

## COMING SOON FROM YOUR LOCAL LIBRARY... FAMILY LITERACY!

*by Alice Mathews*



### HELPING CREATE THE LITERATI

We librarians sometimes like to imagine that everyone is highly literate and loves words as much as we do. But within our cities, suburbs, and rural areas are children who don't grow up wanting to read books and parents who don't understand the implicit and awesome value of words when spoken or read to their children. These are the families for which the decades-young term "family literacy" has been created.

Through my mother's eyes, family literacy meant the way our family sat together in the same room, each reading his or her favorite newspaper, book, or comic. It meant the way my parents read to me, showed me how to print, helped me find the hidden pictures in *Highlights*, and regularly took me to the library to search for books. It meant the way my mother pointed out the directions in the recipe she was following and talked about what the letters and words meant on road signs when we traveled. Family literacy is all of these things. It is parents' conscious and subconscious interactions with their children that effect pre-literacy and literacy development.

But through my eyes as a librarian and former educator, family literacy can also be seen as a more structured set of community and school programs specifically designed to increase literacy skills in parents and children. Parents may not always know the "right" way to teach their children; they may not know what their children can learn at any particular stage of development; they may not know, for instance, that clear, vocabulary-rich speech spoken to a child yields greater reading comprehension which yields easier learning throughout life. These are concepts that can be taught through family literacy programs.

Many family literacy programs such as Even Start, the Head Start Family Literacy Initiative, and the FACE (Family and Child Education) program began springing up in the 1990s to assist lower-educated parents in learning how to encourage pre-literacy and literacy skills in their children. Even Start targets teen parents. Head Start targets low-income families with preschoolers. FACE was begun for the Native American

population. Other examples are Parents as Teachers, which includes a home visitation schedule from child education professionals and a home curriculum for families, and BabyTALK, designed for babies through age five and their parents. Most programs include four areas of focus:

1. adult literacy education
2. parenting education
3. age-appropriate child education and
4. interactive parent-child time (Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002, p.12). Because of the multi-faceted focus of the majority of these programs, families gain more than literacy through program participation.

A multitude of research over the years—much of it still ongoing—has shown that family literacy programs of this type have positive benefits for adults, including better literacy skills, higher percentages of GED completion and post-secondary education enrollment, higher employment rates, greater active participation in community and church organizations, and increased self-esteem (Griffis, 2003, para. 9; Hayes n.d. a, para. 6-7; Padak & Rosinski, 2003). Benefits to children include kindergarten readiness, greater pre-literacy and literacy skills, and continued success through several years of schooling (Hayes n.d. b, para. 6-7; Padak & Rosinski, 2003), and, of course, the often uncounted benefit of greater parent-child closeness and affection.

Participation has increased in the area of family literacy as more programs open and community collaborations of agencies abound. Not every agency is equipped to handle all parts of the program quadrant. Often, for example, the adult literacy part of a program may be housed in a building along with a separate early childhood care center, which may fill the child-education role in the family literacy quadrant. Collaborations of this type are not uncommon, and, as the community collaborates, more can be done. My Indiana county (La Porte), like some others with foresight, has an established Literacy Council which attempts to better use the strengths of its agency members (including schools, libraries, the local Even Start, Parents as Teachers, and

BabyTALK programs, and several parent-and-child focused agencies) to promote literacy within the county (Literacy Council, 2006).

## LIBRARIES MEET FAMILY LITERACY

And where does your library fit into all of this family literacy progress? A few weeks ago, I was talking to another librarian who, on the subject of family literacy, said, “Don’t parents just automatically read to their kids?” Though wishful thinking might miraculously make that happen, the answer is an emphatic “No!” In my previous career and in my present one, I have met many parents who need either the knowledge or the impetus to create a better literacy learning environment for their children at home. Some of them need the structure of a model family literacy program like those mentioned above; some need just the opportunity for more good quality learning that a library can provide through programs, materials, and services. Every bit of nurturing we as library professionals can give that tiny literacy glow is important, so it will burst into the flame of desire for words, and books, and knowledge. THAT’s where your library comes in!

## COUNTERING THE TOP TEN CONCERNS

School libraries, because of their active role within a constant-learning environment, have been more likely to embrace a role in family literacy; public libraries have not ventured into the family literacy arena as much. Public libraries and librarians, in particular, may have concerns about adding family literacy to their already full schedule of tasks. A list of ten (shall we call them the Top Ten?) concerns might include:

1. *Libraries and librarians may not recognize that parents need help teaching their children.*

“Parenting remains the greatest single preserve of the amateur.”—*Alvin Toffler* (Toffler, 2007).

No one is a perfect parent; we all need help.

2. *Libraries and librarians may not believe the library can and should be a part of the community family literacy effort.*

Libraries have resources to share. Libraries have missions, which generally include service to their communities. Family literacy programs and services are ways of fulfilling a library’s service commitment.

3. *Libraries and librarians may not know how they can best support and affect family literacy.*

Ask. Ask your local literacy council. Ask teachers. Ask parents. Ask other local organizations with whom you might collaborate. Ask each other. Ask your Board of Directors. Ask children.

4. *Libraries and librarians may believe that schools are the best or most appropriate places to provide*

*family literacy programming and libraries are only an additional support to the educational system.*

As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. It may take several agencies, plus family, friends, teachers, and others to provide family literacy learning to those who need it. Libraries have always been learning sites in their own right; they can also be teaching sites.

5. *Libraries and librarians may be unwilling to spend staff time and energies on programming they think may echo similar programs elsewhere or that may not bring in large numbers of attendees.*

Much programming that goes on at your library is already full of literacy experiences for children. Other programs may need to be adapted or created to fit the audience of children, adults, or an intergenerational mix. You may need to take your programming out of the library sometimes. Don’t worry about numbers for this programming—this is an investment into your community which will reap more readers in the long term!

6. *Libraries and librarians may be unwilling or unable to cooperate with other local agencies to bring about a streamlined and comprehensive community effort.*

Collaboration can sometimes be challenging but is often rewarding. If other agencies want you to help, they’ll find a way. If your library must do something on its own to benefit family literacy, remember it’s better to do something than to do nothing.

7. *Libraries and librarians may not feel library staff are teachers.*

Most family literacy programs and services offered in libraries cover books and reading skills, things you already know about. If you have expertise in an area, share it—that’s what teaching is. There are other resources in the community to call on should you need them.

8. *Libraries and librarians may not know what their real role is in family literacy.*

Your library may collaborate, or it may design its own family literacy effort. Each branch may play one small role in the effort. Follow your library’s guidelines, requests of other agencies and teachers, family literacy guides available from several resources, and your own instinct to design worthwhile programs and services.

9. *Libraries and librarians may think that preschool story time is the only way they can/should become involved.*

Preschool story time is great and always has been! It was the first step many libraries took to engage little people in books. Now see how you can stretch it to include parent-child activities and think about other

types of programs that might include family literacy activities.

10. *Libraries and librarians in middle-class or well-to-do areas may think there is no need for family literacy programs in their area.*

Au contraire. Most large-scale program efforts (EvenStart, Parents as Teachers) are directed toward low-income families only, though BabyTALK involves anyone from any socioeconomic level. Libraries are one of the few places where people of all socioeconomic and educational levels can be offered storytimes, booktalks, discussions, cultural and craft programs, and other literacy-bearing services.

## POSSIBLE FAMILY LITERACY VENTURES FOR LIBRARIES

If you don't know how to begin, here are a few ideas:

- Ask preschool and kindergarten teachers for concepts that their students don't understand, then plan a family program around them.
- Create a specific parenting collection with books, videos, parenting magazines, developmental guides, parenting referral resources, etc.
- Design readers' advisory materials to help parents connect with books and websites that focus on parenting.
- Encourage and teach informational literacy to parents as a tool to learn more.
- Find out which local organizations, if any, already have family literacy on their agenda and how you can support them through your library's collection, programs, and services.
- Use nonfiction as well as fiction in your programming to enlarge children's perspectives and interests.
- Make every program a cultural and educational one that expands the minds, vocabulary, and skills of the age group(s) attending.
- Hold programs that are multi-generational to allow parents and grandparents more interaction time with the young people in their families.
- Hold participatory programs with more aspects to them than just read-alouds.
- Hold family booktalks and discussions.
- Plan a program series on child development or best books for family time.
- Market your family literacy services at community locations where people who can make use of them will see them—not just in-house and in the newspapers.

- Create “fun times” kits with books and expansion materials for parents to use with their children.
- Talk to the parents and children who walk into your library!
- Model a variety of reading to adults and children alike whenever you can.
- Experiment with ways of keeping parenting and family literacy issues fresh.
- Evaluate what works, and what doesn't. Then try again—your efforts will all be worthwhile!

Family literacy is an area in which a little can mean a lot. We need to begin venturing into the family literacy arena, even if we have not already. The amount of time spent should be viewed as an investment into the community we serve and into future patronage of the library. Which part, or parts, each library plays, will differ according to the needs of its community, but each public and school library should play a part, from the smallest branches to the mega-libraries of big cities.

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Besides managing a branch library, Alice attends evening graduate classes as an IUPUI SLIS student. Before her career in the library world, she held an eclectic set of mini-careers that included tutoring elementary-aged ENL students, directing a nonprofit preschool for low-income families, and writing and performing educational storytelling programs for schools and libraries. Her undergraduate degree is in Radio-TV education. She is the mother of five children.

