

Can reading adventure packs (RAPs) complement and enrich the literacy program in your classroom?

Barbara Fisher

Senior lecturer, Faculty of Education, Avondale College NSW

Introduction

Children's personal experience, confidence and success (or otherwise) with books and reading, particularly at the initial stages, is directly related to their attitude towards reading (Wang, 2000).

“*The packs are intended to provide an enriching literacy experience for the children*”

Many of these attitudes are developed prior to school commencement and often are closely linked to early literacy experiences in the home. Economic conditions of the household may determine children's exposure and access to quality reading materials in the home. Some low-income families find it extremely difficult to resource their children's early literacy needs. While it appears that most families are aware of the importance of the home literacy environment and the need for reading resources, too many are without books or lack an adult who is willing to read to children.

With the realisation that family members can contribute positively to early literacy development, there has been a plethora of programs and initiatives in recent years designed to support and encourage family participation in children's literacy education. Surprisingly, most current programs assume (often incorrectly) that parents/carers have sufficient available finances to resource the literacy needs of their children.

RAPs' origins

Margaret Gill is an experienced 'early years teacher' in Victoria. She has long been aware of the difficult economic conditions and financial constraints that impact many of the families in her school district. Hence she constantly tries to narrow the gap between the home literacy levels and early literacy needs of the children in her classroom. While visiting three New York schools in the USA, she saw an innovative early literacy reading program in action. It was a co-operative home-school venture. The excitement and enthusiasm exhibited by the children using this literacy program impressed her, and she was eager to adapt and trial a similar program in her own classroom. On returning to Australia, Margaret,

with assistance from the writer, developed and trialled Reading Adventure Packs (RAPs), a literacy program that utilised packs of stimulus material (Fisher, Gill, & Greive, 2005). The program was an attempt to support and improve children's attitudes to reading and involve members of the family in the children's reading by supplying reading resource materials.

The RAP program involves the collection and organisation of literacy resources by the teacher into several themed backpacks. Students borrow the resources and take them home on a rotational basis. The resources in the packs (listed below) are intended to provide an enriching literacy experience for the children and contribute to their development of positive attitudes toward reading. In addition to focusing on resources facilitation, family participation and literacy enrichment, the program's other main purpose is to complement a teacher's existing literacy program in the classroom, rather than compete with it.

Typical weekly sequence

On Monday morning the names of all the children in the class are placed in a hat and five names are drawn out. A record of these is kept together with the corresponding name of the RAP taken home by each child. The randomly selected children are the first group to enjoy the literacy activities at home for four school days, thus giving the entire family access to all the activities available in each backpack.

At home the children may choose to read and complete all, or as many of the activities as they desire. The family/children select the activities and the time frame for their completion. Teachers are not required to check on how much or how little has been completed. An exercise book is provided to encourage the children to record something they learnt, discovered or enjoyed during the week from their particular literacy RAP. Children are able to read each other's stories or comments when it is their turn to have the RAP. Prior to returning the RAP to school on Friday morning, parents/carers are expected to check the inventory to ensure that

all the contents are returned in the backpack. At school, each Friday, special recognition is given to the children for their week's participation in RAP. They may place the soft toy from the RAP backpack on their desks, for the day.

The teacher's role in the weekly program

Once the program is set up, the teacher's involvement in the program only requires the distribution of the backpacks on Mondays and their collection and checking on Fridays. After the RAP program has completed one rotation, the cycle commences again.

RAP contents

Each RAP is based on a specific theme. Examples are: Noah's ark, ducks, sheep, dogs, dinosaurs, cooking, and music. The following make up each RAP:

- a soft toy indicating the theme
- a 'Note of Explanation to Parents/Carers'
- an inventory listing the literacy activities
- an 'Instruction Sheet' for parents/carers on how to use the RAP and its many activities
- an exercise book for writing stories, comments, etc.
- a variety of literacy activities linked to the theme, catering for K-3 children. Activities include four or more story books and selected craft activities, jigsaw puzzles, colouring sheets, dot-to-dot pictures, games, videos, worksheets, puppets, CDs and writing books
- all associated materials needed for the completion of the activities in the RAP (e.g. a lead pencil for writing in the exercise book, scissors—both left and right handed for the craft activities, coloured pencils, pencil sharpener, eraser, etc.).

Evaluating and learning from the program

After trialling RAP for two consecutive school terms, parents/carers and children were given an opportunity to evaluate the program using a questionnaire.* The following is a representative selection of responses:

One parent/carer wrote: 'I think that they are fantastic.' Another noted: 'We enjoyed having the packs.' Yet another responded: 'My child thoroughly enjoyed the reading pack.'

According to data from the questionnaires, parents/carers reported that girls, more often than boys, demonstrated a positive change in attitude toward reading as a result of using the RAP. Girls were more likely to initiate reading, read independently, and read more often than boys. Mothers were the parent/carer most involved in the literacy development of the children in the home. The data also indicated that time was a significant factor in parents/carers' comments about assisting their

children with reading. For example one parent/carer wrote: 'I believe it is important. However it doesn't get done every night.' Another said: 'I try when I can.'

Ideas for improvement were suggested. It was advocated designing each RAP with more self-correcting activities and games, thus lessening parent/carer supervision and intervention. It was also noted that some of the RAP components could be augmented to allow them to appeal more strongly to boys' unique literary preferences and needs. With the incorporation of these changes into the RAP program, its developers believe it will assist parents/carers in providing their children with a richer home literacy environment. Hopefully the program will be another forward step in the literacy journey of children, in becoming competent, independent readers. **TEACH**

“Some of the RAP components could be augmented to allow them to appeal more strongly to boys”

Endnote

* The questionnaire may be obtained from the author.

References

- Fisher, B., Gill, M., & Greive, C. (2005). Reading Adventure Packs: A pilot program promoting family involvement in children's literacy attitudinal development, in D. Hansford (Ed.). *Multiliteracies & English teaching K-12 in the age of information and communication technologies*, 2004, (pp.1-19). Armidale: Australian Literacy Educators' Association & the University of New England.
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1 RAP example: cooking

[Photography: Barbara Fisher]