Bringing families closer through picture book reading

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BY GENAN ANDERSON

“A” gain, Miss Gina. Let’s read it again,” cries a group of four-year-olds. With all the books in the classroom library, why do we keep reading this one over and over again? What can be learned from repeated readings of the same book? How does the reading of a book change as a child’s literacy skills increase? What can parents do to facilitate their preschool child’s pre-reading and emerging reading skills?

In an effort to share the answers to these questions with parents, our center decided to try an approach different from the traditional methods of parent education and communication—newsletters, pamphlets, books, parent conferences, parent workshops, and informal conversations. We wanted to change behavior rather than simply distribute information. What did we do?

We know children are more likely to retain and apply knowledge they construct for themselves (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992). Why not try the same instructional style with parents? To meet our goals, we developed a classroom lending library filled with book titles spanning a variety of categories (highly predictable, alphabet, narrative, and informational). We purchased the books in softbound editions to minimize costs and used canvas book bags to protect the books as they traveled to and from school with the children. On the inside cover of each book we taped a 3-by-5 index card with five to seven ideas the parents could use to extend the interaction of the book with their child.

We expected the parents’ skills in reading with their children to improve simply with the increased time they spent with their child and books. Since the books went home over a long period of time, many of the children chose to check out the same book repeatedly. It was in the repeated readings that we hoped the parents might look to the card and extend the book experience with their child.

The results warmed our hearts and taught us what we already knew: "Parents really care about their children and will do anything to help them" (Rockwell, et al., 1996). Their responses reflected their use of every one of the interactive techniques we suggested. A sampling of those reflections illustrates the growing skills parents acquired as they read interactively with their children: 1) The child retelling the story: "Our son repeats the story back to us, so we know he likes the stories and his listening comprehension is improving." 2) Informal conversation between parent and child while reading together: "We would talk about the pictures, and he is now more interested in books than he was before. He also wants to learn how to read, and so I am trying to teach him the letter sounds." 3) The child inserting words and/or familiar phrases in the stories: "We read Caps for Sale a few times together and after the third time I left out phrases that were repeatedly used, and he was able to fill in the blanks. I was so impressed by his ability to remember details and the proper order to put them in." 4) Playing guessing games and predicting what would happen next: "The first time he checked out Brown Bear, Brown Bear we played all kinds of guessing and remembering games with it. Brown Bear, Brown Bear is a favorite. He thought it was so cool to be able to read to his Dad." 5) Adding sound effects or acting out the story: "We read The Little Mouse, The Big Red Strawberry, and The Big Hungry Bear seven times one afternoon before he allowed us to exit the kitchen. We enjoyed dramatizing the characters as we read."

One key to the success of the program was choosing titles (some could be selected in Spanish or English) that were read frequently in the classroom, books the children knew and loved. We had
hoped that books going into homes where English was not spoken or understood by all family members would provide an additional opportunity for the family to extend their English language skills. One family reported that their daughter was able to tell her mother a story in Vietnamese as she pointed to the pictures and the corresponding words in the book and then read the story again in English. In another family, the father reported that he read books to his child and as the Spanish-speaking mother interacted with them she was able to speak more English.

Another unforeseen key to our reading program was giving a child full control over selection of the book he or she would take to share with the family. Reading the books was not "homework" in the traditional sense of a child bringing homework that the parent takes responsibility for the child to complete and return. Having the book read to them became a priority for each child the minute he or she met his or her parent. In fact, one of the most frequent responses from the parents was their delight in having the child initiate the reading time and their pleasure in having the child excited about reading.

We used this program in our university laboratory preschool and replicated it in three Head Start classrooms. Our goals were to increase the skills of the parents in reading to their preschool children and to extend the amount of time they spent reading to their child. We hoped this would ignite the children's disposition to learn to read as well as increase their pre-reading skills. We found that as the children participated in taking books home, their teachers reported an increased attachment to favorite books and desire to read more within the classroom. The parents related their appreciation for reading with their child and a reason to spend quality time with their preschool child.

The most satisfying and frequently reported result was an increased closeness between parents and children. One mother tried to find the English words to express her feelings by saying, "I'm feeling my daughter more loving within me. I know better my daughter." One of the boys in our classroom would count the pages of the book in English and then in Spanish, as his family read his book. He wanted to make sure that they didn't skip any of the pages or end the magic the family shared as they sat around his book too soon.

Our constructivist approach to parent education was an exciting adventure we will continue and extend. This path is built upon a foundation of trust in parents' desire to teach and support their children and a willingness to seek and incorporate knowledge that will assist them. Our challenge as early childhood educators is to provide a vehicle for parents to gain that information in relevant, transferable ways that support both parents and children (Workman and Gage, 1997).

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References