The Effects of a Family Literacy Project on Home Literacy Experiences

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Abstract
This article describes how one South Texas school district successfully implemented a family literacy project, which positively impacted the home literacy experiences of children in pre-kindergarten through grade three. A total of eight parent workshops were offered to parents over a two year period. Workshops presented parents with information about reading aloud to their children, effective read aloud strategies, and the reading process. Three hundred two (302) parents and other primary caregivers participated in this project. Survey data collected at the beginning and end of the project indicated that the project resulted in a substantial increase in the quantity and quality of read aloud experiences in the home. Furthermore, teachers reported that the project helped strengthen a positive relationship between home and school. Therefore, this study supports the viability of schools implementing parent/child reading projects that can play an important role in enhancing the literacy environment of the home.

Introduction
Literacy begins as a result of early experiences in the home. Educators are always looking for innovative ways to improve the quality of those early experiences. They recognize that parents represent their children’s first and most influential role models in many areas of their life, including becoming competent life-long readers. A family’s value of reading is transferred from one generation to the next when children are read to, when they have access to reading materials in the home, when they are encouraged to read to find out about the world, and when they see their parents reading. Therefore, it is the family that forms the vital foundation upon which grows a child’s capacity and desire to learn to read. What parents do to help their children learn is generally more important to their academic success than the family’s financial status or social class (Butler & Clay, 1993; Doake, 1988; Fox, 2001; Goodman, 1984; Smith, 1988).

Of all the literacy experiences in the home, perhaps one of the most beneficial is reading aloud to children. There is a strong research base for reading aloud to children. Research studies have positively linked parents reading aloud to their children to a child’s interest in reading (Durkin, 1966; Louizides, 1993; Morrow, 1983). Louizides’s (1993) study, for example, indicated that a strong background of being read aloud to beginning at an early age has a positive effect on children’s choices to read independently in their leisure time. Also important to reading achievement, vocabulary development and listening comprehension are positively influenced by reading aloud (Fondas, 1992; France, 1991; Hale & Windecker, 1992; Soiferman, 1991). In addition, Sullivan (1988) found that reading aloud to children had a positive effect on the child’s attention span. Research by Lovinggood
(1980) and Soiferman (1991) found that children who had been read to had a greater knowledge of language including concepts of print, story structure, and book language. Lastly, reading aloud to children is positively correlated to intelligence, creativity, and self-concept (Hale & Windecker, 1992).

Programs that teach parents how to read aloud to their children and motivate them to do so may help avert problems experienced by some beginning readers. With just this purpose in mind, one school district decided to implement a two-year-long family literacy project they entitled Families Reading Together. The project’s goal was to improve home literacy experiences, primarily by increasing quality read aloud events. Data was collected and analyzed to answer the following questions:

1. Will participation in Families Reading Together result in increased occurrences of read aloud experiences in the home?
2. Will participation in Families Reading Together improve the quality of read aloud experiences in the home?
3. Will children's interest in reading increase as a result of participation in Families Reading Together?

**Method**

Families Reading Together was implemented in a small town in South Texas, USA with a population of approximately 5,000 people. The elementary school serves approximately 660 students in grades pre-kindergarten through 3. Approximately 88% of the students are Hispanic. Ninety percent of all students receive free or reduced-cost lunch. Approximately 300 primary care givers (parents, grandparents, etc) of pre-kindergarten through third grade children participated in this project over a two-year period.

Parent surveys were used to determine the effectiveness of the project. Parents were asked to complete a survey at the first and last sessions of the project. The survey consisted of questions addressing how often parents read to their children, children’s attitudes toward being read to and learning to read, and strategies parents used when reading aloud. Pre and post survey nominal data were analyzed for increases or decreases in desired home literacy behaviors.

Families Reading Together consisted of a series of four workshops held throughout the school year, which presented parents with information about reading aloud to their children, effective read aloud strategies, and the reading process. The four workshops presented in year 1 were repeated in the second year of the project to reinforce the strategies and provide on-going support for parents. Different children’s books were used in year 2.

Each session followed a similar five-step format. First, the workshop presenter introduced information about the benefits of reading aloud to children and how to select books for reading aloud. Next, the workshop leader modeled selected read aloud strategies using the featured children’s book. Third, the parents practiced the read aloud strategy in pairs. The social context of this activity provided an important learning environment for parents. Parents and children were seen laughing and enjoying themselves as they read books together. The workshop leader circulated and answered parents’ questions. Fourth,
the workshop presenter led a discussion about the read aloud strategy and how it makes the read aloud experience more enjoyable and beneficial to literacy development. Lastly, children, who have been engaged in fun literacy activities related to the featured book in another area of the school, joined their parents in the workshop. Each child was given a copy of the featured book and parents read to their children applying the read aloud strategies presented in the workshop. After the read aloud was complete, parents enjoyed visiting with each other and the presenters as refreshments were served. Students took the book home to enjoy again and again. An outline of workshop sessions is presented in Appendix A.

Children’s books were chosen for each session based on the appropriateness of the book for the read aloud strategy being presented. Books were selected that would appeal to children’s interests and that would be at the listening level of the majority of children attending the workshop. The reading strategies and techniques taught in these sessions were as follows: making predictions, retelling, learning new information, using predictable language and rhyme, and relating reading to personal experiences.

The making predictions strategy is an effective comprehension strategy because it helps to set purposes for listening and actively involves the listener in the read aloud experience. Also, like many of the read aloud strategies selected for this project, it will directly transfer to reading comprehension because good readers predict and confirm as they read. To use the making predictions strategy, parents were taught to use two questions during the read aloud experience. These two questions were as follows: “What do you think will happen next?” and “Why do you think so?”

Story retelling was also selected as a read aloud strategy for this project. After parents read a story to their children they helped them retell the story using the illustrations as prompts. As parent and child retold the story they condensed the information and put it into their own words. This required them to identify and connect the central ideas as they remembered the story that was read aloud.

One of the sessions each year was devoted to reading nonfiction books. In the well know 1985 report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 81), experts in literacy emphasized the need to develop proficiency comprehending expository text stating that, “Teachers should devote more time to teaching strategies for understanding not only stories but also social studies and science texts.” Parents were taught a simple read aloud strategy to assist their children in comprehending nonfiction text. Before beginning the reading parents would talk to their children about what they already knew about the topic. Next, during the reading parents and children would talk about the new things they were learning. Lastly, after the reading parents would ask their children, “What did you learn that was new?”

For parents of emergent readers, information was given about the value of repetitive language structures in helping their children develop a predictive set for facilitating word identification. Parents were instructed on how to select books that are ideal for beginning readers. The workshop presenter modeled how to use predictive language during a read aloud to engage their child as an active participant in reading the text.
Additionally, parents were taught how the use of rhyme helps to develop awareness of sounds in language and is enjoyable for all ages. For beginning readers rhyme can help develop phonological awareness. Phonological awareness involves understanding the different ways in which spoken language can be broken down and manipulated. Phonological awareness has been linked to success with beginning reading instruction. Also, rhyme can facilitate word identification by making text predictable. For beginning readers and fluent readers alike, text containing rhyme provides an enjoyable reading experience for many children.

Making connections between what one is reading and prior knowledge and experiences facilitates both listening and reading comprehension. Therefore, the last session of each school year was devoted to this important read aloud strategy. While reading to their children, parents were taught to use prompting questions to help their children relate what was being read to them to their own personal experiences. For example, as parents read *Happy Easter Little Critter* by Mercer Mayer to their children, they would talk about past experiences with this holiday such as dying eggs, egg hunts, and getting dressed up.

**Results**

*Quantity of Read Aloud Experiences in the Home*

Perhaps the most important goal addressed in Families Reading Together was to encourage and motivate parents to read aloud to their young children. At the first and last session of Families Reading Together the parents were asked how often they read to their children. Results of this survey question are presented in Table 1. An analysis of the pre-post surveys shows a 23% increase in parents reading to their children at least two times each week. The majority of parents were reading more often to their children at the conclusion of the project.

**Table 1**

Survey Results: Quantity of Read Aloud Experiences in the Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>October Yr 1</th>
<th>May Yr 2</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often, on average do you read to your child?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>-14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 times a week</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>+18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday/almost everyday</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quality of Read Aloud Experiences in the Home

In addition to encouraging parents to read more often to their children, a major goal of Families Reading Together was to improve the quality of those experiences. Read aloud experiences that are interactive in nature, those in which parent and child engage in discussions about the stories, have a greater potential of enhancing the literacy skills of children (Anderson, et al., 1985; Beck & McKeown, 2001; Teale, 1984). Each session of Families Reading Together modeled effective read aloud strategies and techniques. Many strategies were modeled and then practiced in a controlled social context. Focus strategies/techniques included the following: predicting, retelling, relating to personal experiences, predictable language, rhyme, and learning new information. The results of questions on the survey that assessed the degree that parents were regularly using selected read aloud strategies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Survey Results: Quality of Read Aloud Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>October Yr 1</th>
<th>May Yr 2</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your child asks you a question during a read aloud session and you answer it.</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>+6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You and your child compare something read about in the story to something in child’s real life.</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>+26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You stop during the reading of a story to ask your child what he/she thinks will happen next.</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>+24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your child retells the story you have read using the pictures.</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>+23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you finish reading a book to your child you and your child talk about the story.</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>+17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You read books that include rhyme and/or repetitive language to your child.</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>+22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When reading a factual book, you discuss prior knowledge and new information before, during, and after reading the book.</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>+31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pre-kindergarten through third grade parents reported that they were using the read aloud strategies presented at the Families Reading Together sessions. All strategies showed an increase in use. Greatest increases were shown in predicting (24%), retelling (23%), and relating the content of the story read to personal experience (26%).

Parents were also given information about an effective technique for reading nonfiction. When asked if they used this technique with their children, 61% reported that they did before the project began. At the last session, 92% of the parents reported using this modeled read aloud strategy, which represents a 31% increase.

**Understanding of Emergent and Developing Literacy**

As part of the Families Reading Together project, aspects of emergent and developing literacy were discussed with parents. The benefits of a literacy-rich home environment, which includes parents modeling reading as a desired activity for both entertainment and to gain knowledge, were discussed. The results of survey questions pertaining to this aspect of early literacy are presented in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>October Yr 1</th>
<th>May Yr 2</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does it affect your child if he sees you reading?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>-7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you read for your own enjoyment?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The project saw a modest (7%) increase in parents’ understanding of the importance of children seeing their parents reading. The project saw only a slight increase (4%) in parents’ reported reading for enjoyment.

**Reading Interest and Attitude**

Interest and a positive attitude towards reading play a very important role in a child becoming an independent reader (Tobin, 1981). The Families Reading Together sessions were designed to be enjoyable celebrations for both the children and the parents attending. The results of questions pertaining to reading interest are presented in Table 4.
Table 4
Survey Results: Reading Interest and Attitude

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>October Yr 1</th>
<th>May Yr 2</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How would you rate your child’s interest or desire to be read to?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong interest</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>+21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average interest</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>-17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low interest</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you rate your child’s interest or desire to one day become an independent reader?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong interest</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>+21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average interest</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low interest</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An analysis of the pre- and post-surveys indicates an increase in both the parents’ rating of their child’s interest or desire to be read to (21%) and their child’s interest or desire to one day become an independent reader (21%). Parents were asked to write comments about the project on the post-survey. Typical responses were, “I like reading together. It made my child enjoy reading more when he sees parents attend with their children to read together. It encouraged my child to want to read more.”

Discussion
Speaking before the Colorado Early Childhood Cognitive Development Summit in May of 2003, First Lady Laura Bush states, “From the crib to the classroom, children need to spend time being read to by parents and other adults. If we take time to talk to and listen to children - to read with them and surround them with books - then we will help establish the skills, knowledge, and confidence that they will need to read and succeed.” (Office of the First Lady, May 21, 2003). Laura Bush is not the first person from our nation’s highest office to advocate parents reading to their children. Addressing the 2000 Winter Conference Annual Luncheon, former First Lady Barbara Bush tells the audience, “There is no better way to spend quality time with children than to put your arms around them and read to them or have them read to you.” (Clayton, 2000, p. 72). The Bush women and others around the country are promoting the practice of parents reading to and with their children.

Considering the importance of home literacy activities like reading aloud, schools should consider taking an active role in strengthening the literacy environment of the home. Designing and implementing parental workshops that promote early literacy has
the potential to prevent reading failure and to ensure all children will become successful readers. The Families Reading Together project successfully met its objectives of increasing the quantity and quality of read aloud experiences in the home. It also had a positive effect on elementary students’ interest in reading.

One of the reasons for the success of this project is possibly the high participation rate. Participation in this project was very high with about 80% of parents attending at least six of the eight sessions offered over a two year period. High participation is believed to be due to the following factors: 1) workshop sessions were enjoyable experiences for both children and parents, 2) workshop leaders treated parents as partners in their children’s education, 3) sessions were well advertised, and 4) children were given a book at each session to add to their home library collection.

Also, when looking at this project and other similar projects that were successful they all had one thing in common: They supported parents’ efforts to read aloud to their children over an extended period of time. One time workshops or presentations do not seem to have the desired effect of changing literacy practices in the home.

The project had other unexpected but welcomed outcomes. Many teachers reported that the relationship they had with parents was vastly improved. Parents became more involved in their children’s education. During scheduled and informal parent-teacher conferences parents seemed more at ease in discussing their children’s progress in school. Dialogue between parents and teachers was occurring more often and with positive outcomes. The positive home-school relationship that this reading project helped to build will certainly have long-lasting effects upon the education of these children.

Conclusion

As educators, we can be passively concerned about children not coming to school ready to learn to read or we can provide active programs for families that play an important role in enhancing the literacy environment of the home. This project, which could easily be replicated, has shown that schools can play an important role in enhancing the literacy environment of the home in a non-intrusive manner that respects the cultural values of families.
References


**Children’s books cited**


Appendix A

Outline of Workshop Sessions

**Sessions 1 & 5**
**Read Aloud Strategies:**
Making predictions & story retelling– To use the predictions strategy parents are taught two questions: What do you think will happen next? and Why do you think so? 
Story retelling – Parent reads story to child. Child then retells story using the illustrations as prompts.

*Suggested Children’s Books (Grades PK-1)*
*Happy Birthday Clifford* by Norman Bridwell; *Clifford’s Puppy Days* by Norman Bridwell

*Suggested Children’s Books (Grades 2-3)*
*The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka; *Officer Buckle and Gloria* by Peggy Rathmann

**Sessions 2 & 6**
**Read Aloud Strategies:**
Learning new information – To use this strategy parents learn process: 1) What do you know about the topic? 2) Read to learn more. 3) What did you learn that was new?

*Suggested Children’s Books (Grades PK-1)*
*Hats, Hats, Hats* by Ann Morris; *Bread, Bread, Bread* by Ann Morris

*Suggested Children’s Books (Grades 2-3)*
*The Magic School Bus Lost in the Solar System* by Joanna Cole & Bruce Degen; *The Magic School Bus on the Ocean Floor* by Joanna Cole & Bruce Degen

**Sessions 3 & 7**
**Read Aloud Strategies:**
Predictable language (PK-1 only) – Session demonstrates how the use of repetitive language structures of some young children’s stories help to develop a predictive set for facilitating word identification.
Rhyme – Session demonstrates how the use of rhyme in children’s books helps to develop awareness of sounds in language and is enjoyable for all ages.

*Suggested Children’s Books (Grades PK-1)*
*I Was Walking Down the Road* by Sarah E. Barchas; *Silly Sally* by Audrey Wood

*Suggested Children’s Books (Grades 2-3)*
*The New Kid on the Block* by Jack Prelutsky; *Joyful Noise: Poem for Two Voices* by Paul Fleischman

**Sessions 4 & 8**
**Read Aloud Strategies:**
Relating reading to personal experiences – Through prompting questions by parents, children relate reading to personal experiences.
Suggested Children’s Books (Grades PK-1)
*Happy Easter Little Critter* by Mercer Mayer; *All By Myself* by Mercer Mayer

Suggested Children’s Books (Grades 2-3)
*My Father’s Dragon* by Ruth Gannett; *Charlotte’s Web* by E.B. White