



Making Connections: Aligning Parenting Education with Children's Education

Introduction

Researchers now recognize that children acquire important early literacy skills beginning at birth, and that success in reading is largely dependent on what they learn during their pre-reading years. (Bredenkamp 1987) Even Start Family Literacy capitalizes on these early years of development in order to equalize the learning opportunities of the children of our country's most disadvantaged families.

Over the past two years, Even Start Family Literacy programs have been challenged to make "meaningful changes in program design for the preschool population." Specifically, Even Start Family Literacy programs are charged to improve the quality, intensity, and duration of instruction for Even Start Family Literacy children, ages three to kindergarten-entry. As Even Start Family Literacy programs work to improve and expand the language and literacy experiences of children at these ages, they also need to consider how instruction in the classroom impacts instruction in the home for both the preschooler *and* the parent.

The preschool years may be one of the greatest opportunities for engaging parents in the education of their children. Parents often feel the most comfortable in providing literacy guidance and teaching during this period in their child's language and literacy development. Research shows that the direct transfer of literacy (i.e., parent teaching child how to write his/her name or identifying letters of the alphabet, singing the alphabet) is prominent during the preschool and kindergarten period (Snow and Tabors 1996), so it can be an important time to capitalize on engaging the parent as a "teacher."

Meidel & Reynolds (1999) found that when families are involved in their children's early childhood education, children may experience greater success once they enter elementary school. Parents, then, must be equipped with the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that both support children and reinforce what is learned in the preschool setting.

What parents do independently in the home to support the development of language and literacy is valuable. When they are prepared to support and reinforce what the child is learning in a high-quality preschool setting, the value of parent involvement increases exponentially. Therefore, integrating parenting education with high-quality preschool instruction, although challenging, must remain a priority for Even Start Family Literacy programs.

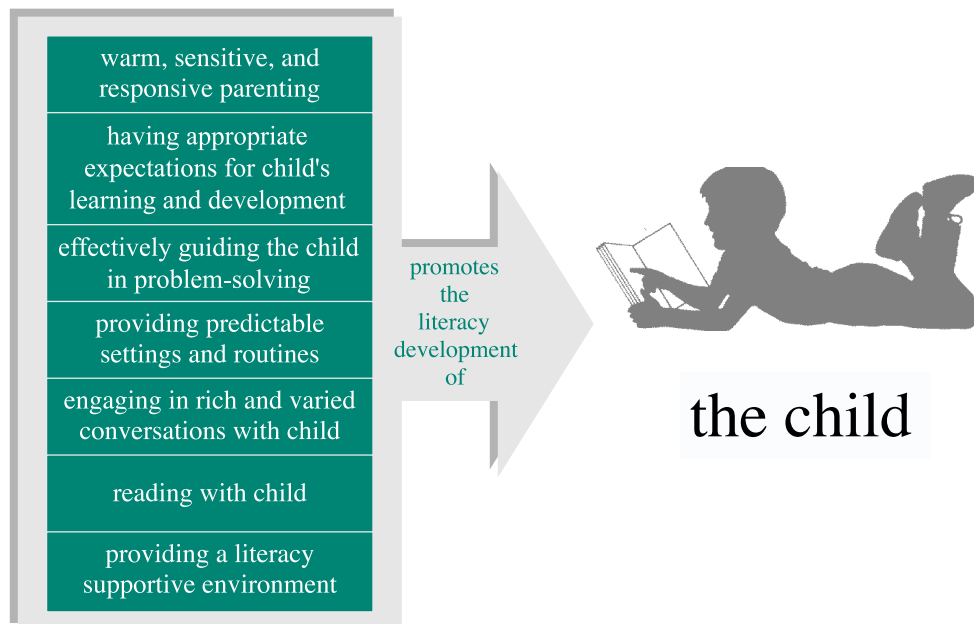
This paper explores a framework to consider in designing parenting education for parents of children in preschool programs. While the paper is specific to working with parents of preschool children, the framework can be adopted for all Even Start Family Literacy parenting education.

Designing a Framework for Instruction

"Parent teaching is most effective when parents are interested in participating, consider participation important to their children's learning, have sufficient time and energy to meet the expectations of their involvement, can commit to long-term participation, enjoy spending time with their children, and have support from family and close friends." (Kaiser and Hancock 2003) Designing parenting education programs so that the intended audience wants to participate, feels it is important, and can commit to participating is a challenge that

all Even Start Family Literacy programs face. As each program is unique, so too are their approaches to parenting education.

Some Even Start Family Literacy programs choose to focus on strengthening parenting behaviors known to support children's literacy development. Those behaviors include:



Curricular goals are fashioned around the development of these behaviors. Successful goal achievement results in parents' regular use of the behaviors in their daily interactions with their children. These behaviors, in and of themselves, make worthy and powerful contributions to the development of children's literacy.

Another approach used in designing parenting education programs is to focus on teaching specific activities parents can do with their children to support and reinforce their learning in the classroom. Even Start Family Literacy children who attend high-quality preschool programs should participate in learning experiences that lead to specific competencies in:

- oral language
- vocabulary and background knowledge
- emerging literacy skills
- comprehension
- fluency and interest in literacy
- motivation to read.

In this approach, providing parents with the knowledge base to further their children's learning around these "school readiness" skills forms the basis of parenting education curricular goals.

A third, and more powerful, approach for developing parenting education curricular goals is to combine the first two. In so doing, family educators can teach parents both *how* to best contribute to their children's literacy development and *what* developing competencies they can intentionally reinforce in their interactions with their children. This "how" and "what" is taught to students who aspire to become professional teachers; since a parent is the child's first and foremost teacher, parenting education should also include the how and what, albeit within the parenting role.

Let's consider, as an example, the parenting education behavior of shared language interactions. As described and assessed in RMC's Parent Education Profile (Dwyer 2003), a curricular goal could be for "the parent to actively engage a child in discussion using strategies such as paying attention to child's interests, using open-ended questions, providing verbal encouragement, and giving the child time to process the information." In this case, the "how" is learning and using specific strategies (i.e., paying attention to children's interests, using open-ended questions, etc.) in everyday conversations, in book reading, and

during pretend play. “What” the parent is teaching to their child is communication and listening competencies, such as:

- **listening to others and indicating understanding**
- **asking questions for information and to extend learning**
- **speaking with speed and expression appropriate for the purpose.**

Developing the child’s competencies is the work of both the preschool and the parent. Parenting education helps make the connection between children’s learning in the preschool classroom and learning in the home. That connection requires a systematic plan for ongoing and frequent communication between the preschool teacher and the parent. Such communication may have to be established initially by someone other than the parent, if he or she lacks a sense of personal efficacy. Family educators can play an important role linking the learning in the classroom to the learning in the home and facilitating the development of the home-school relationship.

Application To Practice

As suggested above, children are expected to achieve certain skills by the time they enter kindergarten. Both teachers and parents need to help support children in developing these language and literacy skills. Let’s explore how a family educator worked with a teacher and a parent on building a child’s vocabulary and background knowledge.

Setting the Stage

The family educator has worked with the Even Start Family Literacy family for the past four months. The family educator describes the family as quite isolated, limited by few resources, and with marginal transportation. The family is composed of Ella (3.9 years of age), Nathan (8 months), and their grandparents (in their early 40’s) who were given custody of both children six months ago.

The grandmother is nurturing and attentive to both children. It is she who enrolled in Even Start Family Literacy with the children, “wanting more for them than what she felt her own children experienced.” Both grandparents dropped out of school; Grandmother was in a special education program when she left.

The family lives in a trailer on the property of a large farm. Their home is provided as part of the grandfather’s employment as a farmhand. The grandfather works very long hours and family outings are very rare. Grandmother does not drive and Grandfather is not available to transport during work hours.

The family educator facilitated Ella’s enrollment in Head Start. The program runs four mornings per week and transportation is provided.

(Adapted from discussions with Champlain Valley North Even Start Family Literacy Program 2004)

Planning Complementary Instruction

With Ella enrolled in Head Start, one of the goals for the family educator was to strengthen the connection between school and Grandmother. Grandmother’s experience as a student and, later, her children’s lack of success as students diminished her senses of efficacy and confidence in communicating with school effectively. Grandmother noted that whenever a school needed to connect with her, it was “bad news.” Even with Ella, Grandmother expressed great reluctance – in fact, maintained it was impossible – to attend Head Start meetings and activities, citing lack of transportation and Nathan’s care as two real barriers. While it was difficult to discern the primary reason for reluctance, the family educator took the first step to initiate communication with the school (by visiting Ella’s classroom), with the intent of transferring that connection to Grandmother.

After Ella attended five weeks of Head Start classes, the family educator made arrangements to meet with her teacher to discuss her transition and to explore topics for parenting education with Ella's grandmother. The classroom teacher noted, based on direct observation, a lack of consistency in Ella's participation in small and large groups. While the teacher first assumed that it was due to shyness, further observations led her to believe that Ella participated well in discussions about what she understood, but backed away from participation when the topic was unfamiliar.

The teacher described how she placed a variety of toy animals in the center of a table and explored, with small groups of children, ways to sort the animals. Ella did fine when sorting by size and colors. When the group started to sort "zoo animals" from "neighborhood animals," Ella named cows, dogs, and horses with ease. She then put a zebra with the horses, calling it a horse and could name no other animals. The teacher repeated this kind of activity with objects related to transportation and household objects. Ella did well with household items, but could name little in transportation. The teacher came to the conclusion that Ella was lacking background knowledge and vocabulary, both vital in the development of reading and writing.

The family educator and teacher worked together to develop a plan to help build Ella's background knowledge and vocabulary. The teacher outlined a plan to intentionally expose Ella to a variety of experiences and materials, paying careful attention to attach words and meaning to those experiences. In addition, throughout the year, there were several field trips planned which could serve as excellent opportunities for expanding vocabulary. The teacher also intended to be present more often during pretend play so that Ella would not pull back if she lacked understanding. The teacher would be there to help scaffold understanding so Ella could continue to play. The family educator would complement those classroom activities by teaching Grandmother to foster Ella's exposure to new vocabulary through shared book-reading, extended conversation, and field trip preparation.

Family educators must be prepared to help parents acquire the skills necessary for developing their children's literacy. As in the example of Ella, family educators may need to initiate action in order to establish a foundation. From this action, the family worker can work with the parent to explore other ways to learn what is happening in the classroom, such as writing letters to the teacher, requesting progress reports from the teacher, and visiting the child's classroom.

Customizing Instruction: The Complexity of Parenting Education

As discussed earlier, a powerful approach to help parents support their children's language and literacy development is to develop curricular goals which promote key parent behaviors in conjunction with teaching specific skills to share with a child. This takes thoughtful planning, as each parent-child dyad is unique. The developmental level of the child in all domains must be considered, as well as the parent as both an adult learner and a parent learner. Add to these considerations, the dyad itself and the context in which the learning is taking place.

As the family educator began to formalize the plan, she considered what key behaviors might be involved in preparing Grandmother to be able to support the preschool instructional plan for Ella. The family educator drew from what was recorded as positive parenting. Grandmother was nurturing to both grandchildren and committed to having Ella and Nathan succeed. Although she was very receptive to Ella "going to school and getting a head start," Grandmother attended only 10% of the Even Start Family Literacy group sessions held in the four months since enrollment. The family educator believed that this was primarily due to hardships inherent to the family's rural isolation coupled with Grandmother's lack of confidence.

Sensitivity to the family's background was of critical importance in planning instruction. Given their isolation and lack of education, the family educator recognized that the grandparents, themselves, did not likely have varied and rich vocabulary and sufficient background knowledge. The family educator also recognized the need to provide some adult education as a precursor to the parenting education: the family educator needed to teach Grandmother

the meaning of some words and build Grandmother's own background knowledge in order for Grandmother to be able to work successfully with Ella.

The family educator designed a number of strategies around building vocabulary and background knowledge to be done over time. The first strategy was to coordinate instruction with Grandmother on relevant learning activities prior to Ella's Head Start field trips. The goal of this strategy was for Grandmother to adequately prepare Ella with background knowledge for understanding and further learning on field trips.

The first scheduled field trip was the community bakery. The family educator brought a non-fiction book about cooking and baking and some old magazines to devise a sorting game that Grandmother could do with Ella. The family educator also showed, and played with, Grandmother a "game" involving the gathering of household baking tools for the purpose of teaching the tools' names and purposes to Ella. Grandmother directly experienced each activity and then shared the activity with Ella, with the family educator facilitating as necessary. The family educator left follow-up activities to be continued and expanded after the educator left. This cycle of learning – direct instruction through modeling, practicing, doing, sharing feedback, and follow-up – was planned for each field trip.

The second strategy was to foster language experiences in the home. The family educator knew from research that good conversation holds the potential to expose children to new vocabulary, to increase cognitive development, to build knowledge of the world, and to develop good listening skills. Beyond helping Grandmother understand *why* conversation was so important, the family educator taught Grandmother specific skills which enhanced her ability to engage both children in extended conversation. The family educator introduced the CAR technique (WA Research Institute, undated):

- **Comment on what the child says and then wait.**
- **Ask the child a question about what the child has said and then wait.**
- **Respond by adding a little more to the child's response.**

CAR is a technique that, when well practiced, becomes "second nature" and can be used in pretend play, book-sharing, or everyday conversation. It is an easy technique to learn and incorporate into everyday interactions. The family educator weaved the use of CAR into instruction continually – through modeling, teaching, and practice – until it became comfortable for Grandmother.

In addition to teaching the CAR technique, the family educator shared a variety of selected non-fiction and fiction books with Grandmother, making sure that Grandmother understood the meaning of unusual words so that she could, in turn, share the books with Ella. The family educator also encouraged Grandmother to maintain a running list of "new words" that Ella said, teaching Grandmother a way to monitor Ella's "progress." It was hoped that as the grandmother became cognizant of Ella's progress and able to talk about it with the family educator, she would develop a stronger sense of efficacy that encouraged her own ability to communicate with Ella's teacher directly.

The above mentioned strategies for building vocabulary and background knowledge rely on the presence of some key parenting behaviors. To do any of the activities well, Grandmother needed to be:

- **warm, responsive and attentive**
- **able to have meaningful, interactive, two-way conversation with her child**
- **able to make shared book-reading an enjoyable learning experience**
- **able to guide and scaffold Ella's learning.**

While giving Grandmother supportive activities to do with Ella, the family educator recognized that she needed to be vigilant about the manifestation of key parenting behaviors in the "parent-child" interactions and continue to encourage those behaviors; the stronger the behavior, the greater the probability that the grandmother could effectively serve as "teacher." The Parent Education Profile would help to monitor that growth over time.

Assessing Instruction

In planning Ella's instruction in the classroom, the teacher identified that she would monitor Ella's growth of vocabulary and understanding of words through both formal and informal assessments, including:

- **program-mandated language and literacy assessments**
- **running records of new/unusual words spoken and understood by Ella**
- **recorded observations of Ella's participation, or reluctance to participate, in play, planned activities, and discussions.**

The teacher planned to review these records and communicate with the family educator in eight-week cycles; at these times, they could discuss any changes in instruction for Ella and how those changes might impact instruction for Grandmother.

There are many variables that could impact Ella's progress: the unique pace of her cognitive and language development, her growth of confidence and comfort in the classroom, the teacher's planned intervention, and the support provided at home. All or any of these variables will likely influence Ella's progress, so it might be difficult to tease out which variables hold most impact. Most important is that Ella is making gains.

More than Ella's progression requires assessment. The family educator's efforts to strengthen support from home must also be observed and assessed, both informally and formally. Parenting education in this scenario involved engaging Grandmother to sensitively and appropriately provide new learning opportunities for Ella through conversation, use of shared book-reading, and intentional play that prepared Ella for school experiences. Grandmother was also taught how to "monitor" Ella's new vocabulary, just as the teacher was doing. To plan meaningful instruction, then, the family educator needed to assess where Grandmother stood in all these areas. The Parent Education Profile (PEP) serves as a powerful guide for how to help Grandmother strengthen literacy behaviors that will ultimately benefit Ella. The planned instruction relates to every PEP scale and almost every PEP sub-scale. In addition to that formal assessment, the observation narratives of each home visit, if well written, could also provide important insight into Grandmother's growth over time.

Conclusion

Parenting education is a complex, and critically important, component of Even Start Family Literacy. It cannot and should not stand in isolation of child education. Rather, it should support child education in clear and definitive ways. What the family educator working with Ella and her grandmother chose to do was based on:

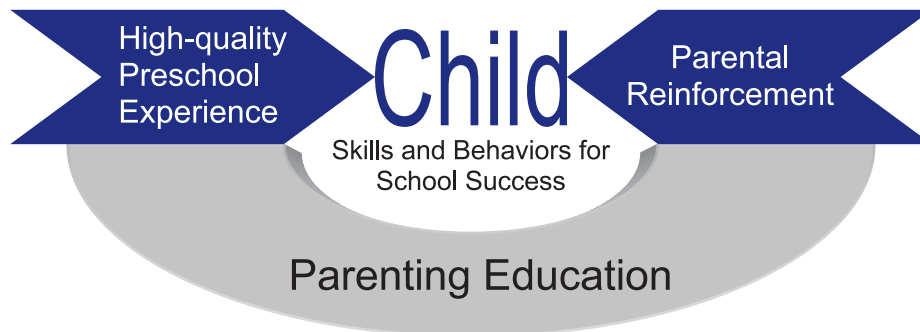
- **Ella's needs**
- **the abilities, aspirations, and life circumstances of Grandmother**
- **an understanding of what research indicates**
- **information gleaned from both informal and formal assessments.**

The family educator began by looking at what the teacher was doing in the classroom with Ella to address her needs. After it was determined that Ella needed extra work building background knowledge and vocabulary, the family educator focused on how the teacher was doing this with Ella.

The family educator then sought to make the connection between the preschool classroom and parenting education. To do this, she nurtured the parent's (in this case, Grandmother's) skill in fostering background knowledge and vocabulary. The family educator considered *what* Grandmother needed to know so that she was equipped to "teach" Ella, and *how* to teach Grandmother strategies that would cultivate ongoing parenting behaviors, such as engaging in meaningful two-way conversations with Ella.

Another family educator might plan instruction very differently. There is no prescriptive way to address the educational needs of each child and parent, but the “what” and “how” must always be incorporated into the plan. The *process* demonstrated in this paper is one that can be used over and over again when developing parenting education.

Programs must take the time to look critically at their parenting education components to define current practices and make necessary changes. Particularly for the preschool population, parenting education has the potential to positively influence the literacy development of participating children, diminishing that “inequality at the starting gate.” As programs strengthen their preschool program, parenting education should be carefully considered as part of the design.



Resources

Bredenkamp, S. 1987. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children as cited in Dickinson, D.K. and P.O. Tabors. 2001. *Beginning Literacy with Language: Young Children Learning at Home and School*. Baltimore, MA: Brookes Publishing.

Dwyer, M.C., et al. 2003. *Even Start Family Literacy Parent Education Profile, Full Scales, Directions for Administration*. 2nd edition. Portsmouth, NH and Albany, NY: RMC Research Corporation and New York State Education Department.

Kaiser, A. and Hancock, T. 2003. “Teaching Parents New Skills to Support Their Young Children’s Development.” *Infants and Young Children* 16, Number 1: 9-21.

Meidel, W. and Reynolds, A.J. 1999. “Parent Involvement in Early Intervention for Disadvantaged Children: Does It Matter?” *Journal of School Psychology* 37, Issue 4 (Winter): 379-402.

Snow, C. and Tabors, P.O. 1996. *Intergenerational Transfer of Literacy*. (January). www.ed.gov/pubs/FamLit/transfer.html.

WA Research Institute. “Talking and Play” of *Language is the Key* video series. Series available from WA Research Institute, 150 Nickerson St., Suite 305, Seattle WA 98109, ph: (206) 285-9317.

Take Time for Professional Development

There are many ways to use and share the information contained within this document. If you are looking to initiate a discussion of parenting education practices within your program, consider using the following procedure at your next staff meeting. It may be helpful to designate a specific staff person to facilitate the discussion.

Facilitator Notes

One week prior to the staff meeting, distribute copies of the article to all staff members to read. During the staff meeting, facilitate discussion of any or all of the following questions:

1) Thinking about what we read, what most closely resembles the approach our program takes in delivering parenting education: a) strengthening parenting behaviors, b) teaching parents activities to do with children or c) using a combination of the two? What do our data, assessments (formal and informal), local evaluation, and observations tell us about the impact of our parenting education approach?

2) What process do we have in place, or need to put in place, to be certain that parenting education and the education of children, ages three to kindergarten-entry, are aligned?

3) The “Application” section of the article (Setting the Stage, Planning Complementary Instruction, Customizing Instruction, and Assessing Instruction) describes a family and notes how staff used a strengths-based approach in working with that family. “Set the stage” for one of the families with whom you currently work by listing their strengths, goals, and values. What can you do to maximize benefits to the child and parent when planning and customizing instruction? What assessment instrument have you found particularly useful in planning instruction for this family? Discuss your ideas with your peers.

4) How can we adjust our curriculum, instruction, and assessment to reflect a parenting education program that addresses both the “how” and the “what”? What are the implications for partner or collaborating agencies? What are our next steps as a group? as individuals?

Whatever avenue you choose, remember that to achieve our goal of helping parents achieve their goals, we must continually examine and strengthen our parenting education efforts.



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