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Jane A. Romatowski

The University of Michigan - Dearborn

Mary L. Trepanier

The University of Michigan - Dearborn

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Examining and Influencing The Home Reading Behaviors Of Young Children

Jane A. Romatowski,

Mary L. Trepanier

The University of Michigan-Dearborn

Numerous studies have shown that a family's reading behavior positively influences a child's success in reading at school (1,2). Aware of this phenomenon, we decided to survey the parents of the pre-schoolers at our child development center for the purpose of establishing the current level of home reading behavior. Such data would certainly be useful to our staff in curriculum planning but, more importantly, it would also provide insight for others concerned with the literacy skills of young children. Thus, we designed a survey to help us gather relevant information.

HOME READING SURVEY

The survey consisted of written responses to questions concerning the number of available children's books in the home, the time spent reading with the child, and the quality or type of behaviors that accompanied or resulted from the shared reading time. Of the 30 families surveyed, 25 families completed the questionnaire.

Since living in a print-oriented environment with readily available age-appropriate books is an important factor in the development of reading skills, several questions were asked exploring the availability of books at home suitable for young children. Of the 25 respondents, 84 percent reported having over 40 books available to children at home, with no one choosing less than 10 books. When asked to estimate the total books purchased by the family for the child, approximately half (47 percent) reported purchasing more than 50 books while another 24 percent reported purchasing more than 100 books. All 25 respondents replied that their children had received books as gifts. Also, 80 percent reported using the public library as a source for providing

books at home. Clearly, these findings suggest that the parents of these pre-schoolers place a high value on making books available to their children at home.

Although the availability of books is important, equally important is the availability of reading time and people for reading in the home. Therefore, our respondents were asked questions regarding the frequency of time spent reading, the time of day when reading often occurred, with whom the reading time was shared, and by whom the reading was initiated. The majority of families reported reading to their children between 4-7 times per week. Reading was most likely to occur at bedtime in 60 percent of the homes. Also in the same percentage of homes parents read to their child whenever the child requested.

In determining with whom reading time was shared, respondents were asked to assign the percentage of time spent reading to the child by the a) mother, b) father, c) older children in the family, d) others who reside in the home, or e) others. All respondents identified the mother as participating in the reading activity. In mean percentages, mothers participated in 60 percent of the total home reading time. In contrast, fathers were involved 32 percent of the total time. It is interesting to note that in two cases fathers were credited with using as much as 80 percent of the total time in reading to their children. In addition, 75 percent of the respondents identified the father as an active participant. These findings reflect the increasing role fathers play today in the care of their children.

When asked to name the initiator of the reading time, respondents were given the choices of a) child at the center, b) other children in fami-

ly, c) mother, d) father, and e) others, and asked to identify the percentage of time reading was initiated by each of these. In 75 percent of the cases the child initiated the reading 50 percent of the time or more. In all but one home, mothers initiated the reading less than 40 percent of the time. Though these results tend to support previous research, generally speaking, it is significant to highlight the high interest demonstrated by children in initiating reading time.

Finally, respondents were queried about the kinds of behaviors that accompanied or were a consequence of the reading time. Those surveyed were asked to check all of the behaviors that applied to their reading sessions. The most frequently mentioned activity accompanying the reading of the story was that of the preschooler's participation in the reading (84 percent). Next most frequently mentioned activities, in order, were: more cuddling behavior (76 percent); role playing a story character (52 percent); singing rhymes or songs (36 percent); doing a follow-up activity inspired by the story (24 percent); and physical play with the preschooler (8 percent). It is evident from this data that reading at home encourages oral language development, further acquaints children with books and print, involves them in activities which extend the concepts encountered in the books, and promotes good, social-emotional interaction between family members. Thus, many of the behaviors which encourage the development of reading and language skills as well as behaviors which encourage the development of strong, positive family relationships, do exist in the homes of the children at our child development center.

LENDING LIBRARY PROJECT

Taking into account the present level of home reading experiences of the children in the center, some decisions were made as to the role the center staff could assume in extending reading experiences. The following goals were agreed upon: a) to expose children and their families to a broader range of quality children's literature, b) to capitalize on the child as "initiator" of reading time by creating opportunities for the pre-schooler to take books of interest home from the center, c) to increase the involvement of both parents, but especially the father, in shared reading sessions, and d) to promote a closer partnership between the center and the home in the development of the pre-schooler's cognitive and social skills.

One way of achieving these goals was to have the center staff implement a center lending library. The purpose of the center's lending library was to encourage a child who demonstrated interest in a book at the center to take the book home and share it with the family. Importantly, the child took the book home **only** if one of the parents agreed there was time to read the book with the child **that day**. This commitment by the parents seemed necessary if our goals were to be achieved.

The general procedures for the lending library began with the child having a positive experience with a particular book and demonstrating a sense of delight or interest in it. The teacher, aide, or student teacher, was instructed to be observant of such behavior and to suggest and encourage the child to take the book home. Secondly, if the child agreed to take the book home, then the teacher assisted the pre-schooler in signing the book out and putting a notice in the parent's mail pocket. When the parent (either mother or father) arrived to take the child home from the center, the parent was asked if there were time to read the book with the child that day or evening. If the parent had time to read, then the book was taken home. If not, then the book was reserved for another day. Parents were encouraged to identify a more appropriate day. Finally, the child with the help of the parent returned the book.

Informal measures of the lending library's effectiveness suggest some gains. In a follow-up survey, parents reacted positively to the lending library and encouraged its continuation. There were requests to feature a "book of the month" and to provide book lists to complement curriculum themes. Parents felt that center books should be sent home

with greater frequency. Parents reported that the lending library provided an opportunity to build a sense of responsibility in as much as children were committed to caring for and returning the book. The project also facilitated conversation at home not only about the book, but also about experiences in the center. Because of this, the sense of partnership between child, parent, and center was heightened.

The survey information and the lending library project should be helpful to others who are also concerned with literacy skills of young children. Because the project itself uses available materials and is easily implemented, it can be directly applied in most centers and school settings. Parents and staff working together on a mutually acceptable project with such clear benefits to the children is rewarding for everyone concerned.

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