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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet explains that family literacy programs have been recognized as a way to help children succeed in school while adults develop literacy skills. The Even Start Family Literacy Program is the major family literacy initiative of the U.S. Department of Education. It uses an educational model with four components: adult education and literacy, parenting education to help parents support the educational growth of their children, early childhood education to prepare children for school success, and interactive parent and child literacy activities. Family literacy programs have created many learning opportunities for adult English language learners and their children in rural and urban settings. Family literacy programs serving adult English language learners must do the following: implement programs of sufficient duration to demonstrate learner progress, address both early childhood learning and older children's needs, build on parents' language and literacy, and respect parents' cultures and ways of knowing. As family literacy programs continue to grow in all parts of the country, program staff need to understand and incorporate immigrant parents' strengths, knowledge, and needs into all facets of instruction. Additional resources are listed. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (SM)

# Family Literacy and Adult English Language Learners

NATIONAL CENTER FOR ESL LITERACY EDUCATION

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Family literacy programs have been recognized as a way to help children become successful in school while adults develop literacy skills. The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, reflects this dual goal in its encouragement of adults to "become full partners in the educational development of their children." The law also mentions helping adults to "become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency."

## Trends and Issues

The Even Start Family Literacy Program, first authorized in 1988 as part of Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 (ESEA), is the major family literacy initiative administered by the U. S. Department of Education (2001). Many family literacy programs, including Even Start, use an educational model with four components (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., *Programs and responsibilities: Even Start*):

- Adult education and adult literacy
- Parenting education to help parents support the educational growth of their children
- Early childhood education to prepare children for success in school
- Interactive parent and child literacy activities.

Family literacy programs have created many learning opportunities for adult English language learners and their children in rural and urban settings. Particularly in parts of the country that are experiencing a rapid increase in immigrant population, programs are adapting to address immigrant family issues. While addressing the needs of all families, program staff must be aware of the differences between immigrant families and native-born U.S. families in terms of their strengths, goals, and challenges.

## Best Practices

Family literacy programs serving adult English language learners need to do the following:

*Implement programs of sufficient duration to demonstrate learner progress*

Because it is required by law that learners' educational progress be documented, family literacy programs must be of sufficient intensity and duration for visible progress to be made. This is particularly important with adult English language learners, because they may need time to understand American school culture and expectations while they are increasing their literacy skills. Many learners may not have had opportunities for education in their native countries. In addition, their native language may not be written, or it may use a different alphabet. As a result, they need sufficient instructional time to learn the language offered by family literacy programs in order to become comfortable and proficient in the new language and culture.

*Address both early childhood learning and older children's needs*

Scientists, researchers, and teachers agree that a child's early learning environment is important for school success. Some research suggests that a stimulating and positive environment in the first three years is essential (Chugani, 1997; see also U.S. Department of Education, n.d., *Implications of brain development research*). Other research suggests that the brain's elasticity allows for lifelong active learning (Bruer, 1999). Since immigrant adults and their children often come to this country after the 0-3 year old period, the needs of older children and their parents must be addressed, as well as those of young children. Families with middle- and high-school-age children often need to negotiate whether old country or new country rules apply to social and school situations. As family literacy programs expand their scope to include all children—not just pre-school and early elementary children— they may be able to help families negotiate these complex issues.

*Build on parents' language and literacy*

Many immigrant parents have literacy skills in one or more languages other than English. Others are not literate in any language. Researchers and practitioners are exploring the value of learning to read in a first language other than English both

for its own sake (i.e., as a vehicle for passing on culture and knowledge) and to facilitate becoming literate in the second language.

While reading and writing are critical to effective functioning in the United States, the first educational need that many adult English language learners express is to *speak* English well. Many adult English learners hold two jobs to make ends meet; it may take some of them many years to read well in English. During this time, they are still able to help their children in school.

*Respect parents' cultures and ways of knowing*

Immigrant parents come to the United States to find a better life for themselves and their children, and they often cite their children's opportunities for education and future success as reasons they came. These parents are eager to understand U.S. culture in general, and specifically, the complexities and expectations of school. Yet the language and cultural knowledge that non-English speaking parents have is valuable and should be shared with their children. Family literacy practitioners and parents themselves need to know that telling stories and sharing cultural traditions with children in any language help prepare the children to do well in school, even when the language is not English, and even when this is done orally rather than through print (Weinstein & Quintero, 1995). Family literacy practitioners also need to understand that immigrant parents come to educational programs with many strengths. Their knowledge about learning and child raising may be different, but not deficient. Family literacy program staff should learn about and respect these parents and their cultures, which often include strong, intact, multigenerational family structures. These parents want to learn, but they also have much to teach.

## Conclusion

As family literacy programs continue to grow in all parts of the country, program staff need to understand and incorporate immigrant parents' strengths, knowledge, and needs into all facets of instruction.

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## Additional Resources


Auerbach, E. (1992). *Making meaning, making change: participatory curriculum development for adult ESL literacy.* McHenry, IL and Washington, DC: Delta Systems and Center for Applied Linguistics. See http://www.cal.org/ncle/books/meaning.htm

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