Summary

The Foundations of Literacy Study found that parents can play a crucial role in fostering young children’s emerging literacy and language skills. Parents strengthen children’s skills when they:

- Value their role in their children’s literacy and language development
- Regularly engage their children in literacy and language enhancing activities
- Organize the home to support literacy and language
- Are active partners with their child care providers
- Are role models for literacy

About the Study

The Foundations of Literacy Study was conducted through a grant from the Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station, NEV00625. This report was written by Dan Weigel and Sally Martin, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.

For More Information...


The Crucial Role of Parents in Children’s Literacy and Language Development

Foundations of Literacy Study
University of Nevada, Reno

Nevada’s parents play a vital role in children’s early literacy and language development.

The Foundations of Literacy Study reveals that young children develop stronger early literacy and language skills when parents:

- value their role in their children’s literacy and language development,
- regularly engage their children in literacy and language enhancing activities,
- organize the home to support literacy and language,
- are role models for literacy, and
- are active partners with their child care providers.

This bulletin reports on the Foundations of Literacy Study conducted by the University of Nevada, Reno.
Facts
about young children’s literacy and language development

“Although reading and writing abilities continue to develop throughout the lifespan, the early childhood years – from birth through age 8 – are the most important period of literacy development” from Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children.

Children’s literacy refers to their developing ability to read and write, as well as talk and listen. These skills develop together.

Children’s literacy and language skills are some of the strongest predictors of school success and reduced involvement in at-risk behaviors. Unfortunately, not all children get off to the same start.

The foundation for literacy is set during the preschool years. Some children have many opportunities to develop oral language skills, gain knowledge of the forms and functions of written language, and practice their emerging literacy skills, while others lack these experiences.

Parents play a vital role in the development of young children. The home is where children first encounter language and literacy. Parents can provide experiences to help young children gain a strong foundation.

The language and literacy richness of the home in the preschool years has been shown to benefit children’s performance in areas that relate to school success. Working with parents to enrich home environments, through family or intergenerational literacy programs, increases the chance that preschoolers will succeed once they reach school.

More About The Study

Purpose
The purpose was to identify the key aspects of the home and child care settings that most strongly foster young children’s literacy and language skills. The study took place in western Nevada and was funded by a grant from the Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station.

Participants
Participants included 56 teachers and 150 families (parents and children) from 56 child care classrooms.

What data we collected
We examined a variety of aspects of the home and child care settings, including:
- the characteristics of parents and teachers that help set the environment within which literacy and language takes place
- aspects of parent and teacher activities that expose children to models of literacy, such as adults’ own reading enjoyment and behavior
- parental and teacher efforts that directly involve children in activities that foster literacy or language development, such as shared book reading and language activities
- the types of beliefs and attitudes parents and teachers hold about children’s literacy and language development

For children we used standardized assessments of their:
- knowledge of print
- emergent writing
- expressive language
- receptive language

How we collected the data
We collected data from children who were at least 3 years of age but not yet in kindergarten, as well as from their parents and early childhood teachers. Teachers were recruited first, and then distributed flyers inviting families in their classrooms to participate in the study. Teachers were interviewed and answered questionnaires in their classroom. Most family interviews took place in homes. We interviewed families initially and then again one year later to check for lasting impacts.

For more detail on the study, see:
Children do better when parents and early childhood teachers form a strong partnership.

Children do better when parents:
- Feel good about their interactions with their child care providers
- Participate in discussions or parent-teacher conferences
- Bring snacks for all the children in classroom
- Read newsletters sent from providers
- Help in the classroom

Children do better when parents become good role models for literacy and language.

Children do better when parents:
- Personally enjoy reading
- Spend more time reading for their own pleasure
- Let their children see them reading and writing
- Have good memories of being read to as children
- Have higher literacy skills
- Have completed more years of schooling
- Did well in school

The Study

We assessed the early literacy and language skills of 150 preschool-aged children (ages 3-5) in western Nevada. We examined children's speaking and listening skills, concepts of books and print, interest in reading and beginning writing skills. We also interviewed their parents. We found that five key factors lead to improvement in these skills.

- Parent beliefs
- Home literacy and language activities
- Home routines and activities
- Supportive family-child care connection
- Parents’ own literacy habits
**Children do better when parents…**

**Believe in the importance of reading. These parents believe that…**
- Children learn new words, colors, names, etc. from books
- Reading helps children become better talkers and listeners
- Stories help build children’s imaginations
- Children learn lessons and morals from stories
- Reading helps children learn about things they may never see in real life
- Children learn important life skills from books
- Children are never too young to learn about books

**Believe that sharing books with children is fun. These parents believe that…**
- Reading with their children is enjoyable
- Reading with their children is a special time to share
- Reading with their children is a time to feel warm and close
- It is interesting and fun to read to their children

**Believe in the importance of the parent’s role. These parents believe that…**
- Helping their children develop strong literacy and language skills is an important thing to do as a parent
- Their children learn many important things from them
- There is much they can do to help their children get ready to do well in school
- They have the abilities to help their children learn
- They can help their children increase their early literacy and language skills

**Believe in their children’s success. These parents believe that their children will…**
- Do well in school
- Go far in their education
- Have the ability to succeed in life

---

**Children do better when parents use specific techniques to help their children get the most out of books.**

**Children do better when parents…**
- Read to their children often
- Let their children help pick out books to read
- Make sure their children can see the book
- Try to sound enthusiastic when reading so their children stay interested
- Talk about the pictures in the book
- Encourage their children to help tell the story
- Allow their children to ask questions about the book
- Try to make the story real by relating it to their children’s lives
- Ask their children questions about the story
- Extend the reading with follow-up literacy and language activities

**Children do better when parents organize the home to encourage children’s literacy and language development.**

**Children do better when parents…**
- Plan time to read to their children
- Have lots of books for their children to read
- Allow their children to look at books or read on their own
- Allow their children to do literacy and language activities on their own
- Encourage their children to draw, color and write
- Sing songs, recite rhymes and play games with their children
- Buy new or used books for their children
- Take their children to the library
- Monitor their children’s TV time