Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy

Practitioner's Guide #2

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Parent Interventions and Interactive Literacy Activities

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Introduction

Parent involvement in children's language and literacy development is a continuum. Parents enhance their newborn baby's language and vocabulary growth, whereas with older children parents are involved in school and provide support by engaging in learning activities such as assisting with homework. Parent involvement is an important part of children's growth and development and can be vital to their academic success. Some parents need guidance on how to become involved with their child to support school literacy. In fact, a primary reason adults enroll in family literacy programs is to help their child be successful in school (Brizius & Foster, 1993, as cited in Debruin-Parecki, 2009). These programs are poised to assist parents in accomplishing this goal.

"Parent education," "parent training," and "parent interventions" are often used interchangeably. However, there is a subtle distinction among these terms: parent training and interventions are one type of parent education. Parent trainings and interventions teach specific skills, whereas parent education provides general information about a topic. Current research indicates that merely educating parents about what to do and giving general suggestions may not be enough; parents may need explicit instruction to help them learn and practice how to work with their children to achieve greater academic success.

The purpose of this guide is to inform family literacy practitioners and other educators who work with families about the benefits of targeted skill training for parents that move beyond encouraging parents to be involved with their child and to provide examples of such initiatives. This guide outlines the research literature on parent intervention studies, offers cultural and literacy considerations for working with diverse populations, and concludes with suggestions for types of trainings and activities that have proven successful.

Review of Parent Interventions

Parents of young children are encouraged by schools and the media to engage their children in reading and other activities. Parents can provide critical academic support for teachers who feel pressured to meet the demands of preparing preschool children for elementary school or for meeting state standards. Resources are often limited for teaching small groups of children with reading difficulties at any age level. However, these children could receive additional instruction at home if parents knew what was needed to support their children's language and literacy development (Resetar, Noell, & Pellegrin, 2006) and if parents received specific guidance about what to do (Fitton & Gredler, 1996; Sénéchal & Young, 2008).

Effective parental support could include using storybook reading to teach language, drawing on different strategies such as asking questions and providing additional information about the story (Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). However, observational (Britton, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006) and audio-taped studies (Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005) have shown that parents often do not initiate these strategies as they read with children. Furthermore, parents may not use story reading time to teach children language and literacy skills, such as letter names and sounds of letters (Phillips, Norris, & Anderson, 2008). Parents can learn through trainings how to effectively engage children in practices that support school-based literacy activities; yet, these home literacy activities need to be

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informal, encourage interactions, and stem from research findings (Neuman & Neuman, 2009).

Research provides evidence of how parent interventions can increase children's outcomes in literacy-related skills:

- Sénéchal and Young (2008) conducted a meta-analysis that broadly examined three parent interventions and their effect on children's (K-3) reading skill development. The intervention that taught parents strategies and skills for working with their children on specific literacy activities (e.g., learning the alphabet, letter-sound correspondence, blending beginning and end sounds, and learning sight words) demonstrated that parents' use of these skills and strategies had a strong, positive relationship to children's reading development.

- Mol and colleagues' (2008) meta-analysis focused on interventions to increase the quality of shared book reading—a dialogic book reading intervention versus a "reading-as-usual" control group. They found that using open-ended questions and soliciting verbal responses from children increased expressive language ability. However, parent-led dialogic reading interventions were not as effective for at-risk families (low income and low educational attainment) and older preschoolers (4 to 5 years).

> **Dialogic Reading** – shared reading where the roles shift and the child becomes the storyteller and the adult becomes the listener who adds information or asks open-ended questions during the reading, which may lead the child into more sophisticated storytelling (Whitehurst et al., 1988).

- Reese, Sparks, and Leyva (2010) reviewed literature on parent interventions for preschool children's language development. They concluded that the child's language skill development was related to the topic in which the parents were trained. They stated, "parent training programs should not be viewed in competition or as mutually exclusive; rather, parent-training programs can be designed for the specific needs of particular populations of children" (p. 112).

- Landry, Smith, Swank, Zucker, Crawford, and Solari (2012) found that when parents were taught responsive parenting skills (i.e., warm interactions, cognitive responsiveness in language and holding the child's interest, etc.) and practiced embedding them in everyday activities, these behaviors generalized to shared book reading, which in turn, increased children's verbal responses.

- Reese, Leyva, Sparks, and Grolnick (2010) examined literacy skills of low-socioeconomic status children whose mothers were trained in either dialogic reading or elaborative reminiscing techniques (elaboration on past events during conversations), or were assigned to a control group. When comparing the quality of children's retelling of the story, children whose mothers were in the elaborative reminiscing group scored better on oral language assessments than children with mothers in the dialogic reading strategies group. Importantly, they found that the elaborative reminiscing results were similar for children from ethnically and linguistically diverse families. The researchers speculated that elaborative reminiscing was easier because parents only needed to implement the dialogic strategies during conversations, as opposed to implementing the strategies while reading *and* conversing.

The findings from these studies demonstrate that parent interventions can improve children's language and literacy skills. However, to have the greatest effect, educators should identify a targeted skill as a focal point for the interventions (Sénéchal & Young, 2008; Reese et al., 2010). Furthermore, a parent intervention may improve specific aspects of a child's language and literacy development rather than *all* skills related to this area.

Considerations for Working with Diverse Populations

School-based literacy and the prevalent views of parents' role in supporting and developing successful academic literacy skills are typically based on the values and practices of mainstream, middle-class families. However, views of literacy, parental roles in children's literacy development, and literacy activities and experiences vary by culture, socioeconomic status, and parents' educational attainment. Furthermore, there are important differences in how

families use reading, writing, and language in the home, and in parents' understanding of how children learn to read (Powell, Okagaki, & Bojczyk, 2004). For example, low-income parents often emphasize skill development while engaging in shared reading, whereas middle-class families tend to view shared reading as entertainment (Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, & Schmidt, 2000, as cited in Powell et al, 2004).

Failure to account for cultural, educational, and economic differences can hinder the success of parent interventions aimed at improving children's literacy skills. For instance, Mol and colleagues (2008) found that parent-led dialogic reading interventions were not as effective for at-risk families. They ventured that parents who struggle with literacy may have difficulty implementing the dialogic reading strategies because they require literacy skills that parents may not have mastered. Furthermore, at-risk children may not have enough literacy skills (i.e., ability to make inferences) to benefit from dialogic reading strategies (Mol et al., 2008). Interventions for parents with limited literacy need to consider the parents' skill level and comfort with reading and their past educational experiences. For example, parents may not know how to decipher text or generate open-ended questions. When developing training strategies for parents, it is critical to learn about the parents' cultural expectations regarding literacy development and reading to their child.

An intervention designed to prepare families to support school-based literacy development should be tailored to generate conversations about literacy beliefs and practices between parents and practitioners and parents and children. Furthermore, when working with diverse parents, practitioners need to account for social, cultural, racial, economic, and educational differences, including an understanding that these differences can result in a mismatch between what parents and educators think or know about literacy.

Deciding What and How to Teach Parents

Teaching parents to tutor their children has powerful implications for all children, but especially those who need additional academic support. A family literacy program that initiates an intervention first needs to decide what and how to teach parents.

What to teach

Research indicates that children's literacy development can improve if educators teach parents how to tutor children using effective reading interventions. Both Sénéchal and Young (2008) and Reese et al. (2010) propose that different literacy activities enhance different skills in children's language and literacy development. For instance, reading books assists in the development of relationships of words to the written page (i.e., concepts of print, vocabulary), while other literacy-related activities, such as learning the alphabet and word sounds, contribute to word decoding and phonological awareness.

When designing an effective parent intervention, educators need to outline the desired outcomes and a selection of activities and tasks that will prompt parent-child interactions that aid achievement of the specified goal (Paratore & Yarden, 2011). Reese et al. (2010) found that "The skills enhanced [in the child] are often specific to the training the parents receive" (p. 112). Thus, educators must first determine the language and literacy skill they want to promote and then decide how best to coach parents to incorporate this skill into their home literacy practices.

A program might consider including the following language and literacy skills:

- Elaborative reminiscing (storytelling and talking about past events),

- Fluency (reading aloud together),

- Vocabulary (shared book reading techniques, including dialogic reading),

- Oral language, including phonological awareness (while reading, make up rhyming words, add and take away words in a sentence), or

- Story comprehension (shared book reading, including dialogic reading; talking about the plot, characters, past events).

How to design trainings

Over the years, parent trainings have included various methods, with many producing positive results in young children's reading development. Parent training methods leading to significant gains in children's literacy skill development have included group,

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individual, and videotaped interventions or trainings. However, families who struggle with literacy may need extra support and explanation through face-to-face training and modeling. Each training program needs to be specifically matched and sensitive to families' literacy levels, experiences, expectations, routines, and cultural backgrounds (Paratore & Yarden, 2011).

When designing a training, questions arise such as:

- How much training is necessary?

- What type of training should be provided?

- Should the training be part of an existing curriculum (Sénéchal & Young, 2008)?

- Which kinds of trainings are best for diverse families?

Although these are important considerations, the overwhelming finding is that working with parents on *specific* literacy activities is most likely to boost children's academic skills in the targeted area, regardless of length of the training or how it is implemented (Sénéchal and Young, 2008). Furthermore, studies examining successful interventions with low-income and low-literate families contain modeling and role-playing so that parents can watch and practice the appropriate strategies that will provide the optimal learning opportunities for their children (Reese, Leyva, et al., 2010; Taverne & Sheridan, 1995).

Group interventions. Successful parent trainings have included small groups where parents engage in discussions, modeling, and role-playing. For example, Taverne and Sheridan (1995) worked with low-literate parents who participated in seven small group sessions that included both time for modeling and role-playing.

Individual interventions. Individual interventions take many forms; however, they primarily entail a parent working one-on-one with a trainer. Some examples of successful individual interventions include:

- One-on-one sessions with a trainer that included modeling, adult role-playing, and parent practice with the trainer (Resetar et al., 2006);

- Two one-on-one sessions that included an explanation of the study, watching adults role-play the intervention, and parents role-playing the

intervention with another adult (Whitehurst et al., 1988);

- One-on-one session with a trainer in the home using a slide-based intervention on a laptop computer. The slides depicted the trainer modeling each targeted strategy. The trainer and parent discussed the slides and then watched a short video tape demonstrating the strategy. After the training, the parent received a paper copy of the slides, a handout reviewing the demonstrated strategies, and a refrigerator magnet listing the strategies (Reese, Leyva, et al., 2010).

Videotaped Interventions. Videotaped interventions may occur in small groups or alone, consist of one or more sessions; and be accompanied by trainer-facilitated role-playing activities or self-reflection. Three examples include:

- Parents were assigned to one of three groups: (1) small group videotape training with a live person, (2) videotape self-study with a subsequent follow-up call from the trainer, and (3) videotape self-study with no follow-up call. The training with the live person produced the best results, particularly for parents with a high school education or less as compared to parents with some college education (Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005).

- Mothers viewed videotapes of other mothers engaging in responsive behaviors in everyday activities over a 10 to 12 week period. The mothers then reflected, with a trainer, on videotapes of themselves practicing these behaviors with their own children (Landry, et al., 2012).

- Low-income parents who had completed high school viewed two sessions of videotape trainings on dialogic reading techniques, including viewing and critiquing vignettes of a parent using dialogic reading strategies with her child. After watching the videotape, parents engaged in one-on-one role-play activities (Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, Angell, Smith, & Fischel, 1994).

Conclusion

Parents and teachers can work together to foster children's language and literacy development. Parents can provide the additional boost that children may need to succeed academically. Some parents may need

support in learning how best to enhance their children's language and literacy development and academic success. Family literacy programs can develop or provide parent trainings that target specific strategies for strengthening children's language and literacy skills. However, what is taught and the type of training needs to be sensitive to the diverse learners enrolled in family literacy programs.

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ILA Resources

- Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy: Annotated list of websites of interactive literacy resources, www.ed.psu.edu/educ/goodling-institute/family-literacy-resources/annotated-ila-websites-updated-march-2012

- Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy: Annotated Bibliography (Interactive Literacy Activities), www.ed.psu.edu/educ/goodling-institute/annotated-bibliography

- Reading Rockets, www.readingrockets.org