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Family Literacy's Approach to Dropout Prevention

by
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Introduction

In the past four years, the field of family literacy has begun to play an increasingly important role in the educational arena. It is recognized as a fresh, rapidly growing approach to coping with the nation's enormous literacy problems. It has gained credence with the establishment of the International Reading Association's Family Literacy Commission and the convening of annual family literacy conferences.

By focusing on the family unit as the recipient of literacy and other training emphases, family literacy reaches out to the adult caregiver who will be or currently is nurturing children. The program goal is to break the cycle of illiteracy perpetrated by undereducated parents through early intervention. In intensive programs, preschoolers gain skills, habits, and attitudes for their emerging learning; simultaneously, their undereducated parents acquire literacy, parenting, and survival skills for their everyday life. Less intensive programs may not encompass all these curriculum elements, but are nonetheless targeted toward developing intergenerational literacy.

While the focus of this report is on the parent who is not literate, it should be noted that literate parents also need the message that family literacy imparts. Research on daily reading to children from a recent National Household Education Survey (NHES, 1991) indicates that only about one-third (35%) of 3-to-8-year-olds are read to daily by a family member; 7% are never read to or only read to several times per year.

An Intergenerational Approach

Alarming statistics on adult literacy and preschool readiness have raised the consciousness of educators about the need for an intergenerational approach directed at both parents and children. Nationwide, 23 million adults are considered to be functionally illiterate (reading below fifth grade level). These adults lack the basic literacy skills needed not only to meet the increased demands of rapid change in the workplace, but also to encourage the ongoing development of emergent literacy in their children.

Nationwide, nearly 1.5 million children—35% of all five-year-olds—are not ready for kindergarten according to a 1991 Carnegie Foundation study (Boyer, 1991). Moreover, 17 states scored higher than 35%, with 10 of them reporting higher than 40% of the children unready. It is significant that statistics describing these same 17 states identify them as those with the nation's:

- highest numbers of impoverished children;
- highest numbers of high school dropouts;
- highest numbers of adult illiterates.

Many other statistics such as nonparticipation in adult literacy programs, reading levels of high school graduates, undereducation of single and teenage parents, and growing shortfalls in workplace literacy have served to mold the rationale behind *America 2000: An Educational Strategy, Goal #1*, "Children will start school ready to learn" and *Goal #5*, "Every adult will be literate," the combined goal of family literacy programs.

Program Curriculum

Comprehensive family literacy programs include three components:

1. developing and reinforcing the child's literacy level through age-appropriate curriculum;

2. enhancing the parent's literacy and parenting skills—more intensive programs include academic skills to attain a GED accompanied by learning modules in such personal development skills as goal setting, child development, family communication, and career choices;

3. modeling and promoting literacy through guided parent-child interaction with observation and feedback.

Less comprehensive programs may emphasize either the child's or adult's literacy improvement as a means of increasing parent involvement. Programs may also vary by intended outcomes—encouraging adults in skill development in some instances; in others, creating a positive literacy "mindset." Nickse (1990) has developed a helpful classification system with four categories labeling programs according to their target and intervention purposes (Direct Adults-Direct Children, Indirect Adult-Indirect Children, Direct Adults-Indirect Children, and Indirect Adults-Direct Children).

A Dropout Prevention Strategy

First and foremost, family literacy is a prevention strategy which should be most heavily concentrated on the prenatal through 8-year-old child. To be effective, it begins with the prenatal infant, continues with the newborn, crawler, toddler, and preschooler, and extends through the early elementary grades.

Through family literacy curriculum, prenatal mothers learn the importance of their nutrition and health to their baby's future ability to learn. New parents are introduced to the importance of developing their babies' language skills and given bibliographies from which to make age-level selections. As the infant becomes a toddler and then a preschooler, the parents model reading behavior for their child.

As emphasized in the Commission on Reading's Report, *Becoming A Nation of Readers* (Anderson, 1985), reading aloud to children is "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading." A reading parent can demonstrate the form and structure of written language, and the child learns the sounds and variety of words and patterns of speech. Bonding and communication between parent and child are enhanced as they share ideas and feelings about the content of books. Both can gain information beyond their own experience. Self-expression, self-esteem, and self-confidence grow in parent and child. And, because of the parenting curriculum components, the parent is educated in child development and parenting skills and therefore better able to meet the child's needs.

The child who is ready for school is less likely to become a dropout (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1985; School, 1991). The child comes prepared with the literacy skills to be confident, excited, and able to learn to read. Achievement in school is improved and along with it, attendance, motivation, self-concept, and behavior. Early success with reading and prior interactive reading experiences provide the child with a foundation for the more abstract language patterns, advanced conceptual development, and evaluative thinking skills which are required to progress through the elementary grades. The child is less likely to repeat one of the first three grades, a known correlate to becoming a high school dropout.

There is a well-documented base of evidence (Nickse, et al., 1988) regarding the effect of parent education and interest on children's reading achievement. However, family literacy programs—partially because they have only been implemented for the past five years—have as yet provided little research on intergenerational effectiveness. Fisk (1990) reviewed 32 intergenerational literacy programs concluding that "every program claimed to have been successful . . . and that programs typically did not have any evaluative data other than anecdotal reports from teachers [and] parents."

One of the few intensive model programs to provide research, *The Kenan Trust Family Literacy Model*, cites statistics (Darling, 1992) in support of the field's potential. Of the preschoolers in its program, only 25% later received Chapter 1 or special education services; their kindergarten teachers rated 90% of these children not "at risk" of school failure; and none of the students were retained in grade in elementary school.

Research on a less intensive model, *Beginning with Books* through the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, was conducted in short and long term studies (Segel & Friedberg, 1991). Surveys of 393 parents before and six months after they received book packets and counseling, found an increase greater than 22% in parents' daily reading and children's self-browsing. In a control group study with children who received book packets as one-year-olds, parents' daily reading and kindergarten teachers' evaluations of children's language and reading ability was notably higher for the experimental group.

Parental Involvement Benefits

In addition to developing children's emergent literacy skills, a second benefit of family literacy programs is that they encourage parents to become supportive coaches for their children in school. The parent's new perception of the need for education—and the child's accompanying confidence about literacy skills—is likely to result in improvement in the child's performance.

Stories abound like that of high school dropout Ruby Himan who discovered *HIPPY* in Arkansas, got a GED, enrolled in a technical college, and in the meantime, sent two children on to become straight-A elementary school students (DeWitt, 1991). Or dropout Regina Lynn, currently a senior at Mars Hill College, who enrolled in a *Kenan Program* and in one year helped two children who had been having academic problems attain honor roll status (Wilson, 1992).

Parents may become actively involved in the school. According to classroom teachers of program children from later years, *Kenan Model* parents maintained positive attitudes towards school, supported their children's education, and "well over half" volunteered in their children's schools (Darling, 1992).

How Family Literacy Reaches Former Dropouts

Adult education today faces numerous problems. Current adult education programs are purported to meet only 5 to 10% of the adult population in need of literacy education (Summary, 1991). Moreover, the dropout rate from students who do enroll in adult literacy programs has been estimated to be as high as 50 to 70% (Kazemek, 1988).

Family literacy classes offer a contrast to traditional adult basic education courses. They are designed to treat parents respectfully and children lovingly, use materials and activities that parents and children enjoy sharing, and employ staff who are sensitive to learning strategies in both adult education and child development.

Three nontraditional drawing cards are built into many programs:

- the parent's experiences with collaborative learning;
- the child's insistence on wanting to participate too;
- the "parent-friendly" location of the programs.

Collaborative Learners

There is no typical adult basic education student, but there are a number of reasons for nonparticipation by eligible adults (Beder, 1992). Many are adults who have been alienated by previous school experiences. As high school dropouts, they approach any adult education offering reluctantly, with varying memories and perceptions of classroom failure and teacher intimidation. Some come back with only a shadowy understanding of why they need literacy skills. Or, they may think themselves incapable of learning. Additionally, many are besieged by a spectrum of other personal, emotional, and social concerns.

To modify these attitudes and meet these concerns, a peer support atmosphere, a "collaborative circle," becomes an integral part of the literacy learning that occurs. Each circle varies according to its participants and context, but encourages individual member involvement so that control of the learning is the group's responsibility, not only the instructor's.

This curriculum structure may be the most important factor in student retention. *The Kenan Trust Family Literacy Model* incorporates the collaborative circle along with individualized learning in its adult instruction; teachers facilitate frequent peer group interaction and problem-solving sessions. According to Darling (1992), the *Kenan Model* has improved retention of students, almost half of whom had already dropped out of other adult education programs. In discussing why they stayed with a family literacy program, Darling states,

> Teachers focused instruction on individual goals and demonstrated a caring respectful attitude towards the students as persons. Perhaps most significant, parents reported a sense of "family" developed within groups, and learners supported each other in both academic and personal areas. Many parents said they had never before had such a support group.

A collaborative circle approach might also prove useful at the secondary level with students who are at risk.

Children's Influence

Traditional adult education programs do not involve infants or children. However, preschool aged children can directly influence their parents' attendance and retention. In a summary of research on the *Kenan Model*, Popp (1991) reports that "a final factor that contributed to persistence was the children's enthusiasm for school. Most children responded positively to the early childhood curriculum and developed a love of school. On days when parents might have stayed home from school, children demanded that they go."

Sites

To reach the reluctant adult, family literacy programs have been offered not only through the school, but also through sites that the adult is most likely to trust—even his home. One intensive model, *HIPPY*, serves its families with home visits using paraprofessionals from the immediate neighborhood.

Educators have recognized the need to make services available on an outreach basis, rather than waiting for the adult who may never come to traditional educational sites. Hence, the placement of programs in a variety of community settings (Table 1).

Table 1. Sites for Family Literacy Programs

Community	Workplace	Education
Hospitals	Family Centers	Child Development Centers
Crisis Centers	Work site	Headstart
Health Care Clinics		Libraries
Churches		Correctional Facilities
Homes/Housing Projects		Public Schools
Recreation Centers		Community Colleges

The *BabyTALK Program* in Illinois begins its outreach to families with the prenatal clinic at the hospital (Quigg, 1989). Another program, *Reach Out and Read (ROAR)*, offered at the Pediatric Primary Care Center at Boston City Hospital, serves a culturally diverse population with many single and low income parents (Needleman & Zuckerman, 1992). Since pediatricians have early access, repeated ongoing contacts, and carry great influence with families, they are natural early literacy providers. During the child's examination, the doctor relates reading suggestions to the child's development, may "prescribe storytimes" for five minutes a day, makes a present of a children's book, and can refer a parent to adult literacy services. In the waiting room, volunteers model how to read to children.

In Indianapolis, five shelters with a staff of adult and early childhood educators serve the homeless with *Learning Choices*, a program developed by the Private Industry Council which combines individualized instruction and collaborative learning with family literacy components. *MOTHEREAD*, which is now disseminated through numerous outreach sites, began in women's prisons.

"Parent-friendly" environments conducive to learning exist, but still more community-based programs need to be developed. Adults must feel comfortable in the learning environment, or they will not participate in or take advantage of it. Beder (1992) notes that we do not know the extent to which dislike for school affects the nonparticipation of adult illiterates: "If the effects are substantial, the treatment is obvious. Adult literacy education must be deschooled and disassociated from the trappings and symbols of school."

In her study of what creates resiliency in at-risk youth, Benard (1991) posits an interrelated network of the family, community, and school. She suggests that within the community, we must build "social networks that link not only families and schools but agencies and organizations throughout the community with the common purpose of collaborating to address the needs of children and families." We must create environments and programs that nurture at-risk high school students to become resilient adults as they engage in the process of family building.

Further Strategies for Involving Former Dropouts

In addition to the three "nontraditional drawing cards" mentioned above, how are parents who were high school dropouts invited to participate? From the first day, the parent is introduced to his vital role in the growth of the child. To counter the parent's feelings of inadequacy and frustration, educators state, imply, demonstrate, and reinforce the idea that the parent is the child's first and most important teacher. The adult is empowered to become the best parent he or she can be.

Parental self-esteem is built with overt and subtle messages. To identify what attracts parents to attend initial sessions, the author studied 20 programs nationwide and found that a number of incentives were regularly used (Mansbach, 1992). In order of frequency of use, those cited most often by program directors included:

- specially arranged family field trips, events, and parties;
- program quality and enthusiastic staff;
- peer group support;
- free transportation;
- free child care;
- free books and prizes for parent involvement;
- free meals for children;
- free family memberships (YMCA, zoo, museum).

When relating to parents in family literacy classes, the educational philosophy of most family literacy programs is that learning is a process which should be motivating, creative, and enjoyable. These tenets underlie the behavior of educators as they attempt to:

- anticipate success from parents and children;
- provide nurturing positive role models;
- give parents the responsibility to plan for and help others learn;
- create a team feeling between the parent and peers;
- give frequent, but honest positive feedback to and about the child and to the parent about personal progress;
- communicate with the parent one-on-one, on a personal basis, reinforcing the parent's positive behavior;
- foster autonomy, asking the parent to take responsibility to resolve academic and personal problems;
- be sensitive to goal, value, and cultural differences;
- admit readily to making mistakes;
- use resources designed to be attractive and meaningful to parents and children;
- select printed materials that are visually appealing and at appropriate readability levels.

In 1991, Head Start Commissioner Wade Horne mandated the inclusion of family literacy in all Head Start programs. A guide to spearhead this effort, *Promoting Family Literacy through Head Start* (1991), suggested the following features designed to sustain parent participation:

- use curriculum responsive to parent's needs, self-esteem, and interests (address roles as parents, consumers, employees);
- provide child care;
- address transportation needs;
- make connections with job placement;
- use a peer support system;
- employ supportive counseling, including goal setting;
- require supportive transitions from one program level to the next;
- affirm parent's beliefs that their efforts will benefit the entire family.

Models Deserving National Recognition

There are numerous family literacy programs. Profiles here are of those notable for using two or more of the "nontraditional drawing cards": involving collaborative learning, having strong appeal for children, and using parent-friendly sites. Many of the programs described in Chart 1 originated in the designated city but have since been modified or replicated at numerous geographical locations.

Chart 1. Models Deserving National Recognition			
Program Name/Origin	**Children Targeted**	**Sites**	**Description**
BabyTALK Decatur, IL	prenatal-4 years	prenatal clinic hospital public library	Hospital classes for parents of newborns on reading to babies followed by mailings of quarterly parenting/ reading materials; first year birthday party at the library; library lapsits for parents and ages 1-4; modeling in prenatal and pediatric clinics; many community outreach components
Beginning with Books Pittsburgh, PA	infants-preschool	branch libraries social service agencies	Through 36 social service agencies, distributes a packet of 3 high quality paperback or board books, reading tips pamphlet, free library book coupon; provides ReadAloud (Headstart) Parent Clubs; Read Together Programs (Adult literacy/child); Project Beacon (home visits and child care centers) outreach programs
Families for Literacy Sacramento, CA	preschool-8 years	state libraries	Coordinated effort of the California State Library System-Adult Literacy Services and Children's Services; provide book giveaways, parent/child meetings, storytelling and reading activities, adult literacy instruction through children's literature and language experience materials
HIPPY New York, NY	4- and 5-year-olds	homes neighborhoods	Paraprofessionals from the neighborhood model packaged literacy activities and provide parenting sessions; they also lead peer support sessions in neighborhood centers; National Council of Jewish Women provides seminars on how to begin and operate program
Kenan Trust Family Literacy Louisville, KY	3- and 4-year-olds	primarily public schools	Intensive, 3 or 4 day program in public schools using Family Early Childhood Educators and Adult Basic Educators teaching as a team; includes 4 components—a parent education support group, supervised parent-child together time, adult literacy instruction, adapted High Scope curriculum
MOTHEREAD Raleigh, NC	prenatal-11 years	schools prisons shelters libraries child care centers	Adult literacy classes and story-sharing with children; children's books serve as primary texts; incorporates language experience approach; curriculum also developed for prenatal and infant classes
Mothers' Reading New York, NY	3- and 4-year-olds	University Settlement House	Mothers work in writing workshop format to create "literature" from group writing based on personal experiences, then read their writing to their children
Parent Readers Brooklyn, NY	all ages	community colleges public schools workplace seminars	Began as an adjunct to Adult Basic Education classes; workshops focus on literary genre and reading strategies to encourage parents to read to children at home
TOPS Greenville, SC	infants-4-year-olds	homes and public schools	Monthly home visits and parenting meetings for families of children identified as at risk by the school,whole language parenting packs, referrals to adult literacy programs and social service agencies

A Word about Partnerships

None of these quality programs could function without collaborative partnerships. Such partnerships are most commonly formed between school systems, public libraries, hospital systems, adult literacy programs, social service agencies, and civic organizations. Partnership building involves resource assessment, goal setting, and strategic planning, usually over a lengthy bonding period. But worthwhile programs develop out of this process, and evolve best in the context of the specific community they serve.

With communitywide partnerships and involvement, the promise of family literacy programs is great. Family literacy can reach large segments of our nation, intervening in and altering the cycle of illiteracy. A future generation of dropouts could be significantly reduced, replaced by a generation of learners prepared to meet the ongoing challenges of twenty-first century citizenship. Table 2 is a suggested list of possible collaborative sources.

Table 2. Recommended Community Resources for Collaboration

I. For access to materials, activities and services:
- Agricultural extension programs
- College education and school curriculum libraries
- Newspaper in Education programs
- Private sources of books for families—local bookstores (especially children's bookstores), publishers' overruns, used book drives
- Program enrichment—storytellers, storyreaders, performing artists, writers, poets, reading mentors, adult new readers—from civic clubs, professional organizations, college and public school faculties, etc.
- Public, school, and church libraries
- Reading Is Fundamental (RIF)

II. To support the parent as the child's first teacher:
- Chamber of Commerce or community leadership programs
- Church programs
- Civic, community, fraternal, professional, service/charitable clubs and organizations (youth, adult, and seniors)
- Library family programs and special services
- Local educational alliances
- Mental health associations
- Other family literacy projects—Even Start, library, university, literacy volunteers
- Preschool programs and child development centers
- Publications on parenting and early childhood—State Department of Education, school district, and commercially printed media
- United Way agencies

III. To support the parent in progress as a student:
- Access resource centers with adult education programs
- Community, state, and national literacy programs
- Job Training Partnership Act programs
- Ministerial associations, church and synagogue mentoring programs
- Public school, community or technical colleges/universities—Adult Basic Education/G.E.D./ESL programs
- Urban League—local chapters—training and mentoring programs

Cited Program Contacts

BabyTALK
Claudia Quigg
Rolling Prairie Library System
345 W. Eldorado
Decatur, IL 62522
(217) 429-2586

Beginning With Books
Elizabeth Segel/Joan Brest Friedberg
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh
Homewood Branch
7101 Hamilton Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15208
(412) 731-1717

Families for Literacy
Carole Tallan
California State Library
1001 Sixth Street, Suite 300
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(916) 322-0362

HIPPY USA
National Council of Jewish Women
53 West 23rd Street
New York, NY 10010
(212) 645-4048

Kenan Trust Family Literacy Program
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401 South 4th Avenue, Suite 610
Louisville, KY 40202-3449
(502) 584-1133

Learning Choices
Marjorie Oglander
Indianapolis Network for Employment Training
17 W. Market Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 636-8667

MOTHEREAD, Inc.
Nancy Gaj
P.O. Box 6434
Raleigh, NC 27628
(919) 781-2088

Mothers' Reading Program
c/o University Settlement
184 Eldridge Street
New York, NY 10002
(212) 674-9120, ext. 176

Parent's Reading Program
Ellen Goldsmith
New York City Technical College
300 Jay Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(718) 643-5723

Reach Out and Read (ROAR)
Barry Zuckerman, M.D.
Child Development Unit
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300 Longwood Avenue
Boston, MA 02115
(617) 735-6948

Training Opportunities for Parent Success (TOPS)
Alana Maitlan
Greenville County School District
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500 Gridley Street
Greenville, SC 29609
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