

## **School and Parents Partner Together to Promote Literacy Practices for Immigrant Families**

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### **Abstract**

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*This article is to explore the importance of family literacy and parents' role in children's evolving literacy skill and also to provide some suggestions that could help immigrant parents to partner with schools or communities. Some teaching resources and practical instructional activities (e.g., cooking, STEM, rhyming etc.) step by step, to enhance young children's literacy skills are included.*

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**Keywords:** Parental Involvement, Family Literacy, Partnership

### **Introduction**

Literacy development begins to evolve when children are very young, while sharing and interacting with family members (Baker, 2000; Cohen & Cowen, 2011). Research has shown the positive effects of parents directly emergent and early literacy skills (Baker, 2000; Dever, 2001).

Especially, reading storybooks to children and discussing books are important activities that prepare young children for school-based literacy learning process (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack 2007). Parents read regularly to their children, promote positive attitudes toward literacy development, and enhance their children's language and literacy skills (e.g., Adams, 2000; Dever & Burts, 2002; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Opitz, Rubin, & Erikson, 2011; Whitehead, 2002). When children have books in the home and parents read them the books, they show higher levels of literacy skills than children who may not reside in such literate-rich environments (Wilson, 2013). It is well documented that the home-learning environment has been found to be a significant predictor of reading achievement (e.g., Manolitsis, Georgiou, & Tziraki, 2013; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011; Sylva & Roberts, 2010; Zeece & Wallace, 2009).

Despite the positive relationships between family literacy experiences and children's literacy learning, many parents, lack knowledge of the use of reading strategies and high-quality reading materials. Therefore, they are unable to provide effective strategies to support their children's reading development (Huang, 2013). Particularly, the number of different cultures in the United States is constantly increasing. Many parents speak different languages but do not speak English fluently (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017). Parental involvement in diverse cultural and linguistic families does not have the same positive results in academic achievement when compared to that of families from the mainstream society (Spring, 2001; Li, 2006). Providing diverse families and parents with a variety of reading resources and strategies to promote literacy at home is needed.

To meet the above-mentioned needs, this article provides some practical strategies to help parents create a home literacy environment and collaborative partnership with schools or local communities.

### **Home literacy environment**

First, books need to be easily accessible to children at home. Parents can place books in the kitchen, living areas, bedrooms and family cars since children spend most of their time in these places (Morrow, 2015; Soderman, Gregory, & McCarty, 2005). A variety of different genres of books should be available for

different ages and grade levels of children, such as picture storybooks, nursery rhymes, fairy tales, folktales, realistic literature, informational books, alphabet books, number books, poetry, easy-to-read books, multicultural books, and STEM children's literature books.

Some type of electronic reading materials is also recommended. Since many of today's children are able to easily access technology, and technology certainly is a part of their daily lives. Children can use keyboarding, word processing, internet research skills, social sharing, and navigating interactive e-books. Technology substantially provides support of reading and writing instruction (Reutzel & Cooter, 2012). Parents may consider using technology tools or apps such as Kindle, Nook, iPad, computer to teach children early literacy skills, such as letter recognition, letter sounds, numbers and writing.

Setting up time for reading and storytelling should be part of a regular literacy practice at home. Parents and children can read together at the same time. When children see their parents reading frequently they have more motivation in reading their own books. In the meanwhile, it cultivates a learning culture at home. Parents or family members can discuss or question about stories told or read during the reading time. Interacting with children with questioning and discussion techniques can lead children to respond to the readings and will gradually develop children's critical thinking skills. Their responses gradually will become more complex when they continue to be exposed to different types of books when they demonstrate more high-order thinking about printed materials. Their knowledge of vocabulary and sense of story structure will be improved, both of which support them in learning to read. This confirmed research indicating children who are read to regularly by parents or family members display a natural interest in books and digital reading materials (Morrow, 2015; Reutzel & Cooter, 2012).

Creating some hands-on or "doing" activities that stimulate early literacy skills is important. For example, parents can use ABC picture cards to work on the following activities:

**Phoneme Hop:** (1) Select a picture card, (2) Segment your word into phonemes, (2) Ask the child to hop in the squares for each phoneme he/she hears in the word. Parents can draw a square on a piece of paper and lay it on the floor. **Beginning/Ending Sounds Toss:** (1) Select a picture card and say the name of the picture (2) Toss your bean bag to your child while saying a new word that begins with the same initial sound as the picture on the card. (3) The child will toss the bean bag back to you while saying a new word that ends with the initial sound of the picture. (4) Do this for a few turns and then choose a different picture card. **Dictation:** (1) Parents can say, "We are going to say a word. It is your job to write down all the sounds you hear in that word. (2) When you hear the next word, record all the sounds in that word!! (3) Think- what sounds stayed the same? Which sounds are different? Record the new word.

Cooking can be used for teaching literacy skills for different grade levels (Burnett, 2018). That is one of the best practical ways for parents and children to work together. For young children (K-2), parents can set up a cooking time weekly, working with children to make a shopping list, budget the cost, read the recipe, and teach new vocabulary. Cooking also offers a practical and hands-on way for children to develop mathematical understanding (measuring ingredients, oven temperature, etc), and practice their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills (Burnett, 2018). For example, making a cupcake together not only helps young children to develop early literacy skills, it also teaches them scientific knowledge (observing the change from flour to cake)

Cooking also can be used for 3-6 grade children to motivate them to engage in inquiry-based, discovery-focused, and experiment-oriented STEM literacy activities. To help children gain knowledge about each layer of the earth's soil, parents just need to prepare cooking materials to make a soil cake. Materials needed for this activity are strawberry cake mix, yellow cake mix, white cake mix, chocolate cake mix, eggs, oil, water, chocolate chips, multicolor sprinkles, chocolate fudge icing, and green sugar crystal sprinkles (Huang, Simmons, Wilson, & Hutson, 2018).

Prepare the strawberry cake, yellow cake, white cake, and chocolate cake mixes in four separate bowls as directed on the cake mix box. (Each color of cake represents a different layer of the earth.) **Cooking procedures** (1) Pour a half-inch layer of strawberry cake batter into a greased and floured 9-by-13-inch cake pan. (Any extra can be used to make cupcakes.) Put this into the oven for approximately five to ten minutes, or until it is firm and springy with no "squishy" feeling. (2) Take the pan out of the oven and add a layer of chocolate cake batter of about the same thickness. Once again put it into the oven for five to ten minutes, or until it is firm and not squishy. (3) Take the pan out of the oven again and add a layer of the white batter of about the same thickness. Place chocolate chips and sprinkles over the top. Put the pan back into the oven for five to ten minutes, or until firm and not squishy. (4) Take the pan out of the oven and add the final layer, the

yellow cake mix. Place sprinkles over the top and put the pan back into the oven for the final baking. Allow the cake to cool. (5) When the cake is completely cooled, add the chocolate fudge icing to the top. Details of cooking procedures are listed in Appendix A.

This activity uses different cakes to represent different layers of the earth. *Strawberry cake* mix has flecks of strawberry, similar to granite rocks with crystals. This is the bedrock of the earth. Bedrock is also the bottom layer of the soil. *The chocolate layer* represents shale, or old sea mud. It became a very dense layer of sedimentary rock. *The white cake layer* represents limestone, and were compressed and compacted into a sedimentary rock. *The sprinkles* in the white layer represent fossils of other creatures that are also mixed into the limestone, such as fish bones, shark bones, and so forth. *The chocolate chips* in the white layer represent oil deposits. Parents should tell children this is a non-renewable resource because once it is gone, it cannot be regenerated. *The yellow cake layer* represents sandstone, which comes from millions of years of weathering and erosion that covers the layers beneath. The sprinkles in the sandstone represent more fossils, including those of land creatures such as amphibians, birds, and reptiles. The shale, limestone, and sandstone layers make up the subsoil, the middle layer of the soil. The chocolate fudge icing on the very top is a dark, rich layer representing the topsoil, which is full of weathered rocks and organic matter. Organic matter is plant and animal waste produced either through manure, composting, or the death of plants and animals.

After all the layers are assembled, parents can cut piece of cake and place it on a paper plate. From the side, the layers should be visible, and children can see and discuss the different layers and the information they have learned about them. This cooking project could enhance children's soil knowledge. It also promotes the idea that STEM projects have the potential to change lives and improve agricultural development.

### **Partnership with school and local community**

Family involvement requires more than just parents to participate in school programs and also to engage in creating an environment that supports literacy learning. The following activities may support families with diverse backgrounds to build knowledge-based teaching literacy skills.

### **Family Involvement: Literacy Bag**

Teachers can create a literacy bag project that family members and students work on together at home. Each bag contains a children's picture book, a CD, and a parents' guidebook (similar to lesson plans), along with related activities such as reading fluency, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. Each CD has recorded the content of the book by native English speakers. All teaching materials are also included in each bag. Ask students to take a literacy bag home each week and have their parents to work with them over the week. They can return and get a new bag when they finish the book bag activities. Some parents may not know exactly how to follow the parents' guidebook, so teachers still need to play a scaffolding role to assist them when necessary. The idea of this literacy project was created by the author when she taught a Children's Literature class on the university level. Each semester, students donated their literacy bags to local elementary schools. This project has benefited numerous students' literacy skills, including ELL students. An example of parental instructions in the guidebook is listed in Appendix B and selected literacy activities are provided in Appendix C. This LB is similar to Barbour's 1999 developing the home LBs, and the family LBs that were created by Dever and Burts (2002).

### **Connecting the Classroom to the Family**

As teachers, you not only need to inform families on a regular basis about your children's performance, but also provide opportunity for parents to fully understand what you teach in the school and what your goals for children are: (1) invite family members to school for family meetings for curriculum development workshops, conferences, and school programs, (2) invite families to help with literacy activities such as reading to children, (3) invite parents to school to talk about their cultural heritage or holidays, (4) inform families regularly through phone calls, emails, and conferences, (5) organize a cultural night when each family brings different food to celebrate together. When teachers invite family members to the school it can make them feel like partners in their child/children's education (Morrow, 2015).

### **Family Literacy Night**

To enhance parents' teaching literacy skills, teachers can organize a family literacy night per semester. Many immigrant parents are probably not fluent in English. Some interpreters should be available. Instructional practices should be part of the family night. For example, teachers can provide some teaching demonstration activities to show parents how to work with children with different literacy activities. Since technology has become ubiquitous in our lives, and it allows children to learn outside the classroom, teachers need to inform

families of the newest updated technologies (e.g., phonics, reading and writing Apps) to teach literacy. Meanwhile, teachers can provide some instructional suggestions for parents to organize family time into different categories, such as homework time, reading and writing time. This will help parents to manage their time more effectively and children will follow routines and will gradually develop a reading habit.

To help families connect with the local community's resources, teachers should provide some resources for parents who need to work on language skills or use local available literacy resources. For example, Region 9 service center (The Texas Education Agency), offers adult literacy programs for immigrants to learn English skills. *Read 2 to Learn* is a school-community partnership program that provides extra support in teaching children to read. All volunteers are retired teachers and college students and they read/teach school children on a regular-basis. The program has been beneficial for numerous students who need to work on reading skills

### **Book Club**

Children today appear to be spending a great deal of time in viewing or in operating television or other electronic media (Opitz, et al., 2011). Organizing a book club may shift children's focus from viewing screens. Teachers can provide a list of literature for families to take turns to host a book club bi-monthly. Teachers need to assist families to organize books into different themes, genres, and authors for parents to select. Parents or family members can read the selected books with their child /children before a book club meeting takes place. The host family may provide some discussion questions and activities based on the themes, genre, or author study. It should provide good opportunities for children to speak about what they have gained from the books they read. It also can help children to gain new perspectives of different people and different cultures. A well-organized book club can open new paths for families and children to start new friendships in their community as they have in common- discussion of the books they read.

### **Final Remarks**

Research widely reports parental involvement helps students to achieve better. Parental involvement of children's elementary schooling has been shown to correlate with higher levels of reading achievement increased motivation and engagement and higher secondary school grade-point averages (e.g., Huang, 2013; Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007).

Books and doing literacy related activities display a great potential to bind families and children together at home. Parents need to create a well-designed literacy environment which will directly affect their children's success in becoming literate and in later academic performance (e.g., Melzi, Paratore, & Krol-Sinclair, 2000; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Many immigrant parents may have limited language proficiency, and may be working with multiple shifts or shifts that conflict with regular school hours. We need to encourage parents to spend more time in reading-related activities with their children. Parents and children spending time in reading predicts a positive learning outcome (e.g., Dunsmore & Fisher, 2010; Author, 2013; Melzi et al., 2000).

Teachers and parents should collaborate together to create a good learning environment in which students feel safe, secure, and welcome to learn and grow. Parental involvement, home support, and instructional practices in school always go hand and hand in fostering higher achievement. We should view parents as educators, respect teachers as professional mentors, this "acknowledges the home-school partnership as a rich potential shared among equals, equals who bring important and divergent experience to our students" (Goodman, 1989, p.20)

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### Appendix A. Procedures for making a STEM Cake



Step 1. Cakes in Bowls.



Step 2. Cake mixes in bowls 2.



Step 3. Oil and flour the pans.



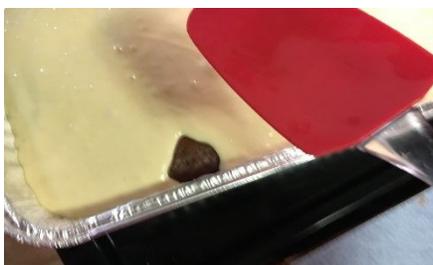
Step 4. Strawberry cake first.



Step 5. Baked till spongy.



Step 6. Chocolate cake next.



Step 7. White cake on chocolate.



Step 8. Add sprinkles and chips.



Step 9. Close up view.



Step 10. Yellow cake last.



Step 11. Yellow with sprinkles and chips baking.



Step 12. Core sample plug.



### Appendix B. An example from the parent's guidebook

Book titled: *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert McCloskey

1. Listen to the CD of *Make Way for Ducklings*
2. Using the flannel board characters, retell the story, in your own words.
3. Making a word game. Given five magnet words: m, a, g, n, e, t, s. Have students make different words by using these letters.
4. Think of an environment you would like to live in or a feature of an animal you would like to have. On a sheet of paper write: "I wish I could live in \_\_\_\_\_" or "I wish I had a \_\_\_\_\_ like a \_\_\_\_\_." Now, using the materials in the bag, design a picture of yourself like that.
5. Write a poem for nature. EG: A Little Star  
Bright and Shining  
Guide me home  
Say Good night  
See you again!
6. Oral reading practice: This activity helps students develop fluency. Have students work in small groups, using the flannel board characters. One student should be a narrator and others play different characters. Have them add their own voices. For example, "Mrs. Mallard led the way into the water and they swam behind her to the opposite bank." "They made such a noise that Michael came running, waving his arms and blowing his whistle."

Permanent items in this bag: (1) The book: *Make Way for Ducklings* & CD, (2) Board games, (3) Flannel board/characters, (4) Magnets

Consumable items in this bag: (1) Paper, (2) glue, (3) pencils

**Appendix C. Some selected literacy activities**

Activity	Objectives	Materials included
Sound-Match	Helps students recognize different sounds, such as beginning sounds, ending sounds, and rhyming words	(1)Flash cards (2) Rhyming book: <i>Stop, Drop, and Flop in the Slop</i> (2009) by Brian P. Cleary
Word Walls	Helps students develop their vocabulary and recognize words' relationships. Students also could learn about the English or ethnographic system through spelling activities.	(1)A large pack of construction paper, (2) A pocket chart (home use)
Word Trees	Develops students' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.	(1)Words from the reading books, (2)Writing paper
Role Play	Uses dramatic methods to increase students' knowledge of word meanings.	(1)Reading book: <i>Three Little Pigs</i> , (2)Word cards
Making sentences	Helps young children to understand sentence structures and reorganize sentences by using different colors. Each color represents a different part of speech.	(1) Four sets word cards including family, fruit, animals, and transport.
Free Writing	Helps students retell familiar stories, develop sequels for stories they have read, write stories called personal narratives about events in their own lives, and create original stories.	Reading books: Teachers read aloud the books <i>Beatrice's Goat</i> (2001) by Page McBrier
Oral Reading	Encourages students to read aloud with their parents or peers.	Reading books: <i>The Upside Down Boy</i> (2000) by Juan Felipe Herrera
K-W-L	Encourage students to see their own purposes for reading and develop comprehension skills after reading the texts.	(1) Reading book : <i>One potato, Two potato</i> (2006) by Cynthia DeFelice (2)DVD, (3) K-W-L Chart
Story Map	Uses vocabulary to make predictions about the setting (What will the setting be like?), the characters (What will the characters be like?), the problem or goal, the action (What might the problem or goals in this story be?), the resolution (how might this story end?), questions (what questions do I have about the story)	(1) <i>The Watcher: Jane Goodall's Life with the Chimps</i> (2011) by Jeanette Winter (2) Vocab-O-Gram worksheet