

Why it is important to involve parents in their children's literacy development – a brief research summary by Christina Clark

Why should parents become involved in their children's literacy activities? The evidence about the benefits of parents being involved in their children's education in general, and their children's literacy activities in particular, is overwhelming. Research shows that parental involvement in their children's learning positively affects the child's performance at school (Fan & Chen, 2001) in both primary and secondary schools (Feinstein & Symons, 1999), leading to higher academic achievement, greater cognitive competence, greater problem-solving skills, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance and fewer behavioural problems at school (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons et al., 2001). Similar impacts have also been identified with regards to literacy practices, including:

- Early reading experiences with their parents prepare children for the benefits of formal literacy instruction. Indeed, parental involvement in their child's reading has been found to be the most important determinant of language and emergent literacy (Bus, van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995). Furthermore, parents who introduce their babies to books give them a head start in school and an advantage over their peers throughout primary school (Wade & Moore, 2000).
- Involvement with reading activities at home has significant positive influences not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich & Welsh, 2004), but also on pupils' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991).
- Parental involvement in their child's literacy practices is a more powerful force than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004), while reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status (OECD, 2002).
- Research also shows that the earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille et al., 2004). Additionally, of all school subjects, reading has been found to be most sensitive to parental

influences (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). In turn, success in reading is a gateway to success in other academic areas as well (Jordan, Snow & Porsche, 2000).

- Although parental involvement has the greatest effect in the early years, its importance to children's educational and literacy outcomes continues into the teenage and even adult years (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). For example, Feinstein and Symons (1999) found that parental interest in their child's education was the single greatest predictor of achievement at age 16.
- Finally, the National Reading Campaign promotes reading for pleasure throughout the whole community to demonstrate the varied ways in which reading can inspire and sustain people to develop their skills, with a focus on those most in need. There is ample evidence that parents who promote the view that reading is a valuable and worthwhile activity have children who are motivated to read for pleasure (Baker & Scher, 2002).

The benefits of parental involvement extend beyond the realm of literacy and educational achievement. Studies show that children whose parents are involved show greater social and emotional development (Allen & Daly, 2002), including more resilience to stress, greater life satisfaction, greater self-direction and self-control, greater social adjustment, greater mental health, more supportive relationships, greater social competence, more positive peer relations, more tolerance, more successful marriages, and fewer delinquent behaviours (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003).

It is therefore important that parents and carers are aware of the significant contribution they can make to their children's learning by providing a stimulating environment around language, reading and writing as well as supporting at home the school's literacy agenda, both during the early years as well as the primary and secondary years of schooling.

Provision through various media also needs to be made to help guide parents to provide a literacy-rich and stimulating environment. Since not all parents realise the importance of their role in supporting their children's literacy, or have the resources or capabilities to do so, it is important that the agencies in contact with them are able to offer them appropriate support. This may well help such agencies meet their own targets, because of the positive effect that increased parental involvement can have on child outcomes. The Family Reading Campaign (www.familyreading.org.uk) is a partnership campaign working to ensure that the importance of encouraging reading in the home is integrated into the planning and activity of all the key organisations concerned with education, health, libraries and parenting.

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