
12-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Ortiz, R. W., & McCarty, L. L. (1997). "Daddy, Read to Me": Fathers Helping Their Young Children Learn to Read. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 38 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol38/iss2/3

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"Daddy, Read to Me": Fathers Helping Their Young Children Learn to Read

**Robert W. Ortiz
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Parents' involvement in their young children's early reading development is reported to be an important prerequisite to school success. Much of the research on parents' contribution to early literacy development has focused on mother-child interaction. Less is known about the role of fathers. Fathers, however, report that they want to be involved with their children's literacy development when given opportunities to do things they feel are interesting and capable of doing. Studies indicate that fathers' involvement with early literacy activities range from reading recreation-related materials to assisting their children with school assignments. This paper provides background information concerning research into fathers' involvement in early literacy development and offers various suggestions on encouraging fathers to become involved with their children's early literacy activities.

Parent involvement in their children's early literacy development is a crucial component to success in the classroom (Salerno and Fink, 1992; Greenwood and Hickman, 1991). We know that when parents help their children with homework, social class disappears as an academic achievement factor. We also know that parent participation in their children's schooling is associated with higher test scores, better attendance, and stronger cognitive abilities. Because literacy skills are essential components of academic success, many researchers have sought to isolate early literacy factors that are associated with reading achievement (Cazden, 1988; Taylor, 1983; Rogoff, 1990). Studies completed in home settings have shown that frequency of parent-child reading during the preschool years is an important determinant of children's readiness to benefit from

formal literacy instruction (Clark, 1975; Goldfield and Snow, 1984; Wells, 1985). Home literacy experiences that appear to be associated with early reading achievement in school include children having their own books, being read to frequently, using the library, and having parents model literacy activities (Mason, 1992; Teale and Sulzby, 1986).

Approaches to looking at familial literacy, though, have tended to focus on maternal contributions to children's early language and literacy development. Because of the historic emphasis on women as primary care givers, mothers have often assumed the responsibility of teaching their young children to read and write (Dickinson, De Temple, and Smith, 1992; Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, and Brody, 1990; Williams, 1991; Backett, 1987; Sparling, Berger, and Biller, 1992). Less information has been collected on early reading development and the fathers' role. Fathers, however, report that they want to be involved with their children's literacy development when given opportunities to do things they feel are interesting and capable of doing (Whittenmore, 1992; Ortiz, 1992; Ortiz and Stile, 1996).

Fathers and Early Literacy Activities

Mothers have played a traditional role in the education of young children. They are often perceived as having a major impact on children's early literacy and language development (Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin, 1990). Even as late as the 1970's, when the inclination was for professionals, educators, and researchers to view both parents as "learners and teachers" of their children, the literature of this period contained almost no reference to the role of fathers in their children's early literacy and language development (Turnbull and Turnbull, 1990). Despite the lack of research in paternal early literacy experiences, studies on family literacy patterns suggest that parental participation in these activities vary between families and family members. Reese, Goldenberg, Loucky, and Gallimore (1989) found that mothers and fathers who assisted with their children's literacy development tended to have more education than those who did not. Reese (1992), in examining the reading achievement of fifth grade students, found a family history of literacy for high achieving students.

Other studies show an array of literacy practices engaged in by parents of low, middle, and high economic backgrounds (Ada, 1988; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992, 1994; Ortiz, 1992). The literacy activities observed in these homes included reading for entertainment, reading as part of daily living, reading for general information, reading for religious purposes and reading materials besides books.

There have been some attempts at investigating father-child early literacy practices. Studies suggest that paternal early literacy activities range from fathers who rarely read with their children to those who establish consistent reading and writing routines (Ortiz, 1992, 1994; Laosa, 1982; Reese, Gallimore, Balzano, and Goldenberg, (1991). In an early attempt to measure the influence of fathers and mothers on young children's reading achievement in elementary school, Durkin (1966) made an effort to interview both parents regarding their roles. Durkin found it extremely difficult to get fathers to attend the interview sessions to discuss their roles in early reading activities. Their absence at these meetings were often reported as the result of "being on the road," "working during the day and going to school at night," "spending long hours at the office," and "having two jobs." This phenomenon prompted Durkin to bring to mind the term "The vanishing American father," referred to in so many titles of popular magazines at the time. Durkin did find that the few fathers who were interviewed tended to have some positive influence on their children's early reading achievement. In a later study, Taylor (1983), in looking at the ways that parents shared their literacy experiences with young children, found that through the interplay of personal biographies and educative styles of fathers, comparable childhood literacy experiences were mediated in different ways. That is, although some fathers had very similar literacy experiences as children, these same fathers had evolved different styles in working with their own children — an idiosyncratic process that Taylor feels can result in varied reading experiences for individual children.

Laosa (1982) examined the linkages between parental schooling and behavior toward their children's academic development. He found that although fathers spent less time involved in early literacy practices than

their spouses, they often read with their children on a regular basis. Laosa attributed parent-child early literacy practices to increased years of parents' formal education. Ortiz (in press) investigated the reading activities of a sample of Mexican American fathers and their children. The children were enrolled in grades K, 1st, and 2nd. He found that demographic variables, such as generation status, education, and income had a minimal impact on joint early reading and writing practices. Instead, early literacy experiences were found to be associated with marital relationships, in that, fathers who "shared" child rearing duties with their spouses, as opposed to "dividing" these tasks, were more likely to read with their children. Other studies suggest that a positive relationship exists between the amount of literacy fathers engage in for their personal use and their children's academic reading tests' scores (Gallimore, Reese, Balzano, Benson and Goldenberg, 1991). Finally, recent findings indicate that fathers who assist their spouses with their children's home learning help create conditions in the home which are supportive of academic achievement (Reese, Gallimore, Balzano, and Goldenberg, (1991).

What Fathers Read With Their Children

Various researchers have looked at the kinds of reading materials that fathers have shared with their children (Ortiz, 1992, 1994; Ortiz and Stile, 1996; Taylor, 1983). These data suggest that many joint father-child early literacy activities do not, necessarily, include books per se or take the form of formal or structured reading activities. For instance, Taylor (1983) found that fathers read various things to their children including newspaper comic strips, children's magazines (e.g., *Ranger Rick*), and the instructions for board games. Ortiz (1992) found that fathers shared literacy activities through a variety of subject areas. For example, recreational related literacy activities were extremely popular. Fathers and children read print found on board games (e.g., Monopoly; Chutes and Ladders; Life; etc.), played the word-game "hangman," and read personal letters from relatives. Fathers often read to their children the print on video boxes and taught them how to read and calculate the batting averages of their favorite baseball players. Working on crossword puzzles and reading cereal boxes were also sources of enjoyable reading time together.

Additional reading interests included religious and occupational subjects. For instance, some fathers read the weekly church bulletin to their children. Other fathers, while reading the Bible during church services, sat next to their children so that they could act as literacy role models. Parents read to and with their children during family prayer time at home, often encouraging them to read simple passages. And, other fathers read to their children various brochures and newsletters from their jobs describing company products and upcoming social events.

Lastly, and interestingly, many of the fathers reported engaging in reading activities which were school related, such as reading homework instructions, notes sent home by teachers, and cafeteria menus. This finding was surprising, in part, given that mothers are generally viewed as the academic "educators" of their young children (Backett, 1987).

What Educators Can Do

The information highlighted from the studies above sheds some light on paternal participation in early literacy activities. Encouraging parents to read with their young children at early ages can enhance high interest levels in text and print once children enter school. Efforts to involve parents in early literacy practices have been one of the primary goals to improve the academic achievement of students (Bowman, 1994).

How can educators encourage parents to participate in and/or continue engaging in early reading practices? The following suggestions provide a framework for inviting parents, especially fathers, to become active participants in their children's literacy development.

1. Allow parents to suggest the types of reading materials and writing activities they would like to share with their children. Engaging in activities that one enjoys is often more productive — and rewarding — than participating in activities that stimulate low interest levels.

2. Encourage parents to start with informal and simple activities which may involve only parent and child, such as reading the weekly comic strip section together or television commercials on subjects children find interesting. The assumption often made is that the entire family must read together to instill in young children the importance of learning to read. Some parents may find group reading activities uncomfortable, particularly in households where reading does not occur as frequently or where parents work late-night or varying shifts.

3. Ask parents to take advantage of spontaneous and incidental reading activities that occur within the home. Such activities include the reading of mail, T.V. guides, newspapers, magazines, labels, instructions, phone books, letters, comics, etc.

4. Suggest that parents capitalize on environmental print. Children who are learning to read are often curious about familiar signs, logos, and billboards they see on their way to school or the market. Parents can read these signs to their children so that they begin to understand that print not only has meaning but that it serves a function.

5. Most important, remind parents to be patient. Allow children to become comfortable in a world filled with print. Children constantly observe others engage in an activity they do not yet fully comprehend — reading. As a result they will ask many questions. Respond with answers they will understand. It takes but a few seconds to help a child make sense of the print around them. The rewards are lifelong.

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