

Seven Research-Based Ways That Families Promote Early Literacy



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RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE BRIEFS

Global Family Research Project introduces a series of occasional research-to-practice reviews laying out high-leverage areas for family engagement. High-leverage areas are those processes and practices that have the greatest effect on student learning and development. They could be processes such as the transition to school, and practices such as engaging families in early math and early literacy. Family engagement is key in building strong pathways that lead to children's healthy development, school readiness, graduation, and subsequent success. Our reviews and related blogs include examples of research and practice and ways organizations are building family engagement in high-leverage areas, as well as links to additional resources. This research-to-practice brief focuses on early literacy.

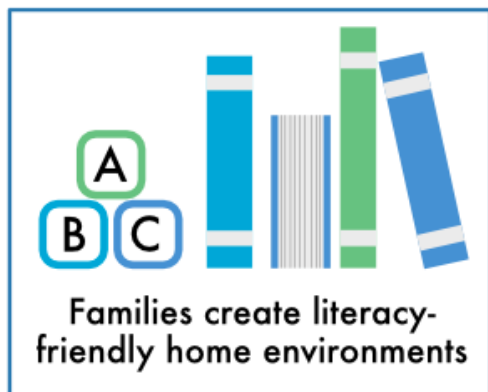
The notion that families play a critical role in promoting children’s literacy development is undisputed. Literacy, or the ability to read and write, is composed of a variety of skills that range from letter recognition and phonemic awareness, to oral language, vocabulary, story comprehension, and motivation. These skills begin developing at birth, and a substantial and solid research base confirms that families play an important role in promoting them.¹ Positive early-literacy experiences—whether at home, in early-childhood programs, schools, or libraries—set children on a trajectory to become confident readers by the time they reach third grade, which is an important milestone on the pathway toward high school graduation.

This review outlines seven practices that research shows families use to effectively promote early literacy. Woven through each of the seven research-supported practices are examples of how early-childhood programs, libraries, and other community-based organizations are empowering families and providing them access to knowledge, skills, experiences, and resources to support their children’s literacy development. Although many of the practices are broadly recognized and agreed upon, often families, educators, and librarians do not have access to the latest research substantiating the practices and to new information about how organizations can support them. Some of the ways the research and examples described here can be used include:

- Raising understanding and awareness of research supporting family engagement in early literacy.
- Guiding the design of research-based family literacy experiences.
- Supporting fundraising for family literacy opportunities.
- Sparking continuing innovation to support families’ and communities’ efforts to develop new ways to promote early literacy
- Helping in the development of indicators and benchmarks that can be used to assess and evaluate the success of programs designed to support family engagement and children’s literacy learning.

This review also provides an opportunity to reflect on ways you are currently supporting and could support family and community engagement in early literacy. At the end, we offer a simple tool employing the seven practices as a lens for looking at your current and future work.

Families create literacy-friendly home environments



There are several dimensions to a literacy-friendly home environment. The number of books in a family’s home is strongly and positively related to children’s reading ability.² Books don’t need to be new or purchased—they can be borrowed from the library or obtained for free through book rotation and lending programs.

Second, storybook reading—whether through a print or digital version—supports children’s vocabulary, knowledge, oral language, and reading comprehension.³ A dialogic-reading style—in which parents prompt children

to talk about the book they are reading and then expand upon what children say—is one way to promote print awareness and other early-literacy skills.⁴

Finally, engaging in parent–child literacy activities, such as teaching letter names and sounds as well as printing words and names, encourages the development of early literacy skills. Among these skills are letter knowledge and word reading, which supports children in becoming fluent readers.⁵

Supporting families in creating literacy-friendly home environments

[The Parent-Child Home Program](#) is a national effort that has been operating since 1965. It sends community educators into the homes of vulnerable preschool-age children to provide families with books and toys and guidance to using them to promote children’s learning. Evaluations have shown that children’s participation in the program is related to their language and social-emotional skills, and later reading abilities.⁶

[Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters](#)—known as HIPPY—partners with parents to prepare their children for success in school, particularly those most at risk because of poverty, limited education, and English proficiency. HIPPY was named one of seven home-visiting models that meet the evidence-based criteria of the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV). Research shows that HIPPY parents become more engaged in reading, talking, and working with their children and that children’s school-readiness skills improve.⁷

[Raising A Reader](#) (RAR) is a nonprofit family engagement and early literacy program that helps families develop, practice, and maintain home-based literacy habits and routines. Community agencies—including family childcare homes, preschools, early elementary-grade classrooms, housing communities, libraries, play groups, and home-visiting programs—bring red book bags filled with award-winning multilanguage books into children’s homes. Research shows that RAR Plus—an enhancement of the RAR model that includes book lending plus five family workshops—significantly improves children’s oral language skills and is associated with improvements in the quality of parent–child reading behaviors.⁸

Families have ongoing and engaging conversations with their children



Parent–child conversations stimulate children’s growing language. The amount of language that young children hear is related to their vocabulary and language understanding. In addition, the quality of language that parents provide—including using rich vocabulary, complex ideas, and talking about past and future events—is even more important than just the amount of language they use.⁹

Elaborate conversational styles—such as open-ended “why” questions with few repetitions and with few questions calling for yes or no answers—encourage the development of children’s semantic and print knowledge.¹⁰ These types of conversations can take place anywhere, anytime, including at supermarkets, museums, and libraries.¹¹

Technology promoting parent–child conversations

Technological advances are supporting families and educators in their efforts to reinforce parent–child conversations. For example, at [San Mateo County](#) (California) [Libraries](#) families with children age 30 months or younger can enroll in the Talk, Read, Sing parenting program in which parents take home a “talk pedometer,” which measures the number of conversational turns and words spoken to the baby. The technology from the [LENA Research Foundation](#) tracks conversations and assists parents in increasing language interactions with their children.¹² Many libraries now also offer families an opportunity to borrow a [Starling](#)—a small gadget that counts the number of words children hear and sends data directly to parents’ smartphones so that parents can gauge in real time the amount of words their children are hearing throughout the day.¹³

[The New York Hall of Science](#) has developed a suite of iPad apps that promote parent–child conversations around math and science. [Picture Dots](#), one of the most recent apps, invites families to take a photo of something they see in their daily life. Children can then drag red, green, blue, and yellow dots onto the photo and assign each dot a sound, a word, or a phrase. When the children press play, they can hear the story they created.

Families hold high expectations for their children's learning



High parent expectations about young children's potential are related to gains in children's emerging literacy skills and self-directed learning.¹⁴ For example, when parents believe that their children will succeed in school and receive good grades, their children enjoy greater success than those of parents who do not hold those beliefs.

Parent expectations are formed, in part, by their sense of responsibility for the children's educational outcomes; beliefs about whether one should be engaged in supporting the children's learning, beliefs, and confidence

that personal actions will help the children learn; and opportunities for engagement with schools and in the community.¹⁵

Communities setting high expectations

The [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#) raises awareness for families about the importance of children reading on grade level by third grade, and provides families and organizations access to promising practices that families can use.

The Pinkerton Foundation has helped promote high expectations for children's reading in two areas of New York City through a community-wide effort called the Neighborhood Literacy Initiative. This initiative brings together a collaborative of community partners, with libraries as the hub, with the collective goal of increasing literacy for children from birth to fifth grade by creating a community culture of reading. The initiative has bolstered community opportunities for literacy development, built energy and enthusiasm for reading, increased the knowledge of families and communities in promoting literacy development, and improved reading scores on state exams in partnering schools.¹⁶

Families make reading enjoyable



Learning to read is not only about learning letters and sounds but also about developing a love of reading, and becoming motivated and passionate about it, all of which can be fostered by parents. When parents and their children engage in warm, nurturing, and encouraging interactions, children become more engaged, which in turn enhances children’s growing literacy skills.¹⁷ And parents benefit, too—these enjoyable experiences help mitigate stress that adults might experience.¹⁸

Organizations bringing pleasure and delight to reading

The [Best Books](#) section of the [Common Sense Media](#) website provides families and children from preschool through adolescence recommendations for stories that will captivate readers of all levels.

The [National Center for Families Learning](#) (NCFL) has created [Wonderopolis](#), a virtual platform that poses intriguing questions each day to encourage reading, discussion, and learning among families and children. For example, parents and children can learn about yodeling or discuss whether they think the Loch Ness monster is real.

Families use their home language



Statistics show that nationally, 23 percent of young children are dual-language learners (young children learning both English and another language simultaneously).¹⁹ Their language and literacy development benefits from adults who talk with them in the language in which the adults are most competent and with which they are most comfortable.²⁰

In addition, children enjoy a healthier ethnic identity and better relationships with their caregivers when they are able to communicate in their parents' home language.²¹ Children's early literacy skills also benefit from families who use storytelling and book-sharing styles that are more aligned to their cultural preference.²² Organizations support families in using their home language by raising up their desires and preferences and designing programs based on those ideas and strengths.²³

Raising up families' voices in family literacy programming

[Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors](#) is a comprehensive training program developed by and for Latino parents with children ages birth to five. Parent input shapes all aspects of the Abriendo Puertas curriculum, which engages parents in lessons—including the importance of reading and understanding how language develops—that reflect the culture of the families who take part. Participation in Abriendo Puertas increases educational activities at home, parents' approaches to reading with their children, and library use.²⁴

Families communicate with their children's teachers



Connecting, communicating, and getting involved with early-childhood programs and schools improves children's language and literacy.²⁵ Educators can provide information about individual children's learning and development as well as model reading strategies that further children's growth.

Participating in workshops and family literacy programs can also have benefits. When families participate in programs that offer ideas for fun and stimulating parent-child activities, their children develop higher comprehension-related abilities and improved sound and letter knowledge.²⁶

Empowering families to communicate with schools

[Learning Heroes](#) is an organization that is dedicated to helping answer parents' questions about what children are expected to learn each year and how to support children's learning. The [Learning Tools](#) section of their website offers resources that are searchable by subject from trusted organizations to help children succeed in school (e.g., English, math, and life skills) and grade (K–12).

Families visit the library



Visiting the library is an important way to promote children’s language and literacy development. Libraries offer books and digital resources that families can borrow, along with story times and other parent–child learning opportunities.²⁷ Kindergartners who visit libraries with their families exhibit higher levels of performance on assessments of reading, mathematics, and science in third grade than those who rarely visit.²⁸

In library settings, when parents provide direction in choosing library books and Internet-based learning resources, their children spend more time reading and acquire more knowledge compared to children who are left to navigate library resources on their own.²⁹

Promoting family engagement in libraries

[Ideabook: Libraries for Families](#) from the Public Library Association and Global Family Research Project offers a research-based framework to guide libraries’ work in family engagement, and shares 54 profiles of the innovative ways that libraries—big and small—support families in promoting children’s learning and development, especially literacy.

[Every Child Ready to Read \(ECRR\)](#) is a research-based curriculum and resource guide developed by the Public Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC). ECRR helps librarians support families in nurturing their young children’s literacy development by emphasizing singing, talking, reading, writing, and playing.

[Family Place Libraries](#) is a nationwide network of librarians who are trained in the Family Place Library approach, which builds on the knowledge that good health, early learning, parental involvement, and supportive communities play a critical role in young children’s growth and development. The Family Place model increases identification and support for children with delays and special needs, reduces parent isolation, and helps transform libraries into welcoming, family-friendly early-learning environments.³⁰

The [American Library Association](#) and its affiliates, the ALSC and REFORMA: the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking, sponsor the Pura Belpré Award, which is presented annually to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth. By offering collections that reflect demographic changes in communities and conducting early literacy programs in different languages, public libraries attract diverse families with young children.

Reflection Tool

Early-childhood programs, schools, libraries, and other community organizations are taking responsibility to reach out to families so that they feel empowered and have access to information, experiences, and opportunities to use the seven practices, as well as other resources, to effectively support their children’s learning and early literacy development. We offer the tool below for you to think about the seven practices, and use them and other evidence-based practices as a means to reflect on your own current and future work supporting family engagement in early literacy.



Family Literacy Process	What We Are Doing Now	Ideas for Change	Priority for Change (<i>High, medium, or low</i>)
Create literacy-friendly home environments			
Support ongoing parent–child conversations			
Ensure that families have high expectations for their children’s literacy development			
Assist families in making reading enjoyable			
Encourage families to use their home language			
Make sure that families visit the library			
Promote the importance of home–school communication			
Other evidence-based practice(s)			

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