

IMPACT



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University of Idaho Parents as Teachers Program Lays the Foundation for Literacy

The Situation

Renewed concern for success in school has led to a focus on literacy as an essential skill for all children. Research in emergent literacy shows that the foundations of literacy are laid well before children come to school, including the words and sentence structure of spoken language, awareness of word sounds and rhythm, scribbling and pretend writing, and interest in print and books. Early skills such as these help children learn to read when they are older.

Studies further show that home environments influence children's literacy development. For example, regular book sharing allows parents to introduce new words by labeling objects. Family mealtime provides a natural context for parent-child conversation, and rhyme and word play increases children's awareness of word sounds. Minimizing background noise such as the television sets the stage for talk among family adults and children. In all of these ways family adults support their young children's literacy development.

Variation in language experiences in home and community can lead to disparity among children in literacy development. For example, a recent study of communities shows that low-income children had more restricted access to books and print in their neighborhoods. Book sharing is also related to income, with estimates that middle-class children typically enter first grade with 1,000-1,700 hours of one-on-one book reading with an adult, while low income children experience just 25 hours. Parents'

vocabulary and conversational styles also vary widely among families, affecting the daily exposure to language for children. Family and community variables such as these influence children's foundational skills for literacy.

Our Response

Parents as Teachers is a parent education program for parents of children from before birth to kindergarten entry, which uses home visits and group meetings to teach parents strategies to support their children's learning in the early years. As such, the Parents as Teachers program is ideally positioned to address issues of parent roles in emergent literacy.

The University of Idaho Extension offers the Parents as Teachers program in 14 Idaho counties, serving 352 families and 586 children. The program works with the full diversity of Idaho families, including parents at all educational and income levels, teenage as well as grandparents raising grandchildren, single and two parent families, and Spanish and English speakers. Parents as Teachers has the potential to help parents throughout the state support their children's emergent literacy.

Literacy and Parents as Teachers. In order to clarify the role of Parents as Teachers in promoting early literacy development, the University of Idaho did a content analysis of the *Parents as Teachers Born to Learn Curriculum Prenatal to 3 Years*. Researchers developed a comprehensive coding scheme for literacy content in the curriculum, based

on strategies shown by research to promote language and emerging literacy. The four major categories of literacy coding include:

- *Oral language development*: stages of language development, strategies that promote growth in vocabulary and syntax.
- *Print awareness and understanding*: stages of writing and reading; strategies that strengthen print awareness and interest, attention to book content, prewriting.
- *Neuroscience*: brain development and its role in language and literacy.
- *Literacy related development*: skill development in symbolic thought, motor and social/emotional skills.

Program Outcomes

Results of the literacy content analysis show that, from the very first lessons, the Parents as Teachers program introduces parents to core concepts of language and literacy development, including the four major areas of neuroscience, oral language development, print awareness and understanding, and literacy related development. In fact, every monthly and weekly lesson over the three-year period includes literacy content within at least 3 of those 4 areas.

While language and literacy are well represented throughout the curriculum, literacy is often not the explicit lesson topic. In half of the monthly lessons, parents learn strategies that foster basic literacy development in the context of other topics such as attachment, play, or stranger anxiety.

In fact, one of the most extensive literacy lessons has toilet training as the focus. Literacy activities include vocabulary expansion with new words for body parts, and bath-time play activities to help children learn the terms. Parents also consider how to introduce the toileting expectations in age-appropriate language—preparing for the upcoming talks they'll have with their child on the subject. Parents are encouraged to read books about the potty with their children, using the books to spark further discussion on the topic. Parents themselves will be reading the lesson handouts on toilet training, modeling reading and interest in the printed word to their children.

Parents learn to be sensitive observers of their child's readiness for toilet training, and to praise all positive efforts—both strategies that will serve well in all teaching contexts with their children. In this way, thoughtful curriculum development can make any topic relevant to development of literacy skills for young children.

Adult Learning Strategies. The Parents as Teachers curriculum uses approaches to parent education known to be especially effective in working with adult learners. For example, regular home visits incorporate information tailored to the current stage of their child's development—concepts and activities can be directly applied at the time they are learned. Lessons also orient parents to upcoming developmental stages of language and literacy, so they understand changes in their child's behavior as they occur. Literacy concepts are introduced into the curriculum through extended discussion and supporting activity, then reappear regularly as refreshers in future lessons, helping parents adopt the concepts as integral to their thinking about their children. Finally, literacy-relevant ideas are introduced as concepts, but parents also learn how to apply them on a daily basis with their child.

In sum, the present study shows that the Parents as Teachers curriculum combines extensive early literacy content with effective strategies for adult learning to draw parents into the language and literacy worlds of their children. This analysis suggests that the Parents as Teachers program in Idaho can serve a major function in helping parents foster their children's emergent literacy. University of Idaho Parents as Teachers programs bring research-based strategies to help parents realize their children's full potential for learning.

For More Information

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