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PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S READING READINESS DEVELOPMENT

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Before the days of community-supported schools, parents were the primary reading teachers of their children. This was, of course, if the parents could read themselves. Once schools became established, parents generally relinquished the responsibility for teaching their children to read to the schools. Despite the fact that today most parents know how to read, too often they take a very inactive role in their children's reading development.

The important influence of parents and the home environment on the developing child provides educators with a resource to insure children's successful growth in reading. It seems that the responsibility for children's reading development lies neither solely on the parents nor the schools, but rather must be shared by both. The preschool years, in which the parents play the largest role in the child's life, is the time when parents can help establish a foundation for learning to read once school starts. Thus, public education should be available to parents to provide them with the opportunity to develop their children's learning potential during the preschool years.

The success of past parent education programs and home intervention projects in helping parents to develop their child's reading potential, points to the need for programs and projects on a wider scale. In order for these programs to develop effectively, it will be necessary for educators to assess and to gain insight from the literature in setting up their parent education programs.

Although most children do actually learn to read in school, research has shown the importance of the preschool years in laying the foundation for learning to read. The influence of the parents during these years on their child's intellectual development, in general, and reading readiness development, in particular, is well-documented. The purpose of this paper is to review the pertinent research to provide educators with the background for developing programs in which parents can be instructed in ways to insure their children's progress in learning to read.

Schaefer (1972) reviews a wide variety of research on parents as educators of their children from birth. He maintains that parents have great influence on children's intellectual and academic achievement. He further suggests that programs to educate parents in developing their children intellectually would serve as effective supplements or alternatives for pre-school education. DeFranco (1973) emphasizes the necessity of establishing a solid base in reading readiness before the child starts school in preventing later reading problems. She points out that readiness techniques

used with children from infancy on have shown positive effects and that adult education in the use of these techniques would serve to help parents in developing children's reading potential.

AREAS OF PARENT INFLUENCE

The interaction between the parent and child from birth entails a complexity of behaviors, attitudes, and feelings which can either foster or obstruct learning. As Margaret Weiser (1974) states, "We are finally becoming convinced that children learn long before they go to school; in fact, learning may be said to begin the moment a child is born." (p. 226) Some of the areas of preschool learning which impinge directly on the ability to read are: language development, experiential background, auditory and visual perception and discrimination ability, and interest in reading. In each of these areas parents play a major role as teachers and developers.

In their research and writings, Goodman (1968), Smith (1971), Weiser (1974), and Rupley (1975), have established that language is the basis of reading. In order to be able to associate verbal symbols with a meaningful referent, a child must have a well-developed skill in language. Language develops through listening and responding and being responded to from birth. If a child has not been encouraged to attend to and try to imitate the elements of language, he will not have the facility with language necessary to provide a firm base for reading development. The amount and quality of language used in the home will determine the language skill the child will have when he begins school. Children need parents to talk to them and to listen to what they have to say.

Milner (1951) studied the relationship between reading and parent-child interaction. She found that children who scored higher on reading and language tests came from a richer verbal family environment. She concluded that children who scored lower as compared to those who scored higher lacked an extensive opportunity to interact verbally with adults of high personal value who possess adequate speech patterns.

Like language, the experiential background of the child is an important factor in reading. As Carl Smith (1971) explains, "An adequate supply of concepts gained from experience and the manipulation of language constitute a basic ingredient for the eventual comprehension of what is read." (p. 14) Besides giving the child a background from which to bring meaning to printed symbols in reading, experience helps to develop the skills, concepts, and feelings which enhance the act of reading. Ward (1970) maintains that the role parents play in arranging experiences in the child's preschool years is so vital that parents should be considered the first teacher of reading.

Some of the experiences a child has in his preschool years can help to develop the auditory and visual perception and discrimination abilities necessary for reading development. Unless a child is capable of perceiving and discriminating between the letter sounds and symbols, he will not be capable of reading. By providing children with experiences which stimulate

and develop their sensory equipment, parents are helping to develop the audio-visual abilities necessary for reading. Smith (1971) demonstrates parents' role in developing sensory capabilities in their child. He describes the situation of an infant who is given the minimal amount of attention from his parents and/or caretakers and who receives little auditory and visual stimulation. Smith concludes:

This kind of deprivation may have long-lasting effects on the reading and learning performance of the child. There are implications, too, for the effect of sensory stimulation on the decoding operation and on perception. For the eyes and ears must report accurately for decoding and perception to take place." (p. 13)

A child's interest in reading is another important factor in learning to read. Parents and the home environment figure heavily in whether or not this interest is developed. The availability of reading material in the home is certainly a necessity in developing a child's interest in books and reading. Sheldon and Carrillo (1952) investigated the relation of parents and the home environment and certain developmental characteristics to children's reading ability. One significant finding of their study was the relationship between availability of books in the home and reading achievement. It was determined that as the number of books in the home increased, the percent of good readers increased.

However, as Weiser (1974) claims, being surrounded by books is not enough to fully develop a child's interest in books. The child needs the attention and positive attitudes of an adult who interacts with him using books. By reading to the child, answering his questions, asking him questions, interpreting the author's message, pointing out important elements of the stories and pictures; parents are helping to develop the child's love of books and reading which is so important in motivation to learn how to read. In addition, by reading books themselves, parents provide the child with a reader model. This type of preschool experience with books serves to enhance a child's opportunity to be successful with reading.

PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Many parents are interested in helping their preschool child get ready to read. However, they do not know what they can do to help. Programs and studies have been conducted which support the efficacy of instructing parents in how to develop their children's reading potential.

Frank Freshour (1972) describes a parent education program designed to improve parents' and children's attitudes towards school. It was felt that by instructing parents in the factors involved in learning to read and by offering them specific suggestions in helping their children, the children would be positively influenced once school began. The author enumerates the aspects of physical, speech, and attitudinal development to which parents were directed to give their attention. The program was successful in improving children's preparation for school and in helping parents to become aware of how they could function in a supportive role.

Levenstein (1970) conducted a study to investigate the effects of helping low income families develop cognitive growth in children through verbal interaction. Two groups of children were initially given an intelligence and vocabulary test. The subjects in the experimental group were visited by a social worker who brought toys and books. In the presence of the mother, the social worker interacted with the child using the toys and books, thus acting as a model for the mother and presenting possible verbal categories for mother-child communication. In the control group, subjects were visited and given toys and books but no verbal stimulation. After a seven month period, the groups were retested. The experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group on the IQ and vocabulary tests given. Thus, the author concluded that cognitive learning “. . . can take place in the home, with major involvement of the mother, even when the mother has limited mastery of symbolic modes of representation and is harried by the problems of large family and small income.” (p. 431)

Another program still in progress is the Brookline Early Education Project (BEEP) in Brookline, Massachusetts (Pierson, 1974). This program was designed to insure early detection of any educational or physical handicap in the children involved. Parents of various ethnic backgrounds were initiated into the program a few months before the birth of their child. A center was organized to which parents could take their child for free health and developmental exams. There was also a resource area with information to increase the parent's understanding and influence on their child's development. Each family was assigned a teacher, who had background in child development and was a parent as well, to act as a liason between the center and the family. Although no concrete indications of the effects of BEEP are yet available, the program has been favorably received by those involved and, also, provides an interesting model of parental involvement in preschool development of children.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that parents do play an important role in their children's progress in learning to read. Particularly during the preschool years parents have a strong effect on the child's growth and development in terms of factors involved in the reading process. Educators have not tapped parents as a resource in insuring children's successful growth in reading. What is called for is a stronger relationship between schools and parents working together to prepare children for learning to read. The programs cited in this paper serve as a guide for what can be done. Each school system needs to design and implement a program appropriate for its community. Children can only stand to benefit by such programs and, feasibly, many of the reading programs schools are faced with will be minimized.

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