

How can early childhood programs encourage families to enhance children's early literacy development? Find out about some of the many possibilities with Family Literacy Bags.

Using Family Literacy Bags to Enhance Family Involvement

Martha T. Dever and Diane C. Burts

Many kindergarten children enter school without the family support and experiences with books and other literacy materials they need to succeed in school (Berger, 1995; Boyer, 1991; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Neuman, 1997; Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Educational environments that support the literacy learning of young children, particularly culturally and linguistically diverse learners, are therefore a high priority (Jimenez, 1997; Koskinen et al., 2000).

**Book reading
develops knowledge
for success.**

The Family Literacy Bags (FLB) project described here is grounded in the research and professional literature on

family involvement and literacy development. Preliminary research findings are also shared.

Parent Involvement and Literacy Development

Family involvement, interest, and support play a critical role in children's school achievement and educational success. Schools that stress the importance of parents as educators and of homes as learning environments can positively influence children's learning (Barbour, 1998; Berger, 1995; Dever, 2001). One aspect of parent involvement that has been studied extensively is the role of the family in children's literacy development (Bus, Ijseendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Koskinen et al., 2000).

Data from longitudinal and correlational studies are compelling with regard to the benefits of reading books

at home to young children and in revealing the strong relationship of lower levels of literacy achievement associated with infrequent or limited reading of story books in the home (Robinson, Larsen, & Haupt, 1996). High frequency of home picture book reading is related to children's:

- ability to benefit from formal literacy instruction,
- greater ability to attend to text and school-type learning,
- increased print-related knowledge, and
- increased motivation and desire to interact with books and learn to read (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Robinson, Larson, & Haupt, 1995).

Book reading is essential to develop the knowledge necessary for eventual success in reading acquisition and is "as strong a predictor of reading achievement as is phonemic awareness" (Bus et al., p. 17). Neuman (1997) argues that "engaging parents and children in mutual activities that include book reading, but are not limited to it, may constitute the richest potential for supporting children's early literacy development" (p. 119).

**Native language
literacy provides
a firm foundation
for learning.**

Even in low-literacy families and those for whom English is not the native language, frequent book reading positively affects children's literacy skills

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(Koskinen et al., 2000). For students learning a second language, oral and print literacy proficiency in their native language provides a firm foundation for learning (Au, 1993). Having more books available is also helpful to second-language learners (Koskinen et al.).

Children have differing degrees of support for literacy development at home, and economic and social class differences in access to print resources are widely documented (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1999). Ways to increase parents' reading to their young children, especially for those from low socioeconomic status (SES) and non-native English-speaking families, are needed.

Most parents want to support their children's literacy development, but they may not know how. Parents may be unfamiliar with the variety of good books available, so it is helpful to make high-quality books available in their homes on a regular basis. Several early childhood educators have implemented strategies for involving parents and other family members in book reading with preschool and kindergarten children.

Robinson and his colleagues (Robinson, Larsen, & Haupt, 1995; 1996; 1997) conducted several studies with pre-kindergarten children from low- and middle-SES

families to assess the impact of taking home high-quality picture books. Teachers indicated a noticeable increase in children's interest in books in the classroom, the number of books read at home, and the amount of time spent with books for both middle- and low-SES kindergarten children (Robinson et al., 1995, 1996). The researchers

Project Description

As one effort to design a project to address children's early learning opportunities, 30 different Family Literacy Bags (FLB) were developed at the Emma Eccles Jones Center for Early Childhood Education at Utah State University. Several of the bags contain books and guidebooks in both Spanish and English. After the

project was piloted, all kindergarten teachers in four school districts in northern Utah received 20 different FLB. The objectives for providing kindergarten classrooms with FLB are to:

- Enhance communication between kindergarten teachers and parents representing diverse populations and a range of reading levels.
- Increase parents' and other family members' involvement in promoting the early reading skills of kindergarten children.
- Enhance parents' understanding of how to read and discuss books with their children.

Children are given a FLB to take home for a week to share and enjoy with their families. They take an FLB home approximately every third week. Each FLB contains three high-quality children's books, a guidebook for parents, and materials for extension activities. The three books reflect a general theme or topic such as *friendship, change,*

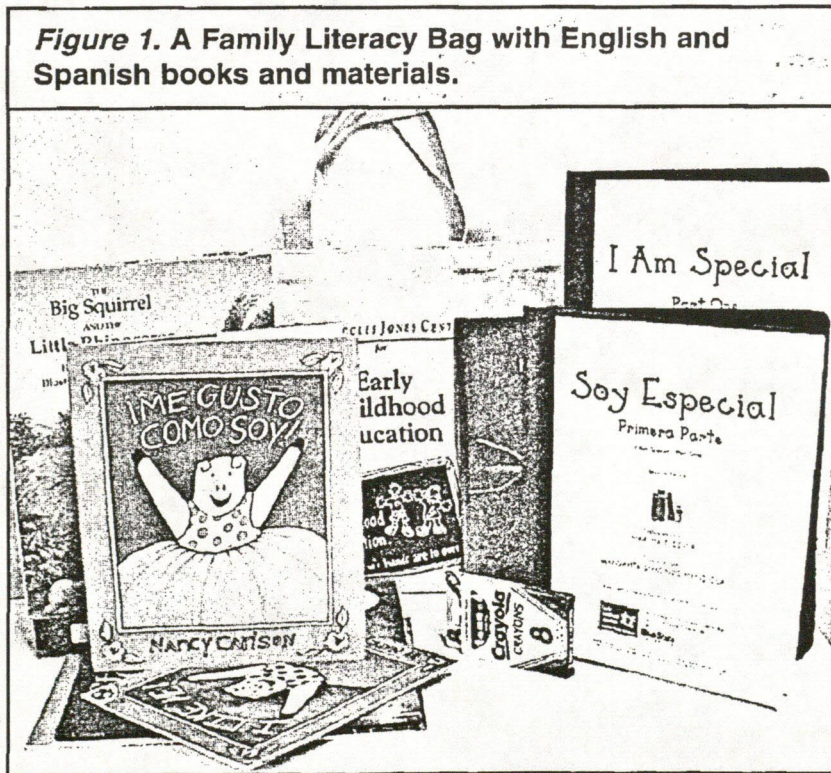


Figure 1. A Family Literacy Bag with English and Spanish books and materials.

Photo courtesy of the authors

Educational environments that support the literacy learning of young children, particularly culturally and linguistically diverse learners, are a high priority.

concluded that "given the potential benefits of home picture book reading, program innovations that can successfully support and encourage parental participation of not only low-income, but also middle-class families, in home literacy events are worthy of further exploration" (Robinson et al., 1995, p. 243; Barbour, 1998).

or buttons. Some of the bags contain culturally relevant books for Latino families and materials in both English and Spanish. See Figures 1 and 2 for information about the contents of FLB and a selected book list.

Each guidebook contains general information for parents on effective ways to read with their children. For example, families are encouraged to have their children sit next to or on their laps to enable them to see the text. This behavior supports children's development of print awareness and letter recognition.

Guidebooks also contain suggested questions for discussing specific books with children. A parent might be encouraged to ask children to identify a favorite character or encourage children to talk about how it might feel to be that character. This is followed by suggested activities that connect to the theme.

The *Buttons* bag, for example, has a small container of buttons for children to use for a variety of activities. After reading *Corduroy*, children can search the house for a button to replace the one Corduroy lost on his overalls. Finally, the guidebook contains a list of the bag's contents and an FLB evaluation form.

Teachers are encouraged to use the FLB project as an opportunity

for kindergarten children to learn to be responsible for the bag's contents. They discuss appropriate ways to handle the bag and generate ideas for how to avoid losing the contents. Children enjoy role playing these strategies.

Project Evaluation

Regular feedback from parents is received via evaluation forms included in each FLB. The form asks parents to indicate the degree to which they:

- 1) enjoyed the books in the bag,
- 2) read the books more than once,
- 3) enjoyed the activities, and
- 4) found the information in the guidebook was helpful.

Additional open-ended questions elicit responses concerning what

they did/did not like about the FLB and specific things they learned from using the FLB.

Additional data are being collected with two instruments. First, teachers completed a Pre-Parental Involvement Questionnaire whereby they recalled parental involvement activities from the prior school year. At the end of the school year, they again complete the survey with regard to the current school year. Survey questions query the kinds and number of contacts they initiate with parents, contacts with minority parents, and the strategies they use to involve parents.

Parents complete the Parent Home Literacy Questionnaire prior to distribution of the FLB and again at the end of the project. The measure is designed to ascertain parents' current frequency of reading with their kindergarten child, the amount

Figure 2. Selected Family Literacy Bag Book List

Name of Bag	Book Title	Author
Change	It Looked Like Spilt Milk	Charles G. Shaw
	Little House, The	Virginia Lee Burton
	Mouse Paint	Ellen Stoll Walsh
Dr. Seuss Books	Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?	Dr. Seuss
	Horton Hatches the Egg	Dr. Seuss
	Sneetches and Other Stories, The	Dr. Seuss
Eric Carle Books	From Head to Toe	Eric Carle
	Grouchy Ladybug, The	Eric Carle
	Secret Birthday Message, The	Eric Carle
Exploring Our World	Grandfather Tang's Story	Ann Tompert
	I Went Walking	Sue Williams
	This Is the Way We Go to School	Edith Baer
Gardening	Growing Vegetable Soup	Lois Elbert
	Tiny Seed, The	Eric Carle
	Tops and Bottoms	Janet Stevens
Mem Fox Books	Hattie and the Fox	Mem Fox
	Possum Magic	Mem Fox
	Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge	Mem Fox
Mistakes	Curious George	H.A. Rey
	No, David!	David Shannon
	Too Many Tamales	Gary Soto
Tales From Around the World	Abuela's Weave	Omar S. Castaneda
	Babushka Baba Yaga	Patricia Polacco
	Tale of Rabbit and Coyote, The	Tony Johnston

of time spent reading, the kinds of books read, other literacy-related activities parents engage in with their children, and which family members are engaged in book reading and other literacy-related activities.

Preliminary Findings

The data source for preliminary findings is the FLB evaluation form contained in each bag and completed by parents during the pilot phase of the project (N=262). Pilot schools included kindergarten classrooms in a Title I city school, a middle SES semi-rural school, and a university laboratory school. Data that addresses goal one of the project is not yet available. However, the Likert scale responses and the qualitative responses to the open-ended questions on the FLB evaluation form provide preliminary data related to goals two and three of the project. The data suggest positive results related to these goals.

Responses to the items on the Likert scale have implications for goal two—*Increase parental involvement in promoting the early reading skills of kindergarten children as well as involvement with other family members*. Findings indicate that 82% of families enjoyed all of the books while 18% enjoyed some of the books. When asked if they read the books more than once, 44% indicated *All*, 46% indicated *Some*, and 10% indicated *None*. Thirty-nine percent enjoyed *All* of the activities, 55% enjoyed *Some*, and 6% enjoyed *None*.

Figure 3 briefly chronicles the experience of one family with the FLB project. These are some additional, representative comments regarding family engagement with the FLB:

We loved the literacy bag! An especially [sic] favorite was *Mouse Paint* along with the paints to emphasize the concept. Reading has always been a favorite activity. Thanks for providing such a positive experience.

The meaningful stories were fun to share with my children. It sparked questions about our own ancestors. I enjoyed exposing my children to different cultures and time periods. It was fun just reading together.

Because we are Hispanics, we would like our heritage and Latin-American culture to be handed down to our future generations. This is absolutely a wonderful idea.

New books—Great activities—New ways to approach reading. More than just “reading.” The stories especially, and the helps for activities. Our *whole* family liked the stories.

My husband spend [sic] more time reading to my kids just for the reason that the books were in Spanish.

We loved *Roxaboxen* and pretended to create our own imaginary town. Our pre-schooler couldn't get enough of *The Knight and the Dragon* and had as much fun as the kindergarten student telling the story.

I've always read to our children (ages 16-12-8-5), but the drawing activities were new to me and exciting for our 5-year old.

The preliminary data suggest that goal three—*Enhance parents' understanding of how to read and discuss books with their children* is also being positively addressed. On the Likert items, 48% of the families found *All* the information in the guidebook helpful, while 46% found *Some* information helpful, and 6% found *None* of the information helpful.

Figure 3. One Family's FLB Experience

Barb is married and a part-time university undergraduate. She picks up her son Kale from kindergarten at noon every day, and after lunch, they tackle his “small amount” of homework. On the weeks they have a Family Literacy Bag at home, they end homework time enjoying books and activities found in the bags. Barb suggested that “it reminds me to read with him and [transitions] homework time into play time.”

Barb characterized Kale as “on the immature side.” As a parent who values reading, she continues, “I always let him select the books we will read. Sometimes we read all of them and other times, we just read some of them. Like, last time [we had a Family Literacy Bag] it was the Dr. Seuss books. Kale was enthralled with the book *Horton Hatches the Egg* and we read that one over and over and over, and we didn't get to any of the other books!”

Kale and Barb often completed some of the activities in the various bags. Completion of activities was determined by Kale's interest in them and how much time they had. (Barb had a 1:30 class on many days.) Barb shared, “I just knew that some of the activities would be too difficult for Kale so we didn't even try them. Sometimes we'd just talk a long time about the books.”

Barb summarized their experience when she said, “I just love the concept! It gives me new ideas for talking about books with him and reminds me to be interactive when I read to him. He seems to really enjoy the time we spend doing it.”

Following are representative comments related to goal three:

Talk more. Don't just read and get the book done—talk about it! Relate it to ourselves. Thanks!

[I learned] to ask better questions after reading the book. They remember more.

We learned a lot of things about snakes together.

[I learned] to ask more questions, to not just give a monologue, but make reading more interactive.

[I learned] how to make activities that focus on a book you read together.

I learned how to select some questions to discuss the story and to do some activities.

I learned to ask more questions when I am reading to them and to have them respond more about what we are reading instead of hurrying through to get to the next book.

[Children] learn more about the stories when they get to interact with the story when they do their activities.

Conclusion

The Family Literacy Bags project has successfully engaged kindergarten children and their families in interactive book reading. Preliminary findings suggest that families did enjoy the FLB, they engaged in reading, and they elaborated the reading experience with discussion and activities that focused on the books. Parents also acquired new learning about how to read and interact more effectively with their children during and after book reading. This is particularly true with regard to posing open-ended discussion questions as parents and children talked about the stories.

The results of the pilot project are encouraging. FLB seem to be an

effective way teach parents how to read interactively with their children and to engage children and parents in regular book reading at home.

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Authors' note: The guidebooks for 30 FLB appropriate for children ages 4 to 7 are available for the cost of printing and postage. Contact Dr. Martha T. Dever, Emma Eccles Jones Center for Early Childhood Education, Utah State University, Logan, UT, 84322-2805.

NEW POSITION STATEMENT AVAILABLE NOW!

On November 18, 2001, the SECA Board of Directors adopted a new position statement entitled *Early Literacy and Beginning to Read*. Copies of the position statement may be accessed by going to the SECA Web site after January 15, 2002; at www.SouthernEarlyChildhood.org or printed copies may be obtained by contacting the SECA office at 800-305-SECA.