

Helping parents understand and foster their child's literacy development

Early childhood educators know that parents are a child's first teachers. We need their support and involvement to enhance a child's cognitive development.

Cognitive development encompasses a wide range of skills, including thinking and language. As children learn words to name objects, tell stories, and engage in conversation, they are taking the first steps to **literacy**, loosely defined as the ability to read and write. Just as developing cognitive skills leads to early reading and writing, early reading and writing also enriches the "organization and dynamics of children's thought" (Seifert 2004). In short, one influences the other.

The interplay of these skills from infancy onward informs our preschool curriculum and classroom practices. But in addition to our providing literacy activities in school, we want parents to participate in literacy activities with their children at home.

How do we help parents understand and foster literacy development at home? The following questions and answers may provide guidance to you and your staff.

Why is it important to encourage parents to develop their child's literacy at home? As educators, we can not only inform parents of the critical role they play in their child's academic success but also encourage parents to actively participate in their child's education. Parents can either enhance our efforts in preparing their children academically or detract from them.

A recent study about mothers' academic beliefs illustrates the importance of parents' active support. The study (Weigel, Martin, and Bennett 2006) found that mothers who believed they played an active role in building their preschool children's knowledge actually created a more literacy-rich home. Their children developed greater interest in reading and

more print knowledge than children whose mothers believed that schools are primarily responsible for teaching their children.

Which literacy skills can parents build at home? Before children can read and write, they must develop pre-literacy skills such as the following: print awareness, letter knowledge, phonological awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (Honig, Diamond, and Gutlohn 2013). Parents can help children develop these pre-literacy skills at home as a means of supporting what their children learn in early care and education classrooms.

How can I encourage parents in developing their children's literacy? Invite parents to the classroom, center, or school for a family literacy night. During the event, host a seminar for the parents in which you teach how to enhance their children's literacy at home. Model how to actively engage children with the book during reading. Inform parents of specific literacy skills they can



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develop with their child at home and give tips and guidelines for success.

Provide several types of books (picture books, alphabet books, storybooks, and developmentally appropriate nonfiction books) for parents to read with their child. After reading, provide a book-related activity for the parent and child to do together. Award books as door prizes, or give a book to each family in attendance.

Family literacy nights are a great way for teachers to help parents understand the importance of being active participants in their young child's cognitive development. These events also present a wonderful opportunity to teach parents how to reinforce the literacy skills a child learns in the classroom.

How can I support parents in creating a literacy-rich home? A literacy-rich home is one in which books and reading are routine activities. Here are some ideas:

- Encourage parents to build their home library. Parents can buy inexpensive books at a local public library used book sale, discount bookstores, thrift shops, garage sales, flea markets, book fairs, or a book club catalog, for example. Offer guidance on choosing the best books for children.
- Send home a library card application. Encourage parents to check out books from the local public library or the library at your local college. Parents with older children may also check out books from that child's school library for their preschool child.
- Host a classroom book exchange. Ask parents to bring a wrapped, gently used book from home and have the children play a gift exchange game. Children will be excited to add a new-to-them book to their home libraries.
- Send a weekend book bag home. In a small tote bag, place a developmentally appropriate book and a book-related activity. Loan the book bag to a student for the weekend. For example, the book bag might include *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle and art supplies with which the parent and child can make a caterpillar/butterfly. The Internet is a great resource for finding many book-related activities.
- Give a book to children for their birthdays or as holiday gifts.

How can a parent use books at home to develop their children's literacy? Parents can begin to develop a child's literacy simply by reading

with their child at home (Epstein 2007). A home read-aloud ideally looks like a conversation between the parent and the child about the book. These conversations allow the child to gain new vocabulary and explore new sounds, building a child's phonological awareness (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer 2009).

During reading, a child may ask questions, share a personal story, and identify objects in the pictures, for example. Parents can welcome these interjections as an excellent way to gauge how well the child understands the story (Hendrick and Weissman 2007).

If a child does not seem to be following the story, the parent can use several strategies to clarify the story. For example, the parent might back up and reread the text or direct the child to use the pictures as context cues to build understanding (Honig, Diamond, and Gutlohn 2013).

Though the child may not be ready to begin reading independently, the child still benefits from the parent's modeling and guided practice with effective reading strategies.

I teach very young children. How can I involve their parents in beginning to develop their literacy? Parents can *read* a picture book with their child. You might suggest a picture book that connects to the child's interests (National Research Council 2000). The best picture books have vivid illustrations (Honig, Diamond, and Gutlohn 2013).

A child becomes an active reader when the parent asks what is happening in a picture (Honig,

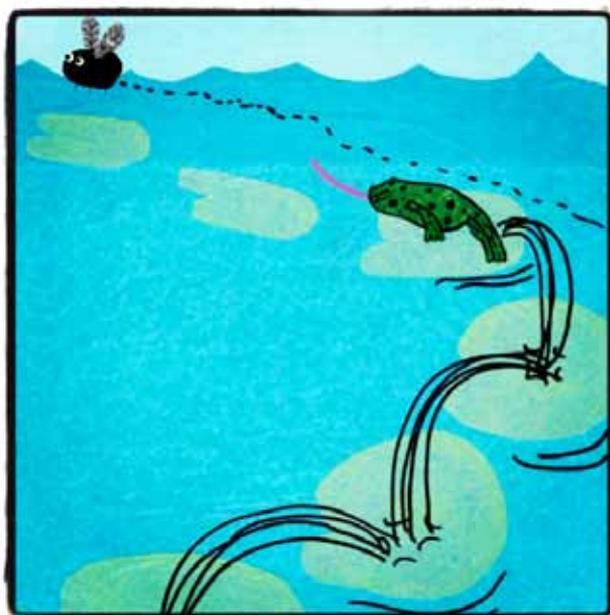


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Diamond, and Gutlohn 2013). Parents can begin to build predictive skills by asking the child what will happen next in the story (Hendrick and Weissman 2007). Again, this early practice helps the child build effective reading strategies that can be used when beginning to read text.

Which type of books is best for parents to use to develop their child's literacy—print or electronic? Technology is prevalent in our daily lives. Electronic books can be a wonderful way to generate a child's interest in reading. However, an electronic book can detract from the reading experience, particularly when the purpose is to develop early literacy skills.

One study comparing parents' reading the two types of books with 3-year-olds is informative. While reading an electronic book, 41 percent of parents' speech involved trying to control the child's manipulation of the book (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer 2009). In contrast, while reading a traditional book, 92 percent of parents' speech concerned the book. These findings support the use of print books in generating beneficial parent-child conversations about books. Indeed, conversations in which both parent and child elaborate on the story and produce sound effects while reading is a strong predictor of reading success (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer 2009).

Print books also lend themselves to furthering a child's understanding of print concepts. While reading a traditional book with a child, the parent can call

the child's attention to the features of the book, such as the spine, front and back covers, and the correct way to hold a book. Print books also enable the child to tangibly explore the directionality of print. In particular, parents can allow children to turn the pages of a print book (which children love to do), while calling attention to the fact that we first read the left-hand side of the page and then the right-hand side before turning to a new page. However, three to five references to concepts of print are enough during one book reading (Honig, Diamond, and Gutlohn 2013).

How can parents develop a child's literacy without books? On the path to becoming literate, children must develop print awareness and letter knowledge (Honig, Diamond, and Gutlohn 2013). Parents can call attention to concepts of print and build a child's letter knowledge without books.

THE BEST PICTURE BOOKS HAVE VIVID ILLUSTRATIONS.

A parent can teach a child that print conveys meaning using environmental print (Honig, Diamond, and Gutlohn 2013). Environmental print is print found in everyday life. During breakfast a parent might point and say, "I know this cereal is called Honey Nut Cheerios® from reading these words." Or a parent could inform the child, "Because I read this bill, I know how much money I need to pay the water company." Parents can also use environmental print to teach their children the directionality of print (Honig, Diamond, and Gutlohn 2013). While dining out, for example, a parent can show the child that we read the menu from left to right and top to bottom.

Environmental print is also useful in building a child's letter knowledge. Young children love their names. Parents can capitalize on this interest by calling attention to the letters in their child's name. While running errands, a parent might ask the child to find words that begin with the same letter that begins their name, for example. Correct responses deserve verbal acknowledgement: "Yes, the 'W's' in *Whole Wheat* are the same as the 'W' that starts your name." Incorrect responses are opportunities for explanation: "The let-

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ter that starts *Granola* looks like the 'C' in your name, but it's a 'G.' See the extra mark on the bottom end?"

As a child's literacy continues to develop, parents can begin to ask their child questions such as, "Your name is /Mmm/allory. What other words begin with /mmm/?" to develop the child's phonological awareness.

Equip parents to be teachers

Parents play a crucial role in helping their child develop early literacy skills. As early childhood educators, we can help parents recognize the important role they play in their child's cognitive development. As teachers, we are responsible not only for teaching young children but also for equipping parents to be teachers in their home.

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