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Working with Fathers...Dads & Emergent Literacy

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Dads & Emergent Literacy



Key Words
fathering

As a young teacher of toddlers I vividly recall reading the book *Caps for Sale* to small groups of two-year-olds. The children were enchanted by the quaint peddler who walked through town with a stack of different colored caps on his head calling, “*Caps for sale, caps for sale, 50 cents a cap.*” The favorite part of the story was when a group of pesky monkeys stole the peddler’s caps while he slept and taunted him from the branches of the tree when he asked for his caps. After the peddler’s hat throwing tantrum the monkeys threw the caps down and the peddler collected them and walked back to town, his caps again neatly perched upon his head.

While none of the toddlers had ever seen a peddler selling caps they all could relate to the frustration of the peddler, his tantrum, and the eventual resolution. I quickly learned the power of stories to engage, delight and teach young children.

When my children were young I loved reading to them. My favorite book was a Margaret Wise Brown book, *On Christmas Eve*. It captured the restless wonder of four children who could not get to sleep on Christmas Eve so they sneak downstairs to “*touch the Christmas tree and make a wish.*” The story comes alive with the simple language that describes the sounds, smells, and wondrous sights of the dark house and the feelings of curiosity, awe, and fear that the children experienced on the magic night. My children all loved to go to the library in St. Cloud, that has a large children’s section with an endless collection of interesting books. I was hooked on books, and reading with my children continued beyond the preschool years into chapter books.

I naively thought that all fathers loved to read to their young children. Then I encountered a group of fathers in a Family Literacy program who told me in no uncertain terms that reading was mother’s domain and my enthusiasm for reading was no match for their hardened attitude about reading to young children as a woman’s job. I backed off from promoting reading even though I knew that these dads would miss out on an experience that would bring them closer to their children and prepare the children for learning to read. I have learned through my experiences with Family Literacy programs that reading to young children is a learned art that must be supported and practiced. It does not come naturally to most parents and may be more challenging for fathers, especially those with limited educational backgrounds and still fresh memories of school failure.

There is increasing evidence that fathers play an important role in their children’s educational success (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). This article will examine what we have learned about fathers and early literacy — from research and practice literature — and present some strategies for encouraging fathers to take an active role in promoting early literacy.

Review of Literature on Fathers and Early Literacy

It is clear that from reviewing the literature that parents play an important role in promoting literacy development in young children (Karter, 1994). There are some general principles about early literacy that emerge from the research (e.g., Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Glazer and Burke, 1994). First, children begin to learn literacy before formal education begins. Children also learn literacy skills in real contexts and learn writing at the same time. Most practice and applied research literature has focused upon

mother-child or teacher-child interactions (Ortiz, Stile & Brown, 1999). We know that fathers play a powerful role in school achievement (Department of Education, 1997) and that fathers who read to young boys have an important influence on later school achievement (Martin, 1991). However, there is limited understanding about mother-father differences in promoting early literacy and we are just beginning to explore how fathers interact with young children and the various ways that they promote emergent literacy.

The research and practice literature outlines some of the important factors related to father's influence on emergent literacy (e.g., Martin, 1991; Ortiz and McCarty, 1997). Ortiz (1993) describes father's length of time on present job, prior job training, level of education and role at home as important factors related to father's reading and writing activities. Halshall and Green (1995) in contrast describe family contexts for literacy as very complex and state that the influence of factors such as parent education level, SES and culture on home literacy environments is still unclear. There are a couple of points about fathers that do emerge with some clarity. The first is that father's attitude about shared child rearing duties is a factor that influences father's involvement in literacy activities with young children (Ortiz & McCarty, 1997). It makes sense that fathers who share all the responsibilities of child rearing will see reading to young children and promoting early literacy skills as an important parental role. The second point that emerges is that father's own literacy skills are important as both a positive role model and a teacher of literacy skills.

The question of mother-father differences in promoting early literacy has not been addressed in a direct manner in the research or practice literature. There are a few descriptions of gender differences that can be gleaned from the literature. Ortiz and McCarty (1997) report that fathers read a variety of things other than books to young children, including newspaper comic strips, children's magazines and instructions for board games. Bus, Belsky, van Ijzendoorn & Crnic (1997) note that fathers seem to be less experienced, less comfortable and more uncertain about how to read to very young children. Fathers also appear to be less sensitive to children's motivation and comprehension.

Martin (1991) mentions that fathers and boys are more motivated by reading materials that they find interesting. Karther (1994) provides examples of fathers and literacy activities that reflect this point. One father read car magazines while a second father used computer software to help his young child learn the alphabet. It is premature to make any generalizations about fathers and their involvement with early literacy. It does appear that fathers' literacy activities and interests may be different and that they may need support in developing specific skills for promoting early literacy.

Implications for Parent Educators

Fathers appear to be an untapped resource for promoting early literacy in young children (Ortiz, Stile and Brown, 1999). It is not enough to identify a range of literacy activities and assume that we have uncovered and explained fathers' contribution to literacy development in young children. Parent educators are in a position to promote both attitudes and skills that will increase the potential impact of fathers on early literacy development in their children. The following strategies and ideas can be integrated into parenting programs with fathers to support men in developing positive attitudes and skills that will promote literacy in young children.

1. *Stress the importance of fathers in directly promoting early literacy skills and attitudes in children.*

Fathers may be uncertain about their role in directly promoting early literacy. Father's attitudes about shared child-rearing roles can be addressed by directly reporting to fathers how important their influence is on a child's development of reading and writing skills. Point out to fathers that they can promote literacy not only through reading and direct instruction but that they are already influencing children through modeling and informal literacy activities. Fathers may need reassurance that their investment in early literacy pays long term dividends.

2. Introduce fathers to good literature for young children.

I bring 15-20 children's books into my parenting classes for incarcerated fathers to read on audiotape. I enjoy watching this group of men reconnect with their own positive childhood experiences with reading while they browse for a book or an idea for a book that their child might enjoy. It is interesting to observe which men connect with which books. Some pick out the classic, *Curious George* or *Clifford* stories while others look for books that depict fathers or their cultural group in a positive manner. I encourage them to think about what kind of stories or subjects their children might enjoy. Just exposing them to good literature for young children can motivate fathers to read more to their children.

3. Connect with father's interest areas and support informal and simple literacy activities that fathers already do.

Fathers already engage in many literacy related activities that they enjoy and can learn to share with their children. Helping fathers to identify what they currently like to read — whether it is the sport's page, car magazines, or the comics. Fathers model for children the importance of reading and can learn ways to share their interests with their children. I found my latent interest in baseball was rekindled when my son started to collect baseball cards and we talked about players, positions, and batting averages.

4. Provide information about and models of story reading skills.

It is often assumed that only fathers who have limited literacy skills need any assistance with learning to read to children. However, most adults have not been introduced to the specific skills and techniques for reading to children. Some parents appear to be natural storytellers who know how to engage their children in a book. However, many parents can benefit from learning specific techniques for reading to young children. We have invited a male storyteller to our annual Father's Day Celebration to model how to engage children

in a story by asking questions, using different "voices," and varying intonations.

5. Share information about typical developmental sequences for literacy in young children.

The emphasis on promoting early literacy starting from infancy means that fathers will need relevant developmental information about how children learn to read and write. Children develop important attitudes and skills about literacy during these early years. Parents who have realistic expectations about emerging skills will be able to promote positive attitudes towards literacy and help children develop specific skills. For example, sharing good books for two- to three-year-olds can help fathers to understand what skills children are learning at this age.

6. Introduce fathers to books for young children that focus on positive role models of fathers.

This strategy allows you to reinforce the importance of fathers and provides books that fathers will enjoy. A list of books for young children that focus on fathers is included on *M&M p. 52*. This list was developed with the early childhood teacher as part of a short three-session class that was offered in St. Cloud for fathers and their young child, ages three to five. We adapted Motherread/Fatheread (1995) curriculum materials to introduce fathers to ways to promote literacy development. We used books that focused on fathers as a parent-child activity and as a basis for parent discussion. The children's books were discussed both for content/themes and for pointing out specific techniques for reading with children.

Summary

While we may not know all that we should about fathers and how they influence children's literacy development we do know that they are an important influence. Ortiz, Stile and Brown (1999) identified two important themes that surfaced when they talked to fathers about supporting early father-child literacy activities.

First, fathers wanted their children to be ready for school. Second, fathers found that early literacy activities are a way to bond with their child. Reading books and sharing other literacy activities with their child can lead to a closer relationship with that child as well as promoting school success. Early childhood years are a critical time for fathers to connect with their child and to learn effective and fun ways to support their child's literacy development.



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Books about Fathers for Young Children

- Abel's Moon* by Shirley Hughes (1999).
- Animal Daddies and My Daddy* by Barbara Hayes (1968).
- Daddies at Work* by Even Merriam (1989).
- Daddy and Ben together* by Miriam Stecher and Alice Kandall (1981).
- Daddy and Me* by Catherine Daly-Weir (1999).
- Daddy, Daddy Be There* by Candy Dawson Boyd (1998).
- Daddy Tell Me a Story* by Lynn Floyd Wright (1998).
- Daddy's New Baby* by Judith Vigna (1982).
- Dancing with Daddy* by Willy Welch (1999).
- Emma's Pet* by David McPhail (1985).
- Father and Son* by Denize Lauture (1992).
- How Many Stars in the Sky* by Lenny Hart (1997).
- I Love My Daddy Because* by Laurel Porter-Gaylord (1996).
- I'm Not Sleepy* by Denys Cazet (1992).
- If I were Your Father* by Margaret Park Bridges (1999).
- Kevin and His Dad* by Irene Smalls (2000).
- Let's Play Rough* by Lynne Jonell (2000).
- My Bunny* by James Young (1999).
- My Dad* by Debbie Bailey (1991).
- The Father Who had 10 Children* by Benedicte Guettier (1999).
- Source: Glen Palm & Kevin Beneke, *Dad's Project*, 5/2000.



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