



background

Early Reading Futures At Stake

Ounce of Prevention

Promising strategies head off reading problems

The consequences are grave for poor readers in a society like ours, where jobs increasingly demand a high level of reading ability. The good news is that, for most children, reading difficulties can be prevented.

Across the nation, promising reading interventions are being used to foster early development of language and reading skills.

Good reading instruction is still the best way to prevent reading difficulties. But children face the best odds of becoming strong readers when reading and language development is nurtured at home and in day care, as well as in school.

To that end, school officials, teachers, caregivers, policymakers, and parents share the responsibility of seeing to it that children enter school already on their way to becoming successful readers.

Preschool

The evidence of the potential of preschool to improve children's early language and literacy development is heartening.

Studies suggest, for example, that phonological awareness training given in preschool has helped children develop an important understanding of how words can be broken into sounds. Children with developed phonological awareness are aware of, and better able to recognize, the sounds of language.

In one study, all but one of the 21 preschool children given phonological awareness training were later able to make rhymes. In contrast, only nine of the 21 children who did not receive the training could later rhyme.¹

Comprehensive preschool programs, in particular, appear to make an impact on later reading ability.

In the Abecedarian Project, infants received enriched day care that stressed language and cognitive development through age 5. At follow-up, the children showed significantly higher reading achievement from grade 3 through grade 8.²

However, not all preschools offer adequate language environments.

A North Carolina study reported that public preschools in the state rated lower on language and reasoning measures than on other aspects of the Early Childhood Environment Rating. The findings suggest that the language development needs of the children were

not being fully met and that mechanisms for improvement were not available. A study of 32 Head Start classrooms also found the lowest scores on the test to be for language and reasoning.³

In North Carolina and elsewhere, studies of preschool literacy conclude that overall program quality is an important factor in determining the effects preschool will have on the language and preliteracy skills of children.

Studies also suggest that preschool teachers are an important – and underutilized – resource in promoting literacy. Central to a preschool's role in the prevention of reading difficulties is each teacher's knowledge and experience and the support its teachers are given.

related reports

Poor reader, dim future

In our technological society, children must be more than merely literate. See Report 21.

Why children struggle to read

Factors that contribute to reading difficulties are found at home, at school, and in the community. See Report 22.

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In homes where reading is a source of entertainment, children are more likely to have a positive view of reading and books.

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Parents As Teachers

A child's attitude about learning to read is likely to be influenced by the attitudes, values, and expectations of his or her parents with regard to reading.

Children of parents who view reading as a source of entertainment have a more positive view of reading than do children whose parents emphasize the skills aspect of reading development. Children who view learning in school as irrelevant to life outside school are less motivated to invest time and effort in learning to read.

Parents and family can also contribute other important elements of learning to read, such as print awareness, concepts and functions of reading, knowledge of narrative structure, and vocabulary and discourse patterns.

Tapping such valuable resources is at the heart of parent-oriented early intervention services aimed at improving literacy and language outcomes. These programs are usually built around regular home visits by a parent educator, who offers information and guidance on child development and how to prepare children for school.

Studies suggest some of these services strengthen important aspects of reading development.

An example is Parents As Teachers,

a voluntary parent program that begins in the third trimester of pregnancy and continues until the child is 3 years old.

Children in the program performed significantly better than comparison children on tests of cognition and language at age 3 years.

Later, children who participated in the program scored much higher on standardized tests for reading ability in first grade, and parents were more involved in their children's education than were parents of children in the comparison group.⁴

Family Literacy

Wide variations exist among

programs that seek to enhance literacy within families as a way to improve the reading skills of children and avoid having them struggle with literacy and language in school.

Successful family literacy programs, however, have several features in common. Most take steps to ensure participation, such as arranging transportation; tailor the program to the specific needs of families; use instruction that is meaningful and useful; build a staff that is stable and brings diverse expertise to the project; and raise funds that enable them to continue their work over an extended period of time.

The Even Start Literacy Program, an attempt to unify early childhood education and adult education for parents, is one family literacy program that has been evaluated by a large-scale national survey and a long-term study. It was found to have its greatest impact in improving the availability of reading materials in the home, parents' expectations of their children's success in school, and the school readiness of children.

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references

This report was based on the following publications:

National Research Council (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, C.E. Snow, M.S. Burns, & P. Griffin, eds. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

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¹Brady, S., Fowler, A., Stone, B., & Winbury, N. (1994). Training phonological awareness: A study with inner city kindergarten children. *Annals of Dyslexia*, **44**, 27-59.

²Campbell, F.A., & Ramey, C.T. (1994). Effects of early intervention on intellectual and academic achievement: A follow-up study of children from low-income families. *Child Development*, **65**, 684-698.

³Bryant, D.M., Peisner-Feinberg, E., & Clifford, R. (1993). *Evaluation of public preschool programs in North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: Frank Porter Graham Center, University of North Carolina.

⁴National Diffusion Network (1996). *Educational programs that work: 22nd Edition*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

Children, Youth & Family background is published by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, a program of the University Center for Social and Urban Research. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

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