The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life. (Henderson and Berla, 1994, p. 1)

What Have We Learned About Important Family Literacy Experiences?

The importance of storybook reading in early reading success is undisputed. In studies new and old, children who have had many and diverse experiences in storybook reading do well on school-based measures of literacy.

However,

The assumption that the absence of storybook reading, and relatedly, poor performance on tests of emergent reading, is indicative of “low-literate” home environments is not supported by research.
Language, culture, and class influence the ways parents and children use literacy,

BUT,
Most linguistic, cultural, and social class groups use print in some ways in the home setting.

What Have We Learned About Parents’ “Readiness” to Help?

Parents’ interest or ability to support their children’s literacy learning is not dependent on proficiency in English language or literacy.

Uses of Literacy at Home Reported by Mothers in One Community

Mothers with and without a high school diploma reported spending more time in literacy activities that were deliberately and explicitly intended to advance their children’s learning than in any other type of literacy activity.
The amount of time mothers spent in reading with their children was not influenced by their years of formal education.
The amount of time mothers spent in reading with their children was influenced by the length of time they participated in a family literacy project.

What teachers do to promote and support home/school partnerships is a decisive factor in what parents do.

“Parents’ education did not explain their experiences with parent involvement unless teacher practices were taken into account. In the classrooms of teachers who were leaders in the use of parent involvement, parents of all educational levels said they were frequently involved in learning activities at home.”
( Epstein, 1986, p. 291)
Teachers need to exchange, rather than prescribe, ways of using literacy and language.

Promising Practices
- Households as Funds of Knowledge Project (Moll, Armanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992)
- Project Flame (Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995)
- Pajaro Valley Experience (Ada, 1988)
- Parents as Classroom Storybook Readers (Krol-Sinclair, 1996)
- Engaging Families (Shockley, Michalove, and Allen, 1995)

The Intergenerational Literacy Project
1989 - present
- Improve English literacy of adults
- Support literacy development and academic success of their children
- Conduct research on the effectiveness of an intergenerational approach to literacy

Families Served
- Urban, immigrant, economically poor community
- 1500+ adults and 3535 children served between 1989 - 2002
- 23 Different First Languages
- 46 Different Countries of Origin
- New immigrants (1-5 years in US)
- 8 years (on average) parental education
Ways Parents and Teachers Exchange Information About Literacy at Home and School

Literacy Logs

Parent-Child Literacy Checklists

Family Literacy Portfolios
Parents keep a portfolio documenting their children’s uses of literacy.
Parents are taught strategies for observing and documenting their children’s literacies and for sharing the information with teachers.
Parents are invited to bring their portfolios to the regularly-scheduled parent-teacher conference to share and discuss.
Outcomes of Family Literacy Portfolio Project

Parents and teachers used the portfolios to build on and reinforce each other’s point of view. Conversations were described by parents and teachers as different from those in previous conferences, “deeper” in the words of one parent; more “balanced” in the words of one teacher. Increased children’s learning opportunities at home.

Parents as Classroom Storybook Readers

Parents participate as storybook readers in their children’s kindergarten to second grade bilingual and general education classrooms. Parents receive training in book selection and in read-aloud strategies.

Outcomes of Parents as Classroom Storybook Readers Project

Parents incorporated read-aloud strategies that they had not used in their initial sessions. Parents engaged children and were consistently responsive to children’s comments. Tape recordings of at-home readings indicated that parents used the strategies they had learned with their own children at home. Parents who participated were those most likely to be labeled as not supportive, i.e., limited English proficient, few years of formal education.

The Monthly Newsletter

Teachers share with parents the details of classroom themes and activities. Teachers elicit from parents information about how the focal themes or activities connect to children’s experiences outside of school.
Transportation Experiences Our Children Have Had

- T [train] from East Boston to downtown Boston very often—Ramón
- Bus from Chelsea to East Boston to see relatives every week—Dimas
- Bus from Chelsea to Haymarket and then took T [subway] to Medical Center—Juni
- Boat in El Salvador to sightsee—Encarnación
- Plane from Germany to Boston—Senija
- Car from Bosnia to Germany—Sevida
- Car from Everett to Chelsea every day—Maria
- Car trip from Chelsea to Bangor, Maine (7 hours)—Brankica
- Truck from Everett to Rhode Island to visit family—Silvia
- Steam Boat in Boston in the spring—Lilian
- Bicycle at Revere Beach—Céferino
- Bicycle at McDonald Park in Medford—Dora
- Horse in Honduras going to my sister’s town—Clarit

What Have We Learned About Developing Home/School Partnerships

Successful recruitment of “hard to reach” families can be accomplished with the collaborative effort of the full range of community agencies and over a period of several months. Parents seize opportunities to use literacy at home in practical ways. Special practices and programs enhance parents’ understanding of the classroom and teachers’ understanding of the home.

What We Have Learned About Parent-Teacher Interactions

In some cases, parents maintain a strong connection with the teacher, visiting and talking with her frequently. In others, parents rarely speak with the teacher, but carefully monitor school performance by attending to homework and asking about school each day. Language difference between parents and teachers discouraged parents from attending school events.

Characteristics That Distinguish Effective Home-School Partnerships

An assumption that parents are concerned with their children’s success and interested in collaborating with teachers in ways that will support their children in school. An assumption that parents and teachers have much to learn from each other, and they have established practices and routines that enable such learning to occur. An understanding that different family cultures, traditions, and circumstances may dictate different ways of collaborating. An understanding that parents may need some explicit instruction in the types of activities teachers believe will benefit children. An understanding that connecting all aspects of children’s lives will enhance children’s opportunities to learn.
Effective Home/School Partnerships Require Reciprocity

...Programs are implemented; partnerships are developed. Programs are adopted; partnerships are constructed. Parent involvement programs as America’s schools have implemented them have serious problems. By their very nature, most programs have steps, elements or procedures that become static. A program cannot constantly reinvent itself, change each year, be different in every classroom, and for every teacher-family-child relationship. Yet schools and parents have a shared and vested interest in children that almost demands some kind of collaboration. We believe, along with an increasing number of home and school educators, that this shared responsibility should be a genuine partnership.

— (Shockley, Michalko, and Allen, 1995, p. 91)

Final Words

The teacher makes the difference.