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The Teacher-Parent Partnership: Helping Children Become Good Readers

**Celeste A. Resh
Marilyn J. Wilson**

Teachers recognize the importance of parental involvement in children's learning. If children are to learn most efficiently and effectively, the home and the school must work in conjunction with each other. No other time for parent-school involvement is more critical than the early years of a child's educational experience when the patterns and habits of literacy are evolving and developing, a fact recognized by educators and supported by the findings of various national commissions on education.

The role of parents in helping children become good readers is stressed, in particular, in *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. This 1985 survey of major studies on reading from the past twenty years concludes that "parents play roles of inestimable importance in laying the foundations for learning to read" (p. 27). In order to succeed in that role, parents must be aware of what their children can learn and how this learning can occur. Further, according to one of the studies cited by the Commission on Reading, children who came to school knowing a lot about written language were children whose parents "believed that it was their responsibility to seize opportunities to convey information about written language to their children" (p. 25). This suggests that some children who come to school

knowing little about written language may have parents who are unaware or unsure of their potential role in helping their children succeed in school.

That one of the causes of reading problems may indeed be related to lack of knowledge or uncertainty on the part of the parents rather than to socioeconomic factors, as is often assumed, receives support from a 1982 report on home environment and school learning (Iverson and Walberg, 1982). This quantitative synthesis of eighteen studies indicates that parental socioeconomic status indicators such as occupation and amount of education are not as closely related to children's academic ability and achievement as are measures of sociopsychological environment and intellectual stimulation in the home. Iverson and Walberg conclude that "home environment variables, unlike socioeconomic status, are changeable and are worth not only further experimentation but merit constructive efforts to improve them as well" (p. 151). If factors such as uncertainty or inadequacy are part of the problem, active intervention on the part of teachers and administrators is certainly merited.

Two decades of research on the importance of parental involvement show that children whose parents support and encourage their school activities do have an academic advantage, according to Joyce Epstein of the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University. Epstein sees the problem as one of effectively involving parents in their children's education. She notes that few teachers make frequent use of parent involvement, but when they do, 85 percent of the parents asked spend at least fifteen minutes a day helping their children at home (Epstein, p. 127). Teachers can play a significant role in involving parents in their children's learning, and parents who lack a strong

educational background or who have feelings of inadequacy may be more willing to get involved if they are provided with some specific suggestions.

With this in mind, we developed and distributed a pamphlet to elementary teachers and administrators in our local areas as a way of aiding school-home interaction. The pamphlet, with simply written, easy to understand suggestions for parents, encourages them to help their children read, not by teaching reading skills, but by providing activities and materials that will create interest in reading and in books. The activities suggested are intended to support basic reading strategies that children need to become successful readers. We see these activities as complementary to, rather than duplicates of, classroom reading instruction.

The pamphlet covers these five major categories of home activities:

1) helping young readers become aware of print meaning in their environment by encouraging them to read ads, signs, billboards, maps, newspapers, cereal boxes, letters, etc.;

2) using reading activities that include reading aloud to children and encouraging them to join in; helping them figure out unfamiliar words; helping them develop good predicting strategies that focus on meaning and that help them deal with relationships between print symbols, words, and meaning;

3) making children's magazines and books available;

4) encouraging a variety of language experiences such as telling stories; writing down stories and experiences that can be used as reading material; encouraging children to write notes, letters, songs, signs, and greeting cards; encouraging them to read directions and instructions for recipes, games, and so forth;

5) encouraging thinking and questioning.

These strategies all involve environmental print and readily available materials that can be used to encourage sound assumptions about the relationships between print and meaning. Based on current research in reading, they give interested parents some direction and guidelines for helping children develop interest and ability in reading without requiring great expenditures of time.

Teachers can provide support for these activities in the classroom as well. Some of the activities, such as figuring out unfamiliar words, encouraging thinking and questioning, and providing different language experiences, can be introduced in the classroom prior to or immediately following parental use of the pamphlet.

Excerpts from the pamphlet appear in Figure 1. Master copies of the pamphlet are available upon request from the authors free of charge. We encourage duplication of the master copy for distribution at parent-teacher conferences or at PTO meetings, in school newsletters sent home to parents, or with year-end reports to parents as suggestions for summer reading activities. Its most effective use, we believe, involves teachers providing the pamphlet to parents directly, usually during parent-teacher conferences. Teachers can ask parents to use the pamphlet, identifying the two or three most appropriate activities. Many parents have been delighted to take an active role in helping their children develop good reading habits and attitudes. Schools have reported that parents have expressed appreciation for receiving the information and have found the pamphlet's suggestions useful in working with children at home.

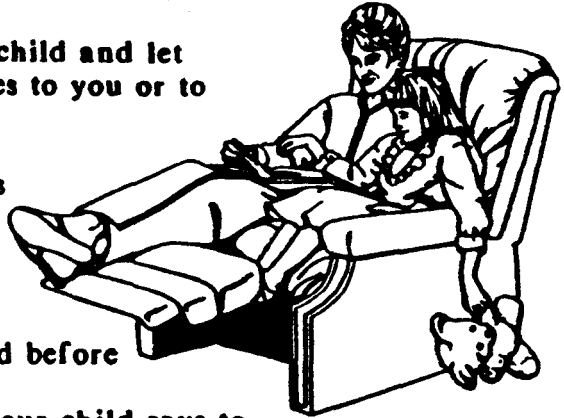
When there is real cooperation between the teacher and the parent, and when the parent feels capable of supporting

Figure 1
Excerpt from *Reading in the Home:*
Helping Children Become Good Readers

ENCOURAGE DIFFERENT LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES:

Tell stories to your child and let your child tell stories to you or to siblings:

- Family experiences
- Holiday events
- Fairy tales
- Scary stories
- Nursery rhymes
- Stories they've read before



Write down things your child says to you, and encourage your child to try to read them back to you:

- Stories
- Songs
- Nursery rhymes
- Events, such as a trip to the zoo

Encourage children to write:

- Stories
- Songs
- Signs
- Posters
- Notes to each other and to you
- Letters to friends and relatives



When grocery shopping with your child:

- Read some labels and point to the labels and words as you read them.
- Give your child some coupons and have your child help find the items on the shelves.

the school's efforts, the gap between parents and schools may begin to narrow. It is even more important that, as parents engage in their children's learning experiences, they are positively affecting the sociopsychological environment and intellectual stimulation that are so closely related to their children's academic success. A simple pamphlet cannot accomplish all of this, but it can provide a start.

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A new feature — "Expanding Horizons" — enables *RH* readers to share exciting teaching ideas with one another. In this issue, a writing center theme is presented on page 34, and scrapbook journals for preschoolers are described on page 78.

Have you a suggestion to submit to "Expanding Horizons"? Send two typed copies of your idea, with a self-addressed stamped envelope, to: Editor, *Reading Horizons*, Reading Center & Clinic, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 49008.

