

8-1-2001

## The Family Storyteller: A Collaborative Family Literacy Program

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### Recommended Citation

Weigel, D., Behal, P., & Martin, S. (2001). The Family Storyteller: A Collaborative Family Literacy Program. *The Journal of Extension*, 39(4), Article 17. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol39/iss4/17>

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August 2001 // Volume 39 // Number 4 // Ideas at Work // 4IAW2



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## The Family Storyteller: A Collaborative Family Literacy Program

### Abstract

Children who begin school with limited literacy skills are struggling uphill from the first day they set foot in school. The University of Nevada Cooperative Extension initiated a collaborative family literacy effort to improve the literacy skills of both parents and their children. A series of six weekly workshops have been provided across Nevada to over 500 families. Pre-post interviews with families have revealed significant increases in the amount of time parents read with their children, their enjoyment of reading time, and their use of specific parent reading techniques. Children have made significant gains in their enjoyment of reading with parents and their understanding of print concepts.

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## Introduction

Literacy is a major concern in Nevada. One quarter of Nevadans--nearly 300,000 youth and adults--are illiterate. They can not read or write well enough to do simple tasks, such as filling out a job application or reading the newspaper.

The foundation for literacy is laid during the preschool years by parents who read to their children, who have books and magazines at home, and who model reading and writing. A child between ages one and six who shares a book with an adult for 15 minutes a day will have had 455 hours of individual reading instruction before entering school. A child who isn't read to will have none. These children are struggling uphill from the first day they set foot in school.

The Cooperative Extension Children, Youth, and Families team in Nevada has identified family literacy as a key program need. In the fall of 1997, Cooperative Extension initiated a community collaborative effort named the "Family Storyteller" in four Western Nevada counties to improve the literacy skills of parents and their young children.

The primary members of the collaboration are Cooperative Extension, KNPB-Channel 5 Public Television, the School District, and the County Library System. These collaborators have brought together a unique blend of expertise to bear on the problem of low literacy in our state, including child and family development, media technology, literacy development, and children's literature.

## Program Design and Delivery

The "Family Storyteller" not only gets books into children's hands, but also helps parents learn to use the books effectively to improve their children's literacy skills. The program's main purpose is to provide workshops that improve the literacy skills of both parents and their children. The workshops are designed primarily for families with preschoolers and beginning readers. They help all families but are specifically designed for parents who may have limited language skills and few children's books at home.

The workshop series includes six sessions during which families:

- Discuss and learn basic parent/child reading techniques, including previewing a book, using expression as they read, pointing to pictures and labeling, reviewing and retelling, having children predict, and linking the book to life;
- Watch a video that models critical parent-child reading techniques. (The videos were developed specifically for the project to show parents reading with young children and modeling the selected skills. The video segments also address common questions about the value and activity of reading with young children.);
- Practice reading, in which the facilitator first models how to read the book. (Parents then practice reading with each other, before finally reading the book to their children.);
- Learn about take-home activities that extend the learning from parent-child workshops into families' homes. (The take-home activities provide ideas that parents can use to enhance their children's literacy and language development. The materials include descriptions of activities plus all the supplies needed to do the activities at home.); and
- Receive a free book and materials to complete the extender activities at home. Selected children's books featured in each workshop session include *Goodnight Moon*; *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*; *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*; *Peter's Chair*; *The Wheels On The Bus*; and *Have You Seen My Duckling*.

One of the secrets to the project's success is that parents and children participate in literacy activities together. When parents and children arrive home from the workshops, with a book and materials to do additional learning activities in hand, the children can hardly wait to get started. And parents have learned what to do to help their children. In this way, they will both succeed as they practice newly learned skills and interact as a family.

Since the program began in late 1997, 41 workshop series have been conducted at sites across Nevada with nearly 500 families. To reach target families, parent-child workshops have been conducted with community programs serving at-risk families, such as Even Start and Head Start programs, Hispanic service and migrant programs, adult literacy programs, libraries, elementary schools, family resource centers, and child care centers in low income neighborhoods.

To help deliver the program, nearly 70 workshop leaders throughout Nevada have been trained, including librarians, elementary teachers, school principals, Head Start and Even Start teachers, and literacy specialists.

Cooperative Extension and the Agricultural Experiment Station provided start-up funding to design, develop, and evaluate the program. The collaboration obtained additional funding from private foundations and the University of Nevada, Reno. Several cooperating agencies have obtained specific grants to conduct the program, and other agencies have built the costs into their existing operating budgets.

### **Accomplishments and Impacts**

We have had tremendous response from parents, workshop leaders, and the community. Comments from parents confirm that many of them have limited language skills.

- "I can help my child learn to read now, develop language and listening skills, so that she can do very, very good in school."
- "I so [sic] happy to come and this class is really important for our kids to learn reading."
- "I lern [sic] and I like everything."
- "My daughter and myself had a wonderful time together during the workshop. Her reading has increased."
- "This a great program. I liked the home activity and book and also my children injod [sic] a lot."
- "Family Storyteller is one of the *better* programs that I have attended."

Workshop leaders relay similar experiences.

- "The program is excellent at building the vocabulary skills of our low-literacy parents."
- "Parents mentioned that they changed the way they read with their kids."
- "Many of the children did not have books in the house."
- "Parents said how much the kids wanted to read the books when they got home."
- "Parents related to the parents on the videos...'I'm not so bad'."
- "Families loved the take home activities. They were awesome!"

To assess the overall impact of the "Family Storyteller," we developed seven new evaluation techniques, most of which require few reading and writing skills to complete. Using these techniques, all parents have rated the major components of the workshops as either a 4 or 5 on a

scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being extremely pleased.

Pre-post interviews and assessments with families have revealed statistically significant increases ( $p < .05$ ) in the amount of time parents read with their children, their enjoyment of reading with children, and their use of 14 different parent reading techniques. Children have made significant gains ( $p < .05$ ) in their enjoyment of reading with parents and their understanding of print concepts.

As word about the program has spread, a number of additional agencies have requested help in conducting the program with their families. Also, the volunteer workshop leaders have had many requests to offer more workshops. We believe the "Family Storyteller" program provides a model for other communities and states on how a collaborative effort can successfully address the issue of low literacy.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to acknowledge Patricia Miller (VP Programming, Production, and Education, KNPB, Channel 5), Karen McGee (Reading Coordinator, Washoe County School District), and Leona Wright (formerly Director of Children's Services, Washoe County Library System) as partners in the success of the Family Storyteller.

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