
Results of Collaboration Between College and Schools with a Parent Involvement Reading Program

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Parent involvement programs in local schools are much in demand. Schools showing improvement in reading development can also show increased involvement of parents in the classroom or at home. Most parents are willing to help—not knowing how to help is the problem. Educational institutions need to share what they know about reading and learning to read with parents to help them feel confident in assisting their children. Educators and parents can all observe the results.

Jim Trelease stated in Bernice Cullinan's (1992), *Read to Me: Raising Kids Who Love to Read*:

Children whose parents have taken them to museums and libraries, and to visit relatives in faraway places, invariably have larger vocabularies and interest spans than do children who spend their days monotonously watching four hours of television in the same neighborhood day after day.

Competent readers and writers are no more born than athletes are. Not one player in the National Football League was born wanting to play football. That desire had to be planted by someone—usually a father or uncle, perhaps an older brother. And you can be sure there were little rubber footballs around his home as a child and he was taken to neighborhood playground scrimmages while still a youngster. In each instance, seeds were planted that would someday blossom into a professional athlete (p. 2).

The analogy between the creation of an athlete and the creation of a lifelong reader is obvious. Homes filled with books, either personally owned or borrowed from the library, and all sorts of writing tools, will encourage the growth of competent readers and writers. An important component of this home is an adult who understands the importance of reading aloud from as early an age as six months until the child has grown and left the home.

Reading experts have long encouraged parents to read aloud to their young children. One reason for starting at six months of age is that this is a time when the child begins to associate reading with a sense of peace, comfort, and security (Neuman, 1986). Reading aloud is the best-known, most researched and most frequently recommended parental practice that is significantly related to positive attitudes toward reading and reading achievement (Silvern, 1985). However, it cannot be assumed that parents realize what an important role they play in the development of this lifelong skill. While reporting that reading aloud is an enjoyable activity to share with their child, parents also indicate that they are not aware of many of the specific contributions this process makes to their child's development. Many parents are surprised to learn that reading to the child has been shown to significantly increase children's listening and speaking vocabularies, letter and symbol recognition abilities, length of spoken sentences, literal and inferential comprehension skills, number and nature of concepts developed, interest in books and reading, and view of reading as a valued activity (Silvern, 1985). In fact, parents have what may be the most crucial role of all involved in the child's literacy development. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) call upon parents to:

lay the foundation to read . . . [by] informally teaching preschool children about reading and writing by reading aloud to them, discussing stories and events, encouraging them to learn letters and words, and teaching them about the world around them. . . In addition to laying a foundation, parents need to facilitate the growth of their children's reading by taking them to libraries, encouraging reading as a free time activity and supporting homework (p. 57).

With these thoughts in mind, the elementary library coordinator of Warsaw Community Schools in Warsaw, Indiana, set out to support teachers and administrators in strengthening the parent-school bond in working together to create strong, lifelong readers.

Program Development

The elementary library coordinator approached the principal of Atwood Elementary, a small school in the Warsaw School corporation, to discuss the possibilities of a parent education/involvement program at his school. There was already a reading incentive program established at the school, as is common in all of the area schools. The existing program was available for students in all grade levels of the school. The components of the year-round incentive program were mostly classroom or student based, with little inclusion of other members of the families. This was a ripe field for a program that would bring the parents and students to the school at the same time, emphasizing the adult's commitment to reading as a model for the children.

The principal contacted the Department of Education in Washington, D.C. to inquire about the possibilities of funding. He found that acquiring national funding would require a lower-socioeconomic level for the school family as well as being time intensive. He then contacted the Indiana State Department of Education. He was encouraged to write a proposal for a grant from Reading is Fundamental (RIF), which handles the administration of the national endowment money in the state of Indiana. The focus for the granting of funds through this channel is giving books to students to add to home libraries. The books are chosen by the students from a diverse supply provided by the grant funds.

RIF required assurance of local funding in specific increments before grant money would be awarded. Grace College, a small liberal arts college near Warsaw, agreed to become involved by providing that local funding. In addition to funding, the partnership of the local school and the college required committee meetings for planning and book selection, and acquiring copies of the book, *Read to Me: Raising Kids Who Love to Read*, by Bernice E. Cullinan (1992) for all participants. Cullinan's book was distributed to each parent at the beginning of the parent training in reading sessions.

Advantages for a small college becoming involved in such a program were many. First of all, the college had a stake in the future of the students in the local community. Part of our job as members of that community included helping parents understand the importance of reading at home with their children. The parents needed to be aware of the stages to take their children through in order to attain the enjoyment of reading. Fighting illiteracy enriched the livelihood of our small community. Also, this was one way our college could become visible in the community as an institution that had a greater agenda than just

being known as the community on the hill. A third advantage was for our students. The college students enrolled in the Children's Literature course could choose to work with this program as fulfillment of a field experience requirement. As future educators, they could learn firsthand the vital importance of including parents in the education of their children, reinforcing the significance of intergenerational literacy.

As one of the last bastions of small rural elementary schools, Atwood Elementary stood as a proud family-oriented place of instruction. With approximately 60 families in the school, a program such as this had the potential for touching almost every family

The program consisted of two separate, but integrated components: distribution of free books for the students and parent training in reading sessions. The students and parents in grades 1-3 were targeted.

Distribution of Free Books

Three distribution dates were established: "Begin Again with a Good Book" (the beginning of second semester), "Don't You Just Love a good Book?" (Valentines Day giveaway); and "Take a Break from School, but not from Reading" (a precursor to spring break).

The committee for the program was composed of the library coordinator, the school librarian, two parents, two teachers, two students, the principal, the college liaison, and two college students. This committee gave suggestions for order the books from the approved lists of vendors provided by RIF. Application had been made for a \$500 mini-grant. The approved vendors had agreed to comply with the discount price RIF required for the selected paperback books, with no shipping and handling charge. The other stipulations mandated by the foundation were that the students chose the books and that any remaining books were used in similar give-away programs and were not to be placed in libraries.

Parents and Reading Training Sessions

The RIF program was used as a springboard for the local coordinating team to set up parenting seminars for the families of the students who had received books. The program focused on the Children's Press material, *Parents as Partners in Reading* (Edwards, 1990). After these training sessions, parents and children were encouraged to share the books received at the distribution.

Session One included an overview of the program, introduction of participants, and the viewing of the video, *Jim Trelease and the Read-Aloud Handbook*, which was one of three videos provided with the Children's Press program. Several of the mothers had become familiar with the video during the previous year and were enthusiastic about wanting their husbands to view it. The video made a particularly strong impression on the fathers in attendance.

Grace College students took the responsibility of working with the children in book-related activities. Themes had been developed by the students for each session and reading aloud, art activities, games and songs centered around each theme.

Session Two began with comments and questions from the parents that had formed during the lapse between sessions. The objectives of this session were (a) to help the parents understand the importance of reading, (b) to make parents realize that they were their children's first teachers, (c) to encourage parents to support their children's reading development, and (d) to motivate parents to read to their children.

Preparing for Reading, the second video in the three-video series, was viewed and discussed. During this session, the team and the parents discussed the selection of appropriate books for age level and interests. Along with choosing an appropriate book for reading aloud, the parents also needed to consider planning appropriate times and locations for the shared reading. Reading time was to be quiet, relaxed and uninterrupted. The more pleasant the experience, the more likely the children would want it repeated, which would increase learning about words, language and ideas.

Setting the stage for the reading was mentioned also. Directing attention to interesting pictures in the book, relating the book to the child's experiences, and stressing that this was something the parents would be doing with the children set the tone for this bonding, learning time.

The important roles that researchers have found that parents play in the shared reading event were described. First, the parent was a director, responsible for making the reading session a pleasant, meaningful experience for the child. Next, the parent was a monitor, constantly checking the child's reactions, changing books or reading style if boredom was observed. Third, the parent sometimes became an informer, answering the child's questions. All questions were not to be answered by the parent, as the opportunity needed to be given to stretch the child's mind. The parent could then be instrumental in helping the children find their own answers (Edwards, 1990).

During this training, several parents told of their experiences at home, which led to a rousing session sharing ideas they felt worked and questions they had about how to be more effective.

Session Three began as before, with comments and sharing about what had occurred at home after the previous sessions. Most of the parents had a story to tell about how their children reminded them of their commitment to read aloud every day or about how much the adults were enjoying the books selected by their children.

Reading Strategies, the third video in the series, sparked interest as the coordinators modeled some of the strategies, while recommending some effective, interesting books for shared reading. It was stressed that the time the parents spent at home reading with their children encouraged their children's reading skills to progress and improve for school activities. Allowing them to finish sentences as they reread familiar stories, discussing the story, the pictures and the ideas, and praising the children for each step toward reading mastery all provided positive results for the children as they learned in the school setting.

The following questions for evaluating books were given:

1. Are the illustrations colorful and appealing?
2. Can the print be easily read?
3. Is the language natural?
4. Is the story or information worth reading?
5. Is this a book both of you will enjoy?

Many books were shared by the librarians and college faculty that could be selected for shared reading. This became one of the favorite events of the parents, especially when they had time to examine the selections after the training session.

Suggestions for finding new books also were discussed: (a) ask other parents what books they are reading, (b) ask librarians and teachers to suggest the more popular ones, (c) ask bookstore sales people what books are best sellers, and (d) ask your child to name a book he likes and then try to find a similar one or one written by the same author.

Conclusion

The parents at Atwood Elementary enjoyed involvement in activities with their children and were very supportive of school programs. This program was no exception, with 45 parents attending the three sessions, which represented 30% of the school population. The principal considered this a successful initiative. Parents reported that the books their children selected from the free distribution became valued possessions and encouraged the purchase of others. The parents did not realize that they were welcome in the school library and could select books to check out for home use. They began to take advantage of this opportunity, allowing them to make their home more literacy-rich. The town of Atwood does not have a public library, and since they are in a different township than Warsaw, the large library located there was not available to the residents without prohibitive cost for a library card. The parents learned that they could use the card belonging to the Warsaw School Corporation to borrow books from the Warsaw Public Library. Here was another open door allowing for a variety of reading material.

The collaboration between the school and the college was a bonding affair, with the college students enjoying the time so much that many returned to the school to read and interact with the students in the classrooms. Thus, all those involved reaped positive benefits in understanding parental roles of importance in the reading process, which helped lead to the construction of lifelong readers in this small rural community.

References

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