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PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING
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He has become more independent and confident. He will attempt a difficult word without asking me or will read on and come back to it. He enjoys reading more now that I am more relaxed and not correcting him all the time.

(A parent, 2009)

Educating parents about reading makes a difference not only to how children learn to read but also to how they support and encourage their children's efforts. Parents and carers can be an under-utilised and undervalued resource when it comes to supporting literacy learning. In the majority of cases, parents and carers have a vested interest in and a strong commitment to their children achieving literacy success. They make time to read with and listen to their children. However, if their children struggle with reading, they often feel bewildered, frustrated and a sense of shame. Too often, their children continue to struggle and suffer the consequences of their parents' guilt associated with not being able to remedy the situation. As Cunningham and Allington, (2003) confirm most parents are unsure of how to teach reading or help their children with literacy development.

Valuing Parents in the Reading Process

by **Kaye Lowe**

This PETAA Paper explores the many reasons for involving parents and examines effective ways to promote sustained involvement. Collaborating and uniting with parents to support the literacy success of all children is our best option for reducing literacy failure. Research indicates that educating parents about literacy learning and providing them with some effective strategies results in improved literacy outcomes.

Why parents are our best allies when it comes to teaching reading

The reasons for involving parents are many and the more significant reasons are included below. The positive results for their children's literacy learning are undeniable.

Improved learning outcomes

Research by Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) states that children from homes where parents model the uses of literacy and engage children in activities that promote basic understandings about literacy and its uses are better prepared for school. According to Purcell-Gates (2000), the number of children achieving literacy success was significantly increased when parents co-operated actively in their children's school education right from the start.

Improved literacy outcomes

Senechal's (2006) intervention studies involving 1174 families showed that overall parent involvement had a positive impact on children's reading acquisition. Parent programs, where they were taught specific literacy skills to use with their children, were twice as effective as those where parents listened to their children read and six times more effective than those where parents were encouraged to read to their children. Toomey (1993) reinforces Senechal's findings and states that parents listening to their children read contributed to reading improvement of their children.

▶ However, students whose parents were given simple but specific strategies on how to read books sent home from school, fared better than students whose parents were given general strategies. General strategies could be simply: 'Read to your child every night'. Specific strategies include the use of prompting clues, paired reading, guided reading, or book orientations.

In a recent parent course involving forty-six parents, they were asked how they help their children at home with reading. The majority answered that they read to their children. Most were not aware of strategies and recognised that what they were doing was not enough. Often they were frustrated and understandably one parent confessed to resorting to enticements: 'We make special trips to the book store with donuts and frozen coke after.'

Improved attitudes to reading

Research by Sargent, Hill & Morrison (2006) and Snow, Burns and Griffin, (1998) contends that parental involvement, beliefs, and attitudes toward reading exert a profound impact on children's literacy development.

Added value

Parent-education programs can be designed both to improve the literacy skills of parents as well as to enhance the learning of their children. Darling & Westburg (2004) claim that 'As parents learn about the essential skills for reading and practice those skills with their children, they can support their children's reading acquisition while improving their own' (p.776). Many parents express that through participating in parent-education, they discovered the joy of reading for themselves: 'Yes. I put myself down as really disliking reading and now I know I don't have to be perfect. I now read more.' (A parent, 2009).

Improved parent-child relationships

Parent-education programs provide a means of restoring the bond between the parent and child by using strategies geared for success and fun. Many programs involve parents working alongside their children.

Networks of support

Research by Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee (1998) found that parent programs provide a venue for parents to share their concerns, celebrate their successes and realise that they are not alone in their quest to improve their children's literacy skills.

What is the current status of parent education research?

There is a lack of research on parent-education programs. It appears that most programs are short-lived, often school-based and predominantly designed for parents of children in the early years of school. Few parent programs address the needs of children in the primary grades and beyond.

The changing nature of families means that the notion of parent education has to expand to include a diverse range of carers – mothers, fathers, step parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents and siblings. If parent education and family literacy initiatives are to be inclusive, the changing nature of families and the diversity of communities and cultures must be reflected in the naming of such programs. Recognising and valuing different forms of literacy and the many ways literacy is supported in homes and communities means that parent-education programs must embrace diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

While there is a considerable body of research on the effects of literacy interventions with mothers of young children, Ortiz (1994, 2004), studies of the impact of literacy programs with fathers is generally neglected.

What makes a program effective?

Research indicates that the most effective programs endorse the following principles:

Hands-on approach

Effective parent-education programs are practical, relevant and comprehensible. They help parents understand why particular practices and strategies are important. Parents discuss and practise literacy routines before implementing them, on their own, at home. The program meets them where they are at with ongoing support and personal contact.

Authentic reading texts

Quality reading materials and resources are made available to parents and support their efforts at home. Often parent-education programs are accompanied by a family lending library.

▶ Easy, enjoyable and consistent activities

Time expectations are kept to a minimum of ten to fifteen minutes, five nights a week. Reading time is established as a nightly routine.

Documented home activities

Parents keep logs of their home-reading activities that serve as a reminder and record of the learner's progress.

Accessibility and incentives

Timing, ease of access and availability are important considerations.

Effective parent-education programs offer:

- a broad range of times, for example, during school time, after school, weekends
- incentives such as child care, links to other service providers, certificates of achievement
- multiple modes of delivery, for example, online, hotline, home visits.

Three different models for delivering parent-education programs could be considered:

- 1 Those delivered directly to adults and children
- 2 Those delivered to children only with benefits for parents
- 3 Those delivered to parents with expected benefits for children. (Nickse, 1991).

Parents involved in the planning

Effective programs involve parents in the planning and accommodate the range of different literacy experiences and practices of the community. Effective literacy programs are those that reflect the literacy practices associated with what families already know and do in their home and community.

Course components

While content varies from program to program, there are common features that are described below.

Strategies for prompting

Parents are taught strategies for helping children identify unfamiliar words. Parents are encouraged to use context clues, meaning, and phonic clues. Parents are discouraged from giving direct or inappropriate prompts. Direct prompts include saying the word immediately or telling the child to sound it out. Inappropriate

▶ prompts include taking the child's attention away from the text by saying something like 'It is the same colour as the jacket you had on yesterday.'

Modelling

Parents are instructed on how to read stories aloud at home. It is explained that sharing stories serves numerous purposes: introduces unique language opportunities and rare words, broadens children's horizons, instills confidence, and supports the development of comprehension skills through retelling, dramatic play, and story extensions. **Table 1** lists some strategies that could be used.

Vocabulary

Parents are instructed on the importance of vocabulary and how vocabulary impacts on reading. Examples of strategies are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 1: Specific strategies for parents doing modelled reading with their children

Paired reading	Parent and child read a text together. The child takes over reading alone in sections where they feel confident. The child may devise a method of letting the parent know when he/she wants to read independently, for example, tapping on the parent's arm. For more difficult texts, taking it in turns to read sentences, paragraphs, pages of text could be established prior to the reading.
Shared reading	The parent reads to the child and discusses various text features such as illustrations, headings, and interesting words. The child reads along while appreciating the print and illustrations. The child connects visual to oral language, builds print awareness, and gains confidence.
Choral reading	Parent and child read aloud and in unison. The parent models fluency and expression. The child reader hears patterns of language and develops sight word vocabulary. Poems for two voices, songs and simple scripts could be used.
NIM (Neurological impress method)	Parent and child read the same reading material together and aloud in normal reading voices. The parent moves finger under words in a fluid motion rather than on a word-by-word basis, as the child reads along repeating the words.

Table 2: Strategies for parents to improve children's vocabulary

Extended conversations	Ask questions like: What do you think the author meant by ...? Tell me why you think X did Y ...? What do you think will happen next ...? Why do you think the author did ...? How are these characters the same or different? Why do you think the author used this word?
Develop word awareness and love of words through word play	Puns, riddles, word games, alliteration, poetry, create a family anthology of favourite poems, collect family sayings
Games	Play games such as Up words, Scrabble, Find -a-word, I spy
Scribe stories	The child dictates stories while the parent writes down exactly what was said. The child rereads the story.
Look for unusual and interesting words	Identify prefixes, suffixes and root words while reading aloud. Identify word families and synonyms and antonyms.

Print-related concepts

Parents are taught about concepts of print, phonological awareness and alphabetical principles. Phonological awareness is the awareness of the sound structure of a spoken word. That is, the ability to distinguish units of speech using auditory skills, for example, recognising the syllables and individual phonemes in a word. It includes an awareness only of speech sounds and phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness. Ideas are shared such as sorting food according to beginning sound, using alphabet books, reading and learning nursery rhymes, and playing with alliteration.

Variety of text types

Parents are instructed in the use of many types of text including environmental print, expository texts, factual texts, and the use of scribed texts dictated by the child.

Choosing a book

Methods of book selection are often considered in parent programs, as for example, the five-finger rule below.

The five-finger rule

Parents explain the following to their child:

1. Choose the book you think you would like to read.
2. Open to a middle page that has quite a few words on it.
3. Begin to read the page.
4. Each time you come to a word you don't know, hold one finger up.
5. If you have all five fingers up before you reach the end of the page, you may not be ready for this book just yet. A book where you have two or three fingers up is probably the one that you might like to try.

Independent level of reading – a good choice



Instructional level – too difficult just yet



▶ Book orientations are used in many programs to introduce the child to a book and scaffold their success. Parents spend time talking about the cover, the title, the blurb, unusual words in the book and the story sequence. This is done prior to reading the book together.

Some websites to help parents and children choose appropriate and interesting books

<http://www.storylineonline.net/>

Funded by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the members read a variety of popular children's books.

<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/cmis/eval/fiction/authors/>

Western Australia Department of Education and Training includes information about authors and illustrators of children's and young adult literature. Preference is given to Australian authors and illustrators.

<http://www.insideadog.com.au/>

Insideadog is a project of the Centre for Youth Literature, State Library Victoria. The site promotes young adult literature, highlighting Australian writers.

Behaviour management and discipline

Some programs include a component that examines ways to manage children's behaviours and improve parent-child relationships.

Technology

Parent-education courses provide an opportunity to showcase best practice and demonstrate technology as the medium of today's education. For struggling readers, it can be an incentive to explore new ways of engaging with texts, provide fun and entertainment while reading, and give readers access to information about topics of interest.

Hot tips to share with parents

1. Start with what interests your child. If your child is interested in horses then that is the best place to start. Visit bookshops, libraries, stables, movies . . . places where your child can find books, brochures, videos, software programs that are of interest. The key is providing a way to read the material. If the book is too difficult, try recording it chapter by chapter for your child to read along. Take it in turn to read one page each or for struggling readers try one sentence each. This helps your child fill in any of the meaning that may have been lost and helps with unfamiliar words.
Start with what interests your child.
2. Don't make reading together a test. Take a walk around your surroundings and read the signs as you go. Read a magazine or newspaper together. Sit back and relax while your child reads to you. You do not have to follow along with every word nor do you have to watch over your child's shoulder. From afar you can say things like ' . . . oops, that did not make sense to me. Take another look at that.' Rather than become the instant word factory, make suggestions like: 'Try reading on, go back to the beginning of the sentence and reread that for a clue'; 'Look at the pictures, what does it look like might happen?'
Enjoy reading together and vary what you read.
3. Before starting to read, support your child to be successful rather than set them up to fail.
Find ways to support your child to be a successful reader.
4. Browse through the book before reading begins and discuss the illustrations, any unfamiliar words (like the names of characters or places in the story), and the sequence of events in the story. This activity takes very little time but ensures that your child has the confidence to start.
Give your child the time and space to read alone.
4. Give your child the time and space to read alone. Trust that if your children want to read by themselves that they are gaining sufficient meaning from the book to find it satisfying. All you have to do is be excited about their efforts to read independently and ask questions such as: 'That looks like a really interesting book, what is it about?'; 'Where are you up to, what has happened so far?'; 'I would like to read that book . . . are you enjoying it? Tell me about it.'
5. Support your children's efforts by making sure they have a reading light. Providing a small CD player or laptop computer so children can read along in the privacy of their own space could also be an enticement into the world of books. Check that they have a place to store their books – make it feel like a valuable collection of precious things. Books should be visible as a reminder – they could be stored on a shelf, in a specially decorated box, or put between book holders on top of a cupboard.
Support your child's efforts by making books and reading special.
6. Let your child choose what they want to read and just keep opening up the invitation to the smorgasbord of books available. Say things like . . . 'I found this really interesting comic book today. Would you like to read it or something else?'
Let your child choose what they want to read.

'Do you know that Paul Jennings has a new book out. Would you like to read that? You might want to borrow it from the library next time we visit.'

'Let's look at this book of poems and see if there is one that you would like to read.'

'Here are five books from your shelf, which one would you like to read tonight?'
7. Funny books, mysteries, unusual stories often appeal to children who are in the process of discovering the joy of reading. Wanting to read is an essential ingredient so do not spend
Help them discover what they really like to read by offering a variety of books.

time worrying about whether a book is the right reading level or that comics are less appropriate than books, or chapter books are better than picture books etc – enjoy the fact that your child is reading. Good readers discover what they really like.

8. Take time to talk to your child about their good experiences of reading at school

Take time to talk to your child and discuss what they are reading and share their experiences with them.

– books they liked listening to the teacher read, favourite authors, poems that they remember. Start a collection of family favourite poems or a folder of information about favourite authors – locate their websites and send them an email. Together visit the local library once a week – make it a routine for you to borrow as well as your child. Do not take ownership of your child's choices. The important thing is to find a way to share the books borrowed either by reading them together or allowing your child to borrow them to look at the illustrations and pictures. Not all books are read cover to cover and a lot of books are appealing because of their wonderful photographs or drawings and they do not need to be read in a traditional sense. Enjoy the experience of looking at books and talking about them together.

9. Reading and writing go hand in hand. When it comes to writing, again it is not a test. Children need real reasons to write. Start with their interests

Reading and writing go hand in hand. Start with their interests and give them real reasons to write.

– if your child is an avid sports player, start with a camera and photo album. Labelling the photos or writing stories could be suggested. Make the suggestion but do not take it personally if your child does not like your idea. The idea is to keep making suggestions.

10. Stay calm and relaxed when your child makes mistakes or forgets a word. If you get frustrated, change the situation by looking for the positives things your child has accomplished in the reading. Say things like:

Stay calm and relaxed and positive while your child learns to read with you.

'I really enjoyed how you sounded like the old man in the story.'

'I can see that you understand how to use punctuation.'

Other suggestions to encourage writing:

- scanning photos and making a family book with accompanying favourite things for each person in the book
- emailing
- making books and using scrap art techniques to decorate it
- writing lyrics for songs
- drawing and labelling designs



'Your voice got louder when you saw that exclamation mark.'

'Do you realise that you read four pages tonight?'

'What did you like about this book?'

Or simply say 'How many more pages would you like to read and then I will read the rest?'

11. Remember that your relationship with your child is ultimately more important than any book, word or reading session. The thing your child will remember in twenty years time is that

Leave happy memories of your reading together. Your relationship with your child is more important than any book or reading session.

you spent precious time reading together on a regular basis. Do not underestimate the importance of the quality time you share because when your child is an adult he or she will well remember the name of the book that you both loved.

Conclusion

Along with the staff associated with the program U-CAN READ: Literacy Intervention Years 3–10, I was recently reminded by parents of the benefits and value of parent education. Through program evaluations and emotional responses, we heard parents' stories of success. Most parents' needs were easily addressed. In the majority

of cases, they just wanted to know what they could do to help – they wanted knowledge and strategies. Their tears of appreciation said it all.

More than ever, we are convinced that the students enrolled in U-CAN READ benefit most when they work collaboratively with their parents. We are in this together – parent, child and teacher. As teachers, we need to generously share what we know and in doing so support and celebrate the efforts of parent and child. With a united effort, the incidence of student reading failure can be minimised and hopefully eliminated.

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ABOUT PETAA

The Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA), founded in 1972, is a national professional association supporting primary school educators in the teaching and learning of English and literacies across the curriculum. For information on how to join and to view professional learning resources, visit the PETAA website.

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