DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 446 CS 010 970

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TITLE Advice for Parents: Recommendations for Home Literacy Activities Based upon Studies of Young Successful Readers.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Early Childhood Education; Early Reading; *Family Environment; High Risk Students; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Influence; Reading Aloud to Others; *Reading Research
IDENTIFIERS Emergent Literacy

ABSTRACT

Two research studies hold promise of assisting educators in developing appropriate recommendations for helping parents help their children learn to read and write. Dolores Durkin studied children who entered school already knowing how to read. She followed the students for several years and found that the early readers maintained or extended their lead in reading over their non-early reading peers. Durkin's study associates early success in reading with parents who did activities with their children, talked with their children about words and experiences, and answered their children's questions and responded to their requests. Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines focused for several years on four inner-city families of children who were successful in learning to read. The most significant finding was that even though the families lived in terrible, desperate conditions, the success of the children defies the stereotypical view that children from such conditions can never succeed. The families were highly cultured, literate, provided a rich literate home environment, and had high expectations for the children. From these studies, three recommendations for parents regarding literacy learning can be gleaned: (1) have high expectations for children; (2) provide children with a rich literate environment; and (3) become involved in the reading and writing life of children (particularly by reading to the children daily) in a low-key and informal way. (RS)

ADVICE FOR PARENTS:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOME LITERACY ACTIVITIES

BASED UPON STUDIES OF YOUNG SUCCESSFUL READERS

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1992

It is becoming increasingly clear that the role of parents in their children's literacy development is crucial to whatever success in literacy learning children may experience. Studies have shown that when parents are involved in their children's academic lives the children do better.

Educators who recognize the importance of parents are challenged to recommend appropriate practices for parents to help their children. Beyond the traditional advice of "read to your children", "turn off the television set", and "make sure they complete their homework" not much is usually offered to parents. Indeed, the professional literature on literacy education does not provide a compelling set of recommendations for parents wishing to work with their children. When such recommendations are written they are usually based upon the "common sense" notions or personal experience of the author.

Thus, educators who wish to inform parents of effective and recognized practices for home use in aiding their children's reading and writing development have little from which to draw.

In the area of early literacy learning two research studies hold promise of informing teachers of appropriate home practices. The first study is Durkin's (1966) landmark research on children who enter elementary school already

knowing how to read. The second study involves children from inner-city environments who are successful in learning to read and write (Taylor & Dosey-Gaines, 1988).

The purpose of this paper, then, is to draw from these two studies parental practices that appear to be important in their children's literacy learning. Educators, then, can use this information to develop appropriate recommendations for helping parents help their children learn to read and write.

Children who read early

Durkin (1966) studied children in California and New York who entered first-grade already knowing how to read. It should be noted that at the time of the study children did not generally receive formal instruction in reading and writing in kindergarten. Whatever these children knew about reading and writing was due, in large measure, to what they learned at home. The children in the study came from the local public school systems and had IQs that ranged from below to above average.

Durkin followed these children for several years and found that, in general, the early readers maintained or extended their lead in reading over their non-early reading peers through the years. This effect was more pronounced for the lower IQ early readers. This suggests that what effects the home had on children's reading and writing

achievement were not short-lived but, indeed, had enduring influence on their progress as readers.

In order to learn what happened in the homes of early readers Durkin interviewed their parents. Perhaps the most important finding from this study was that children who learned to read early came from families in which there was the active involvement of parents in the lives of their children. Parents enjoyed being with their children and participating in activities with them. In an interview of one mother, for example, Durkin reported that "It became obvious...that much of the mother's free time was spent with Arlene" (P. 60). Another mother reported that the child's father "took great delight in spending time with his daughter," ...He read to her every single night and this was always a special time for both on them" (p. 66). In contrast, parents of non-early readers often did not have time to spend with their children. Durkin reported, for example, "Another mother...said she was so busy that she did not have time to answer the door or telephone" (p. 110).

What kinds of literacy related activities were found in the parents' involvement? Durkin found several types of activities that seemed to have a significant impact on the children's learning to read. First, and as might be predicted, every one of the early readers were read to at home. Although many of the non-early readers were also read

to, Durkin found that parents of early readers read to their children with greater frequency. Moreover, when reading to their children the parents of early readers allowed the children to see the text during the reading. This, presumably, helped the children develop an early understanding that the print on the page represented oral language. Also, while reading aloud the parents of early readers placed more emphasis on responding to their child's questions about words and pictures. Parents of non-early readers were over twice as likely as parents of early reader to "check" their child's comprehension of the story.

Not only did parents of early readers read to their children, they enjoyed reading themselves. Over 80% of the mothers of early readers described themselves as avid readers. Only a third of the mothers of non-early readers characterized themselves as avid readers. Such an enjoyment of reading created an atmosphere in the home where reading was encouraged and felt to be important.

The home environment seemed to be a significant aspect of the lives of the early reader families. Durkin found that the homes of early readers tended to have library trade books and other reading materials such as comic books, newspapers, and encyclopedias available to the children.

Deliberate attempts on the part of parents of early readers to teach their children to read were not common. An

informal approach as characterized by responding to children's questions and requests was more likely. If there was a formal instructional environment it was found in the play schools that were organized and directed by older siblings. The informal nature of the parent-child interaction was highlighted when Durkin asked parents if reading should be taught only by a trained person. Seventy percent of the non-early readers answered affirmatively while only 30% of the early readers thought that this should be the case.

Finally, when parents were asked to identify things that interested their child in reading the top answer for both early readers and non-early readers was being read to at home. Two items, however, showed great differences between the two groups. First, over five times as many parents of early readers than non-early readers mentioned an interest in words as a factor in developing a desire to read. Also, many more parents of early readers than non-early readers felt that the availability of reading and writing materials in the home played an important role in their children's literacy growth.

In sum, then, Durkin's work associates early success in reading with parents who enjoyed the company of their children and did things with their children, talked with their children about words and experiences and, in

particular, answered their children's questions and responded to their children's requests. Parents of successful early readers read to their children often. They helped their children see that the print in text represented oral words. They kept their activities with their children informal and low key. Little pressure was put on the children to learn to read. Instead the parents seemed to invite their children into reading through their activities with their youngsters, through their example, and through the home environment. Early readers saw their parents read and they lived in homes where there were lots of books, magazines, newspapers, pencils, pens, paper, chalkboards, and other reading and writing instruments.

Successful readers in the inner-city

The study of inner-city families by Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) occurred in the 1980's. The focus in study was on the inner-city families of children who were successful in learning to read. Taylor and Dosey-Gaines focused their attention on four families and followed these families over several years.

The most significant finding from this study was that even though the families studied lived in terrible, desperate conditions, the success of the children in these families defies the stereotypical view that children from such conditions can never succeed. Rather than a picture of

uncultured and illiterate families that make up the stereotype the families that Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines studied were highly cultured and literate. Reading and books were a major part of these families' lives. Family members used reading and writing for many purposes from negotiating with the government bureaucracy to appreciating a good story or poem.

As in the Durkin study Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines found that the parents provided a rich literate environment for their children and were involved with their children. Books and other reading and writing materials were found and used in these homes. For example, one father reported to the researchers, "Tasmika wanted a new book bag. She got two book bags...I watched her put it on today. I don't know how many books she has in it, but I said, 'Tasmika, you can't even lift that. Look at you."...Jerry left and came back with the bag. He sat down in between us and showed us the books that were packed tightly inside" (p. 31). And in another observation Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines reported, "We often saw Shauna doing her homework as she sat beside her mother, and Pauline told us that they frequently worked together" (p. 23). These and many other observations recorded by Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines work to dispel the stereotypical image of illiterate and uninvolved parents in inner-city families. Despite harsh conditions the parents

made sure that their children had access to literacy related materials and they took time to be involved in their children's development as readers and writers.

Beyond high levels of involvement with their children and providing their children with a literate environment the parents in Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines' study had high expectations for their families. The parents believed that their children would do well in school and become good readers. And, these high expectations were communicated to the children. One parent, Tanya, expressed her expectations for her daughter, "People tell me all I can do is hope for the best. I think if I give it my go I think that my kids will turn out fine. I'm hopeful...there's no reason why my child should be standing out there on the corner. I'm not going to have it" (p. 5). Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines also wrote about a young mother, Tanya, who was attending college, "...Tanya wanted her own children to get degrees. 'I'm not going to have them saying that they don't want to go to college because I didn't,' she said. Tanya went on to say that she wanted to go herself for them" (P. 12). A third mother in the study "...spoke with fierce determination of her hopes for her children. She told us, 'If it takes all I have I'm going to help them get out of this situation" (p. 49).

Underlying the stories of the four families described

in this study were strong hopes and high expectations for the children by the parents. Despite the poor conditions in which their families lived, despite a realization that the odds were against them, the parents believed that their children could and would do well in school and beyond.

Advice to Parents

These two studies may not be the only ones on the impact of the home on successful school learning, but they are among the most important. From these studies three major recommendations for parents regarding literacy learning of their children can be gleaned.

First have high expectations for your children. Expect your child to read well and communicate that expectation to your children. Make sure that you communicate this expectation often, in various settings and situations, and in subtle as well as explicit ways. Celebrate your child's successes in learning to read and encourage him or her to persevere. Children need to know that their parents are concerned about their growth as readers. When children realize that their parents view reading as important they will accept literacy in their own lives as an important goal.

Second provide your child with a rich literate environment. Make sure there are books and magazines and other materials appropriate to your child's age and interest

around the home. Take your child to the library and bookstore so s/he can choose books on her/his own. Give your child easy access to paper and pencils and markers. Encourage your child to use these materials. And, be a model of a literate person yourself. Let your child see you read and write frequently and encourage her/him to read or write with you.

Lastly, and perhaps most important, become involved in the reading and writing life of your child. It takes time, there's no doubt, to play and work with your children. But the time spent with your child on fun and informal activities in reading is worth every minute. By being involved with your child you are enriching that literate environment and you are communicating to your child the message that reading is important and I want you to be a good reader and enjoy reading.

Read to your child daily. Pick a good time for both of you and read to your child for 10 to 15 minutes per day. Allow your youngster to read with you if he or she desires. And, encourage her or him to ask questions about the story or to make predictions about the story or upcoming chapters.

Take your child to interesting places. Talk to your child about those places and about interesting works that you come across. Encourage your child to write down his or her feelings about the experiences you have, or if s/he

can't write to dictate those thoughts to you and you write them down. Then later read this back to the child. Play simple word games such as "say the opposite of the word I say". Keep a dialogue journal with your son or daughter. Communicate in writing by passing a journal back and forth between the two of you.

In all of the these activities it is crucial to keep the activities low key and informal. Children need to enjoy the activities they share with their parents and not view them as a formal instructional activity or some sort of check on their learning. The experiences need to be mutually enjoyable and not be directive.

Parents can make a difference. And, the suggestions made here, based upon the studies of Durkin and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, should provide parents with specific and valid guidelines for helping their children get a good start in learning to read and write.

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