

Enhancing Family Competence Through Literacy Activities

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SUMMARY. The present paper describes the range of positive family outcomes found when the parents of low-income preschoolers engage in literacy activities with their children. One hundred parents attended a series of family literacy workshops designed to instruct parents on the use of effective book sharing techniques to use with their children. The goal of the program was to increase the children's school readiness and emergent literacy skills by training parents to be more effective and self-confident "first teachers" of the type of literacy skills necessary for early school success. Parents reported that both the amount of parent-child book sharing increased and the time spent reading was more interesting and enjoyable. Children's language skills as well as their interest in books and learning increased. Personal benefits to the parent

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included enhanced self-esteem and self confidence, increased knowledge of normative child development and sense of efficacy as a parent, heightened understanding of the importance of parental involvement, increased feeling of literacy competence and interest in improving their own education, and sense of increased social support. Other family members (spouses and siblings) also increased their literacy activities. Family relationships, communication, and feelings of togetherness were also enhanced. Implications for individual and family competency enhancing interventions are discussed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]

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Being literate is thought to be a significant factor in a person's ability to function successfully in society and thus, is perhaps the single most important skill a child can acquire (Dorotik & Betzold, 1992; Hess, Holloway, Price, & Dickson, 1982). The U.S. Department of Education's most recent national survey reported that nearly 25% of all Americans (more than 40 million adults) are functionally illiterate (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993). These individuals have difficulty reading the safety labels on medications, filling out applications, following written instructions, writing a note to their child's teacher, and reading a newspaper. Low literacy negatively affects both the individual and society as a whole as it contributes to poor school achievement, high dropout rates, underemployment and unemployment, welfare dependence, crime and incarceration, and poverty (Sticht & McDonald, 1989). In a technologically advanced, print-dependent environment, the illiterate are often excluded from full and meaningful participation in society and are placed "at risk" as consumers, employees, tenants, and parents. At highest risk for inadequate literacy skill development are people of color and those from low-income backgrounds (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993).

The acquisition of age-appropriate language skills is basic to a child's educational progress and achievement. Children from low-income, urban backgrounds are at high risk for underachievement, school adjustment problems, and dropping out (Children's Defense Fund, 1992; Raz & Bryant, 1990; Tuma, 1989). The Carnegie Founda-

tion's report on school readiness found that as many as 35 percent of children entering kindergarten are unprepared for formal education with deficits in "language richness" rated as a "moderate-to-serious" problem for 88% of these unprepared youngsters (Boyer, 1991). In other words, significant numbers of children from low-income, urban areas enter school deficient in the necessary prerequisite skills for academic success and, once in school, engage in a perpetual game of academic "catch-up" which many eventually lose (Alexander & Entwistle, 1988; Morrison, McMahon, & Williamson, 1993). While functional literacy skills guarantee neither positive school adjustment as a child nor successful vocational achievement as an adult, without these skills such accomplishments are nearly impossible.

The need for preventive efforts during the preschool years focused on school readiness, in general, and language readiness, in particular, is clear. The importance and necessity of involving parents at this early stage is also clear. Parents are the child's first and perhaps their most influential teacher. Literacy development begins in early childhood within the context of looking at books and listening to stories being read or told to them by an adult. Parent-child storytelling activities encourage the development of rudimentary emergent literacy skills that are essential for successful mastery of more formal reading instruction (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Research suggests that preschool-aged children whose parents read to them on a regular basis become more competent readers and are significantly more successful in school (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1984; Rich, 1985; Stevenson & Fredman, 1990; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1991; Wells, 1985). Research also shows that one of the best predictors of a child's educational success is the parent's positive involvement in the educational process (Reynolds, 1991; Rich, 1985). Unfortunately, functional illiteracy and insecurity about their own reading competence discourage many low-income parents from engaging in both parent-child literacy activities and active involvement in their child's schooling.

Clearly, if low literacy and early school failure in high risk children is to be prevented, early intervention focused on developing or improving parent-child literacy activities before a child enters school would seem to be a most propitious place to begin. The existing literature includes examples of several different approaches to teaching effective parent-child literacy strategies (e.g., Arnold & White-

hurst, 1994; Cronan, Cruz, & Arriaga, 1996; Edwards, 1991; McCormick & Mason, 1986). The present study reports the results of a family literacy intervention that involved training parents to be more effective "first teachers" of the types of emergent literacy skills that are important factors in children's readiness for school, reading acquisition, and later school success. The evaluation will focus not only on the "intended" outcome of increased language skills in the target preschoolers but also on the "unintended" positive consequences at both the individual and the family systems levels.

METHOD

The Adrienne Kirby Family Literacy Project

The Adrienne Kirby Family Literacy Project is a competency-enhancing intervention program. Its goal is to increase low-income, preschool-age children's language and school readiness skills. The project is a "resource exchange" (Sarason & Lorentz, 1979) collaboration between an urban, non-profit family service agency and a private, suburban university (Primavera, 1999). The Family Literacy Project consists of a child and a parent component. The child component provides individual or small group language tutoring in the classrooms by over 200 undergraduate volunteers for nearly all of the 800 preschoolers enrolled in the agency's Head Start/Childcare program (Primavera, 1999; Primavera & Cook, 1997). The goal of the parent component is to enhance the children's emergent literacy skills by training parents to become more effective "first teachers" to their children and to increase the parents' sense of competence and involvement in their children's education. Parents attend an eight-session series of literacy workshops led by workshop facilitator who is a member of the Head Start staff. The literacy activities presented in the workshops are modeled after the "Parents as Partners in Reading" curriculum (Edwards, 1990) and are designed to instruct parents, regardless of their own literacy skills, in age-appropriate book-sharing techniques to use with their children. The lessons rely heavily upon modeling and role-playing. Each session consists of a full group meeting where formal instruction, video presentations, discussion, or activity preview takes place followed by more individualized practice of

the particular book sharing/literacy skill(s) featured for that session. For example, one activity was designed to help parents develop effective book-reading techniques by showing how a child's attention might be increased by the use of different parent-child seating arrangements or different book-holding strategies or by changing voice tones and inflections. Another activity was designed to acquaint parents with the types of questions that they could ask their children during reading to stimulate the development of the more advanced of literacy skills utilized in formal schooling (e.g., answers that must be put together from different parts of the story or answers that cannot be found in the story and rely on the child's own experiences). Each week parents are provided with "homework" assignments that reinforce the concepts presented during the workshop session. The workshop series culminates with a parent book-making project where each parent authors their own book to become part of their child's home library.

Participants

From September 1994-June 1998 (four academic years), 100 parents/guardians (97 mothers and 3 fathers) of preschool-aged children (age 3-5 years; 52% male, 48% female) enrolled in an urban Head Start/Childcare program volunteered to participate in the parent workshop component of the Adrienne Kirby Family Literacy Project. The Project was advertised (i.e., via posted announcements in the Head Start classrooms and by direct invitation by the teacher) as one that would focus on helping parents help their children be successful in school. The participating families were representative of the demographics of the approximately 800 families serviced by the agency's Head Start/Childcare program: 48% were Black/Caribbean; 39% Hispanic/Latino; and 13% White. For 25% of these families, a language other than English was spoken in the home. Seventy-nine percent of the families were single parent, mother-headed households. All families were either receiving public assistance or had yearly family incomes of less than \$20,000. Parents' educational level ranged from less than eighth grade to having some college experience. Thirty-seven percent of the parents did not have a high school diploma or its equivalent. Self-reported reading ability ranged from functionally illiterate to literate.

Procedure

The information gathered was derived from three sources: pre- and post-interviews with participating parents, journal entries of the workshop facilitators, and teacher assessments of the children's progress. To control for existing differences in participating parents' literacy levels, all assessments were conducted via semi-structured interviews with Project staff. Two raters conducted a content analysis of the interviews to identify the themes expressed in the participants' responses. A coding scheme was developed that defined each of these themes. Two other raters coded the participants' responses. The inter-coder agreement was 95%. Coding differences were resolved by consensus.

Pre-Project Assessment. Before beginning the literacy workshop series, participating parents answered a series of questions (either open-ended or Likert-type ratings) related to: (1) their personal and parent-child reading activities (e.g., "In a typical week, how often do you read the newspaper? . . . read a magazine? . . . read a book?"; "When you read newspapers, magazines, or books for yourself, how much time do you spend reading?"; "In a typical week, how often do you and your child read or look at books?"; "When you read or look at books with your child, about how much time do you spend?"), (2) their level of satisfaction with both their own reading ability and their ability to share books with their children, and (3) the availability of reading material in the home.

Post-Project Assessment. At the conclusion of the parent workshop series and at the end of the academic year, parents answered a series of questions (either open-ended or Likert-type ratings) related to their perceptions of overall program success and, more specifically, how their participation in the literacy workshops had affected (1) the quality of parent-child book sharing, (2) their preschool-age child's language skills, (3) their feeling about themselves and about their own literacy skills, and (4) other family members (i.e., siblings, spouses). In addition, the teachers of the children of participating parents were asked to assess the children's language skill improvement and to indicate the type of language skills that had shown most improvement.

RESULTS*Pre-Program Literacy Behaviors and Satisfaction*

The data suggested that prior to participating in the project, the majority of parents were sharing books with their children and reading on their own on a regular basis. Forty-one percent reported that they shared books or read to their child every day or nearly every day (5-6 times per week) and 17% reported a frequency of three or four times per week. Infrequent (1-2 times per week) parent-child book sharing was reported by 26% of the parents while 3% stated that they never shared books or read to their child. In terms of how much time they spend sharing books with their child, 40% of the parents said that their parent-child book sharing sessions typically lasted 15 minutes or less; 40% spent 15 to 30 minutes sharing books per session, and 20% spent 30 minutes or more.

Parents' reports of their own personal literacy behaviors revealed that a significant number were non-readers or infrequent readers. Overall, 20% percent reported that they never read books for pleasure and 12% never read newspapers or magazines. Fifty-two percent were infrequent (1-2 times per week) book, newspaper or magazine readers while only 26% read the newspaper and 12% read a book every day or nearly every day (5-6 times per week). The majority of parents (67%) reported that when they did read it was typically for 30 minutes or less.

Only a small percentage of parents reported that they were "very dissatisfied" or "somewhat dissatisfied" with their ability to share books with their child (10%) or their own reading skills (27%). The majority of parents categorized themselves as being "very satisfied" with parent-child book sharing skills (63%) and personal reading ability (51%).

The availability of children's books in the home varied considerably from no books to well over fifty. Fifty-eight percent of the homes had twenty or more children's books in the home while 14% had five or less.

Overall Program Success

When asked to rate the success of the program in meeting its goal of helping parents prepare their children for school by increasing their

language skills, 97% of the parents gave the program the highest rating with the remaining 3% rating the program as "somewhat successful" (1 = not at all successful; 4 = very successful). One hundred percent of the parents said that the program was "helpful" in teaching them to more effectively share books with their children and that they would recommend the program to other parents.

All parents should join the program. I always would read to my children a lot and I thought I knew how to do everything. But here [the program] I learned how to read to them better. They are more interested [in books] now. They ask me to read to them all the time. It changed everything. I feel more ready to help them in school. My kids learned so many new words. We have so much fun reading together!

The Quality of Parent-Child Book Sharing

Seventy-two percent of the parents said that they have learned how important reading to their child is to their child's future success in school. Eighty-nine percent of the parents said that, as a result of the program, they spend more time reading to their child. Most parents said that they learned how to make reading time more interesting for their child (82%) and that reading time was "more enjoyable" and "more fun" for both parent and child (75%). Many parents reported instituting some form of daily reading rituals (e.g., after dinner, before bed) and a decreased amount of television viewing. Over 1,000 books per year were borrowed from the Project lending library and nearly one-third (31%) of the families became new users of their local public library.

I used to just read, read, read. And he used to wiggle around and not pay attention 'til I yelled at him. Now I know that it's not important to finish a book if he wants to talk about one page. I learned how to 'make funny voices' and give him hugs and kisses so we have more fun. Now instead of 'Mommy, stop!,' he say 'Mommy, more books!' I make time every day now to read to him no matter how busy I am.

I read more to my children. I did not read enough before. I read to them every day now. And I read books that will help them learn.

I learned how to pick books that will help them learn more. I took my children to the library and now they have their own cards. Now they can choose their own books.

Children's Language Skills

Both parents and classroom teachers indicated that the children made substantial gains in their language skills as a result of the home literacy activities. Using a 4-point Likert rating scale (1 = no improvement; 4 = significantly/greatly improved), 47% of the parents and 30% of the teachers rated the children's improvement language skills as "significantly improved," 43% of the parents and 42% of the teachers rated the language improvement as "moderately improved," and 10% of the parents and 28% of the teachers described the children's language skills as "a little improved." Parents and teachers noted increases in the children's vocabulary and that the children used more words and understood more words in conversation. They also noted that the children were able to express their ideas with greater detail and conceptual clarity and that their speech/pronunciation was more understandable. The children were also seen as being better able to use their imaginations and more interested in learning, in general, and in learning how to read and write, in particular.

Parent Outcome

The data suggested that parents reaped significant personal benefits through their participation in the parent literacy workshops including: enhanced self-esteem, self confidence, and pride; an increased knowledge of normative child development and sense of efficacy as a parent; a sense of empowerment in playing a crucial role in their child's education; an increased feeling of literacy competence and interest in improving their own education; and sense of increased social support and decreased feelings of isolation.

Seventy-one percent mentioned that they felt better about themselves, proud of themselves for how they are able to help their child learn, or more confident in what they do.

Even though I did not receive my high school diploma I feel very good about myself. I see that I am helping my children. When I

read the books they think I am so smart and so funny. When I read, it encourages them to be like Mommy 'a reader.' They are proud of me and that makes me proud of me too.

Before I don't read books to my children because I [was] scared to say some of the words. Now I see how much they learn and how much I learn too. I can help them even if I don't read so good now. But I'm learning to read better too!

Sixty-eight percent said that they had achieved a greater understanding of their children's age-appropriate developmental needs and capabilities and that they had learned more creative and effective ways to parent their children.

My daughter used to line up her dolls and open a book to 'read' to them. But she wasn't 'reading,' she was just making up stories in her head. I used to yell at her and tell her to stop making up stories. Now I know that it was good what she was doing. Now I know that I should praise her for trying to 'read' to her dolls. It's good for child to use make-believe.

My older daughter always gave me such a problem with doing her homework. I usually ended up yelling at her or punishing her. Then I started using the things I learned here [the literacy workshops] about how to make reading more fun and I tried some of the things with my daughter's homework. Now it is more like a game. She does her homework every day and we don't have to fight as much.

Sixty-six percent mentioned that the program taught them how important a parent is to their child's school success. Seventy-one percent felt better able to help their child succeed in school.

I had such a hard time in school when I was growing up that I pretty much stayed out of my older kids' school. I figured they're smart. They can do it. Now I know I need to be there every step of the way. I need to get in there and be a part of it. If I don't know something, we can learn together. I can help my older ones like I'm helping [my preschooler].

A little over one-half of the parents (51%) reported that as a result of their participation in the program they were thinking about return-

ing to school themselves to further their education. Follow-up contacts by the Head Start staff revealed that 25% of the parents had returned to school ranging from general education studies to high school diploma equivalency programs to college courses.

My mother didn't know how to read so I had to struggle more than the other kids in school. This group helped me to decide to do something about it. If I'm going to be able to help my kids, I have to be able to read better. I'm going back to school.

I never told anyone before but I can't read. I'm smart so I learned the tricks to 'get by' and fool people. It's easy to fool people. I think bringing these books home is helping me. They're easy so I don't make too many mistakes. Pretty soon my kids will be using harder books in school and I won't be able to fool them. I need to go to school. Funny thing, I really think I can do it this time.

Perhaps the most striking example of personal empowerment was the professional advancement of one of the mothers who participated in the very first parent workshop series. After completing the program, this mother applied for a job as an Assistant Teacher at the agency. She matriculated at the local community college and received her Associates degree in Early Childhood Education. She is now the Head Teacher of her Head Start classroom and has served as one of the three parent workshop facilitators for the Family Literacy Project for over two years.

Finally, 68% of the parents indicated that they benefited psychologically from the social support they received from the parents' group as they faced the difficult task of effective parenting within a stressful, sometimes dangerous urban environment. They reported that they felt less alone, less afraid, and better able to cope with the challenges of daily living.

Effects on Other Family Members and Family Functioning

Participants reported numerous positive consequences within their family and for other family members who did not directly participate in the Project. In the majority of the two parent households (65%), program parents indicated that their spouse also became more involved in sharing books with the children. Of the 84 families consist-

ing of two or more children, 84% reported positive effects for the target preschooler's older or younger siblings. Younger siblings were included in parent-child reading time where they otherwise would have been excluded because they were "too young" and target preschoolers were apt to imitate the book sharing behaviors of their parents and "read" to their younger siblings. Older children were found to be reading more themselves, to model the behavior of their parents and become more involved in reading books to their younger siblings, to improve in their own reading skills due to increased practice, and to achieve higher grades. The most dramatic case was that of an 8-year-old girl whose mother was told that her daughter would be placed in a class for "slow learners" the following school year because of her poor language skills and difficulty mastering third grade material. The mother, who was functionally illiterate herself, began to use the strategies she had learned in the literacy workshops with both her 3-year-old and her 8-year-old. The television was turned off and, one hour each day was set aside as "reading time." The mother encouraged both girls to use their imagination and tell stories or to remember what they had done that day and relate the details in sequence. She made vocabulary games out of almost every commonplace daily routine (e.g., meals, shopping). The older child's reading skills quickly progressed using the easier preschool books as a starting level. By the end of that academic year (6 months later), the girl was performing at grade level in all areas including reading and the issue of placement in a remedial program was abandoned.

At a larger family systems level, parents frequently commented that the successful and enjoyable experience of reading together resulted in a more general improvement in both parent-child relationships and sibling relationships. Interactions within the family were seen as being more positive, communication between family members increased, and there was an increased sense of closeness and togetherness.

DISCUSSION

The present study found that, in addition to the "intended" outcome of increased emergent literacy and school readiness skills in the target preschoolers, the families that participated in the Family Literacy Project also displayed a host of positive "unintended" consequences as well. These positive outcomes included increases in multiple

indices of well-being for individual family members as well as several positive changes at a family systems level.

Two of the most important protective factors that support the development of both literacy competence and social-emotional competency in low-income preschoolers are exposure to engaging, responsive, and cognitively challenging caregiver-child interactions and the caregiver's level of self-esteem (Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1994). The data presented here suggests that even an eight-week intervention is capable of setting that protective process in motion. The data suggest that parents, regardless of their reading proficiency, were able to adopt interpersonally enjoyable, cognitively stimulating book sharing strategies that were appropriate for their child's interests and temperament. The parents' experience of success with the Project's literacy activities contributed to increased feelings of parental efficacy, self-confidence, and competence. Persons with a positive sense of self can be expected to cope in a planful, focused, and active way with the problems and challenges confronting them (Schier & Carver, 1992). This type of empowerment was well-documented by the workshop facilitators' journals. These parents began to take more risks while in the process of trying to help their children succeed in school. They volunteered more frequently in their child's classroom, they shared intimate details about their own literacy deficits, they secured information regarding the city's magnet programs and submitted applications for their children, they applied for employment, and they matriculated in school themselves. Clearly no single, short-term intervention is sufficient to combat the negative impact of intergenerational illiteracy or to offset the powerful deleterious influence of poverty, but interventions such as the one described here represent a powerful "first step."

Indeed, the families' positive experience with the Project seems to have set in motion a series of inter-related, mutually sustaining psychological and cognitive processes. For example, the gains in language skills exhibited by the children might serve to validate the parents' feelings of personal efficacy and self-confidence that they, indeed, do have the power to help their children be successful in school. These efficacy beliefs would support increased levels of parental involvement in the child's education, which, in turn, further fosters continued academic success (Eccles & Harold, 1996).

Low income children are considered to be at risk for early school failure and the blame is often placed on the inferior quality and quanti-

ty of parent-child literacy activities, especially book reading (Adams, 1990; Snow & Ninio, 1986; Teale, 1986). Clearly, no one factor leads to school success or failure and being poor in and of itself is not responsible for a lack of school readiness, deficient literacy skills, and poor achievement. It is not whether a child lives in a poor or middle class home or whether that home is in the city or the suburbs or whether the child's skin is dark or light. Rather, it is the kinds of literacy activities that are generated in the home (White, 1982). The data reported in this study echoes the claim of Delgado-Gaitan (1990) that low-income parents are very interested and concerned about their children's school success, but many lack the necessary skills and resources to effectively break the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy. The majority of parents in this study provided their children with an adequate home library and nearly one-half reported that they read to their children every day or nearly every day. Unfortunately, few parents were good models for voluntary reading in that most reported being infrequent readers themselves. What is perhaps most disconcerting is the fact that prior to participating in the program, most parents overestimated their reading and book sharing competence and reported that they were "very satisfied" with their skills. This fact mirrors the U.S. Department of Education's finding that the majority of functionally illiterate Americans do not perceive themselves as being "at risk" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). These findings have important implications for those providing family literacy services. That is, parents are more likely to volunteer for and commit to an intervention that is advertised as being related to enhancing their children's competencies than they might be if it is focused on their own literacy needs. In fact, the first time the present program was offered, it was called "The Family Literacy Project" and parent turnout was poor. Parents told Project staff that many of their friends refused to come because they did not think that they had any problems reading. A change in the Project's name to "Parents as Partners" as well as the addition of the two recruitment mottoes "Help your child get ready for kindergarten" and "Help your child succeed in school" solved the attendance problem.

This study provides evidence those early interventions that train parents, regardless of their reading proficiency, to use effective book sharing techniques with their children can improve children's language skills, enhance the parents' efficacy beliefs and self esteem, as

well as have a positive impact on family functioning as a whole. Although longitudinal data for this study is not available to assess the longevity of the intervention's positive impact, the literature related to long term effects of early intervention programs suggests that it is important for early intervention programs to offer additional, post-intervention follow-through contact (Zigler, 1998). The provision of a series of follow-through literacy sessions would serve to either reinforce a previously learned skill, or to provide a boost to participants' investment in the intervention, or to teach new, more advanced skills to keep pace with the developmental needs and capabilities of the family members.

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