In the past twenty years, studies of literacy have focused on research related to early literacy development. These studies have provoked increased interest in the factors that affect a child’s literacy development including parental, social, and cultural influences. The current understanding of children’s literacy development recognizes the importance of home and community as settings for the growth of literacy skills prior to formal education.

Y. M. Goodman was among the first to describe the importance of the home environment, calling written language in books, letters, and newspapers the “roots to literacy” for children (2). As Trevor H. Cairney in “Literacy Within Family Life” affirms, “Educators continue to view the home environment as an important foundation for later learning and where learning begins” (85). Researchers agree that a supportive environment is essential to emergent literacy. Within this environment, a responsible and responsive adult will be the guiding force for early literacy education.

Early literacy education focuses on the first five years of life as a time of enormous growth of linguistic, conceptual, social, emotional, and motor capabilities. Right from birth, healthy children become active participants in the process of acquiring skills for language and literacy development. They explore their environment, learn to communicate, and in a relatively short period of time, develop the skills to construct ideas about their world. The rate at which children learn depends on whether, and to what extent, their willingness to learn is met with support.

Research by neurologists and psychologists proves that the a child’s development, learning, and growth depends on the relationship among nature, genetic ability, environment, and the care and teaching he or she child receives (Arnold 15). According to Rima Shore and the Families and Work Institute, these influences are crucial to the intellectual development of a child. Many parents and child caregivers instinctively understand the value of the language activities they share with children in the first years of life. These activities can include reading, storytelling, singing, and conversations; each aid in promoting literacy development. Sharing books and reading to children can lay the foundation for the language and critical thinking skills needed later in life.

There is growing consensus among researchers regarding early education: the earlier the better. This consensus gives support to the need for parental participation in the early education of children. Parents have the opportunity to teach their children at a very young age. They are the entry point to the learning process (Epstein 277).

In 1999, Dr. Arthur Lau, my colleague in the Communication Skills Department, and I inaugurated “Parents as First Reading Teachers (PFRT), a series of workshops focused on LaGuardia students whose children were enrolled in the Family College Program. In the early workshops, we instructed the participants in approaches that would help them become their children’s first teachers of literacy. The positive response of the parents to this initiative encouraged us to reach out to the surrounding community through the YMCA of Queens.

Invited by the YMCA, parents, caregivers, grandparents, siblings, or family friends attended a workshop on a Saturday in March 2001. Plans were made to have translators available for parents who spoke languages other than English. The YMCA staff and tutors from LaGuardia Community College’s America Reads Challenge worked to organize crafts, play, and reading related activities for the children of the fifty-six parents and caregivers attending the workshop.

Dr. Lau and I began with a brief explanation of how reading establishes the foundation
for a child’s learning and a presentation of information that demonstrated the importance of parental involvement in the reading process. Our introduction emphasized research findings citing The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth study which found that children who had been read to on a daily basis at the age of two or three did substantially better in kindergarten than children who had not been read to as often. We also presented findings from the same study showing that children who experienced a stimulating preschool environment had significantly higher scores on standardized vocabulary measures. Finally, we stressed that children who become good readers in the early grades or before are more likely to become better learners throughout their school years and beyond.

After our introduction, participants were encouraged to share their experiences reading to their children. Parents and caregivers were candid, recalling both positive and negative experiences. Some demonstrated to the group their method of reading to their children, eliciting agreement by those who used similar approaches. Parents posed questions which determined the direction of much of the workshop: How do you read to your children when they are all of different ages and you don’t have the time to read to them separately? How do you select a book to read? Can we read the same book more than one time in response to our children’s request for their favorite book? Do I have to finish the story? How do I know if my children understood the story?

Anticipating many of the questions posed by the parents in our workshop sessions, we decided to respond to the group by offering our personal experiences as parents and literacy professionals. The family stories that Dr. Lau and I shared about reading to our own children demonstrated several different methods for introducing children to literacy. Agreeing with Cairney that there is no single pathway to literacy development, we encouraged the parents to try each of these methods until they discovered an approach comfortable for both parent and child.

We also provided participants with practical guidelines for reading to young children: read a story as frequently as possible; set up a reading area in your home where the children can find books and look through them on their own; talk to your child about the story you are reading; use different voices and read at different speeds to give the story excitement; ask questions about the characters in the story; ask your child to draw a picture about the story; read books with rhymes to practice the sounds of the language; practice the alphabet by pointing out letters whenever and wherever you see them; read wherever you go – the labels on supermarket shelves or signs you see on the subway or when driving; and, take turns reading if your child is able to read to you. Taken together, these guidelines offered parents sound and practical pedagogical practices, and a plan to follow as their children’s first reading teachers. To further enhance the learning process for the parents, we screened a video in both English and Spanish that showed how parents and children might engage in a number of these practices.

One concern repeatedly expressed during the workshop by parents and caregivers was the difficulty of finding time to read to their children. In the midst of their busy lives, having the time to become their child’s first reading teacher was an enormous challenge. To address these concerns, Dr. Lau and I offered the observation that the way a parent interacts with a child during reading time is more important than the amount of time the reading takes. We suggested that most of the reading interactions could be accomplished in fifteen to twenty minutes a day. In this brief time, a child’s language and reading skills could be enhanced by a parent reading all or just part of a story, or telling a story about everyday occurrences.

For the workshop participants, this information increased the likelihood of accomplishing a daily language development task. We emphasized that finding time each day to read or tell a story with the child sends a clear message that, regardless of how busy parents are, reading and being with the child are priorities.
At the end of the workshop, with the goal of helping parents build personal home libraries, we distributed free age-appropriate books. When the children returned to the workshop, each parent and child found a space in the room and began to apply the reading skills and methods they had learned. Parents were encouraged by their new-found knowledge, skills, and confidence in their abilities to accomplish this task. The children were delighted with the new books, the stories being read, and the time spent with their parents. The workshop instructors supported these activities by offering praise and gentle suggestions when necessary.

Everyone was pleased with all that had been accomplished on a Saturday afternoon. Dr. Lau and I were able to extend our work in the field of literacy acquisition beyond the walls of LaGuardia Community College into the surrounding community. We were gratified to see parents become more confident in their ability to promote their children’s language and literacy development. While parents gained a great deal of knowledge during this and subsequent workshops, those who truly benefited from the “Parents As First Reading Teachers” program were the children. With the help of their parents or caregivers, the door was now open to explore the wonder of books and enter the realm of flying animals, talking plants, magical tales, and awe-inspiring adventures.

While literacy educators are often not of the same mind or opinion on issues of pedagogy, there is considerable consensus about the benefits of early literacy acquisition for children and the vital role played by parents and the environment. The Parents as First Reading Teachers series is one example of how, as educators and parents, we can open up the world of words to another generation.

NOTE
1. America Reads Challenge is a federal work-study program that recruits, trains, places, and supervises college students to assist elementary school children with reading skills.

WORKS CITED


