

Title: "Home and School Together: Helping Beginning Readers Succeed"

Full Citation: Paratore, J. R. (2002). "Home and School Together: Helping Beginning Readers Succeed." In A. E. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, Third Edition. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Subject(s): Home-School

Grade Level: Preschool, K, 1–2, 3–6, 6–8

Synopsis: This article reviews the research of the last 10 years on the role of the family in children's literacy.

It is widely believed that parents are at fault when children fail in school. Surveys show that teachers believe the greatest obstacles to student success are the parents' lack of time for their child, lack of interest in their child's education, or lack of knowledge of how to support their child's learning.

Research seems to support this belief. "For years, studies have correlated children's reading success with parental traits and actions." (p. 49) Durkin (1966) found that children who were early readers had mothers who spent time with their children, read to them, answered their questions, and showed them by their own example that reading is enjoyable. Durkin concluded that "early readers are not a special brand of children Rather, it would seem, it is their mothers who play the key role in effecting the early achievement." (pp. 49–50)

Many other studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between parent-child reading at home and eventual success in reading at school. Anderson et. al's report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985, in this database), concluded that "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." (p. 23) This conclusion was challenged by Scarborough and Dobrich (1994). They reexamined earlier studies and argued that, once you control for socioeconomic status and the individual child's interests and aptitudes, the effect on future school success of parent-child reading was "negligible." However, a meta-analysis of 29 studies of parent-child reading by Bus, vanIjzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995) refuted this conclusion. The authors reported that their results provided a "clear and affirmative answer" that "parent-child joint storybook reading is one of the most important activities for developing the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (p. 15). As a result of this research, many programs have been instituted to encourage parent-child reading (e.g., Even Start, family literacy intervention programs).

While the body of research summarized above focuses on deficits in certain families, another body of research has examined resources that families offer, often unrecognized and misunderstood by teachers. Luis Moll and colleagues (1992) has called these resources "household funds of knowledge." Some studies document these resources:

In a well-known 10-year ethnographic study by Shirley Brice Heath (1983), rich literate traditions were observed in non-mainstream communities. She concluded that the "children struggled in school not because they were language- and literacy-deprived, but rather because they were language- and literacy-different." (p. 52)

Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines (1988) studied African American children living in urban poverty, and observed many home literacy events. Literacy was integrally connected to accomplishing routine tasks and was embedded in their daily lives. By contrast, literacy at school was decontextualized, fragmented, and disconnected from

real events outside of school. This is why, they argued, these children experienced failure at school.

Teale (1986) studied literacy experiences of children in low-income, urban homes. He concluded that “virtually all children in a literate society like ours have numerous experiences with written language before they ever get to school.” (p. 192) Like Heath and Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, he observed that the children used literacy in their daily lives, to get things done. He also observed that they differed widely in the frequency of literacy events, and he noted that most parents did no storybook reading with children. (The 3 children who did engage in storybook reading consistently at home had the highest scores on tests of emergent literacy.)

Purcell-Gates (1996) observed 20 low-income families, and reported that “families used print most often in the context of entertainment (e.g., playing board games, reading *TV Guide*) and to mediate daily routines.” (p. 53) “She also observed that most texts read were those at the word and clausal level: coupons, advertisements, food labels, and so forth.” (p. 54) She challenged Teale’s statement that “virtually all children in a literate society like ours have numerous experiences with written language;” on the contrary, she found that some families in her study had quite busy and satisfying lives with very little reading of any kind.

Valdés (1996) reports that the assumptions and values of first-generation immigrant parents are in conflict with, or at least incongruent with, the actions expected of them by mainstream American teachers. These families felt that their job was to provide a *moral* education for their children, but not to assist in their academic education, which they felt was the role of the teacher. (See Valdés, 1996, in this database.)

Paratore concludes, “Across different families, different cultures, and different contexts, researchers have observed a rich tradition of literacy behaviors and other funds of knowledge that, although different from mainstream literacies, if understood, acknowledged, and appropriately built upon by teachers, might lead linguistically and culturally different children to more successful school experiences than many of them now have.” (p. 56)

Three conclusions can be drawn from the research:

1. Storybook reading by parents is important.
2. Teachers often don’t notice, and therefore don’t build upon, the rich and varied literacy and language practices embedded in children’s daily lives.
3. Language, culture, and class influence how families and children use literacy and understand schooling.

In working with parents, teachers need to have an attitude of reciprocity or collaboration. Several recent home-school programs have been successful in using these insights.

Gonzalez et al. (1995) report on home visits that were effective in helping students do well in school. Teachers visited homes not to report on problems or teach the parents, but to learn about the knowledge that exists in the students’ homes.

Intergenerational family literacy programs have also been successful. For example, Project FLAME (Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995) teaches parents how to help their children in school (reading books, visiting the library, teaching ABCs, helping with homework) but begins from parents’ experiences (they write about themselves) and their social networks (they learn collaboratively in small groups).

Another program, Intergenerational Literacy Project (Paratore, 1993, 1994, 1995) brings parents together to improve their English, learn about US schools, and learn how to help their children in school. "To connect the new literacies they are learning with those they already know, learning experiences are situated within the routines of daily life." (p. 60) The parents choose what to read and write based on their personal issues and concerns. "As in Project FLAME, there are multiple indicators of the success of this project. In addition to high and consistent rates of attendance (73% over the first 10 years of the project) and a low rate of attrition (17% over the first 10 years of the project), studies indicate rapid growth in adults' English reading fluency, steady growth in oral and written English proficiency, and steady increases in the practice of reading and writing with their children at home (Paratore, 1993, 1994, 2000). An in-depth study of the home and school literacy experiences of 12 children whose parents participated in the project found 8 of the 12 children to be experiencing high or moderate rates of success in school (Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999)." (pp. 60–61)

Another successful program is reported by Ada (1988). Parents meet monthly to discuss children's literature and read stories and poems written by the children and parents. Activities are offered for children as well (to meet baby-sitting needs), personal written and phoned invitations are given, and transportation is offered. At the meetings, parents begin by discussing an issue of importance to them, and then they form small groups to read and discuss a children's book related to the issue. They write their own stories at home.

Krol-Sinclair (1996) reports on a program in which parents are trained in storybook reading strategies and then read storybooks to children in the classroom. The program provides parents with access to the classroom, so that they can become familiar with school culture and routines, and also gives them strategies for readings stories at home to their children.

Madrigal et al. (1999) report on a book loan program used as part of a preschool program. A book lending library was set up near the preschool room, in a hallway through which parents passed every day. Parents could check out books to take home to read to their children (both English and Spanish books). 70% of children and their parents participated in the program.

Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995) describe a first- and second-grade program that begins on the first day of school, when the teacher asks parents to "tell me about your child." During the year, parents keep a home reading journal in which they record responses to a homework assignment: to read, discuss, and write about a book chosen by the child 3 times a week. Children and parents are invited regularly to share family stories (children daily during storytelling time, parents in writing for a class book). Meetings with parents are held 7 times a year, called "adult literacy conversations," to help teachers understand what parents believe is important about literacy and schooling.

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