

**From Books as Coasters to Bedtime Stories:
*Family Literacy in Alberta's Next Generation***



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Introduction

Pivotal Research Inc. partnered with the Centre for Family Literacy to research family literacy in the workplace. The objectives of the research were to measure the importance and requirements of literacy in various occupations, to learn more about family attitudes toward literacy and to understand the effect of parents' expectations and behavior on their children.

This study measured family literacy in two ways. First, the requirements of literacy in a range of occupations were determined using four skill assessment domains—prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem solving—as described in the *International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey* (IALSS). Second, case studies were developed for a sample of occupations to measure family literacy expectations when the interviewee was growing up as well as respondents' education, training, professional development and communication of family literacy values to their children.

Background

Research shows literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills affect individuals' economic and social potential as well as the ability to engage in life long learning, whether this relates to skills or knowledge or participation in social networks and communities.

Overview of Research Methods

Interviews conducted in October and November 2005 explored literacy levels at work and at home and family literacy experiences, achievement and expectations. Interviews were conducted with 22 people in a variety of occupations and industries. The criterion for participation in the study was having a child under the age of 18 living at home.

The interviews determined the required literacy level for each literacy domain at work and at home. Respondents' family literacy experiences were examined including parents' education level, academic achievement expectations for their children and modeling behavior. Family literacy achievements included level of education achieved, personal and professional development, modeling behavior, reading to children, helping with homework and amount and type of social and cultural excursions. Family literacy expectations included children's academic achievement, amount and type of television programs watched, computer activities and websites visited by parents and children, and children's reading, writing and rhyming activities.



Literacy Levels

Most occupations required literacy at the two highest skill levels.

While Level 3 literacy skills may be necessary to function in today's knowledge based and high technology society, higher levels of literacy are increasingly required in the workplace with most occupations requiring literacy at Levels 4 and 5.

Prose literacy levels decreased as education and skills required for work decreased.

All senior executives required Level 5 for work while low skilled occupations required the lowest level of literacy. Responses clustered around Level 4, indicating this is the minimum level of literacy required for semi-skilled occupations.

Most occupations required the highest level of document literacy.

Most occupations required document literacy at Level 5 although low skilled occupations required Level 1.

As skill level decreased, so too did the level of numeracy required for work.

Overall, responses for level of numeracy required for work clustered around Level 5 with the remaining responses decreasing with occupation skill levels.

All occupations except low skilled jobs required the highest level of problem solving.

Over half of respondents required problem solving skills of Level 4 for work activities.

Literacy requirements for non-work activities clustered around Level 3.

Prose and document literacy and numeracy skills required for non-work and recreational activities clustered around Level 3 which is considered to be the level required to adequately function in today's society. Problem solving skills required were determined to be Level 4, the highest level of difficulty.



Family Literacy Experiences

Over one third of respondents said their parents were not high school graduates.

Half of the respondents said their parents expected them to achieve a high school diploma. Nine respondents said their parents expected a university degree.

Most interviewees said their parents modeled reading.

Most parents read the newspaper frequently and half read other material. Half of the respondents said they were read to regularly or sporadically.

Over one third of respondents grew up in towns with no public library.

Of those who had a library in their town, almost two thirds had public library cards and used them regularly or infrequently. Five respondents accessed books from their school library.

Respondents' parents modeled a variety of writing behaviors.

Most respondents said they saw their parents paying bills, calculating taxes and writing letters.

Respondents' parents modeled singing and rhyming behaviors.

Over half of respondents remembered singing and rhyming at home when they were children. Seven respondents said both parents or the whole family sang at church weekly.

News programs were the most frequently watched television shows.

Respondents frequently watched news programs on television. Others recalled their parents also watched sports, Disney and comedy shows.

Social and cultural outings were not frequent for most respondents.

Nearly half of respondents said they did not go on social and cultural outings. The others said they went on factory tours or to the beach during the summer.



Family Literacy Achievements

Interviewees represented five occupation categories and several industries.

Industries represented included construction, education and business services with over half of respondents representing the business industry.

Most respondents met their parents' expectations for educational achievement.

Seven people exceeded their parents' expectations by achieving a college diploma or university degree.

On the job training or learning was required for almost all occupations.

Almost all respondents received on the job training. Two people said they learn by working or engaging in self directed learning activities.

Almost all respondents engaged in professional development activities.

Professional development included courses, seminars, webinars or workshops. Four people engaged in self-directed learning. None of the respondents indicated they took part in personal development initiatives.

Family Literacy Expectations

Respondents have higher educational expectations for their children than their parents had of them.

Expectations were unrelated to occupations or literacy proficiency. Most people expect their children to obtain a college diploma or university degree.

Respondents read to their children more than they were read to as a child.

Only four respondents recalled being read to regularly when they were growing up; three quarters of respondents said they read to *their* children every day. Everyone in this study said they have a large number of books at home.

Television watching is a common activity at home.

Half of parents watched TV regularly, six watched programs with their children and five watched television after their children had gone to bed. Drama, documentaries and reality television were the most frequently watched.

Respondents and their children access the internet for a variety of purposes.

Of the 19 people who access the internet at home, half used it mostly for product research and six for email and chat groups. Half said their children access the internet mostly for email, chat groups and recreational games.

Almost all respondents modeled singing and rhyming.

All but one respondent modeled singing and rhyming by singing at home, while driving or at church services. Some sang to or with their children.

Respondents and/or their children access books from public and school libraries.

Less than one third of respondents access reading material from the public library. Eight others had library cards but infrequently used them or did not use them. Most school aged children access reading material from their school library.

Most respondents took their children on social and cultural outings.

Respondents mentioned visiting the TELUS World of Science, art gallery, Royal Alberta Museum, Valley Zoo, Ukrainian Cultural Village and festivals in Edmonton.

Status of Family Literacy in the Workplace

There is a relationship between literacy proficiency, employability, wages and job satisfaction.

Family literacy programs enhance employment status and/or job satisfaction and increases in literacy scores result in higher earnings.

Workplace literacy can impact on safety in the workplace.

Many companies invest vast resources in safety training and initiatives. "If a worker cannot read a safety sign, an operator's manual or the terms of a safe work permit or a work order, he or she will not be safe in the average workplace."

It is estimated \$4 billion are lost by businesses due to literacy problems.

Approximately \$1.6 billion of the \$4 billion in revenues lost due to literacy problems were attributable to workplace accidents.

Occupations are increasingly requiring employees to have high literacy proficiency.

Statistics Canada research and the current study showed a trend in which employees in all levels of occupations are required to have higher levels of literacy across all literacy domains. This trend emphasizes the importance of investing in literacy initiatives that build and maintain proficiency levels to keep our workforce competent and competitive.

Additional education and professional development are necessary to be successful.

Lifelong learning is a reality. More than half of respondents took courses online or attended seminars, workshops and webinars or attended training and learning opportunities provided by their employers. Others engaged in self-taught learning to keep current with new developments and trends in their industry.

Status of the Next Generation

Parents exhibit a variety of modeling behaviors.

Respondents passively and actively modeled negative and positive modeling behaviors. The lack of consistency in modeling may indicate a lack of awareness of the impact of modeling on children.

Children's success begins at home.

The past generation was focused on the work ethic and literacy was not emphasized. Respondents are more involved with their children and engage in more literacy activities with them than respondents experienced when they were growing up. The research suggests new parenting practices will result in greater literacy.

There are positive indicators that parents are increasingly aware that positive literacy behaviors can ensure literacy skills in the next generation.

This may result in more parents who are interested and able to support family literacy and an increase in the number of qualified workers in Alberta's next generation.

Call to Action

This research showed an increase in the emphasis on family literacy, but generally there continues to be a lack of awareness of the importance of family literacy behaviors and tools. Everyone has responsibility to practice family literacy. Here are some ideas for YOU:

- Read to the children in your life—not just your own children, but grandchildren, nieces, nephews and friends. Tell stories about the “olden days” and what it was like when you were a child. Children are always fascinated that their parents were once children too!
- Involve children in the literacy events of the family—activities as common as writing birthday cards, writing a grocery list, checking prices in a sale flyer or sorting the mail.
- Be a literacy role model. If children do not learn the value of reading from their role models, they will not learn this from anyone else.
- Spread awareness about the literacy challenge and talk about solutions. Explore family literacy programs in Edmonton and the surrounding area.
- Take your children and their friends to the Royal Alberta Museum, Edmonton Art Gallery, TELUS World of Science or the Valley Zoo. Talk about what they see and what they think.
- Take children to plays and festivals—watch their smiles and enjoy their laughter!
- Be a family literacy champion. Support efforts to make family literacy a mainstream issue. Literacy and learning needs to have an awareness profile similar to that of seat belt use and anti-drinking and driving.