

Thank you for this opportunity to share some of the current thinking about the importance of parent involvement in early childhood development. I will concentrate my remarks on the development of language and literacy, since this is where most of my work has been focused.

I am a teacher educator. Though I have done a fair amount of research over the years, my primary contribution to the field has been as translator of research to practice. I have been a classroom teacher and learning disabilities specialist. I am also a mother and grandmother. So, I bring many perspectives to the table.

Though I focus my remarks today on parents, virtually everything I have to say also applies to child caregivers, whether they are grandparents or childcare workers in home care or preschool settings. These individuals are often with young children for most of their waking hours and, of course, caregivers frequently act in familial ways with the children in their charge. I have organized my comments around three major points:

**Point #1. Literacy learning starts early and persists throughout life.**

Learning to read and write is an ongoing process from infancy. Contrary to popular belief, it does not suddenly begin in kindergarten or first grade. From the earliest years, everything that adults do to support children's language and literacy *really* counts.

Research indicates that:

>Although oral language is foundational to literacy development, the two also develop concurrently. What children learn from listening and talking contributes to their ability to read and write and vice versa. For example, young children's phonological awareness (ability to identify and make oral rhymes, identify and work with syllables in spoken words, and the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds – phonemes- in spoken words) is an important indicator of their potential success in learning to read. Phonological awareness begins early with rhyming games and chants, often on a parent's knee.

>Children who fall behind in oral language and literacy development are less likely to be successful beginning readers; and their achievement lag is likely to persist throughout the primary grades and beyond. (Juel)

>It is not enough to simply teach early literacy skills in isolation. Teaching children to apply the skills they learn has a significantly greater effect on their ability to read. (Report of the National Reading Panel)

Implications:

Parents and caregivers need to:

- Know that a child's capacity for learning is not determined at birth and there is a great deal they as parents and caregivers can do about it. (Zero to Three)
- Be aware that there are many informal and enjoyable ways that language and literacy skills can be developed in the home.
- Provide opportunities for children to use what they know about language and literacy in order to help them transfer what they know to new situations.

**Point #2. Oral language is the foundation for literacy development.**

Oral language provides children with a sense of words and sentences; builds sensitivity to the sound system so that children can acquire phonological awareness and phonics; and it is the means by which children demonstrate their understandings of the meanings of words and written materials.

Research indicates that:

>Children reared in families where parents provide rich language and literacy support do better in school than those who do not. Language-poor families are likely to use fewer different words in their everyday conversations and the language environment is more likely to be controlling and punitive. (Hart & Risely)

>Exposure to less common, more sophisticated vocabulary (*rare words*) at home relates directly to children's vocabulary acquisition. Rare words are those that go beyond the typical 8,500 most common words in the English language (Dickinson & Tabors).

>There is a strong relationship between vocabulary development and reading achievement. We know that good readers combine a variety of strategies to read words; and that even when children have excellent decoding skills, they frequently meet words for which the pronunciation is not easily predictable. Children, who acquire strong vocabularies, increase their ability to make use of what a word might be along with what they know about phonics. (Nagy, Clay)

**Implications:**

Parents and other caregivers should -

- Take time to listen and respond to children.
- Talk *to* and *with* children not *at* them.
- Engage children in extended conversations about events, storybooks, and a variety of other print media.
- Explain things to children.
- Use sophisticated and unusual words in their everyday talk with children, when it is appropriate to the conversation.

**Point #3. Children's experiences with the world and with print greatly influence their ability to comprehend what they read.**

True reading involves understanding. What children bring to a text, whether oral or written, influences the understandings they take away.

Research indicates that:

The more limited a child's experiences the more likely he or she will have difficulty with reading. There are two kinds of experiences that are highly influential to literacy development. Both can and should be provided in the home:

- Background knowledge about the world
- Background knowledge about print and books

(Rand/OERI Report)

Implications:

Parents and caregivers need to -

- Keep in mind that interesting concepts and vocabulary do not emerge from a vacuum. Parents should help provide interesting content to think and talk about.
- Involve children in trips to local points of interest and talk with them about what they see and do.
- Establish a habit of raising and responding to children's questions about things that occur in the home environment or at trips to local points of interest.
- Provide time for reading to children and talking with them about what is read.
- Share a variety of types of literature, including lots of informational books. Books stimulate conversations about ideas and concepts beyond everyday experiences.
- Make books accessible for children to return to on their own to "pretend read" -- a child's personal reenactment of the read-aloud experience.

In a setting like this, one cannot help but think of the famous questions: "What did you know?" and "When did you know it?" I have offered what I think are among the most important things that we know about parent involvement in early childhood language and literacy development. I can tell you that we have known these things for some time. Perhaps the key question of me today is "What are you doing about it?"

There are some important efforts in place, most notably some of the Even Start programs and the Family Literacy programs that are involved with Head Start. I do not think that we have touched the surface, however, in terms of reaching the vast number of parents who need this information, particularly those who choose to stay at home with their children and those who are caregivers in family day care settings. My concern is that too few children are benefiting from what we already know. Reaching stay-at-home parents and family day care providers, perhaps through the media or through links with existing child care providers, may be the new frontier of support for early childhood development.



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