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Beginnings Workshop

early literacy: do parents matter?

by Michael Gramling

Michael Gramling, Human Development Specialist and lifelong social justice advocate, found his professional home in 1979 when he discovered Head Start and embraced its values and its goals – particularly those of enhancing the dignity of families living in poverty and of supporting parents as the primary educators of their children. The body of work he has produced since then reflects his values, his academic training (M.A. in Human Development, Pacific Oaks College), and his real-life experiences as a Head Start parent, teacher, and manager.

In his current position as Human Development Specialist at T/TAS, Michael crisscrosses the country working with professionals in the field to develop more responsive approaches to the individual needs of children (particularly those of children who fail to thrive in typical early childhood environments) and more targeted in their support of parents and their decisive role in the success of their children. Michael is the primary author of the national 2003 Head Start Family Literacy Project training as well as the T/TAS publications *Positive Approaches to Supervision, and Positive Guidance: Making A Place for Everyone*. Most recently, he was honored to be a contributing author to the 2006 Zero to Three publication *Learning to Read the World*. With his wife and colleague, Teresa Christmas, he home schools his two youngest children, Magnolia and Amelia, (now in their teens) and welcomes their company on his travels and their assistance at his training sessions.

The desire for a better life for our children is almost universal, and the belief that it can be achieved through education has been an enduring myth of American culture from the beginning of our history. Parents who scratched out an existence on frontier homesteads and parents who worked in the sweatshops of the industrial revolution alike still found the time to teach their children how to read and write. Parents bound in slavery had perhaps the best understanding of the power of literacy to transform their circumstances and risked consequences most severe to acquire these tools and pass them on to their children.

As access to publicly-funded schools became more widespread, though, the job of educating children passed from the hands of parents to the public school. Parents, however, still retained responsibility for early learning, and for generations, up to and including the baby boomers, what we now refer to as the process of school readiness occurred primarily in the home.

In one generation, all of that changed.

In 1974, only 7% of children in the United States received care outside the home. By 1995, that number had grown to 61%. Enrollment in year-round Head Start grew from 20,000 in 1965 to nearly a million during the Clinton Administration. Today there are 38 states currently providing Pre-K services. There were none prior to 1995.

In the blink of an eye, responsibility for early learning, literacy, and school readiness passed from the home to the professional. It is a social and educational experiment unprecedented in our history, and it certainly raises the question of whether parents really matter anymore. Literacy is pretty complicated stuff, after all, and what does a parent know about such esoteric topics as phonemic awareness or the conventions of print? Many child care workers would be very quick to point out that parents don't really even want the job. Preparing the child to read and write, they maintain, is just one of the many childrearing responsibilities the parent has abdicated to the child care center. From this perspective, parents, if not superfluous, are at best adjuncts to the process:
people who have to be prodded and guided to do even a small share of the work. "We are working on author and illustrator this week," we tell the parent. "Please make sure you point these things out when you read to your child."

Hmm. . . . Is that right? Parents are our helpers? There could be some merit in that statement if reading and writing are understood as narrow, highly-specialized skills. It is only when early literacy is seen in the broader context of the explosive expansion of the child's ability to communicate and his single-minded determination to decode his world that we can more accurately identify the parent as the primary educator of the young child.

To understand the role of the parent, we need first to identify those early experiences and abilities that most reliably predict successful reading. Chief among these is language. Children with strong language skills are not only more likely to read and write well in first grade, they are also more likely to do so in college. And, as Hart and Risley (1995) demonstrated, early language development occurs primarily in the home.

If language development in the home is in fact decisive, then the role of the program and its relationship to the parent shifts dramatically. Rather than sending home simple tasks to complement classroom lessons, child care programs need to develop strategies to support a language-rich home. When the parent's everyday behavior can influence outcomes far beyond the early intervention of a preschool, our primary job

becomes to help parents develop habits to enrich discourse that become a part of the fabric of daily life.

Some of these habits might include:

- *How was your day?*
  Children from birth to five are notoriously unresponsive to questions about what they did or what they learned in school that day. Child care programs however can support this daily habit by sending home notes, digital photos, e-mails, and work samples that allow the parent to not only ask the question, but to guide the response. From our notes and photos the parent can say to the preschool child:
  — *"It looks like you and Melissa were playing dress-up. Did you go to the mall?"*
  — *"My e-mail says that you were the table setter today and you counted five napkins."*
  — *"Tell me about these boys you're climbing with on the playground? Are they your friends?"*

For infants and toddlers, parents can still ask about the child's daily experiences, but supply the answer themselves based on information and images provided by the center. The personally meaningful connection between printed words and the child's experiences can also be built and strengthened if the caregiver reads the notes, emails, and captions aloud to the child *as they are written*. Then, at the end of the day, when the parent reads the exact words again out loud in the home, the child grasps firsthand the very powerful notion that printed words can convey stories about himself and his world through time and space.

- *What a day I had!*
  Parents and teachers alike often make the mistake of trying to build language by constantly asking questions. Questions are great because they provide opportunities for children to use language, but children birth to five acquire language not by talking, but by *listening* to the important adults in their lives. Parents can, therefore, support language development by building the habit of telling their children about things that happened while the child was away at school:
  — "I went shopping and . . . "
  — "Your grandmother called today and . . . "
  — "Today, while I was cleaning your room . . . "
  — "I was watching TV today and . . . "

As they listen, children not only acquire words, they also begin to see that *conversation* is the way that people take turns sharing their ideas and experiences. Three and four year olds may soon begin holding up their end of the conversation, but infants and toddlers who may not respond verbally nevertheless benefit greatly from hearing adults describe their experiences. (It is difficult to know exactly how much of the flow of conversation an infant understands, but the glimpses available to us suggest that the infant's receptive vocabulary can be enormous if he or she is exposed to a language-rich environment). The habit of telling children about their day can also help parents learn to talk to their children as people, instead of constantly trying to 'talk down' to children for fear that they won't be able to understand.

- *Narration.*
  Words overheard by the child when parents speak to each other are also an important part of the language-rich home. Children who live with only one adult, however, may have fewer opportunities to overhear words spoken to other adults. Narration, then, is simply the everyday habit of describing one's actions and thoughts to children as they occur.
  — In the car for example, "We're going to stop by the bank before we go to the store because I need to cash a check before they close" or "That driver is not very considerate. He didn't put on his blinker."
  — In the kitchen, "It says to microwave for three minutes on high, but the microwave is broken. Do you think fifteen minutes in the oven will work just as well? Let's find out."

  Young children are depositories of words. Parents can get in the habit of making very large deposits throughout the day when they practice simple narration.

- *Intentionally involving children in using printed words throughout the day.* Parents can support literacy through spoken language as well as printed word. The classic example is the grocery list, which dovetails nicely with narration: "That's the last of the peanut butter. We better put it on the list." These printed words become even more meaningful when the parent takes the child to the store and uses the list to actually find and buy groceries. Recipes, directions on the frozen pizza box, sticky notes to help remember things, lists, and captions

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on photographs in the family album are also great examples of the daily habit of connecting print to experience.

This should not be confused with the practice of labeling common household objects like 'chair,' 'table,' or 'door.' Meaningful print helps us make decisions and guides what we do. Labeling objects, on the other hand, is arbitrary and disconnected from daily experience. We don't need a sign on the chair to tell us to sit in it.

- *Meaningful labeling* helps us sort things out and keep track of things. A sign that says 'Daddy's chair' for example, rather than 'chair' might be helpful in certain circumstances. Instead of the word 'door' which is not particularly useful, a sign on the door that announces that this is 'Jeremy's Room' would be very cool. Sorting signs that tell us where to put 'silverware,' 'canned goods,' 'pajamas,' and 'underwear' can also be quite functional, just like the signs at the grocery store that help us find 'dairy products' or 'pet food.'

As we work with parents to interact with their children and the printed word, we should be cautious not to mislead them. We are not asking them to teach a collection of sight words. The actual number of words a child might learn to recognize by interacting with print in this manner is small and not of great significance. What is very beneficial, though, is the understanding that adults use print all of the time to guide them through the day. Print itself then becomes an important part of the puzzle that is the grown up world that the child becomes highly motivated to solve.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

It should come as no surprise then, that *the role model of the adult reader* has also been shown to be a critical early experience shared by successful young readers. It seems that if parents don't read for their own enjoyment, chances are that children will not either. Programs can support the habit of daily adult reading through library card drives or by lending books and magazines directly to parents. Most importantly, parents need to be reminded that children look to them constantly to see what it means to become a man or a woman, and that critical values, such as a love of reading and the importance of education are transmitted minute by minute in daily life through the parent's own behavior.

This brings us back to our question, "Do parents still matter in the age of child care?" Certainly what has not changed is that parents still want their children to be successful in school and in life, and that they are willing to do whatever it takes to ensure their children's future. Indeed, enrollment in child care and Pre-K programs is frequently an intentional decision by the parent to prepare the child socially and academically for what comes next. Parents have faith that the professional has the tools and the expertise to do the job. To justify that faith, perhaps we need to examine our own beliefs and re-affirm in our hearts the central role of the parent. Only then can we provide the support and guidance to help all parents become successful teachers.

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