

Parent Education and Literacy

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Parents and carers can have a profound impact on their children's literacy learning. They can make a difference to how their children discover the world of literacy and how they fall in love with books and, ultimately, how they view themselves as literacy users.

Most parents, however, are unsure of how to teach reading or support their children's literacy development. The strategies and ideas they use are often based on what they think they did when they were at school. Despite their commitment and good intention, they are often left feeling bewildered and stressed when their children fail to succeed.

An intensive review of the literature pertaining to parent education and literacy highlights the following:

In the majority of cases, parents have a vested interest in their children achieving literacy success. They want their children to succeed. They have ready access and in many cases they elect to make time and provide one-on-one assistance to children experiencing literacy difficulties. Despite their work commitments and home commitments, they will find time.

The most effective programs for parents are those where they learn to apply reading strategies. Going beyond just reading aloud, parents who read to their children in combination with literacy strategies contributed the most to positive outcomes.

Parent programs where parents were taught specific literacy skills to use with their children were twice as effective compared to those where parents listened to their children read.

The definition of 'parents' needs to be extended to include a diverse array of carers. At our parent program, we have lots of grandparents appearing. We have fathers, step-parents, mothers, stepmothers – that's the nature of families today. There is a growing involvement of grandparents as primary carers and providers of education support. We need to give them some ideas and strategies as well. Parent education initiatives must reflect the changing nature of families and recognise the many and diverse ways that families are constituted.

The proliferation of parent programs in the early years diminishes beyond Year 3. That's a sad fact but, you know, we've put in prevention methods but after Year 3 very few programs exist. While there has been a significant emphasis on the role of parents in the early years, few parent programs, according to research by Wasik, address the needs of children in the primary grades and beyond.

Evidence-based, prolonged research on the effectiveness of parent education programs is lacking. Unfortunately, most programs are short-lived, often school-based and predominantly designed for parents of children in the early years of school. In-depth descriptions of the components of reading programs, meaning the specific content and strategies and how programs go about evaluation, are often overlooked.

The role of fathers in children's literacy development has been largely ignored. While there is a considerable body of research on the effects of literacy interventions with mothers of young children, studies of the impact of literacy programs with fathers is truly neglected. Researchers Anderson, Streelasky and Anderson found that the dominant image on a hundred randomly selected family literacy websites was of mothers reading a book with her young child.

When we look at the essential criteria for effective parent education programs, there are seven points that I'd like to make.

That parents participate in hands-on and practical approaches to literacy. Parents need to understand why particular practices are important. If they don't understand that then they don't see the relevance of applying that in their home context. Parents benefit from opportunities to discuss and practise literacy routines before implementing them on their own in their homes. So strategies should be easy, enjoyable and consistent.

The second thing is, whatever happens in parent education programs should provide authentic, interesting, quality reading texts. Parents need to know what to use to excite their children to want to read. So, often, effective parent programs have a lending library. This is an ideal way to encourage family literacy opportunities at home. The lending library allows children to choose texts that they are excited to read.

A third aspect of parent education programs is really to involve parents in the planning and to build on the literacy practices associated with what the family already does and what's already being done in terms of literacy in the community. Programs should be designed to meet the specific needs of parent groups. It's important to recognise and respect the unique and differing ways that families participate and promote literacy in their homes. So the parent education program should encompass all forms of reading and writing across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

A fourth aspect is to provide ongoing training, communication and support. A parent education program just doesn't happen in isolation. It should include many opportunities for discussion and questions. Parents often feel threatened about their own lack of education or ability to read so, for them, coming to a parent education course can be very threatening. The course needs to be sensitive to the needs of parents and meet them wherever they're at and provide ongoing support and personal contact. It is possible that a program serves two purposes: one, that it improves the parents' literacy skills; and secondly, it enhances the learning of their own children.

A fifth aspect is ensuring accessibility in regards to time and place. We really have to take into consideration where the program happens and at what time it's happening. Often, the research shows that it's most effective when combined with other services, such as health; social services.

And parent education programs must set realistic expectations. Time is an important consideration of home reading programs and in our program our expectation is that parents only spend and commit to ten minutes a night reading with their children. We find that they go beyond that and parents tend to be able to meet that.

Reading routines should be established at home and we've found that it's useful for parents to keep a log of their reading activities.

A seventh aspect is to provide opportunities for networking. The parents that have turned up at parent education programs need to know that they're not isolated and that there are others who share similar concerns.

An example of a parent education program is U-CAN READ: Literacy interventions in Years 3 to 10. This is a joint project of the ACT Department of Education and the University of Canberra. It's housed at the University of Canberra. Parents attend the seminar series and then, along with their children, they attend up to 12 weekly sessions, working with a literacy adviser. It's based on establishing collaboration between the parent and the child. It's not about tutoring the child, it's really about educating the parent and then having the parent work with the child to achieve literacy success. So the notion is that we introduce a lot of ideas and strategies in the parent seminar series and then the parent applies these at home and gets additional support in the one-on-one sessions. Here are some strategies that we use.

First of all, train parents in book orientation. We want to put the scaffolding into place so that before the child even encounters a book, they're familiar with the vocabulary, the content, the genre. They know that this book is actually going to be of interest to them. We want it to be non-stressful so, with parents, we introduce them to a lot of strategies around independent, paired, guided, shared reading. One of the most effective strategies we find is something called NIM – Neurological Impress Method. It's a very simple strategy where the child and the parent share the book, with the child reading along and echo-reading behind the parent.

Another thing that we really want parents to do is to stop taking over responsibility for choosing books for their children. We want to put that back in the hands of the child. We want the child to make informed choices when it comes to books and we want to find ways to celebrate the choices they make. This child may choose a book that's beyond their reading level but, as an adult and a parent, it's important that we give the child access to that. That may mean just reading through, flicking through the pages and talking about illustrations. It might mean reading the first chapter and having the child read the second; reading one paragraph, the child read the next. We need to find ways of giving the child access to the books that they're choosing to read.

Another really important aspect of parent education programs is to give parents ideas and strategies around prompting. We need to move parents out of being instant word factories. They need to know what to do when their child struggles with a word because readers who are struggling often fixate. They come to an unfamiliar word and just don't know what to do beyond that. So if the parent knows to say things like, 'Read on', 'Go back to the beginning', 'Have another look at that', 'Does that make sense?' They're the sorts of strategies that are assisting the child to become independent.

Another aspect that we've discovered in the Literacy Centre is that structural language is so important. If you always sit in the same place to read and it's always at the kitchen bench and it's always stressful and everyone ends up frustrated, move. Go and sit on the lounge room floor; sit on the bean bag; pull the books off the shelf; play; go outside and sit under a tree. Structural language can also alter the context in which reading occurs. We have to put fun and enjoyment back into it. So when a parent reads with a child, we want them to use funny voices. Read jokes; read newspapers; read the things that you love to read; a magazine that you've picked up off the shelf. There's nothing to say that your ten minutes can't be done reading that little excerpt. There is no right book, there's only access into many books and we have to get children excited about that possibility.

At U-CAN READ, we hear many positive outcomes from the education we do with parents. We love it when we hear parents say that they've been freed up to enjoy reading with their children and that the family dynamic around literacy has changed. We know then that we're on the right track.

When a parent can instil a love of reading instead of a message of fear and failure, children respond accordingly. We want parents and children to work together in a context of joy and happiness around reading because that's what's going to transfer into the classroom; and it's really going to make a difference to how that child feels about themselves as a reader. That has to be our commitment in parent education: to give parents strategies and ideas for them to feel that they really, truly, are supporting their child's literacy success.