



FLaRE Document

Family Literacy

Vicky Zygouris-Coe, Ph.D.
Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence (FLaRE) Center
University of Central Florida
College of Education

Document # 4-001
©2001 FLaRE Center
University of Central Florida

Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Center
College of Education
University of Central Florida
Orlando, FL 32816
<http://flare.ucf.edu>

MISSION OF THE FLaRE CENTER

The mission of the Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence (FLaRE) Center is to support the Florida Department of Education in its statewide implementation of the Florida Reading Initiatives by functioning as a principal informational delivery mechanism for improving the early literacy and reading instruction to children and families across the state of Florida.

The Center will serve as...

- an information clearinghouse for scientifically based reading and family literacy research
- a lighthouse for disseminating information on successful projects
- a research/development center to document effective practices based on rigorous research methods
- a development center for preservice and inservice teacher training
- a linkage for school districts, IHEs, community organizations that have a vested interest in family literacy and reading excellence.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON FLaRE RESEARCH DOCUMENTS

Richard Allington, Ph.D., University of Florida

Joyce Fine, Ph.D., Florida International University

Deborah Harris, Ph.D., Florida Atlantic University

Susanne Lapp, Ph.D., Florida Atlantic University

Robert Lemons, Ph.D., Florida A & M University

Geri Melosh, M.A., University of Florida

Charleen Olliff, Ph.D., Florida Gulf Coast University

Barbara Palmer, Ph.D., Florida State University

Rex Schmid, Ph.D., University of West Florida

Nile Stanley, Ph.D., University of North Florida

Gail West, Ph.D., University of Central Florida

Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Center
College of Education • University of Central Florida • Orlando, FL 32816
<http://flare.ucf.edu>

Table of Contents

Section I	Family Literacy	Page 4
Section II	What is Family Literacy?	Page 5
Section III	What Teachers Can Do	Page 15
Section IV	What Principals/Schools Can Do	Page 18
Section VI	Summary	Page 20

Family Literacy

The family is the beginning point for the development of human resources within a culture. Families provide an intergenerational transfer of language, culture, thought, values, and attitudes throughout the formative years of their children's lives. Families help children construct meaning about life, culture, language, learning, and literacy.

The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) has compiled many statistics that point to the importance of family literacy in the United States of America. The following list of statistics paints a call to action for family literacy support and initiatives:

- Every 40 seconds a child is born into poverty and every 37 seconds a child is born to a mother who did not graduate from high school.
- 71% of children whose mothers completed college attended early childhood centers in 1996, compared to 37% whose mothers had less than a high school education.
- The more types of reading materials there are in the home, the higher the level of student proficiency.
- One in three parents contact the school about the child's academic program and belong to the PTA. Parents with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to do both.
- More schools with poverty populations and minority enrollments of 50% or more perceived the following issues to be barriers than schools low in these characteristics:
 - Lack of parent education to help with homework;
 - Cultural or socioeconomic differences;
 - Language differences between parents and staff;
 - Parent attitudes about the school;
 - Staff attitudes about the parents; and
 - Concerns about safety in the area after school hours.
- Adults participating in family literacy programs showed greater gains and were less likely to drop out of the program in literacy than adults in adult-focused programs.
- Children participating in family literacy programs showed greater gains than children in child-focused programs.
- Parents in family literacy programs reported more educationally supportive home environments.

The National Literacy Survey (NALS) of 1993—the most comprehensive survey of the literacy skills of adults in the U.S.—reported that the skills of 40% of all American adults are below the New Basic Skills benchmark (level 3 on the NALS 5-level scale). Children of adults who participate in literacy programs improve their grades, test scores, reading skills, and are less likely to drop out of school. Prisoners generally have significantly lower literacy skills than the general population. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is the fastest growing area of the adult basic education system. Nearly 20% of children in America live in poverty.

Until recently, literacy problems have been addressed by: (a) remediation programs for adults in the form of adult education or workforce literacy programs, and (b) early childhood initiatives for children who are considered to be at-risk for future school failure. Although both of these types of programs have had success, there is a tremendous need to work within the family unit to prevent the generational cycles of poverty and under-education. Family literacy programs have increased in numbers over the past few years.

What is Family Literacy?

The National Literacy Act of 1991 defines literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential.”

The United States Congress defines “**family literacy**” as **services provided to participants on a voluntary basis that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family (such as eliminating or reducing welfare dependency) and that integrate all of the following activities:**

- **Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children.**
- **Equipping parents to partner with their children in learning.**
- **Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.**
- **Appropriate instruction for children of parents receiving parent literacy services. (H. R. 1385, passed by the House in 1997).**

This need for a common definition of family literacy resulted in the federal government adopting a federal definition for family literacy to be used by Adult Education, Even Start, Head Start, and Title 1 programs. For the purposes of this document, **we at the Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence (FLaRE) Center, have adopted the previously mentioned federal definition for family literacy.**

In 1991, the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association (IRA) formed a Family Literacy Commission to: (1) investigate issues, questions in family literacy, (2) describe programs in schools and community agencies, (3) increase awareness about the relationship between family literacy and children’s literacy development, and (d) stimulate new developments in family literacy initiatives (Morrow & Neuman, 1995).

The Family Literacy Commission views family literacy as the ways parents, caregivers, children, and extended family members use literacy at home in their community. Family literacy may occur purposefully by a parent or a caregiver, or may take place spontaneously as parents and children interact on a daily basis. Programs outside the home include parent involvement programs, (where parents learn to help their children in literacy and school-related activities), intergenerational programs, (where parents and children are involved in literacy-type activities together), and studies that examine the many uses of literacy in families from different cultures (Morrow, Paratore & Tracey, 1994).

There are four components of family literacy programs:

- Adult education
- Childhood education
- Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time
- Parent education

The adult education component is designed to extend basic education skills and lead to economic self-sufficiency and life experiences. Parents learn personal and family problem-solving skills, how to use information for lifelong

learning and self-improvement, negotiation skills, interpersonal skills, and how to apply those skills in their home and community.

The childhood education component is designed to promote developmentally appropriate activities for children using current research in brain development and reading. It is recommended that programs endorse and practice the recommendations of the National Association of Young Children (NAYEC). These recommendations provide for the use of a developmentally appropriate curriculum, low teacher-student ratio and small group size, authentic assessment, the importance of culturally relevant curriculum, and parent involvement. Early education programs are offered through collaborative efforts with First Start, Head Start, Pre-Kindergarten early intervention, Even Start, and preschool programs with extended day services.

The PACT component is a trademark of family literacy programs. The federal definition of PACT time is interactive literacy activities between parents and children. PACT sessions can take place in centers or at home and they allow parents to interact, play, and practice literacy activities with their children. It allows parents to observe modeled sessions, learn about child development, observe their children participate in different activities, and learn new ways to support children's development. Many low-income parents desire to learn more about how to help their children in reading (Edwards, 1995). The goals of PACT time sessions include:

- Capitalizing on the strengths of parents and viewing them as primary leaders in their families;
- Enhancing parents' awareness of how children learn and what activities or experiences are important to their learning;
- Providing parents with information about how to support child learning at home; and
- Providing opportunities for parents to practice their skills and provide modeling, feedback, and suggestions.

During PACT time sessions parents also receive specific information on how to support their children's literacy development. The following are some of the literacy-related activities NCFL recommends parents engage in:

- Encourage oral language development (e.g., tell family stories, review classroom events, field trips, activities and encourage children to talk about their experiences).
- Model literacy skills (e.g., read stories, sing songs, cook together, write letters to relatives or friends, schedule reading time together, and involve the child in everyday functional literacy activities).
- Develop a sense of story (e.g., arrange pictures together, or ask the child to predict what will happen next in a story you are reading together).
- Write collaboratively (e.g., illustrate and write stories together).
- Use various tools of literacy (e.g., use games, finger play, color, draw, paint, or follow directions when making a craft together).
- Encourage thinking and creativity (e.g., ask questions while reading a story, or relate it to the child's personal experiences).
- Use language for fun (e.g., learn rhymes and jokes).

The parent education component is designed to invite parents to view themselves as the primary teacher of their children, inform parents, provide opportunities for support, offer services to families, and create avenues for parents to become active and full partners in the education of their children. Parental involvement initiatives should

help parents with issues of child development, working with the child’s strengths and needs, teaching children strategies that promote critical thinking skills, creating a literacy environment at home, and dealing with discipline and problem-solving. Parental engagement can take many forms; the United States Department of Education describes the following types of parental involvement in the home:

- Active organization and monitoring of the child’s time;
- Provide help with homework;
- Discuss school matters with the child; and
- Reading to/with young children.

The purpose of the Even Start Family Literacy program (Federal definition in the Even Start Legislation, Part B, Title 1 of Elementary and Secondary Education Act) is to create a unified approach to family literacy and to help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by improving the educational opportunities of the nation’s low-income families by integrating early childhood education, adult literacy or adult basic education, and parenting education. The program shall—(1) be implemented through cooperative projects that build on existing community resources to create a new range of services, (2) promote achievement of the National Education Goals, and (3) assist children and adults from low-income families to achieve challenging state content standards and challenging state student performance standards.

The main goal of family programs such as Even Start is to help maximize family involvement in literacy by combining adult, parent, family, and early childhood education in an interactive, comprehensive, and systematic manner.

We know that parents or other caregivers are potentially the most influential people in the education of their children. Literacy begins at home. Children’s first experiences with literacy are shaped by parents’ and caregivers’ literacy. Children’s interactions with others at home create contexts for learning and children’s literacy is embedded in everyday life activities.

Research supports a strong link between the home environment and children’s acquisition of school-based literacy. Such practices as shared reading, reading aloud, making print materials available, and promoting positive attitudes toward literacy in the home have been found to have a significant affect on children’s literacy learning (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1984; Morrow, 1993). Children’s socialization, oral language development, and literacy development is first constructed at home (McGee & Richgels, 1996).

Most families act together on literacy-related tasks and activities. Some families, however, do more than others. Research shows that the types of literacy practiced in some homes are incongruent with those that children face in school and consequently, the kinds of literacy practiced in classrooms may have little meaning for those children outside the school. However, there is evidence that the literacy contexts many low-income, minority, and immigrant families create help support family literacy (Auerbach, 1989). Therefore, it is very important that we begin to acknowledge “multiple literacies” (Morrow & Neuman, 1995, p. 550) found in the social practices of culturally diverse families.

Family literacy is an umbrella term often used to describe a wide range of programs involving family members and literacy activities. The programs vary in intensity, types of activities, and duration. There are numerous local fam-

ily programs throughout the country that provide parents with skills that increase children's literacy and educational development. Many programs are supported by the Federal Even Start Family Literacy Program, which was authorized in 1988 to fund local partnerships that provide local instruction to low-income parents. Other programs function as independent single-site centers that were created by local activists or educators in response to community needs. In addition, there are other family programs that receive funding from private organizations (Come & Fredericks, 1995; NCFL, 1994).

Findings of the National Center for Family Literacy (1994) suggest that family literacy programs have been proven to be more effective than standard adult education programs with adult family members and more effective than child-focused programs with disadvantaged children. Parents' success in a family literacy program provides them with cultural knowledge, relational knowledge (i.e., parent-child relations), and brings about more involvement in their children's schooling.

Family literacy describes a wide range of activities from a parent reading a book to a child to a formal program with many services for adults and children. Family literacy takes place in hospitals, clinics, summer camps, local libraries, community centers, workplace sites, jails, places of worship, and classrooms. Helping families engage in literacy activities will strengthen and improve the literacy skills of all family members.

Researchers in adult literacy and literacy within K-12 schools recognize the role of the family as central to children's attitudes toward school and children's learning. Parental involvement in their children's schooling influences student achievement, attendance, self-concept, motivation, and behavior.

Two of the National Education Goals stress the important role of parents in children's education (National Education Goals Panel, 1998). Goal 1, the *readiness* goal, emphasizes the role of parents as their children's first teachers. Goal 8, aimed at schools, emphasizes the need to promote parent-school partnerships that will increase *parental involvement* in their children's schooling. There is much research to support the importance of parental involvement in children's education (see Henderson & Berla, 1994). Children whose parents are involved in their schools by attending school events, back-to-school nights, or volunteering are more likely to do well in school, and to exhibit fewer problems than children whose parents are not involved.

Parents can become involved in their child's education in various ways. A synthesis of Epstein's (1990) work on parental involvement is presented below:

- Provide for the health and nutrition of children.
- Communicate with school.
- Volunteer and attend school events.
- Provide learning activities at home.
- Become involved in school decision-making.
- Collaborate with community organizations to increase family and student access to community resources.

The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) acknowledges that effective parent and family involvement help create a strong support system for educators and families. The National PTA recommends that a successful parent involvement program include the following components:

- Parents play a vital role in assisting student learning.
- Parents are welcome in the school, and their assistance and support are intentionally sought.
- Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
- Regular, meaningful, two-way communication is established between home and school.
- Responsible parenting should be promoted and supported.
- Community resources are made available to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning.

Mikulecky and Lloyd (1995) in a study of NCFL programs in various states reported that parents who participated in parent involvement programs maintained many significant gains. A synthesis of those gains is presented below:

- Parents provided a wide range of literacy materials at home for their children: they took their children to the library every three weeks and bought or borrowed books for their children every one to two weeks.
- Parents engaged in a wide range of literacy activities at home with their children: they looked at or read books to their children almost every day, children asked their parents to read to them almost every day, and children's book and magazine reading increased to more than once per day.
- Parent talk involved more explaining and less direct instruction about hygiene or manners/behavior.
- Parents and children played together with toys or games about 30% more often.
- Parents displayed their children's writing and drawings every four to five days.
- Children saw their parents engage in a wider range of reading and writing activities at home.
- Parents learned that children learn through play.
- Parents spent time with their children and helped them read and write well.
- Parents believed that taking their children to the library or other educational programs would help their children's literacy development.

Fredericks and Rasinski (1990) presented five essential criteria that contribute to the success of outreach programs. The following criteria are necessary for the effective implementation of long-term parental involvement initiatives:

- The program has to be built upon the expressed wishes of parents.
- Both teachers and parents have to promote a spirit of shared responsibility.
- Parents have to be actively involved in making decisions and following through.
- There has to be ongoing open communication between parents and school throughout the school year.
- A long-term commitment to continuous and sustained involvement needs to exist.

Effective family literacy programs reflect and respect cultural diversity and do not operate from a "deficit" model for disadvantaged parents; such programs value and appreciate parents' knowledge and instincts as a foundation for further skills development (Taylor, 1993). Also, programs that show parents that their everyday ways of communicating with their children (e.g., conversations, oral-storytelling) are acceptable types of literacy activity (Heath, 1982).

Various researchers have examined the component characteristics of family literacy programs (e.g., Butkus & Willoughby, 1995; Gadsden, 1996; Griswold & Ullman, 1997; Shanahan, Mulhern & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995). A synthesis of the curriculum components that have been found to contribute to the effectiveness of family literacy

programs is presented below:

- Comprehensive and diverse knowledge of child development.
- Comprehensive and diverse knowledge of literacy development.
- Knowledge of cultural differences.
- Respect for cultural differences.
- Provide mutual support.
- Identify and remove communication barriers.
- Build effective communication.
- Build strong interpersonal skills.
- Build meaningful interactions between staff and participants.
- Build the self-esteem of participants.
- Empower participants to direct their own learning to meet personal goals.
- Recognize the existence of multiple literacies and literacy behaviors.
- Examine the background knowledge and existing abilities of participants and use them as a foundation for learning.
- Use social and cultural issues as a context for learning.
- Identify unique needs of participants and help meet them.
- Invite parents to become partners in the collaboration.
- Become an advocate for parents and children.
- Build communities and networks for support, political, and social action.

There is significant research evidence that has shown that learning to read is a growth process that can be fostered at home. The following is a short list of studies that have examined children's home literacy experiences:

- Baker et al. (1996) found that parents' perspectives on literacy related to the experiences they made available to their children at home and to the way children responded to literacy experiences at school.
- Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Cunningham (1991) discovered that low-literacy parents perceived literacy development to be skill oriented and were less likely to participate in literacy modeling.
- Brody, Stoneman, and McCoy (1996) found that children whose parents demonstrated responsive behavior during literacy interactions enjoyed and were more actively involved in literacy activities in the classroom.
- Dickinson and Tabors (1991) reported that children who scored high on tests for vocabulary and comprehension were exposed to explanatory language.
- Hildebrand and Bader (1992) highlighted that children who were read to frequently and were provided with books on tape had higher emergent literacy measures than those who did not. They also found that children who scored low on literacy measures watched more television than children with higher measures.
- Giordano (1997) discovered that the availability of literacy-related materials at home affects the frequency of quality literacy interactions children are exposed to.

Cynthia Urwin (1995) worked for an entire year with a group of eight families and examined the effects of a home-based family literacy intervention on family literacy. She visited the families on a weekly basis, and collected information about various types of literacy events such as informal conversations with family members, observations of home environment, and reading and writing with children. Urwin worked closely with parents and helped them

develop home environments that were consistent with a natural, developmental literacy model. She modeled to parents what happens when children are exposed to print and see it used meaningfully and showed parents how they can become actively involved in their children's literacy development from an early age. She showed parents how to attract their children's attention to print (e.g., by labeling objects in the house, by making book covers of cardboard and contact paper, and by having their children read, write, and draw every day.). Parents committed to reading to their children daily. She also visited the children's classrooms, discussed their needs with teachers, and explained the children's performance and needs to their parents.

Urwin concluded that when resources and ideas are made available to parents, they learn to enjoy reading and learning with their children. Many parents do not know how to help their children. The school setting can be a threatening place for many parents who have had negative experiences in school. Developing alternative programs that are convenient and non-threatening can help us reach families who resist the school culture or feel unwelcome by the teachers and school.

Edwards (1995) designed a program—Parents as Partners in Reading—to teach parents how to read aloud to their children. This book reading program was designed to bridge together parents' expectations about their children's success in school and the school's expectations about parents being good literate models. Group discussion, book-reading practice, and group feedback comprised the components of the program. The positive environment, the absence of a condemning attitude, the ownership parents assumed, and the specific feedback the group leaders provided to parents contributed to the success of this program. Group leaders modeled effective book-reading behaviors (e.g., how to attract and guide a child's attention to a book, how to explore books with children, and how to relate information from text to a child's personal experiences).

Edwards reported that parents were satisfied that someone had demonstrated to them what the school expected them to do at home with their young children, and they made personal decisions to further their education, developed a passion for literacy, shared their opinions in newspaper editorials, and some were offered employment in schools as tutors based on their commitment to literacy and their newly developed literacy skills.

Come and Fredericks (1995) co-developed a program with parents. The—Parents That Read Succeed—program was designed to increase students' reading achievement, improve both parents' and students' attitudes toward reading, increase parental involvement in school, increase the amount of quality time parents spend with their children, foster home-school connections, and create lifelong readers. This program encouraged parental involvement, created a forum for parents to express their ideas and questions, and offered realistic activities that contributed to the literacy experiences of children and parents.

Come and Fredericks attributed this programs' success to the involvement of parents in the planning. Parents and teachers were committed to this project. They organized telephone chains to announce the workshops, put out posters and flyers, and advertised on the radio stations and in church bulletins. Local businesses and various children's book publishers supported this program by providing books that were used as giveaways, for children to borrow and share with their parents at home, and for classroom libraries. Parents received information on:

- The benefits of reading aloud;
- Selecting a book;
- Holding informal discussions about a book with their child;



