

# *Reading Horizons*

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*Volume 35, Issue 3*

1994

*Article 4*

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1995

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## Altering the Succession of Illiteracy in Families: A Tutoring/Home Intervention Model

Ruth Crawford\*

\*The University of Mary Hardin Baylor

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# Altering the Succession of Illiteracy in Families: A Tutoring/Home Intervention Model

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## **Abstract**

The influence of the family and home environment on children's acquisition of literacy has been well documented (Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1986). As a result, many school and family literacy programs have begun to focus on involving parents in the schooling of their children. The public schools systems have realized that it is beneficial to involve non-reading parents in the literacy development of their children. One of the best ways to provide family literacy services which accomplish this is to create collaboration efforts between home and school.



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The influence of the family and home environment on children's acquisition of literacy has been well documented (Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1986). As a result, many school and family literacy programs have begun to focus on involving parents in the schooling of their children. The public schools systems have realized that it is beneficial to involve non-reading parents in the literacy development of their children. One of the best ways to provide family literacy services which accomplish this is to create collaboration efforts between home and school.

This study demonstrates the significance of combining family literacy home intervention programs with one on one intense tutoring for non-reading families. For almost two years this family participated in the home intervention/tutoring program. Prior to the study, Chad — the child in this family — had tested two years behind his grade level. Chad's biological mother, who was fourteen when Chad was born and a high school dropout, ran away after he was born. Chad was left to be raised by his grandparents — Juan and Maria — both self-proclaimed non-readers. Since these grandparents had legally adopted Chad as their son, they are

referred to as his parents. Despite the fact that they could not read, Juan and Maria considered themselves successful parents and citizens. This contention was based upon the fact that they both held jobs, were able to pay their bills, and were providing well for their son materially. Thus, Juan and Maria were reportedly content as non-readers and uninterested in seeking reading assistance. This contentment, however, was soon shattered by a series of events involving their son.

The parents reported that during his first grade year, Chad began to have problems at school. Suddenly, he seemed to be singled out. He was placed in a Chapter 1 reading class. He was told by his teacher that he was lazy. He was ridiculed by his classmates. He was falling further and further behind the other children at school. Then one night Chad called out in his sleep "I am not stupid!" Horrified, Juan and Maria determined that they must do something to come to their child's aid.

Consequently, this family decided that they would pay to have their son tutored at a nearby university reading clinic. Juan and Maria demonstrated great determination in helping their son. This determination was exemplified by the fact that the university reading clinic cost more per hour than Juan made in an entire day. Furthermore, Juan had to arrange to leave work twice a week, every week, in order to take his son to tutoring. Most of the time Juan worked nights. Since the child was in school during the day, this was the only time that he could attend tutoring. The particular job that Juan had allowed him the freedom to leave and return. Though this leaving meant a drive from one town to the next, he did not seem to mind. Despite these deterrents, Juan and Maria made arrangements to send Chad to tutoring.

The first meeting between the tutor and this child occurred on his first day of tutoring. The tutor's impression of Juan was that he was a pleasant and polite man. Her first impression of Chad was that he would rather have been anywhere but there. After the introductions were made all around, the tutor directed Chad toward her office where the tutoring sessions were to be held. Chad, however, had other ideas, and he turned to his father and begged him not to leave. Juan comforted his son but firmly told him that he *would* go with this teacher. As Juan left he called to the tutor, "You make him work, okay?"

The tutor observed that Chad sat on the edge of his seat. The awkward silence which filled the office during that first tutoring session caused the tutor to believe that getting to know this young man would take some time and effort on her part. Chad demonstrated an interest in the many children's books that were in the tutor's office; however, when asked to pick out some books that he would like to read, Chad answered with an air of disgust, "I *can't* read, remember?" Searching, the tutor asked Chad to name some books that had been read to him. There was no answer, and the blank look on Chad's face caused the tutor to probe even further. This probing revealed that no one had ever read to Chad at home — not even a bed-time story. Chad also reported that he had never seen either of his parents read. He knew that his mother definitely could not read. In fact, when asked if his mother had ever read to him, he repeated in the same disgusted tone, "My mom can't *read*." Although Chad felt sure that his father could probably read something he had never actually seen Juan read anything.

In an effort to find *someone* who was reading, or had read, to this child, the tutor asked, "What kind of books does your teacher read to you?" Chad reported that the teacher did

not read any books to his group because she read to the children while he was gone to his Chapter I class. He added that he was only on the worksheets and not the real books. He then reported that this was because he was in the "dumb" group. To provide Chad with an element of success, the tutor began this first session by reading predictable pattern books to him. It was explained to Chad that these books had a pattern that was easy to follow so he should join in and read with her anytime he felt comfortable. However, on this first day of tutoring Chad did not attempt to read along with the tutor.

After Chad left that afternoon, the tutor could not stop thinking about the fact that reportedly no one had ever read a book to him. There was obviously more behind this child's lack of ability than the fact that he was lazy, as his parents thought. The tutor was interested in finding out more about Chad's past experiences. Thus, on the afternoon of the next tutoring session, she asked Juan to name any books which might have been read to his son in the past. The tutor was unprepared for the blunt admission that Juan knew of no one who had ever read to his son. Further questioning revealed that Chad had reported correctly when he stated he had never seen either of his parents read. Juan never came right out and said if he or his wife could read. It was at this point that the tutor knew she had only scraped the surface of this family's literacy background. She believed that in order to fulfill the needs of this family as a tutor, she must understand their history. Through further examinations and interviews it was discovered that Juan possessed a very limited reading ability, and Maria had virtually none. Therefore, in order to promote the literacy development of both the child and his parents, a combination tutoring and home intervention program was created.

The program developed to aid this non-reading family involved both tutoring the child and providing home intervention to foster the family's literacy development. The tutoring consisted of an in-depth bi-weekly tutoring session with the child. This session focused upon increasing his reading ability and improving his self-confidence. The home intervention program provided suggestions and aid to support the entire family's literacy development.

### **A model for tutoring**

The Reading Recovery approach (Clay, 1993), was adapted and used as a tutoring procedure. A model for tutoring was created using several of the basic Reading Recovery components. The following components were taken from Reading Recovery's description of a typical tutoring session (p. 14): reread two or more familiar books; reread yesterday's new book; write a story; introduce a new book; attempt a new book. Each day at tutoring Chad would begin by selecting a book to read. The books Chad could select from were organized by the tutor in groups of six. The books were of an appropriate reading and interest level. The tutor endeavored to insure that the groups included several books that Chad would be able to read with ease, either because of their level of difficulty or predictable nature. Hence, there was always a book that Chad could successfully read and remove. A new book was added to the group each time to replace the one that had been removed. The fact that Chad encountered repeated readings of the books helped insure that at least one book could be successfully read and replaced.

Toward the end of each tutoring session, Chad was introduced to a new book. The tutor used strategies such as the Directed Reading and Thinking Activity (DRTA), and K-W-L in order to support the introduction of the new book. These strategies allowed Chad to prepare for reading by discussing the new book, interacting with it, and thinking about it

(Sampson, Van Allen and Sampson, 1991). The DRTA procedure was developed by Russell Stauffer (1976) to help students become involved in the materials that they read. This procedure has students read, make predictions, and think about what they are reading. The strength of a DRTA is that it allows students to clarify their thoughts and engage in personal reflection and semantic analysis (Tierney, Readence, and Dishner, 1990).

Using the DRTA, the tutor would first ask Chad to examine the cover and title in order to make predictions of what he thought the story might be about. Next, Chad would read a section of the book in order to confirm his predictions and make new ones. The tutor would periodically stop Chad to ask question such as "Were you correct?" or "Now what do you think will happen?" Sometimes, if the book was not lengthy or Chad was reading with great fluency, the tutor did not interrupt the flow of the story. In these instances she waited until Chad was finished to ask him to confirm his predictions. Although this activity proved effective, Chad often tired of it. Thus, the tutor varied the supportive reading activities used in the first reading of a book.

Another supportive reading activity used during the tutoring sessions was the K-W-L procedure (Carr and Ogle, 1987). First, the tutor wrote the letter *K* at the top of a piece of paper and recorded on this sheet what Chad *knew* about the topic of the book. The next piece of paper had the letter *W* at the top and on this paper the tutor recorded what Chad *wanted to find out* from reading the book. The final sheet of paper had the letter *L* on the top and it was on this sheet that the tutor recorded all of the things that Chad *learned* after having read the book. The K-W-L procedure seemed to work best when Chad was reading an informational book, while the DRTA proved most effective with narrative-type texts.



Finally, during the reading of any text the tutor assisted or supported Chad in his reading by "prompting, priming, and telling (words) if need be (Clay, 1993, p. 17). This was done in order to support and encourage Chad's fluent reading of a text. Other recommendations incorporated from the Reading Recovery approach were those for selecting texts in order to facilitate fluent reading. These recommendations included the following:

*Use known texts, or texts with rhythm-like songs, poems (or sometimes prose) because they carry the reader forward. Choose repetitive texts which are better read with exaggerated expressions. Read a story to the child, emphasizing the phrasing. This should provide support for the feel and sound of the patterns of words and breaks, or pauses. Write down a repetitive sentence or phrase from a specially selected story for later use with the child (p. 53).*

Reading Recovery includes, as one of its components, a focus upon isolated words. Some of the activities completed by children in Reading Recovery include tracing, writing, and speaking certain sets of words in isolation from text. In order to provide a more holistic tutoring approach, these word-oriented activities were omitted and replaced with a variety of other writing activities. When Chad first came to tutoring he did not want to write. In fact, he stated, "I can't write." Thus, in order to support Chad's writing, several meaning-centered activities were used during the tutoring sessions. These activities included patterned writing activities, journal writing, written conversations and the use of a word wall.

Although the tutor encouraged Chad to engage in invented spelling, he initially refused. Instead he would look around the tutor's office for any words that he might use, so the tutor created a word wall to support his writing. The word wall was created by placing words on note cards which

were then stuck on the wall. Chad chose most of the words present on the word wall. However, the tutor did make suggestions for additional words taken from writing activities and books that they encountered. The word wall proved an effective aid to Chad in his writing. Furthermore, the use of a word wall supported him in both his vocabulary development and spelling.

Patterned writing activities were also used during the tutoring sessions. The patterns were taken from the predictable books Chad read, and were used to help him create his own books. Sampson, Van Allen and Sampson (1991) discuss the fact that redundant or predictable patterns provide a dependable repetition of a sentence pattern with variations in sentences, repetition for easy reading, and a spelling aid for many words. One of the patterns Chad adapted came from Bill Martin's *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1992). In this activity Chad changed the wording of the pattern from the book in order to include things that were familiar to him. His book was entitled *VCR, VCR, What Do You See?* Another highly successful writing activity was written conversation. The written conversation activity was just that — a conversation between Chad and the tutor which had been written down. The tutor would usually begin by writing a question to Chad such as, "How was your day?" At first Chad often answered back by copying exactly what the tutor had written and assigning the print different meanings. As time went on, however, Chad began to answer questions in his own words, even initiating some new ideas. Several times during this activity, Chad used invented spelling. The tutor believed that this use of invented spelling demonstrated that Chad was feeling supported enough to engage in risk-taking.

In order to provide an avenue for free expression, the tutoring session included a daily journal writing activity which

was completely unstructured. During this activity Chad was given the choice of *if*, *and*, or *what* he wanted to write in his journal. Many times Chad simply drew pictures. Other times he declined the invitation to write in his journal. Yet each session Chad was at least given the opportunity to express himself freely through his writing. One of the most important steps in learning to use language proficiently is understanding its possibility for expression (Sampson, Van Allen, and Sampson, 1991). The goals of the tutoring sessions were to provide Chad opportunities to read fluently, perceive and practice patterns through reading and writing, and to express himself freely. While the writing activities differed, these tutoring goals were similar to those of the Reading Recovery program.

### **Home intervention model**

Family literacy home intervention can involve many forms. One of the most successful forms requires the interventionist to visit the home setting in order to interact, and support the family's literacy development (Darling and Hayes, 1989). The tutor in this study went into the home to study the family, and all intervention with this family took place in their own home during this time. Twice weekly the tutor went to the home in order to monitor the progress of the family literacy intervention, and to provide support and further assistance.

**The print environment.** One of the first goals for this home intervention program was to increase the print environment. At the time of the first home observation there were no books, other than one family Bible present in the home. The only other print materials were a phone book, a few recipe books, and two of Chad's school papers. There was a clear need to stimulate the print environment of this home. This stimulation was achieved by providing commercially-

created books, encouraging the family to create original books, creating a writing box, and collecting and managing newspapers, magazines, and various other environmental print sources.

The writing box was created in order to supply the family with ample print materials for engaging in suggested or self-directed literacy activities. The use of a writing box in family literacy home interventions has been shown to "generate new writing activities by children and different literacy interactions between parents and children" (Maloy and Edwards, 1990, p. 199). The initial writing box used in this home intervention program contained 50 sheets of white paper, 50 sheets of colored paper, 1 package of markers, 5 pencils, 1 pair of scissors, 1 box of crayons, 1 newspaper, and 1 magazine. Throughout the course of the intervention, new materials were added or removed by the tutor and the family.

Another way that the print-environment of the home was stimulated was through the introduction of various forms of books into the home. Both commercially-created and family-created books were used. Most of the commercially-created books were brought into the home by the tutor. These books were usually predictable pattern books such as Bill Martin's *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1992). Many times the tutor brought books that Chad had previously encountered during tutoring. As the intervention continued, the family was encouraged to borrow books from the library. Some commercially-created books were also bought by the parents. The family-created books, for the most part, were created by adapting simple patterns from books that Chad had encountered during tutoring. The family was also encouraged to collect other sources of print-materials such as newspapers, magazines, and junk mail. These articles could be easily obtained by the family at no expense. Once a week a

free newspaper was delivered to the family's home. Maria had access to the out-of-date magazines from her workplace. Furthermore, the receiving of junk mail is a common occurrence for almost every family (Taylor, 1983).

**Managing the materials.** Simply having print materials available for this family was not enough. The family needed methods for managing these articles. Thus, another step in the intervention was to show the family ways to use these materials. These interactions included examining and discussing materials for the writing box, having nightly read-aloud sessions, using environmental print, and engaging in pattern writing activities. In each case the tutor modeled these procedures before the activities were actually employed by the family. The writing box was used to provide materials for the creation of books or other literacy endeavors. The parents were encouraged to devise ways to use these materials and to allow Chad free access to the materials for his own creation. Supplies in the box were to be monitored by the family and periodically cleaned out. These procedures required the family to discuss their choices of materials and their reasons for wanting to keep or discard materials. Consequently, the family engaged in conversations concerning the necessity and uses of print-materials.

As previously mentioned, the tutor encouraged Chad to adapt patterns from predictable books in order to create his own books. On several occasions the parents were asked to make additions to the books that Chad had created during tutoring. In order to elicit participation from the non-reading parents, simple repetitive patterns were used. The finished books were added to the family's reading list and kept for use in the nightly read-aloud sessions. The family's reading list was comprised of the titles of any books that they had read together or separately. The nightly read-aloud sessions were

adapted from Jim Trelease's (1985) *Read Aloud Handbook*. During these sessions the parents were encouraged to listen to Chad read and to read with him when they felt able.

Throughout the intervention, it was stressed to the family that they should take advantage of the environmental print which surrounded them. Thus word hunts were conducted during which the family read and discussed print as they were driving or walking through their community. During word hunts the parents often asked Chad to search for words that he could read. On one occasion the father took advantage of his own print knowledge to point out the differences in *Pizza Hut* and *Pizza Inn* to his son. Consequently, a long discussion ensued between father and son concerning the differences in the words *in* and *inn*. Print located in newspapers or advertisements was similarly discussed.

The family was encouraged to examine and discuss the junk mail which was sent to their home. Taylor (1983) describes the sorting of junk mail as an obligatory literacy task that most families encounter. This task can be used by families to stimulate interactions with print. The parents were thus encouraged to save the junk mail to be sorted with their son. As the mail was examined, the parents were instructed to ask their son questions concerning the purpose of the mail, who had sent it, and what parts of the mail should be saved. The same type of questions were to be asked about magazines and newspapers which were brought into the home. Through these discussions the parents were afforded the chance to guide Chad in literacy interactions and to reinforce the communicative purposes of literacy.

**Recording the growth.** The final step of the intervention involved recording the family's literacy growth. This growth was recorded through a family portfolio, the family's reading list, observations and interviews completed by the tutor, and

regular family conferences. The family's literacy growth was recorded for two reasons: to discover the influences of the intervention and to allow the family a means for monitoring their own progress.

The family portfolio consisted of a collection of artifacts selected by the family to represent their literacy interactions. The family decided to use a commercially-created scrapbook to display these artifacts. The tutor's only role in this endeavor was to offer suggestions and periodically monitor the upkeep of the portfolio. The parents reported that the portfolio gave them a great sense of pride, and was valued as a memento and a keepsake. The family's reading list was placed in the last five pages of the portfolio. This list recorded all of the books that the family read during the read-aloud sessions or at other times as well as any books Chad read during tutoring or school activities. Again, the family was responsible for copying the titles of the books onto the list. The tutor periodically reviewed the family reading list and added suggestions for further reading.

The regular family conferences took place once a week during the time that the tutor visited the family. During these conferences, the family discussed their interactions and any problems or successes that they had encountered. The conferences provided a chance for the tutor to monitor the family's progress. The conferences also provided the family an opportunity to vent frustrations and receive support from the tutor.

## **Conclusion**

This program was designed to combine the effectiveness of tutoring and home intervention. Through the tutoring sessions the child received intense instruction geared to foster positive literacy perceptions and competencies. The home

intervention program extended these developing competencies by reinforcing the child's learning and the parental role and abilities. While this program was designed for use by a home interventionist, the program's strategies could be easily adopted for use by a classroom teacher. The tutoring techniques would work well in a classroom setting. Likewise, the home intervention strategies could be implemented by a classroom teacher who met regularly with parents through conferences or family literacy sessions where activities were modeled and progress was monitored. The goal of this program to supply more than just isolated literacy instruction (Winter and Rouse, 1990), by involving the parents as models and teachers for their children.

This study demonstrated the benefits of working with non-reading families in combined intervention and tutoring programs. Through this type of program the family in this study began to make positive changes in their reading environment, attitudes, and interactions which had a positive effect on their child's reading progress at school. Concurrently, the parents' realization that their actions influenced their child's literacy development fostered their desire to improve their own literacy. By the end of the study Chad had become a successful reader, removed from the Chapter One reading program, and placed at the top of his regular reading class at school. The parents had improved both their personal literacy skills and their awareness of the types of literacy activities and support that they could facilitate in their home. As a result, the parents developed a desire to be active in their son's literacy development, and to improve their own literacy abilities.

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*Ruth Crawford is an instructor in the Department of Reading at The University of Mary Hardin Baylor, in Belton Texas.*