Supporting Literacy Development for Young Children through Home and School Connections

How can teachers and families work effectively together to support young children’s literacy development? Strengthen the family involvement role in programs by implementing these strategies.

Sonia Michael

Early care and education professionals recognize the importance of parent involvement in a child’s education. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly evident that children whose families are involved in their education are more successful in school (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006). Even before children come to school, the kinds of experiences provided at home can make a big difference in the level of success experienced by the child (Halle, Forry, Hair, Perper, Wandner, Wessel, & Vick, 2009; Justice, 2004).

Everyday routines such as trips to the grocery store or conversations at the dinner table begin to prepare children for the more formal literacy learning that typically occurs in school (Horn & Jones, 2005). Supportive communicative interactions beginning at birth and continuing throughout early childhood encourage language development, an important precursor to literacy development (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2002). Reading to children, providing books and writing materials, and talking to children about letters and writing are all experiences that encourage the development of print awareness and the importance of written language (Roberts, 2008; Sénéchal, 2006). Playing rhyming games and singing songs and nursery rhymes with young children support the development of phonological awareness, which has also been documented as an important forerunner of literacy development (Horn & Jones, 2005; Snow, 2002).

What about children whose early experiences do not involve the types of interactions with language or print materials that are known to be supportive of literacy development? Does it make a difference what information and resources professionals share with families related to language and literacy development? Should instruction provided at school be the focus rather than being concerned with what happens at home?

The Importance of the Home Literacy Environment

While the types of literacy experiences provided at school do make a difference in the way children learn and the kinds of attitudes they develop toward literacy and school (Snow, 2002), it is equally important to make certain that early care and education professionals are helping families and caregivers understand the significance of their role in each child’s literacy development (Horn & Jones, 2005). Many times families want to do whatever they can to support their children but do not understand what types of experiences they should provide, or they may assume that their children are not ready for certain types of learning experiences (Barbarin, 2002). For example, families with young children may not be aware of the importance of such activities as reading books, telling stories, or singing songs with their children (Barbarin, 2002; Massetti & Bracken, 2010). For these families, the information provided by early care and education professionals can make a difference in their child’s literacy development.

Children from homes with fewer material and educational resources as well as children who are African-
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Families who read to their children frequently support literacy development. Early childhood professionals can help families to understand the importance of reading and other literacy activities by sharing strategies and ideas.

American, Latino/Hispanic, or Native American, or whose home language is other than English tend to enter kindergarten with lower reading and mathematics skills. Denton, Flanagan, & McPhee, 2009; Massetti & Bracken, 2010; Qi, Kaiser, Milan, & Hancock, 2006). These children also tend to have continued gaps in achievement throughout their school careers (Fryer & Levitt, 2006; Halle, et. al., 2009; Yeung & Conley, 2008). Much time and effort has gone into addressing the achievement gap, but engaging families and providing them with the support they need to supplement and extend their child’s early development may be one of the most effective ways to address this gap.

In a study of kindergarten literacy practices, Michael (2010) examined the relationship between kindergarten instructional practices and student literacy outcomes in one school district. Classroom practices were measured using two standardized instruments, the Early Childhood Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Toolkit (ELLCO) (Smith, Dickinson, & Sangeorge, 2002) and the Assessment of Practices in Early Elementary Classrooms (APEEC) (Hemmeter, Maxwell, Ault, & Schuster, 2001). No association between the classroom practices measured with these instruments and kindergarten students’ overall literacy achievement were identified. The factors identified by this study that most impacted literacy development were children’s socioeconomic status and home literacy environment. While this finding is consistent with research that identifies socioeconomic status and home literacy practices as significant indicators of literacy development (Dearing, et. al., 2006; Halle, et. al, 2009; Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, & Cortina, 2010) this study also suggests that students from lower socioeconomic conditions and students from homes reporting fewer literacy resources entered school with lower literacy abilities but showed more growth in literacy during the kindergarten year as measured by the district’s literacy assessment system. In other words, students from upper and middle income backgrounds and homes with more literacy resources entered kindergarten with higher levels of literacy development but did not experience as much literacy growth over the kindergarten year as students from homes with fewer literacy resources. Thus, although no specific instructional practices measured by this study were identified as making a difference in student outcomes, this study nevertheless suggests that kindergarten teachers are implementing practices that positively impact literacy development.

This and other studies have suggested an association between family-school partnerships and literacy development (Dearing, et. al., 2006; Michael, 2010; Meier & Sullivan, 2004). Involving families by sharing reading strategies and sending home books for families to read with their children have been reported as successful literacy strategies (Michael, 2010; Meier & Sullivan, 2004). Additionally, family involvement as classroom volunteers, in social events such as PTO/PTA meetings or school book fairs, and participation in parent-teacher conferences appear to be positively associated with children’s literacy development (Dearing et. al., 2006; Michael, 2010). Based on this information, it seems reasonable to assume that interactions between the home and the school are positively impacting the literacy development perhaps as much as the instruction that occurs within the classroom.

Family involvement supports children’s greater success in school.

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Supporting Literacy at Home

So what can early care and education professionals do to increase the awareness of families related to supporting their child’s literacy development? How can they provide literacy related resources to families that will help to improve their child’s literacy outcomes?

Providing additional information and resources to parents may be the extra boost that is needed to support children’s literacy development. Teachers and community organizations can work in partnership with parents to help them recognize the importance of language interactions with children as well as helping them understand ways to increase literacy interactions with their children. They can also help parents realize the importance of early access to literacy materials for their children as well as ensuring that families know how to access these materials.

As early care and education professionals seek to provide suggestions and resources to support families’ awareness of each child’s literacy development, they must keep in mind the importance of respectful interactions with families (Strickland, 2002). When reaching out to families, it is essential to acknowledge the role of the family’s culture as well as challenges, time constraints, and other demands that families experience. In order to develop effective partnerships with families, professionals have an obligation to develop open and ongoing communication with families and to demonstrate a willingness to accept family input as it relates to their roles in each child’s education and development (Barbarin, 2002).

Supporting Language Development

Possibly the most important information to share with families is the importance of talking with their children. Research suggests that children whose families have fewer resources tend to have much lower levels of language development by the time they are four years of age based on the nature of the home language environment (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003; Roberts, Jurgen, & Burchinal, 2005). We also know that oral language development is one of the early predictors of later reading ability and academic achievement (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Sharing with families the importance of language modeling and language interactions with their children can positively impact the amount and types of language children hear in the home (Landry, Smith, Swank, & Guttentag, 2008). These increased language interactions positively impact the child’s language and literacy development (Dickinson & Porche, 2011).

When speaking with families about their interactions with children, there are specific activities that can be suggested while keeping in mind each family’s particular circumstances. For some families, an excellent activity to support oral language development is looking at family photos and discussing the people, places, and things portrayed. As discussed in the vignette, this may not be a fitting suggestion for all families, as some families may not have the resources or time required for this activity. For some families, it may be more appropriate to suggest talking to children about favorite family activities, or sharing stories about family members. This type of activity can be accomplished while driving, preparing dinner, helping children prepare for bed, or other family routines. Other activities that support oral language development while encouraging supportive family-child interactions include pointing out familiar signs while driving, or talking about familiar sites along the road. Families might also name food items and read labels while cooking or shopping. Early care and education professionals should think about the resources, abilities, and time constraints of families and provide suggestions based on each family’s particular needs.
The Center for Early Literacy Learning has developed materials specifically for families of young children that emphasize the development of literacy. Among these are several booklets related to supporting language development for infants, toddlers, and preschool aged children. The booklets provide suggestions for activities that families can use with their children and are all available free of charge. Early care and education professionals can provide these resources to families as print materials through regular interactions such as parent meetings or home visits. See Table 1 for a list of these materials.

Providing Encouragement for Reading

Another way to support families in promoting the literacy development of their children is to emphasize the importance of reading with children early and often. Families living in lower socioeconomic conditions are less likely to reading with their preschooler than are families with more resources (Whitehurst & Storch, 2002). Thus, it is important that all families understand the importance of sharing books and literacy experiences with their children.

Again, it is important to consider each family’s circumstances when making suggestions, but there are several activities that early care and education professionals can suggest while keeping each family’s particular needs and resources in mind. Sharing picture books and reading stories with children is always an excellent activity to support literacy development, however, families should never be made to feel obligated to read to their children if they have time constraints or other limitations. Reading with children should be enjoyable rather than forced. For some families, it may be more appropriate to emphasize the importance of having print materials such as newspapers, magazines, and catalogs available in the home. As in the vignette, some families may not have the ability to read fluently and may feel that reading is something they cannot successfully carry out with their child. For families like Carrie’s, catalogs are an excellent literacy source. Catalogs are an especially inexpensive and accessible item, and can provide opportunities for families to discuss new words with children and talk about the beginning sounds of words. Families might also read food labels to children while cooking, recite nursery rhymes during routine activities such as bathing, and provide alphabet

Table 1. Language and Literacy Materials from the Center for Early Literacy Learning

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<th>Website</th>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php">http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php</a></td>
<td>Infant Practice Guides for families that address: Literacy Learning Experiences, Stories and Listening, Scribbling and Drawing, Rhymes and Sound Awareness, Vocalizing and Listening, and Gestures and Signing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php">http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php</a></td>
<td>Toddler Practice Guides for families that address: Literacy Learning Experiences, Symbols and Letters, Storytelling and Listening, Scribbling and Drawing, Rhymes and Sound Awareness, Talking and Listening, and Gestures and Signing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php">http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php</a></td>
<td>Preschool Practice Guides for families that address: Literacy Learning Experiences, Letters and Spelling, Reading and Storytelling, Drawing and Writing, Rhymes and Sound Awareness, Talking and Listening, and Signing</td>
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magnets or blocks for children to play with while family members are busy with household chores.

Sharing materials with families that promote the importance of literacy experiences and discussing the significance of the information provided in the materials is a technique that early childhood professionals can use in their efforts to support families. Many materials have been specifically developed to emphasize the importance of reading with children and are available at no cost. These materials include the Shining Stars series as well as other print materials in electronic format developed by the National Institute for Literacy to provide families with information related to reading with their children. The U.S. Department of Education has developed materials, also available at no cost, that support family and school partnerships in the development of literacy and general school success. The Reading Rockets and Get Ready to Read websites also provide downloadable materials for families including home literacy checklists and tips for reading with children, many of which are available in multiple languages. Early care and education professionals may choose to provide print copies of these materials as many families may not have access to the necessary technology to obtain the materials on their own. See Table 2 for information about how to access these materials.

Table 2. Literacy Materials for Families

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| http://lincs.ed.gov/publications/publications.html | This site includes a list of publications for parents to use for teaching their children how to read. It also provides a link to each specific publication. Listed below are the publications available on this website:  
• Literacy Begins At Home: Teach Them To Read (PDF File Only)  
• Shining Stars: Toddlers Get Ready To Read  
• Shining Stars: Preschoolers Get Ready To Read  
• Shining Stars: Kindergarteners Learn To Read  
• Shining Stars: First Graders Learn To Read  
• Shining Stars: Second and Third Graders Learn To Read  
• A Child Becomes A Reader: Birth through Preschool  
• A Child Becomes A Reader: Kindergarten through Grade 3  
• Big Dreams: A Family Book About Reading  
• Dad’s Playbook: Coaching Kids To Read  
• Put Reading First |
| http://www.getreadytoread.org | The Get Ready to Read website has excellent materials for parents including a home literacy checklist and an early literacy screening tool available in English, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and Korean. There are also suggested activities for parents to help with early literacy development as well as online games. |
| http://www.readingrockets.org/audience/parents | The Reading Rockets website has excellent downloadable handouts for families including Parent Tips: Reading with Your Child which is available in 11 different languages. There are also downloadable files that you can use to create family literacy bags complete with a letter to the family and activity handouts. You just have to add the books. |
| http://www2.ed.gov/parents | The US Department of Education publishes several helpful materials for parents related to partnering with schools and helping children succeed. Booklets can be downloaded in pdf format or ordered in hard copy from the website. |
Expanding Access to Literacy Materials

Access to literacy materials such as books, crayons, pencils, and paper is another factor that influences literacy development in young children. Access to materials is highly impacted by a family’s socioeconomic status (Whitehurst & Storch, 2002). It is important that early care and educational professionals identify community resources that can be used to provide these materials to families. Donations from area businesses are one way to provide resources to families. Identifying businesses and organizations that provide free materials to schools and families will help get materials to children in need of this type of support.

Encouraging families to access the public library is an effective way to increase young children’s exposure to books and literacy materials and experiences. A class field trip to the local public library branch is one method of increasing a family member’s comfort level with the library and of introducing them to the vast array of resources available there (Michael, 2010). During the field trip, families and children can sign up for a library card if they do not have one and begin borrowing literacy materials of interest to them.

Very often, health fairs and summer community programs are offered at no cost. Locating these programs and ensuring that families are aware of them can greatly increase a family’s ability to provide experiences for their children. For example, public libraries offer summer reading programs and activities developed to encourage families to participate in using library resources. Additionally, schools often team up with community organizations to provide community health fairs that provide resources such as free books, toys, and other materials for participants. By gathering information about available community programs and making this information available to families, early childhood professionals can enhance a child’s access to materials and experiences.

Making Home-School Connections

Positive interactions between families and schools increase children’s success in school settings and support ongoing family involvement in the child’s education (Colombo, 2004; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). Connections between the home and school environment, including communication between the two settings, positively impacts the child’s development and educational success (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). Finding ways to connect literacy activities at home and at school are an important part of each child’s ongoing literacy development. Making connections between the home and school requires early care and education professionals to become familiar with each family’s strengths and resources. While schools can and should provide outreach and educational opportunities for families related to their child’s learning and development, it is also important to listen to families and incorporate family suggestions into the early care and education setting when possible (Colombo, 2004; Strickland, 2002).

School related family nights are one method of reaching out to families to provide connections between the home and school. Through functions at the school, families can learn new ways to interact with their children related to literacy, and educators can learn more about families as they observe the interactions that occur between children and family.
members (Colombo, 2004; Michael 2010). One way to provide this type of interaction is through a family literacy night. During such an event, school personnel can model literacy interactions that typically occur in the school setting including storybook reading and dialogic reading techniques, and explain the importance of these types of activities. Guest speakers may also be invited to address concerns of families and to provide additional resources (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Strickland, 2002).

It is also important to incorporate the kinds of literacy practices that children experience at home into the school setting. These types of experiences are generally more functional and include activities such as making grocery lists, sorting coupons, paying bills, and reading newspapers or other materials (Colombo, 2004). Early care and education professionals can incorporate activities into dramatic play or library areas in the classroom to help children make the connection between home and school literacy activities.

Other methods for developing connections between the home and school include sending weekly newsletters to families with songs and activities of the week, and asking families to come into the classroom to share songs they like to sing with their children. Sending home theme related literacy bags with activities and books for families to enjoy with their children is another excellent method for supporting literacy development and connecting with families (Horn & Jones, 2005). Several exceptional suggestions and materials related to developing literacy bags are available on the Reading Rockets website provided in Table 2.

Summary

In summary, it is imperative that early childhood professionals recognize the importance of family involvement in the role of early literacy development. We know that socioeconomic status, home language, home literacy environment, and family awareness of appropriate early language and literacy interactions with their children all play a major role in each child’s literacy development and school achievement (Halle, et al, 2009). As early care and education professionals, it is critical to identify ways that make materials and experiences available to families. It is equally important to identify ways to help families understand how important their role is in the academic success of their children.

By making connections between the home and the school, we can support young children’s literacy development and academic success. We must ensure that we are respectfully approaching families in our efforts to encourage their use of materials available in the community while helping them to understand their important role in the development of young children.

References


When reaching out to parents, make sure to acknowledge the role of the family's culture as well as challenges, time constraints and other demands.

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