

# Emergent Literacy and Parent-Child Shared Book Reading; “Reading to Children, Home Literacy Environments”

## Introduction

Research has substantiated the importance of the home environment to children’s early literacy and language skills. In these studies, features of the home and family, such as income, parent’s literacy levels and literacy habits, and parent–child engagement in literacy activities have been found to be associated with children’s literacy and language skills (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002). Furthermore, the importance of parent’s beliefs about their role in their children’s literacy and language abilities has been highlighted in many research papers (Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, & Schmidt, 2000).

Neuman and Roskos (1993) write that the process of emergent literacy begins at birth involving all parts of children’s development. In their very early stage in their life, children start to communicate with parents and explore the environment. Then, they begin to use intentional language and construct the concept. Neuman and Roskos (1993) say that emergent literacy will be developed as children begin to understand the functions of symbols and language which they have learnt at home with their parents. Different parts of the home literacy environment will be differentially connected to children’s literacy and language development. Therefore, exposing children to a home environment rich in literacy opportunities and activities will help young children’s literacy and language development. Evans, Shaw, and Bell (2000) support this notion and note that the literacy environment created at home by parents plays a crucial role in young children’s emerging literacy development.

The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss two components of the home environment, comprise of reading to children and literacy environments at home. First, dimensions of reading aloud and storybook exposure to children are discussed, based on data from recent primary studies and reviews of emergent literacy research. Then areas of literacy environments are examined for instructional implications for parental engagement at home.

## Background

### Emergent Literacy

During the past decade, a growing body of literature has been based on emergent literacy (Elbro, Reitsma, & Verhoeven, 2002). Sulzby (as cited in Elbro et al., 2002, p. 249) says that emergent literacy can be regarded as “the reading and writing behaviours that precede and develop into conventional literacy.” To support this, Gibson (1989) notes due to new facts on how young children evolve an understanding of reading and writing, the concept of emergent literacy was developed. Emergent literacy is described by the early development of understanding that symbols have meaning and that they are used for the communication of ideas (Koenig, 1992). Emergent literacy may be looked upon as the process of learning about the environment that helps to the development of meaning and concepts about the functions of reading and writing. In a supportive home environment rich in literacy, based on what parents beliefs are, what they provide for their children may vary with others.

Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman and Hemphill (as cited in Strickland, Morrow, Neuman, Roskos, Schickedanz, and Vukelich, 2004) state that children from homes where parents model the uses of literacy and engage children in activities that promote basic understanding about literacy and its uses, are better prepared for school. Although most preschoolers cannot read and write in the conventional way, there is a progress during this stage when children begin their efforts at reading and writing (Hiebert, 1988). In this period, parent-child interactions in storybooks reading and exposure will help children to gain literacy skills such as letter naming which will be required as a prior condition to reading.

### Reading aloud and storybook exposure

Many studies have shown that children listen to read aloud stories for enjoyment, information, and shared time with parents at home. However, recent research has found that reading aloud regularly to children from babyhood is the most important element in constructing a base for the enjoyment of and success in future (Gibson, 1989). Once children find that stories are fun, they start to learn and understand that symbols represent meaning and stories which have come from print. Gibson (1989) support this notion and notes that story reading at home helps children to perceive that book language is different from conversational language and it

cultivate children's interest in books and in listening to stories and eventually advance their desire to read.

Reading aloud and storybook exposure, is the most studied aspect of home literacy. Sulzby and Teale (1991) observe that reading and writing develop concurrently in young children. Following along in a big book as a mother reads aloud or telling a story through a drawing by a father, will be children's early experiences at home which undoubtedly promote meaningful communication with oral and written language for their lifetime.

Many varied results have been derived from studies regarding the importance of reading aloud and storybook exposure as two predictors of emergent literacy skills (Bus, Van, & Pellegrini, 1995). Lonigan (1994) argued that preschool storybook exposure is likely to be related to some aspects of language, emergent literacy, and reading achievement, but not to others. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) further criticized studies of storybook exposure and reading achievement for including only a single measure of home literacy like the frequency of storybook reading and a single measure of emergent literacy outcome such as preschool language use. However, recent studies are showing more than one literacy component in the same environment and more than one emergent literacy skill.

Evans et al. (2000) note teaching letters at home was associated with better letter-name recognition, letter-sound knowledge, and written-language skills. In contrast, Frijters, Barron, and Brunello (2000) have suggested that children's storybook exposure occurred at home may be associated with better vocabulary and listening comprehension skills but not with better letter-name knowledge, or letter-sound knowledge.

Research indicates that there is much more important thing in home literacy than just reading a book. For instance, Hansen (2004) emphasises that quality of the book and the amount of time parents share with their children in order to make a meaningful conversation is crucial in home literacy and children's development.

When reading a book to children, their main inquiries are centred on the pictures in the books. Children require their parents' assistance and support to instruct them when reading storybooks, in order to become successful readers. Bowman and Tremain (2004) support this and point out that children need adult instruction and guidance to become confident in literacy. Children read stories through the illustration, and then eventually, they tell the story

themselves, using the language of the book. It is important to know that based on children previous knowledge, when parents interact with their young learners by asking questions while reading the story; children will be able to make a connection between the meaning and the print.

### LITERACY ENVIRONMENTS

The home and preschool environments can support children's learning. Morrow and Rand (1991) observe these two important environments as a provider of the primary opportunities for exploration and play that promote the emergent literacy. There are prominent factors in the home environment which help the development of literacy in children. Morrow and Rand (1991) refer to adult-child interaction, different kinds of materials such as books, or writing materials, observations of others in reading such as reading a magazine, and the support from parents such as praising the children's interaction, as crucial factors in development of emergent literacy in young learners.

Bus (2001) writes that parents who begin reading to their child early in life assist to establish their children's interest in books throughout childhood. Bus (2001) notes young learners may not be able to enjoy or understand a book without the support of the parents. Children's parents play an essential role in making the book enjoyable for their children (Bus, 2001). To support this, Leseman and Jong (1998) write that children's early exposure to and participation in literacy activities with parents in rich literacy environment at home, is one of the most important elements in developmental and educational outcomes for children. Leseman and Jong (1998) include children daily interactions in storybook reading with their parents, their observation of their parents while they read books, magazines, papers and bills, writing letters, assignments and shopping list, number of presence book for both adults and children, and opportunities for children to write and read on their own independently, in the home literacy environment.

Environmental literacy at home provides many rich and meaningful examples for the parents to show that storybook conveys meaning and it is constructed with letters that have names and make sounds. Emergent literacy skills can be scaffolded at home by using directional language and by the child reading environmental print. There are many strategies and examples to be explored and further research need to be conducted by participant including children, parents, and teachers on how to

provide engaging opportunities for literacy learning in the home environment or in an early educational context. Parent education is fundamental component of nearly all early childhood programs. However, its efficacy varies widely. More research in various literacy environments, parents involvement programs, and their effectiveness for children literacy development is needed. Barnett (1998) says more and better research is needed to help educators, parents, and caregivers to understand what kinds of parent involvement programs are most effective for target population, and what level of treatment intensity, training of providers, and attention to other program components is required.

### Parent-Child Relationship

Frosch, Cox, & Goldman (2001) note that parent behaviours, such as being warm and supportive, and their emotional relationship are related to positive child behaviours, such as focused attention and enthusiasm, during the storybook interaction. Regarding parent-child relationship Egeland and Erickson (1999) note that during shared book reading children develop a model of their parents in their minds, which will form the future responses and interactions with them. This mental model stem, which happens in very early stage of children's life, will develop an emotional bond between both parents and their children. For example, a one-year-old infant who has developed a secure bond with her father, during her first visits to the childcare centre, will be very upset when separated from her parent, and will be delighted to see him again upon reunion. It works also opposite when the child with insecure bond not show much of either anxiety of separation or joy of reunion towards his/her parents.

(Frosch, et al., 2001) state that developing children secure relationship with their parents is associated with positive cognitive, social, and emotional development throughout childhood and early adolescence. Given the importance of this attachment and its associations with other developmental outcomes, the relationship between children's relationship with parents and home storybooks reading interactions has received huge consideration in emergent literacy. However, further research inquiry is needed in this field (Frosch, et al., 2001).

In sum, by being realistic, that most parents are busy workers and they may not have enough time to spend reading stories to their children at home, it is better to recommend but not to push them on the frequency of story reading but on their behaviour

during this activity. Although frequent parent-child shared book reading interactions are related to language skills, emergent literacy, and reading achievement of school-aged children (Bus, et al., 1995), research shows a relationship does exist between frequency of parent-child book reading and literacy outcomes. Bus et al. (1995) assessed the frequency of parent-child shared book reading. However, they did not examine frequency as an entirely separate component. As a result, it cannot be decided if frequency is more important than the other components like quality.

### Implications for Parents and Caregivers (Conclusions)

The ways in which parent-child interactions can stimulate the development of emergent literacy skills in young children remains to be fully explored. Based on the findings in recent research, there are a number of suggestions for teachers and parents to reflect on storybook reading interactions with children.

- According to the emergent literacy perspective and research findings, literacy development begins early in life and it is continuous in nature. Therefore, during infancy, parents, teachers, and caregivers should start reading to the children in order to develop their literacy skills.
- A playful storybook interactions including a rich conversation about the story and pictures in the book, with full of giggles, smiles and praises make it very fun and enjoyable for children, parents, and teachers. In this, while adults show children the pleasure of reading, children will show interest and enjoyment in reading too.
- In the present climate, as there are many working parents, it is the best for teachers to explain the value of storybook reading and then for parents to decide the frequency of reading storybook to their children or engagement in literacy activities, such as visiting the library, in a way that best suits their schedule.
- Literacy-promoting behaviour in both parents and teachers needs to be strengthened. Adults need to be supportive, encouraging, and responsive to the children's needs during the story reading. They should avoid being angry, impatient, or ignorant with the children and if the children do not show interest in the story or can not sit still, stop the interaction and start a new story sometimes later when the children are ready to enjoy the experience.

In conclusion, parent-child shared book reading is a necessary interaction in young children's lives and is associated with enhanced literacy developmental outcomes. Therefore, it should be a fun and enjoyable experience for both children and adults.

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