

Family literacy's powerful two-punch

by Linda M. Phillips

A new study from the University of Alberta now confirms the assumption that improving parents' literacy skills improves those of their children.

Many people share a widely held belief that family literacy is essential to, and necessary for, children's acquisition of literacy.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of agreement as to precisely what family literacy is in the research literature, and a lack of valid and generalizable conclusions on the success of family literacy intervention programs. Literacy practitioners see the fundamental features of family literacy programs as including a focus on improving the literacy of the children as well as their parents. It is also commonly held that unidimensional programs that focus on just the child's or just the parents' literacy are not effective, and that in order to educate children we must also educate their families.

When we set out five years ago to design our study, *Family Literacy Matters: A Longitudinal Parent-Child Literacy Intervention Study*, the results of which have just been released, it was to see whether these assumptions about family literacy programs could be verified.

The intervention program studied was Learning Together: Read and Write with Your Child (Learning Together). The *Learning Together* program was based on the Basic Skills Agency family literacy demonstration model in the United Kingdom. Learning Together was fully developed by the Centre for Family Literacy and piloted by us prior to this major study. It is a three-part family literacy preschool program: adult, child, and joint adult-child daily sessions. Learning Together consists of eight units of study taught for 90 hours

across 12 weeks of instruction designed to improve children's literacy, parents' literacy, and parents' ability to assist in the development of their children's literacy. Answers to seven questions were sought; only three are summarized here, namely whether beneficial effects accrued to the children's literacy, to parents' literacy, and to the parents' ability to assist in the development of their children's literacy.

This longitudinal study spanned 2001 to 2005 and was offered at five sites (three urban and two rural) identified by Alberta Advanced Education and the Centre for Family Literacy. Low-income and low-educational background families (parents and children) were taught using the Learning Together program prior to formal schooling for the children. Families were followed and all were tested and interviewed at five points in time – pretest, posttest, first-year follow-up, second-year follow-up and third-year follow-up.

The main findings to the first three questions confirmed the incredibly powerful combined effect of parents' education and parents' reading ability on their children's reading ability before starting school. The results showed that the intervention worked the same for children no matter what their beginning age was, from 36 to 60 months of age. What mattered was their beginning literacy level; children at the lowest levels improved the most.

Ethnicity and native language proved to be significant predictors of parents' literacy level. However, educational level was able to cancel out any perceived disadvantage due to ethnicity and native language. In other words, parents of diverse ethnic and language backgrounds with higher educa-

tional levels were also better able to help their children, and neither their ethnicity nor their language held them back. The results show that the children of parents with higher educational levels have higher literacy levels, and much of the benefit comes with the parents having completed high school. Consistent with other studies documented in the literature review, no increase in parents' reading level attributable to the Learning Together program was found but the quality of parents' reading *within their reading level* improved. The results showed that parents acquired and implemented more frequent and varied literacy activities in the home. The study also confirmed that parents appreciated and felt empowered to learn strategies to engage in, and respond to, their children's emergent literacy attempts while in the Learning Together program.

We should redouble efforts to promote the importance of parents completing high school. Given the effectiveness of the program across the range of children's ages (3-5 years), common sense dictates working with families as soon as possible. Policies and programs are needed that make it possible, feasible, and enticing for adults without high school education to enroll in upgrading. **LAW**

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For a copy of Family Literacy Matters: A longitudinal parent-child literacy intervention study by Phillips, L.M., R. Hayden, & Norris, S.P. (2006; Calgary, AB: Detselig), contact temeron@telusplanet.net, or visit your nearest bookstore.