

## *Family Literacy Matters:*

*A Longitudinal Parent-Child Literacy Intervention Study*

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### Chapter 6: Conclusions and Policy Implications

The main objective of this study was to determine whether beneficial effects accrue from the use of and participation in the *Learning Together* program. Specifically, effects were sought on (1) children's literacy development, (2) parents' literacy development, and (3) parents' ability to assist in the development of their children's literacy. Other objectives included (4) the identification of the time to intervene in children's literacy development for the greatest effect; (5) the documentation of parents' contingent responsivity to scaffold their children's language; (6) the reporting of what parents say about their own literacy experiences and perceptions prior to, during, and after their participation in the program; and (7) reporting parents' observations about the literacy of their children now in school. The results of this study lead to several conclusions and policy implications.

#### ***Children's Literacy Development***

The study confirmed the incredibly powerful combined effect of parents' education and parents' reading ability on their children's reading ability before starting school. The results point to the crucial importance of children finishing high school with commensurate literacy achievement. Educational policy makers should redouble efforts to promote the importance of school completion with appropriately corresponding levels of literacy.

The *Learning Together* program affected literacy development positively and no matter what the children's initial literacy level only at the posttest stage. In subsequent follow-up years, the program continued to have a positive influence for all children except those who were in the top 20% to 30% at the pretest stage. This result supports the conclusion that the *Learning Together* program should continue for those children at or below the 70<sup>th</sup> to 80<sup>th</sup> percentile on the pretest measure. In order to maximize the use of resources, children should be screened before entry into the program and recommended for admission only if their literacy levels suggest they would benefit. A

national screening program of all preschool children would help ensure that the program reaches its intended target population.

### ***Parents' Literacy Development***

Ethnicity and native language proved to be significant predictors of parents' literacy level, but these are factors beyond anyone's control. More important than these was educational level, which was shown to be able to cancel out their negative effects. The results show that the children of parents with higher educational levels have higher literacy levels, and much of the benefit comes with high school completion. The results suggest that increasing the educational levels of parents with less than a high school education is the most effective means of increasing their literacy levels and a powerful means of increasing their children's. Policies and programs are needed that make it possible, feasible, and enticing for adults without high school education to enroll in upgrading. Given that adult literacy programs currently reach fewer than 10% of adults who need such programs, continued use of family literacy programs as a means to draw parents into further learning opportunities for themselves as well as their children is warranted.

Consistent with other studies documented in the literature review, no increase in parents' reading level attributable to the *Learning Together* program was found. In order to improve parents' literacy, a program is needed that makes that goal central. One possibility is to develop and assess a comprehensive and accredited adult learning program that builds upon current school-based programs.

### ***Parents' Ability to Assist***

The results showed that parents acquired and implemented more frequent and varied literacy activities in the home. Given the parents' enthusiasm and delight with what they learned from the *Learning Together* program, their requests for a more extensive program signals the need for programs to be longer in duration and directed toward varying levels of literacy attainment.

### ***Best Time to Intervene***

The results showed that the intervention worked the same for children no matter their beginning age from 36 to 60 months of age. What mattered was their beginning literacy level. Given the constant effectiveness of the *Learning Together* program across this age group, common sense dictates working with families as soon as possible.

### ***Parents' Responsivity***

The study confirmed that parents appreciated and felt empowered to learn strategies for engaging in and responding to their children's emergent literacy while in the *Learning Together* program. Seventy-five percent of parents in the post-program interviews requested a continuing or another program to help them to support the children's learning at school. Ongoing and sustained programs for parents are needed in order for parents to learn more sophisticated strategies to help their children as they progress through schooling.

### ***Parents' Literacy Experiences***

Parents in the *Learning Together* program reported being more confident and secure in their own abilities to help their children, reading more often, attending more to print, and engaging more with print in various forms. They expressed a desire to learn more ways to improve their own literacy level. The results point to the need for family literacy programs to more directly address the literacy needs of individual adults and to place more emphasis on increasing parents' literacy skills for their own benefit. Family literacy is about benefits for both adults and their children.

### ***Parents' Observations of Their Children***

The results support the conclusion that the parents in the *Learning Together* program acquired a language to talk about their children's literacy development, learned to make astute observations of their children's skills and abilities, adopted ways to extend and sustain their children's interests, and varied the breadth and depth of literacy within the family. The results again support ongoing family literacy programs to assist and instruct parents to maintain their significant role in the literacy development of their children.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

All of what we have reported may be summarized as support for an evidence-based program in family literacy. The longitudinal quasi-experimental and qualitative evaluation of the *Learning Together* program showed effectiveness for children with the greatest need, qualitative improvements in parents' ability to be able to advance the literacy levels of their children, and the express need for a greater focus on adult literacy advancement. Long-term research on families is necessary in order to study the barriers to sustained literacy development. We need to examine the impact on families of their participation in less intensive family literacy programs as well as the impact of programs such as *Learning Together* offered over a longer period of time. We need to examine ways to help teachers to understand social and cultural differences and their effects on literacy development. We need to examine ways in

which policy and practice can be integrated to best serve the whole child. Finally, we need research that helps us use our limited resources more efficiently by more accurately pinpointing which interventions work best for which groups and at what time.

## Reference

Phillips, L. , Hayden, R., Norris, S.P. (2006). *Longitudinal Research on Centre for Family Literacy's Learning Together Program* (pp. 123-126). Calgary, AB, Canada: Detselig Enterprises Ltd.