story. Parents can teach this concept to their children informally by pointing to the words as they read aloud to their children. Tracking the words also show children that people read words starting at the top of a page and move from left to right. Even when children cannot decode the words, many will imitate their parents and track the words on the page and turn pages while they pretend to read a familiar story.

By modeling, parents teach their children valuable concepts necessary for reading. Parents do not need to formally teach their young children phonics or handwriting. These are skills that can be taught later at school. The home environment is best suited for teaching children to value reading and writing and for instilling a desire to use reading as a learning tool and writing as a communication tool even before children begin to read or write.

Preschoolers enjoy books that contain brightly colored pictures, rhythm, and wordless books. Wordless books help them to create their own stories and emphasize that books contain stories. Kindergarteners still enjoy books that toddlers enjoy, but they also enjoy books such as nursery rhymes, books with repetition, pop-up books, lift the flap books, or books that make sounds.

Developing Readers

Baker, Scher, & Mackler have found that “school-age children who have more opportunities to engage in literacy-relevant activities at home have more positive views about reading and engage in more leisure reading” (1997, p. 74). Even after students begin school, parents should still be involved in encouraging the literacy development in their children. At this age, parents can also encourage their children to choose their own reading material in areas of interest such as comics, puzzles, sports, or animals.

Even after children are reading independently, parents can still read to their children. Studies by Cullinan & Bagert have shown that “By reading stories that are on their interest level, but beyond their reading level, you can stretch young readers’ understanding and motivate them to improve their skills” (“The Basics”). Also, reading aloud to children expose children to story structure and exercise their memory and listening skills (Clay, 1991, p. 28)

Parents can encourage their children to write in meaningful contexts. For example, if a child wants to thank his grandparents for a birthday gift, parents can encourage him to write a note (Cullinan & Bagert, “Write and Talk, Too”). To further motivate the child to want to express himself through writing, parents can encourage the grandparents to write back. Through this interaction, the child learns that writing is a valuable and rewarding form of communication.

Parents can also encourage study skills by encouraging their children to use resource materials such as dictionaries and encyclopedias. When children ask questions that their parents cannot answer, parents can use the opportunity to teach that reading is an essential skill for investigating the unknown and for gathering new knowledge. Parents can teach their children how to search for information using different resources. They can also teach their children the value of newspapers and how they provide necessary information for daily living.

A Teacher / Parent Partnership

Lazar & Weisberg espouse that “Because parents connect with their children in personal ways across time, they can play a special role in helping teachers understand how their children relate to print outside of the classroom” (1996, p. 229). Parents can provide teachers with valuable information about their children that can shape instructional methods in the classroom. Parents have an ongoing relationship with their children that gives them some advantages over a teacher who only has their students for a school year.

In addition, parents who have been teaching their children since the day they were born, can enrich the curriculum of the classroom. They have the advantage of being able to work with their children one-on-one, a situation that cannot be effectively duplicated in a school setting. However, in many cases, the methods of teaching have changed from a phonics-based to a whole language approach since parents have gone to school. Therefore, teachers may need to make some effort in supplying parents with activities that will supplement classroom activities.

One activity that develops reading fluency is called paired reading. In this activity both parents and children read together with the parents pointing out any words their children misread. When children want to read alone, they give a non-verbal cue and continue to read until they make a reading error that they do not correct themselves. At that point, the parents point out the error and begin reading with their children again until a non-verbal cue is given. This activity models and encourages reading for meaning and fluency. It is more effective than having children read aloud on their own since it encourages social contact between parents and their children (Swanson, 1993).

Another activity that can be encouraged is recounting family stories. “When incorporated into the elementary curriculum, family stories are effective tools for encouraging students to learn more about their heritage, to acquire and refine literacy skills, and to develop a greater respect for the multicultural differences that make them unique” (Buchoff, 1995, p. 230). Family stories teach children values and create an emotional bond between the storyteller and the listener. They also give children opportunities to hear the story structure of a story teller. In the classroom, children can be encouraged to retell those stores and practice introducing, recounting plot and resolution, and organizing details sequentially. They can also be encouraged to preserve the stories they have heard through writing.

Conclusion

Literacy, the ability to read and write, is necessary in a world where an increasing amount of information is transmitted through written language. Parents, who are instrumental in teaching their children the spoken language, can be effective teachers of the written language as well. Parents should keep in mind that teaching reading can be an enjoyable experience for them and their children and that they should emphasize reading for meaning rather than decoding skills. The most important activity parents can provide is reading aloud to their children. They should also realize that providing a print-rich environment is essential for reading development. Children need to have a variety of reading material available to them. Parents can purchase reading material and borrow it from libraries.

This paper focuses mainly on the reading aspect of literacy. However, writing is an important aspect of communication since it is a way people can preserve thoughts and events. Parents should encourage their children to write in meaningful contexts rather than just learning to form letters correctly. They can write letters to communicate with friends and family, write reminders of things they need to do or lists of things they need to buy, or write stories to amuse themselves and others.

When parents and teachers work together, they create an atmosphere that is more conducive to learning. Both parents and teachers have skills and resources to bring to the relationship. Parents have interacted with their children for many years and know their children implicitly. Teachers can give parents suggestions on how they can help their children to learn better and enjoy learning.

It also assumes that parents can read and write. Parents who speak and read languages other than English can engage in the above activities in their native language since attitudes and motivation are separate from specific languages. Parents who cannot read any language can still provide a print-rich environment. They can also illicit the help of family members or friends to read to their children and ask for others to help them learn to read so they can become readers as well.

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