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# **Guiding Illiterate Parents in Assisting Their Children in Emergent Literacy**

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As the number of illiterate adults continues to grow, increasing numbers of children have parents with limited reading and writing skills. Such children are deprived of the joys of reading, for their parents do not read to them at bedtime nor do such parents peruse the morning paper. According to Schickedanz (1986), "Although schools may have capable and dedicated teachers, schools are by their nature isolated from the larger world. Children learn from everything they see and do -- at home, at school, and everywhere else" (p. 128).

The importance of promoting literacy in the home environment is emphasized by Leichter (1984) who wrote that "it may be that children can learn to become literate on their own without formal instruction, but when experiences with literacy take place in family environments, the emotional reactions of the parents can affect the child's progress significantly" (p. 46).

If the nation's goal is to break the cycle of illiteracy, teachers need to aid illiterate parents in building the desire

to read and write in their children by providing them with the tools of literacy. The purpose of this article is to provide suggestions for parental meetings, home visits, and resource sharing as a means toward attaining this goal.

### **Review of the literature**

The number of illiterate adults is quite large. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, one out of every five adults (20%) in this country is functionally illiterate while another 34% are marginally literate, i.e., able to address an envelope (U.S. Department of Education, 1975).

*What Works* (U.S. Office of Education, 1986) states that "Parental involvement helps children learn more effectively. Teachers who are successful at involving parents in their children's schoolwork are successful because they work at it" (p. 19). Potter (1989) argues that parents should not only be involved but participants in their children's school. Potter emphasizes that there is a subtle difference between *involvement* and *participation*, with the latter term meaning a greater in depth relationship.

Children from literacy rich home environments are often read to by their parents. As part of the reading session, questions are asked by both parent and child (Durkin, 1966). Morrow (1983) found that children in literacy rich homes possessed an average of 80 books, which were kept in various rooms throughout their homes. Such children typically have library cards and visit libraries on a regular basis.

Parents who foster literacy by providing a literacy rich home environment also seem to know intuitively how to adapt their reading and sharing of books with their children so that the youngsters find the experience to be both

enjoyable and meaningful (Ninio, 1980). Literate parents who promote literacy in their homes tend to talk with their children about written language as they write together. Such parents respond to questions about how to make letter forms and how to spell words (Gundlach, McLane, Scott, & McNamee, 1985). Children of illiterate parents do not receive this kind of literacy support.

### **Ways to reach parents**

Illiterate parents can cultivate literacy in their children if teachers are willing to devote the time and patience to assist such parents. Teacher-parent interactions require that the teacher be sensitive, understanding, and responsive to the needs not only of the children but of the parents as well. The following suggestions are ways that the teachers can facilitate literacy in homes where one or both parents are illiterate.

**Parent sessions.** Illiterate parents may be overly sensitive about not being able to read and write. In addition, such parents are more frequently members of the lower socioeconomic level and may have language and/or other differences including differences in cultural background. In order not to single out illiterate parents, the teacher needs to schedule parent meetings which focus on ways not only to nurture literacy, but also to promote its value. Presentations should be positive and enjoyable sessions so that the parents are willing to make concerted efforts to return again and again.

Parent meetings should be scheduled at the convenience of parents, not at the convenience of the teacher or school. Also, the provision of special services such as babysitting and transportation to and from meetings and other special events encourages parent attendance

(Fredericks and Rasinski, 1990). Serving coffee and cookies or fruit to the parents will help to make for a more relaxing atmosphere. A follow-up phone call a few days later serves to reinforce a presentation.

**Story telling.** Parents may feel intimidated by books but they should be encouraged to share stories with their children. While they may have a limited repertoire of fairy and folktales, they are familiar with stories of their own family. Thus the family history can be shared by telling stories during bathtime or while driving to the grocery store. Children can gain new insights into their own relatives by hearing stories about a grandparent's first job and how grandma and grandpa met. Family traditions can also be shared through such storytelling.

**Children's literature.** Children's literature offers a wide variety of books which illiterate parents can share and enjoy with their children. Most nursery schools, preschools, and kindergarten classrooms have a library within the classroom which contains a large number of children's books (Morrow, 1982). Such a library can be used with illiterate parents to promote literacy in the home environment.

Rather than giving parents a bibliography of such books, handouts should serve as visual aids which require little reading. For instance, photocopying the covers of pattern and predictable books such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* by Bill Martin, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, *Where's Spot?* by Eric Hill, and *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins will enable the illiterate parent to be able to find and locate the book through pictorial clues rather than looking for a specific title and author.

It is particularly important for the teacher to include books which can be readily found in a variety of stores where they are likely to shop. Some books are sold in bargain stores and large multipurpose stores, and illiterate parents are likely to feel more at ease in purchasing books from these sources than from more traditional bookstores. Golden Books offers inexpensive paperback books and read-along cassettes which parents may purchase. Some of these are "watered-down" versions of fairy and folktales; however, they do provide children with a common literary heritage, albeit via a simplified, controlled vocabulary approach.

**Wordless picture books.** Another parent session could focus upon the uses of wordless picture books, by having the parent tell the child the story and later having the child retell the story to the parent. Again, a handout with the photocopy of appropriate titles would be helpful so that the parent could use the picture to identify the book in a book or toy store. Such books as *A Boy, A Dog, and a Frog* by Mercer Mayer, *Anno's Counting Book* by Mitsumasa Anno, and *Deep in the Forest* by Brinton Turkle are appropriate.

**Content area books.** Too often, early childhood and primary grade teachers emphasize narrative books and overlook content area books. There are several good picture books which depict simple scientific and social studies concepts that require little or no reading.

For science, a teacher may wish to suggest such books as *The Grouchy Ladybug* by Eric Carle, *Changes, Changes* by Pat Hutchins, *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss, *Rain* by Peter Spier, and *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* by Judi Barrett. Some readily available titles for social studies are *Find Waldo Now* by Martin Handford, *The*

*Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, *Katy and the Big Snow* by Virginia Lee Burton, and *People* by Peter Spier. These books present concepts on an uncomplicated level. The illustrations provide stimulation for parents and children to discuss the actions taking place.

**Home visits.** Home visitation is an especially important component of a literacy promotion program with illiterate parents. Such parents often avoid the classroom and parent meetings so the teacher must reach out to them via home visitation.

During a home visit, the teacher should attempt to model behaviors which the illiterate parent can easily imitate and perform with a child. For example, the teacher may take along a wordless picture book and encourage the child tell the story. The book can be left with the family to be returned later. Egg carton games which involve matching (e.g., matching upper and lower case letters; pictures of mother and baby animals) can also be left with the family to enjoy together.

Supplies for making simple puppets out of lunch bags, tongue depressors, or socks, along with a sample puppet that can be used as an example will help the parent in making puppets which the child can use for storytelling. A ziplock bag containing a small spiral notebook, colored index cards, two pencils, and a hand-held pencil sharpener will encourage the child to write. On another visit the teacher might leave a magic slate or stationery to promote writing.

**Resource sharing.** The teacher should build a classroom lending library to promote literacy, much like the popular toy lending libraries. Because it is often

inconvenient or uncomfortable for parents to take their children to public libraries, the classroom should offer materials that can be checked out on a regular basis.

### **Children's books and read-along cassettes.**

Parents should be encouraged to check out books and read-along cassettes for their child to enjoy at home. Here the teacher may include good children's literature read by professional actors as well as by volunteers from the local community. Inexpensive cassette recorders may be purchased and lent to those families which don't own one.

Books made by the entire class during a language experience lesson provide encouragement for reading, as the child has contributed to the group effort in compiling the story. The focus can be on the child reading the book to the parent so that the child is sharing the book rather than the parent reading it. Also a child's own language experience story that was dictated to the teacher may be sent home for the child to share, thereby reinforcing literacy.

**Children's videos.** Part of the lending library should consist of videotapes. For instance, *Charlotte's Web*, *The Snowman* and the series of award winning children's books available from Children's Circle (Weston Woods, Weston, Connecticut 06883-1199) are all good possibilities. The Children's Circle collections includes *Whistle for Willie* by Ezra Jack Keats, *The Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Andersen, and *A Story, A Story* by Gale Haley, as well as other outstanding pieces of children's literature. Often video rental stores include selections from Children's Circle which can be rented for a nominal fee.

Sesame Street and Walt Disney videos are available which focus upon the letters of the alphabet, folktales, and

children's songs. Since children are readily familiar with Big Bird and Mickey Mouse, as are their parents, these are typically welcomed in all homes. The Walt Disney "Sing Along" videos are especially appealing to children in that they include songs from favorite cartoon and film classics, for example, "Heigh Ho," "The Bare Necessities," and "Old Yeller." The words appear at the bottom of the screen as a portion of a filmclip is presented along with the song so that literacy is promoted in a positive, upbeat way.

Because some parents will not have ready access to a VCR, the teacher should plan to have set days and times each week, such as a couple of afternoons each week, when a video is played. During this time, parents may come and watch the video with their child. The teacher may wish to laminate a picture of a character appearing in the video and place it in a prominent location to alert parents of the contents of the upcoming video session.

**Magazine packs.** Most teachers subscribe to a variety of magazines. Once read, many magazines are thrown away. To recycle the magazines, a teacher may have children take turns taking home a "magazine pack." For example, a teacher may send home *People*, *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Our Big Backyard* in a colorful backpack. Then each member of the family has a magazine to browse through and enjoy (Farris, 1987).

Reading every article in the magazines word for word is not essential since these magazines have lots of pictures and illustrations. Due to the large number of pictures, lots of conversations can evolve between parent and child on a wide variety of topics, including current events.

## Conclusion

Illiterate parents may be embarrassed about their lack of reading and writing skills; however, many such parents have a strong desire for their children to become literate. These parents need a caring, understanding teacher who is willing to gently nudge them in the right direction so their children will acquire literacy and be able to share in the rewards and joys of being able to read and write.

Anthropologist Colin Turnbull (1983) wrote, "in all cultures, at all times known to us the children are a source of wonderment for they are the supreme example of the human potential for creation" (p. 25). If teachers believe this, they will make every attempt to help illiterate parents to assist their children in becoming literate.

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### **Themed Issue, Volume #32**

Our theme for the fifth issue of Volume 32 will be on **alternative methods of grouping for language arts instruction**. Dr. Mary Hauser, Department of Education and Professional Development, Western Michigan University, will be our guest editor.

If you wish to submit an article for the themed issue, the deadline for submission is **February 1, 1992**. Please follow the standard instructions for submission of articles printed on the second page of the journal, and send your articles to Dr. Jeanne M. Jacobson, Editor, *Reading Horizons*, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo MI 49008.