

The Power of Family Conversation

School and community programs help parents build children's literacy from birth

by LAURA PAPPANO

School matters, but literacy starts at home. Teachers armed with reading contracts and carefully worded missives have long urged parents to read aloud to their children. But now there is a second and perhaps more powerful message: Talk to your kids, too.

Mounting research that links language-rich home environments with reading success and school achievement is driving educators and community groups to target families long before children register for school. In addition to Todd Risley and Betty Hart's landmark work correlating verbal home environments with future literacy, Catherine E. Snow at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and David K. Dickinson, a professor of teaching and learning at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, are assembling data on the impact of early literacy interventions. Their ongoing study of 57 low-income families reveals that home support for literacy markedly influences kindergarten language skills and fourth grade reading comprehension test scores. No wonder those at the leading edge of literacy want to increase the quantity and quality of conversations between parents and children beginning at birth.

"It is really what parents have been doing at home that children have to draw on when they become readers and writers," says Gail Jordan, associate professor of education at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minn., who says children from three to five are "ripe" for engaging in rich language learning.

A decade ago, Jordan created Project EASE (Early Access to Success in Education) to help parents and kindergarten teachers work shoulder to shoulder to help children develop literacy skills. The program, now used in 120 Ohio schools and in Minnesota, invites parents and children to participate in structured evening events that provide education and modeling for parents and offer weekly activities to do at home. Parent-child activities include storybook reading, retelling family narratives, and talking about the world. Retelling family stories, for example, reinforces the sequencing of ideas, emphasizes the value of detail, and sharpens children's narrative skills.

Such approaches are making a difference. A 2000 study that tracked 148 kindergarten students and their families in the White Bear Lake School District in Minnesota (with 77 receiving the intervention and 71 acting as a control group), showed that Project EASE students made significantly greater gains in language skills than the control group. The Collaborative Language and Literacy Instruction Project, created by Daniel Pallante of the Ohio Education Development Center, also uses Project EASE with teachers and parents in Ohio with similar results. An outside evaluation showed that students who attended more of the Project EASE literacy nights with their parents and did more of the take-home activities tended to perform better on kindergarten reading tests.

More recently, Jordan has applied this approach to preschools, creating a program called Building Language Together, now used in 32 preschools in Minnesota. (It is offered in both English and Spanish.) The program includes books that go home with parents and "book scripts" that take parents through each story page by page to prompt parent-child discussions.

"The best talk around a story book," says Nonie Lesaux, associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, takes the story as "a point of departure." Exploratory, investigative discussions that evolve between parents and children, Lesaux says, are central to higher-level literacy learning. "One of the hallmarks of kids who have a good vocabulary is that they can talk about things that are not in the present," she adds.

Jordan notes that the social-emotional bond parents have with children amplifies learning. Parents, she says, can tailor explanations to click perfectly (as when a mom explains "variety" to a daughter with a sweet tooth by naming types of candy). They can also provide more extensive opportunities for rich discussion than a teacher attending to a class of 25 children.

"Let's Talk"—In Any Language

The Let's Talk—It Makes a Difference campaign, started five years ago by the Agenda for Children in Cambridge, Mass., focuses on helping low-income and non-native English speaking families see the value of conversation in fostering literacy. The campaign, targeting children from birth to age 8, has staffers meet new mothers in maternity wards, make home visits, and hold "talk workshops" and "reading parties" to support parents in their teaching role.

"Parents want to do best by their children," says Lauren Leikin, literacy coordinator for the Agenda for Children, which is sponsored by the Cambridge Public Schools and various local health and community agencies. "But the talking and reading don't come as naturally to some parents as to others." For instance, she says, cultural factors can influence how much parents solicit conversation and ideas from children. In some cultures, standards of good behavior discourage children from speaking up. A "major emphasis" of their work, Leikin says, is encouraging parents to engage children verbally—and in their native language (see sidebar "The Home Language Advantage").

The Home Language Advantage

Literacy experts emphasize that it's especially important to convey to non-English speaking parents the value of talking with young children in their home language. Linda M. Espinosa, professor of early childhood education at the University of Missouri-Columbia and author of a January 2008 policy brief, *Challenging Common Myths About Young English Language Learners*, says immigrant parents often believe that they are helping their children by speaking only English with them. But if parents are more comfortable in another language, she says, the opposite is true. Language is a tool for thinking, and children need to be exposed to concepts and ideas through the use of rich language. If parents can't express these concepts and ideas fluently in English, she says, speaking English only can "truncate [children's] development."

"When parents discourage the use of their native language, what happens is the amount of language interaction decreases," Espinoza explains. "What we are really interested in is rich language interaction—in any language."

Early literacy skills learned at home in a child's first language do transfer to English later. Several studies show that English language learners between three and eight who have many learning opportunities in their native language will ultimately perform better on middle school and high school tests of academic achievement in English than those who grow up in English-only settings.

The program has trained home visitors who speak Haitian Creole, Bengali, Amharic, Spanish, and Portuguese in addition to English.

For Karina Gildea, a mother of two young daughters, the home visit from Let's Talk staffer Gretta Hardina is a welcome break. Born and raised in Mexico, Gildea speaks fluent Spanish and good—but not perfect—English. But as someone who attends parent-child play programs and library story sessions, Gildea knows her children's success begins with her.

"I try to talk to her when I am changing her diaper so that she can start understanding," Gildea says of her four-month-old baby, dressed in fuzzy white pajamas with a baby duck on the front. Her two-year-old, who has long dark hair and wears a bright red plastic watch on her left wrist, alternately sits by her side and scampers back and forth to the far reaches of the second-floor apartment. Her request for "TV! TV!" fades as Hardina unpacks board books from her canvas bag. The books are meant for the infant, but it is the two-year-old who clambers onto the sofa and reaches across her mother's lap toward Hardina for one after another.

In a typical visit, Hardina may model how to read aloud interactively, using the book as a launching point for dialogue and asking open-ended questions. She also offers guidance about the stages of reading and "normal" child behavior, she says, "like chewing books, grabbing the book, and turning the pages quickly."

It may seem obvious to educators that reading—and talking—to children from birth can influence school success, but Leikin says survey data gathered from program participants reveals that this is a new message for many parents. For example, only 26 percent of 75 parents reported being "very aware" of the importance of talking to children before attending a "Talk Workshop." Afterwards, 96 percent "definitely" planned to use the skills they'd learned. Similarly, a follow-up phone survey in 2007 with 33 parents who received home visits found that 70 percent had changed the way they spoke to their children as a result of information they learned during the visit.

"Everybody can talk with their kids, and it makes an enormous difference in their children's lifelong academic success," says Leikin.

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