

# **SUPPORTING EVERYDAY FAMILY LITERACY ROUTINES**

## **SECTION I: INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever stopped to think about what your parents did to help your literacy growth and development? You may remember many everyday activities such as being read to, playing games together, having reading and writing materials available in your home, and seeing your parents read. All of these might have had an impact on your ability to read and write.

Acquiring literacy is a developmental process that begins early in life, long before children enter school. Parents and the quality of family learning environments are central to this process. Since the 1950s, researchers have found that parents' beliefs and behaviors influence children's literacy and school-related outcomes. Family factors are especially powerful predictors of children's later language development and academic performance.

Many children from low-income homes are significantly disadvantaged relative to their more affluent peers in the language and literacy skills that predict long-term literacy growth at the time of school entry (Dickinson, 2001). It is critical therefore, that programs working with young children who are economically or educationally disadvantaged partner with parents to ensure that children have access to quality learning experiences both in the classroom and in the home.

For example, one recent longitudinal study found that early home environment factors such as the ways that mothers talked with their preschool children, and the quality and frequency of children's experiences with books accounted for 44% of the variance in low-income children's receptive vocabulary skills in kindergarten (Tabors et al., 2001). Another recent study followed some 350 Head Start children from four years of age through second grade. This study found that the quality of the early home literacy environment, the frequency of shared book reading with children, parental expectations of the child's school performance in reading and spelling, and parents' enjoyment and frequency of reading accounted for 40% of the variance in children's expressive and receptive vocabulary skills in second grade (Storch & Whitehurst, 2001).

Research points to a range of parenting behaviors and beliefs that are positively associated with children's literacy competence and early school success. An earlier Department of Education publication, *The Guide to Improving Parenting Education in Even Start Family Literacy* (2000), presented a framework for use by program managers in planning parenting education opportunities. It focused on how parents can strengthen their children's literacy development and school related competencies through language-rich parent child interactions; supports for literacy in the family; holding expectations of their child's learning and development; actively embracing the parenting role; and forming and maintaining connections with the community and other resources. While it was expressly written for Even Start programs, the framework applies to many programs serving young children and their families, particularly those that value the role of parents in young children's education.

The present document is meant to be a companion piece to the *Guide to Improving Parenting Education in Even Start Family Literacy*. It further explores what parents can do *directly* to support children's pre-reading skills through language-rich parent child interactions and supportive literacy environments in the home. It is written to help program developers sharpen the focus of their parenting education programs to highlight those strategies that are most likely to help children acquire the necessary building blocks for reading. It is also written for program leadership – state and local program coordinators – who help set create a vision for program services and influence staffing and budgets.

This document contains:

- An overview of what we have learned from research about the critical role parents play in young children's cognitive development,
- Descriptions of the everyday literacy "habits" or "routines" that are likely to support children's prereading skills, and
- Implications for program design and management.

Working together, parents and caregivers can help children enter school with the skills necessary to learn to read. Once children enter school, this partnership continues, as children become comprehensive and fluent readers.

Footnote: The word *parent* or *parents* in this document refers to those who are taking on the major responsibility for guiding children's growth and development. That person is often a biological parent but can also be an older sibling, grandparent, family friend, or foster family.

## SECTION II: WHAT WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH

Sidebar quote: “Reading is essential for creating a healthy mind and for building the capacity needed for a lifetime of learning.” (Starting Out Right)

Learning language, learning to read is the major “work” of young children. This process begins in infancy as children learn the sounds of language from the family members around them. Talking, singing, everyday family conversations – all introduce children to the sounds of language and set them on a course to becoming readers. To become readers children need to develop important skills, including learning to:

- **Use** language in conversation
- **Listen** and respond to stories read aloud
- **Recognize** and name the letters of the alphabet
- **Listen** to the sounds of spoken language
- **Connect** sounds to letters to figure out the “code” of reading
- **Read** often so that recognizing words becomes easy and automatic
- **Learn** and **use** new words
- **Understand** what is read (*Put Reading First*)

Learning to use language, learning to read can be challenging for many young children and requires supports for children from the adults around them. Parents do many things to support children’s cognitive development. While there is no single way that parents help young children become literate there are some strategies that represent the essential core of parenting contributions to children’s language development and reading related skills. Decades of research on how young children learn to read and write has helped to identify this essential core. The key elements include the following:

### **How parents talk to their young children matters.**

Children learn about language through the speech they hear at home (Heath, 1983) (DeTemple, 1991). A study by Hart & Risley (1995) found that 60% of the difference in IQ and vocabulary

growth among three year olds could be traced to their early experiences with language. Strong differences in vocabulary and language use persisted into third grade.

The same study found that children did best at age 3 and in third grade when their early language experiences shared certain features:

- *Diversity.* Parents varied the nouns, adjectives, and adverbs they used with their children.
- *Encouragement.* Parents motivated their children by supporting their efforts, repeating and expanding on what they said, and offering them praise.
- *Naming.* Parents helped children notice, name, recall, and relate language to things and events.
- *Flexibility.* Parents consulted children about their wishes instead of telling them what to do.
- *Responsiveness.* Parents allowed children to control conversations the children began.

Snow & Tabors (1993) reported that mealtime conversations where family members discussed recent events and planned new ones were particularly rich for young children. Higher amounts of *narrative talk* – telling about an event that has happened or will happen – were associated with higher scores on a story comprehension task. Because much of children’s first exposure to print in school is in the form of narratives or stories, oral narratives at home (e.g., during mealtimes) can help children learn what kind of information goes into a good story. Narrative talk also helps young children learn how to organize a set of events in a sequence that gets the narrative told clearly.

Higher levels of *explanatory talk* – discussion of explanations such as cause-and-effect relations (“Don’t eat too fast. You’ll choke yourself.”) and connections between ideas, events, and actions – when were associated with children’s ability to connect a word to the correct picture in the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test at 5 years. These results indicate it is valuable for parents and other adult caregivers to take time each day for extended discussions with children, and to encourage children to tell about their day or experiences (Beals, 2001).

### **Reading books together builds early literacy.**

Parent-child book reading is another important parent-child verbal interaction that contributes to children's literacy skills. The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children consistently recommend that parents and family members read frequently with their children. Reviews of research on effects of the quantity and quality of shared parent-child book reading indicate that book reading between parent and preschooler is positively correlated with children's development of language and literacy skills, including later reading achievement (Scarborough, 1994) (Bus, 1995) (Senechal, 2001).

Children gain more from reading with adults when they are active rather than passive participants in the reading exchange. For example, four-year-old children who actively participate during book reading have been found to both comprehend and produce more words than children who passively listen to the story. Active participation in this study meant pointing to the illustrations of novel words or labeling novel words. Both forms of participation helped children to recognize new words, but answering questions helped children to produce more new words than pointing did (Senechal & Monker 1995).

Another high level of active participation in shared book reading is for children to participate in conversations about the text. The ways in which the parent manages the book reading interactions, especially asking and responding to questions about the text, have been identified as predictors of children's literacy outcomes (Pellegrini et al., 1985). For example, children of lower-income mothers who engaged their preschool-age child in a high percentage of talk that went beyond the here and now during shared book-reading – that is, discussion of past experiences, predictions, and inferences – scored higher on language and literacy measures in kindergarten than children whose mothers used a lower percentage of talk that went beyond the here and now. (DeTemple, 2001). This type of discussion, what the researcher called *nonimmediate talk*, typically involves longer utterances and more complex language than simple labeling and yes/no questions.

Repeated readings of a book have been found to be beneficial for children, especially when children are actively involved in the reading process. One study found that three- and four-year-old children could comprehend and produce more novel words when they labeled the words during

three readings of a book compared to one reading (Senechal, 1997). Moreover, repeated readings of a book allow for more discussion, speculation and interpretation, and thus more complex and elaborate language that moves beyond the here and now. Initial readings of a book generally focus on basic understandings of the text and illustrations, and therefore are conducive to here-and-now talk and “fill-in-the-blank” questions (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Research indicates that parents can learn how to actively involve their child in shared book reading, and that children benefit from this type of parental support. In the Dialogic Reading program, an adult-child reading intervention that has demonstrated positive effects on children’s language competence, the adult is encouraged to use questions and other prompts to help the child become the teller of the story. Open questions are among the skills taught to adults in this program to encourage the child to describe a story (“I told you about the last page, now it’s your turn. You tell me about this page.”) (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998).

A study of the relative effectiveness of the Dialogic Reading program when used with parents and with child care teachers found that program effects on children’s expressive language skills were strongest when parents were involved in the program. The program was less effective when used with teachers alone. One-on-one reading exchanges in the home provide more opportunity than large group reading settings in classrooms for adults to scaffold their interactions with an individual child (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998).

Research shows that children at risk of reading difficulty, including children from low-income backgrounds, benefit from instruction that supports the development of phonemic awareness (Ehri et al, 2001). To this end, experts recommend frequent adult-child shared book reading that directs young children’s attention to the phonological structure of spoken words and highlights the relations between print and speech (Snow et al., 1998). It is beneficial for adults to talk with children about how print works. For example, they can talk about letters by name, shapes and sounds; show what is told in print; demonstrate how the string of letters between the spaces are words, and point to individual letters or words during reading. In addition, it is helpful for parents and other adult caregivers to practice the sounds of letters, help children take spoken words apart and put them together, and practice the alphabet by pointing out letters and reading alphabet

books with children who are beginning to learn to read. For children beginning to read, it is also helpful for parents and other adults to point out letter-sound relationships on labels, boxes, magazines and signs, and to listen to the child read words and books from school.

Shared book reading and other conversations such those at mealtime are valuable opportunities for parents and other caregivers to introduce novel or rare words to young children. As noted earlier, children's vocabulary knowledge is one of the strongest preschool predictors of later reading ability. Children with greater language knowledge and ability benefit more from their experiences and learn new words more readily than children whose language knowledge is less well developed (Stanovich, 1986). Research with lower-income families has found positive relationships between the density of rare words used in shared book reading, mealtime conversations, and toy-play situations and children's scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test in kindergarten. Also positively correlated with children's kindergarten vocabulary skills was *informative uses* of rare words such as providing explanations or meaningful information about word meanings (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

### **Open-ended questions enhance children's problem-solving skills.**

Parents can stimulate children's cognitive development by the way in which they ask children questions. Open questions ("What happened at school today?") are generally more beneficial than closed questions ("Did you have a good day at school?") because they encourage the child to use more language in the response and, importantly, they support the use of complex thinking or problem-solving skills in formulating a response. To answer the question "What happened at school today?" a child needs to recall what happened, decide what information is useful or important to share, put ideas together, and put words together to form a narrative or story. Research has found these types of parental interactional strategies with children – what researchers often call *distancing strategies* – to be positively associated with children's school-related competence (Sigel, 1982).

Parents involve their child in increasingly complex language and literacy experiences when they use scaffolding strategies. "Scaffolding" develops new literacy skills by extending existing ones. For example, in one research-based literacy learning program developed for adolescent mothers

and their preschool children, home visitors teach scaffolding strategies by coaching mothers on how to use open questions to stimulate their child's interest (for example, "Who should we invite to our party?"), how to demonstrate literacy-related tasks (for example, writing addresses on envelopes for the party invitation), and how to support the child's initial attempts at more complex tasks or language (Newman & Gallagher, 1994).

### **Warm and flexible parenting helps children succeed.**

Shared book reading and conversations with children occur in the context of a larger parent-child relationship that entails interactions across a range of settings and situations. The level of emotional warmth and level of restrictive versus permissive behavior with a child are predictive of children's school-related competence. Attentive, warm, and flexible behaviors during infancy and preschool years have been found to be associated with children's school readiness at ages 5 and 6 and with school achievement at age 12 (Estrada, et al., 1987). Mother-child attachment security has been found to be related to the quality of mother-child interactions (i.e., level of paying attention, distraction) during activities related to written language (Hess & McDevitt, 1984). Further, mothers' uses of direct control tactics in teaching and disciplinary situations with 4-year-old children have been found to be negatively related to children's school-related abilities at 4-6 and 12 years of age (Hess & McDevitt, 1984).

### **Young children flourish in predictable settings and routines.**

The ease of children's adjustments to school also has been associated with the quality of affect and control in the parent-child relationship. Parent-child interactions characterized by a controlling parent and a resisting child, or by a directing child, have been found to be negatively associated with a child's social adjustment to school (Barth & Parke, 1993). Parents are more apt to have a positive impact on children if they are responsive to children's interests and sensitive to their developmental capabilities and interact with children in ways that allow for choices and active problem solving. For example, responsive parenting can be viewed as a three term chain of events where a child shows an action, the parent responds promptly and sensitively to the action, and in turn the child experiences supportive consequences (Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 1989).

Parent-child interactions occur within a home and family environment that experts recommend should be predictable and orderly so children can learn the meaning and function of things. Researchers have identified a number of features of the environment that support children's development, including regular locations for things, established times for meals and other routine activities, appropriate numbers of toys accessible to the child at any given time, and limits on background noise and crowding in the home (Wachs & Gruen, 1992).

### **Supports for literacy in the home environment make a difference.**

Everyday exchanges in families are embedded in a context that supports or limits the development of children's language and literacy competence. Literacy provisions in the home include children's access to reading and writing materials as well as structured time for reading and a place for reading and literacy materials (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). More broadly, the home literacy environment – including frequency of library card use, number of child and adult magazine subscriptions, number of newspaper subscriptions, number of books the child owns, hours of television viewed per week by the child, and how often the father and mother read to themselves – has been found to be predictive of children's receptive vocabulary, general knowledge, and reading scores at kindergarten (Griffin & Morrison, 1997).

Parents' own reading habits and uses of literacy for problem solving (e.g., using a phone directory to look for help) are models for children (Goodman, 1986). Children of parents who view reading as a source of entertainment have been found to have a more positive view of reading than children of parents who emphasize the skills aspect of reading development (Baker et al., 1997).

Enthusiasm about literacy activities, including a view of reading as fun, has been identified as a contributor to children's reading skills and attitudes (Baker et al., 1995). Also, mothers' positive beliefs about reading have been found to be predictive of mothers exposing their children to joint book reading and to the quality of mothers' book reading interactions with their child (DeBaryshe, 1995).

### **Summary**

In summary, there are a range of parenting practices and styles that include the quality of parents' verbal exchanges with their child, level of involvement in their child's learning, and approach to discipline. Parents hold knowledge and beliefs about child development and appropriate parental roles in supporting children's literacy development and learning. In addition, parents serve as managers of environments for their children when they make decisions about their family's daily routines and the types of settings and experiences they help make available to their children. We know *what* parents do that is important for young children's learning. The next step is to examine *how* parents use everyday opportunities to put research into practice.

### **SECTION III: Everyday routines that support children’s language development and reading related skills**

Research provides rich information about parents’ contribution to children growth and development and is the starting point for planning quality parenting education programs. In particular, there are strong guideposts for the types of parent and child interactions that make a difference for children’s language and reading related skill development. What makes these parent-child interactions so powerful is that they are part of everyday family life. Repeated over and over again, routines send powerful messages to children about learning and their role as learners.

In this section, we will explore what strong parent-child literacy routines can look like in practice. For program designers and project leadership it’s a way to conceptualize the types of literacy “habits” parenting education programs should promote through information and training opportunities for parents. Consider these literacy routines or habits as outcomes you would hope to see as a result of your parenting education program.

#### **Learning through everyday conversations**

##### **DIALOGUE BOX 1A**

As Kathy finishes changing her son’s diaper, he laughs, kicks his feet up high, and grabs his toes with both hands.

Kathy: “Yes, you’ve got your toes.” She kisses his toes and he laughs and coos.

Kathy: “What nice toes you have!”

The baby makes baby noises.

“Yes, very nice toes. You have ten toes! Ten tiny toes!”

##### **DIALOGUE BOX 1B**

Joe and his daughter Jennifer are sharing a moment sitting on the porch and watching cars go by.

Jennifer: “Car, daddy.”

Joe: Yes, it’s a blue car, honey.”

Jennifer: “Blue car.”

Joe: “Right. That is a blue car. And here’s another blue car. That makes two blue cars.”

Jennifer: “Blue cars.”

Joe: “Yes, honey, two blue cars. And look, here comes a red car!”

Jennifer: “The car – it, it turn that way”

Joe: " You're right, the car went around the corner. Where do you think it's going?"  
Jennifer: " Going away."  
Joe: (Pauses and waits.)  
Jennifer: "Go to the store. Going to get ice cream. Jenny likes chocolate ice cream."  
Joe: "Would you like to have ice cream for dessert?"

#### DIALOGUE BOX 1C

Philip and his parents are eating dinner.

Philip: "Recess was fun today."  
Mother: "What made recess fun?"  
Philip: "We play dodgeball."  
Mother: "You played dodgeball? How do you play dodgeball?"  
Philip: "Someone throw a ball and tries to hit you."  
Father: "Someone throws a ball—it's a very soft ball, I hope."  
Philip: "Yes. It's kind of squishy. It just bounce off."  
Mother: "It just bounces. But still you run when you see someone has the ball."  
Philip: "Yes. You run fast."  
Mother: "What happens if the ball hits you?"  
Philip: "You're it."  
Father: "What do you do then?"  
Philip: "Well. See, you don't want to be it so you - you see who's around you."  
Parents: (pause and wait)  
Philip: "Then you try to hit someone else with the ball and make them it. I made Johnny it cuz he's my friend. I got to run a lot today. Nobody could hit me."  
Mother: "Which do you like better—to be the one with the ball or the one running?"  
Philip: "I like to running better."  
Father: "I like to run, too. Running is fun."

Parents talk to their children everyday but verbal interactions can vary greatly in their quality and frequency. Consider the dialogue boxes above. These parents are taking advantage of a teachable moment with their child. Each of these parents is helping their child learn about the sounds of language, about new words and how to use them, and about how to listen to others.

The parents start listening to and commenting on what interests their child. For example, notice how Kathy commented on the baby's toes as he grabbed them or how Joe extended the conversation about cars because that's what Jennifer was interested in at the moment. Notice how each of the parents builds on their child's interest by adding a little more. In the case of the mother and baby, mom is helping her child learn new words and the sound of language. Dad is taking

advantage of a quiet time to introduce new words to his daughter and what they sound like in sentences. He's also helping her learn concepts (e.g., around) about the world and the way it works.

Consider the examples of Jennifer and Joe and the family at dinnertime. These parents ask Phillip questions to get engage him extended conversation. This is an important strategy to get children talking and using language themselves. Sometimes the question is one that has a single answer, such as *What color is that car?* Or *what made recess fun?* In both cases, parents waited patiently for their child to respond. Sometimes the questions have more than a single or right answer. This type of open-ended question requires children to use more critical thinking skills before answering. In the example with the family at dinner time, the child has an opportunity to tell a story, to talk about events that happened at school. By providing an opportunity for their child to practice extended discourse, these parents are helping their child practice the skills he needs to succeed in school.

Also take note of how these parents have extended their child's language by adding a little more. For example, when Jennifer said "*Blue Car,*" her dad responded by adding a little more. He responded with a sentence "*That is a blue car,*" showing Jennifer a different way of saying what she meant. Notice too how Jennifer and Philip's parents gave them time to think about questions and waited for their response. Giving children time to respond (the "five seconds" rule) encourages children to keep talking.

Parents have many opportunities to help children practice language during everyday family interactions. Mealtime, going to the grocery store, playing games together, doing household chores, and bath time are all opportunities for parents to help children focus on language. Parents can do much to help children acquire language and reading related skills through simple, routine interactions. For example, parents can introduce children to vocabulary and the sounds of language by pointing to objects and naming them, explaining how objects are used and how they work, playing word games, using rhymes and poetry to help children focus on the sounds, taking children to new places and talking about them.

## Leaning through books and print

### DIALOGUE BOX 2A

While Kathy is bathing her baby son Michael, he is playing with a soft plastic book about a dog.

Kathy: "Oh, where's your book, Michael? Is it under the water?"

Michael moves the book underwater and makes gurgling sounds.

Kathy: "It looks like your book is swimming, Michael. It's going back and forth in the water."

Michael makes a motor noise and brings the book to the surface.

"Oh, now it's out of the water. It was *in* the water but now it's *out*."

He raises and lowers the book into and out of the water.

Kathy: "Look, Michael, you can see the words. See? Under the water? There's the letter S. Yes, the letter S is under the water, and now it's out of the water. It's the letter S."

### DIALOGUE BOX 2B

Joe is reading his daughter Jennifer one of her favorite bedtime books, *Goodnight, Moon*. As Jennifer turns the pages, Joe reads, following the text with his fingertip —

Joe: "There was a telephone, and a red balloon, and a picture of—what's the picture of, Jenny?"

Jennifer: "the cow jumping over the moon!"

Joe: "Yes! And moon rhymes with balloon, doesn't it?"

Jennifer: "Umm-hm. Moon, balloon. But daddy, can a cow really jump over the moon?"

Joe: "No, sweetie. The moon's very far away. But it makes a nice picture, doesn't it?"

Jennifer: "The moon looks so little."

Joe: "It *does* look little in the picture. And look, here's something else little: 'And there were three little bears sitting on chairs.' There's another rhyme, isn't there?" (pauses and waits)

Jennifer: "bears—and chairs."

Joe: "Yes, bear and chairs and moon and balloon. Let's see if we can find some other rhymes."

### DIALOGUE BOX 2C

Philip's parents are listening to him read.

Philip: "Jack's mother was angry with Jack."

Father: "Why was she angry, Philip?"

Philip: "Because he sold the cow for three little beans!"

Mother: "Yes—that's not a good trade, is it? Go on and read what happens next?"

Philip: "Jack's mother was so angry she—"

Mother: "She threw"

Philip: "She threw the beans out—"

Mother: "Outside. She threw the beans outside. What do you think will happen now, Philip?"

Philip: "I think the beans will grow."

Father: "Right. Remember when we planted the beans?"

Philip: "Yes. Leaves came up."

Father: "Right. Beans are alive. They can grow if you plant them."

One way in which parents help children acquire language and reading related skills is through reading to children on a regular basis. The frequency and quality of the shared reading experience can again vary from parent to parent. In the examples above, parents are doing more than reading stories to their children, they are using books as a teaching tool to help children learn many skills they will need to become readers.

The first example illustrates that it is never too early to introduce children to books. By pointing out the connections between pictures and words, pointing out the cover, letting the child help turn the page, and letting the child explore the book at their own pace this mom is setting the stage for reading. Consider how dad is using a reading of *Goodnight Moon* as a teaching tool. By tracking his finger below the words as he says them, he is showing his daughter that print goes from left to right and that those collections of letters between spaces make up words. By pointing out individual letters and sounds, he is helping her learn about the alphabet. When he asks his daughter what other words begin with the letter “g” he is helping her become more aware of the sounds of language. And finally by asking daughter questions such as *What do you think will happen next?* he’s providing her with an opportunity to practice language.

As children become readers, parents take on a new role – that of listening to their child read. By listening to children read parents can observe children’s fluency. By asking questions about the meaning of text they observe children’s comprehension.

In each of these examples, parents were actively engaging children in a shared reading experience. Parents were being intentional in their use of books as a teaching tool. There are, however, other opportunities for parents to use print as a tool to build children’s reading related skills. Parents can make use of environmental print (e.g., labels, newspapers, cereal boxes, signs, etc) to help children learn to recognize letters and words and to help children practice reading skills.

Parents can also encourage children to write their own stories and then read them as they would a book. For example, writing stories about family photographs and then making them into an album provides children with an opportunity to read about something of great personal interest— their family. Writing stories, drawing pictures, writing letters to friends, making grocery lists are all easy to do family activities that help children practice language and reading related skills. Writing is reading's partner.

### **Creating Literacy Rich Environments**

Parents are the gatekeepers of home literacy environments. Just as classroom teachers set the stage for learning with a print-rich environment, parents set the stage for learning at home. Setting the stage includes maximizing the use of print in the home. For example, labeling items with a child's name, drawing children's attention to print in everyday items such as food labels, newspapers and magazines for children's use (e.g., cutting out words or letters), and samples of children's work and magnetic letters on the refrigerator.

Setting the stage also includes providing easy access to a variety of age-appropriate books, games, puzzles, records, toys and writing materials for children. Providing an accessible space for children to read, play games or work on their homework is another way in which parents can support children's learning.

Parents can also take advantage of other learning environments outside the home to extend children's learning. For example, taking children to the library regularly for story hour or to check out books gets children into the habit of using the library. Taking children to new places in the community can also be an opportunity for introducing children to new vocabulary and ideas. For example, trips to the fire station, the grocery store or the park are different types of learning environments parents can help children explore.

### **Summary**

Parenting is one of life's most challenging tasks. Most parents want the best for their children. That includes being successful learners who grow into productive adults. While all parents have

hopes and goals for their children, parents vary greatly in their ability to support those goals. Parenting education programs provide an opportunity for parents to learn more about *what* makes a difference for children's growth and development, *how* to make their everyday parent-child interactions have a positive impact on children's language and reading related skills, and *where* to turn for the additional supports they need to build strong literacy routines at home.

Well planned, comprehensive parenting education programs provide information to parents. They present research findings in terms of practical strategies. They provide skill-based training and direct instruction so parents can expand or improve their everyday parent-child interactions and build literacy routines. Programs provide supports parents need –including materials and resources --to take advantage of the opportunities offered.

Well planned, comprehensive parenting education programs begin where parents are and help parents achieve the goals they have for working with their children. The final section of this document explores implications program designers and programs leadership should consider in planning an approach to parenting education.

## SECTION IV: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN AND MANAGEMENT

As was stated earlier, many children from low-income families enter school significantly disadvantaged relative to their more affluent peers in the development of language and pre-reading related skills (Dickinson, 2001). If we are to change that trend, we need to focus not on “lessening” the gap once children enter school, but on ensuring that children have access to high quality learning environments – both at home and in care settings, including classrooms - early on in life.

Parents are the gatekeepers for home learning environments. They set the stage for their children’s language and reading related skill development through everyday family interactions. They are having an *impact* on their children’s literacy development whether they recognize the importance of their interactions with their children or not. Sometimes these interactions have positive effects. Sometimes parents need information and supports to expand or refine the quality of their parent-- child interactions before they are effective. While parents bring many strengths to parent-child interactions -- chief among them love and the desire to help their children succeed-- most parents need information and support at some point in time. Parents want to know *how* to help their children get ready for school and to succeed as a students. This requires information and supports from educators and other caregivers.

Federal programs serving disadvantaged populations have historically viewed involving parents in their children’s education as a key strategy to help children be successful learners. For example, Even Start, Head Start and Title I all have well-established practices to support parents in their role as their child’s first teacher and as partners with teachers and other educators working with their children.

However, the *quality* of parenting education and parent involvement opportunities in programs such as these can vary greatly. The challenge for project directors is to take a critical look at their programs’ current parenting education practices and ask themselves the following questions:

## **Do we have clear goals and objectives for parenting education?**

Sidebar quote: “Highly focused programs are more likely to be successful than programs with many broad goals.” (Landry, in press)

Parenting education can mean many things to many people. No one program can address it all. Setting clear goals and objectives can help programs narrow the scope of their parenting education efforts. More focused efforts are more likely to be successful – that is, lead to changes in parents beliefs and behaviors.

In setting goals and objectives, it is helpful to look at *why* you are offering parenting education. In other words, what outcomes or changes in parent-child interactions does your program hope to demonstrate as a result of your parenting education efforts?

The next step is to use scientifically based research to help identify content areas and strategies for *how* to meet your goals. For example, in Even Start Family Literacy programs, the primary goal of parenting education is to strengthen parents’ support of their young children’s literacy development and early school success. That support includes frequent, high quality parent-child verbal interactions that are responsive to children’s interests. Given this goal, parenting education objectives should include playful opportunities for parents to learn about: reading to children, building children’s vocabulary through play, using games and songs that play with words so children learn the sounds of language, helping children learn the alphabet, etc.

This is not to imply that programs can only have one goal for parenting education. For example, in addition to their education services, Head Start provides opportunities for involving parents in health and mental health services. Programs having more than one primary goal still need clear goals and objectives, but they have the added challenge of exploring ways to integrate their goals. For example, a program could address both health and educational objectives by expanding the information on how parents can detect and seek treatment for ear infections to include information on the importance of children ability to hear the sounds of language during their early years.

In addition to identifying clear goals and objectives, program designers need to pay special attention to the *intensity* of services. Promoting children's language and reading related skill development is a labor- intensive process both for parents and for classroom teachers and other caregivers. It is difficult to expect meaningful change in the quality of parent-child interactions unless programs are willing to invest significant time in support of parents. Occasional instructional home visits or a short series of parenting workshops are not enough. Parenting education needs to be well planned, intentional and ongoing if programs are serious about making a meaningful difference in parents' knowledge, skills and behavior. For example, guidance in Even Start suggests 20 hours per month as a target for the intensity of services.

### ***Do we begin where parents are?***

Parents do not come to parenting education programs as blank slates that need to be filled in by parenting "experts." Parents come with their own beliefs about raising children and their role as parents. They have their own ideas about childrearing, the role of children in the family, how children grow and develop and what "good" parenting means. Many of these experiences have been shaped by their culture and family background. For example, in some families parents may view children's questions as evidence of their intelligence while in other families such behavior might be seen as rude and therefore, discouraged. Families may differ greatly in their view of how much physical contact babies should have or how to handle a toddler's anger. Parenting education programs can be an important tool in helping parents and staff members examine their own assumptions about children and themselves.

Parents also differ in their beliefs about their own role in their children's education. Programs may be telling parents that they are their child's first teacher – but they cannot assume that parents believe that to be true. A key influence on parents' decisions to become involved in their child's education is a sense of efficacy for helping their child succeed in school (i.e., Can I have a positive influence on my child's education outcomes?) (Hoover-Sempsey & Sandler, 1997). Working with parents to understand and modify their beliefs about their role in their child's development may be the critical first step in helping parents modify parent/child literacy interactions.

Parents come to parenting education programs with a range of knowledge and skills. They also vary in the frequency of supportive behaviors. This includes important literacy routines that have a direct impact on children's language and reading related skills. For example, the 1999 National Household Education Survey shows that 69 percent of children in households below the poverty threshold were read to three or more times per week, compared to 85 percent of children in households above the poverty threshold. Sixty-one percent of children of mothers with less than a high school education were read to three or more times a week compared to 76 percent of children of mothers with a high school diploma or equivalent, and to 85 percent of children of mothers with a vocational education or some college (Nord, 2000). Parenting education can play an important role in helping parents increase their frequency of reading to children and reading in ways that expand children's skill development through information and training.

In an effort to make parenting education programs inviting and accessible to parents, program designers need to carefully consider the approach and types of materials they use. Materials should be culturally sensitive and provide developmentally and age-appropriate information for parents. They should also be selected with the program outcomes in mind. Finally, beware of using parenting education materials that suggest there is "one right" way to parent – there needs to be room to adapt materials and strategies to fit with the parent audience.

Parenting education should not be thought of as a one-size- fits-all program but a well planned menu of ongoing services parents can select from that meet their interests, needs and level of participation. Parents need to be involved in setting their own goals for parenting education that take into account the strengths and prior knowledge they bring to the process of parenting. Parenting education should be viewed by parents as an opportunity to build on what they are doing "right" rather than correcting what they are doing "wrong."

### ***Are we using sound adult education practices in parenting education?***

At the core of parenting education is the transfer of information. Programs provide information through a variety of strategies, including the use of technology, group presentations, group discussions, and most commonly print. The communication of information is more likely to be

effective if it is provided through a variety of strategies over time. When using written materials, translate them into the home language of the parents you are trying to reach. To make the information accessible to parents who are not strong readers, write materials at a sixth-eighth grade readability level.

Information alone may not be enough. Parents may need additional supports to build their capacity to work more effectively with their children. For example, parents may know that children need to know their alphabet by the end of first grade but they may not know *how* they can help children learn letter recognition. They may think the only thing they can do is teach the alphabet song since that is what they remember being taught. Parenting education can help parents learn other skills or strategies to use with their children.

Learning opportunities in parenting education should be varied and ongoing. Not all parenting education happens in a workshop. Programs should consider using a variety of strategies (e.g., direct instruction, demonstration, group discussion, coaching, observation) and a variety of settings (e.g., home visits, schools, community centers, etc.) to provide parenting education.

Well-planned parenting education programs are based on sound adult education instruction practices. These include: conveying high expectations of learners; using and developing background knowledge to aid in learning new information; encouraging and supporting active student involvement in learning; developing students' awareness of their own thinking; and providing regular feedback to students on progress and areas that need improvement (Cromley & Sweeney, in press).

### ***Have we invested in quality staff?***

One of the biggest assets of any program is well-qualified staff. Without knowledgeable, caring staff, the best plan is likely to fall short of its desired goals. Quality parenting education takes the work of many hands to implement – it should not be the sole responsibility of just one person such as the parent educator or parent coordinator. Parenting education does not just happen as part of

a parent workshop or home visit. Every interaction with a child's parent has the potential for being a parenting education opportunity.

Staff need to be prepared to take advantage of "teachable moments" with parents. That means parenting education staff need to know about child development, particularly how children acquire language and reading skills, if they are to support parents in creating effective home learning environments. Likewise, classroom teachers and other caregivers need to know how to work with parents. They need to know what parenting strategies are most effective in helping children acquire literacy so they can help parents extend children's learning from the classroom into the home.

It's important to invest in *high-quality* staff development that gives staff the content information and skills they need to improve their own instructional practices and interactions with parents. As with parenting education programs, providing multiple opportunities and formats for staff development is helpful in meeting the diverse needs and learning styles of staff. Credited courses, workshops, coaching, and self-paced learning are all examples of staff development strategies.

To maximize the use of staff development funds, opportunities should be focused on what staff need to know and be able to do to help children and parents achieve the intended outcomes of the program. Program evaluation data can help determine what program areas need improvement and suggest a focus for staff development. In addition, with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind* there are new requirements for staff qualifications for programs such as Title I and Even Start that may need to be addressed in a staff development plan.

When funding for staff development is tight, consider collaborating with other programs in your community with the same or similar staff development needs and combining staff development efforts. Check with your Head Start Collaboration Grant director or the Even Start, Adult Education, Title I and/or Reading First coordinator in your state to find out what staff development opportunities are already being planned to support literacy instruction for children and families.

In addition to staff development, program designers should consider other staff supports. If you want your parenting education opportunities to be accessible to parents, you need to be able to offer them at times when parents are available, including evenings and weekends. You may need part-time staff to supplement your primary staff in order to provide adequate flexible scheduling. Parent educators also need access to adequate materials and supplies. For example, if parent educators are coaching parents on actively engaging children in reading, they need books – books of different genres, books for different ages, and books for different interests. Ideally they should have access to sufficient numbers of books to be able to leave them with parents to use at home. Parent education also needs a budget that covers supports for parents. For example, travel for home visitors, transportation for parents, on-site child care, training materials, meeting refreshments and interpreters (if appropriate) are the most common supports needed to facilitate parents' participation. Fortunately, these are allowable costs for Federal programs such as Even Start, Title I, and Head Start.

In addition to staff development, staff need other supports to be able to do their job well. One of those supports is adequate planning time. If all staff are expected to have a role in parenting education, everyone needs to be involved in creating a strategic plan. This helps everyone to understand how his or her responsibilities fit within the larger picture. Staff also need adequate opportunities to problem solve as a group when parenting education opportunities are not leading to desired outcomes.

Staff also need access to information about and a clear procedure for family referrals to other agencies. Families are often dealing with complex issues – struggles with basic needs, substance abuse, family violence, health/mental health concerns– that create family stress. No one program can handle all the needs of families. Collaboration with other agencies is needed to ensure that families get services without programs having to expand beyond their primary goals. For example, one Even Start program found that during home visits, staff were sometimes spending more time helping families deal with a crisis than on the parent-child literacy activities that were the purpose of the visit. The program partnered with a community agency that agreed to provide a crisis worker who would be housed at the adult education building. Parents now see the crisis worker when they attend adult education classes and can set up appointments during their free time to meet with her

instead of waiting for a home visit to talk with some one. Home visitors meet with the crisis worker to keep informed about what she is working on with their families.

### **(Conclusion)**

Program designers and program leadership can make a difference in the quality of the parenting opportunities offered to families. High quality instructional opportunities, sensitive to the interests and needs of families and coupled with adequate supports, can make a difference in how parents view and perform their role as their child's teacher. Children from low-income, disadvantaged families have the most to gain from program interventions that involve their parents in meaningful parenting education opportunities.

Think of this resource document as a springboard for action. It was designed to get program designers and program leadership thinking about how to improve the quality of the parenting education opportunities provided by their program. The next step is for you to become your own researcher and learn more about the impact of quality parent-child interactions on cognitive development. Talk with other programs about strategies they've used to engage parents in their children's learning. Ask parents what they are interested in learning and what supports they need to help their children acquire important language and reading related skills. Engage your staff discussions about research-based practice and about sharing the responsibility for parenting education. Collaborate with other programs in your community and share resources to ensure that there is a consistency of messages about role of parents in children's education. Work toward building a continuum of services for families from birth to school entry by sharing resources.

Parenting education doesn't just happen. It takes knowledge, careful planning and hard work. Strong leadership is critical for creating a vision for parenting education and bringing others on board so plans move from rhetoric to reality.

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