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Elene S. Demos
Edinboro University

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PARENTS: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

ELENE S. DEMOS
Edinboro University
Edinboro, Pennsylvania

This is the third in a series of four articles devoted to parents and reading. The first article described typical school reading programs. The second article described different types, purposes, and scores of reading tests. This article will focus upon parental involvement in reading and will examine research and activities that can be beneficial at home and at school.

Parents As Partners

An increasing amount of research regarding the positive effects of achievement and parental involvement has been generated over the last decade. Studies have demonstrated that:

- the successful mastery of school subjects requires a high level of parental involvement (Dupree and Shields, 1983) and
- the involvement of parents in the reading process begins before the child comes to school and should continue throughout the school years (Vukelich, 1984).

The value of involving parents in the learning process has also been acknowledged by legislation that supports and in some cases requires that parents be involved in advisory councils, special education curriculum and programming for children.

We will examine research that focuses upon special programs, means by which the school can communicate with parents and practical applications and ideas that parents can use with their children to increase development in reading and school performance.

Special Programs

There are many types of special programs that can

integrate parents into the reading process. Programs that focus upon educating parents about the value and importance of the reading process are very prevalent in the current research. Flippo and Branch (1985) report that parents of young children are often very concerned with their children's pre-reading and beginning reading development. Parents want to know what they can do to help their child have a good start in this critically important skill. All too frequently, parents do not have the information available to them to help their child. MacLaren (1966) suggest that providing parents with information about the reading process significantly influences the reading achievement of parents' first grade students. Parent education has been strongly advocated by many school personnel as a key ingredient to student success in reading.

An example of such a program was developed by the Atlanta chapter of the Phi Delta Kappa. This program was designed to inform parents about the value of parental involvement and ways in which they could get involved. The program included a session informing parents about the importance and value of reading, a discussion of the book How to Grow a Reader, a question and answer session and an evaluation session. Participants in the program responded favorably to the sessions and felt the program was helpful in terms of providing ideas about reading.

Swibold (1982) developed and presented sessions dealing with some of the controversial literature available to children. She discussed changes in children's literature and requested that parents try to read some of the literature prior to attending the session. Swibold presented the author's philosophy and raised stimulating questions for discussion. The program prompted parents to read children's books and gave them an opportunity to think about the books and discuss them with their children. The children were amazed to see the parents reading "their" books.

School Communication With Parents

The school must find meaningful ways to communicate with parents. Vukelich (1982) and others suggest that the school should provide written and verbal communication activities to parents to help them choose the most appropriate instructional techniques, to provide parents with ideas they can use to help their child, to help parents

stimulate children's interest in reading, to answer specific questions that parents have about reading and to provide suggestions for supporting the child's development in school. Frequently suggested as a way to communicate with parents is the distribution of activity sheets or a calendar of events that parents can use with their child that presents reading, writing, and language development activities for the summer months.

Schools frequently send home progress notes and letters and have conferences with parents. Unfortunately, these activities usually occur when a child is not making progress or when problems have already been identified. Progress notes from school to home should include information about the child's reading level and should praise some aspect of his or her performance. We suggest also that parents send progress notes to the teacher about special activities and books they have read.

Mini-courses or workshops can also be requested by parents. These sessions could acquaint parents with the reading progress, the reading curriculum and what parents can do to reinforce their child.

The activities mentioned are but a few suggestions for parental communication with the school. Talk with the school principal or your child's teacher to request such a program. Many school districts have reading teachers or reading specialists who can present such programs. If there is a university in or near your community, call and ask to speak with a professor in reading, children's literature or elementary education. They frequently will help present such programs for a group of parents.

Practical Applications

One of the most important things a parent can do with their child is READ TO THEM. Reading aloud to children can positively affect their language development, their interest in books, their readiness for academics, their success in learning to read and their attitudes and values toward reading.

Another important activity is to model reading for your child. Let them see you reading. Whether the newspaper, the Bible, the TV Guide, the Yellow Pages, the sales circulars, the cereal boxes or signs as you are

driving down the street. This reinforces the many reasons and purposes for reading. Also, don't forget to model reading a book on a rainy day, just for the fun of it! What better way to instill the pleasure of reading than to be seen regularly, reading a good book?

Have plenty of books in the house. Provide a library that has meaningful literature and a variety of literature. It has been reported (Morrow, 1983) that children who had more literature available to them at home had greater interest in reading and higher achievement in reading. Wiseman (1984) also states that children who have a variety of literature available will develop reading and writing skills more easily and will have a greater understanding about the elements of a story.

Take your child to the library. Check for the times of the story hours for preschoolers and check books out when you go. This is another good rainy day activity for the family and doesn't cost anything. Check with the local library for puppet shows, readings, special exhibits and other activities. Librarians welcome seeing you and the children and will also welcome any suggestions that you have for future programs.

Criscuolo (1981) suggests using the newspaper with children to help them in reading. He suggests developing picture stories about events they have read in the paper. He further suggests that children could develop a home vocabulary notebook in which children cut out interesting words they have read and write definitions for those words. Another suggestion includes an activity called party fun. Parents can ask their children to plan a pretend party. The children can cut out the grocery list or sort it into paper goods, beverages, foods, etc. Another activity is called fact or opinion. Children can be asked to read an editorial or an articles and underline all the facts with a green crayon and all the opinions with a red crayon. Also, most newspapers included a special section for children.

Another area that cannot be overemphasized is the parent-child interaction. Just talking with your child about things they have seen, things they have read, their feelings and experiences are valuable to children. We encourage parents to praise their child's successes and

reinforce their academic achievement. Put their papers with stars and happy faces on the door, so as they leave for school, they can be reminded of the good work they have done in school. Your interest and your caring tells they they are important and useful people.

Summary

Parents have frequently been overlooked in the education process. Educators are currently more aware of your interest, caring and willingness to help your child and the school develop your child's ability and interest in reading. The school is there to answer any questions that you might have about how you can support your child's progress in reading. As a parent, you can reinforce and support and monitor your child's progress in reading. At last, teachers, administrators, and parents are pulling together in a team effort to encourage the development and achievement of our nation's youth.

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