

Family Learning and Literacy

Human beings are social learners, and our first social group is our family. Children learn from their parents, from their siblings, and from other adults in their lives. They learn to talk, they learn to interact, and most relevant to education, they learn to read. In her seminal three-year study of learning in families, Denny Taylor concluded that children are motivated to learn to read to participate in their family unit, not to access knowledge in the wider world¹. So, when someone says that children read to learn about the world around them, they are incorrect. Children read to interact with their families.

What would happen if we moved learning to read back into the family? More people would be literate. By leveraging children's natural desire to participate in family activities, we would engage them, motivate them, and accelerate their acquisition of literacy. That acceleration is particularly important in bilingual families. Children naturally acquire spoken language in every language they hear on a regular basis. However, children do not learn to read naturally. They need to be taught phonological awareness for each language so that they can successfully decode alphabetic words into understood ideas. They need to be taught vocabulary; first verbal and then written. They need to practice in each language to become fluent. They need to learn to apply comprehension strategies in each language, and they need to learn writing mechanics and self-expression to write successfully in each language.

Family learning is an approach to intergenerational learning. It acknowledges the family and its culture as the foundation of learning for the child. Seeking to participate in their families, children eagerly seek out information about their cultures, and parents are best positioned to share written information to satisfy that interest. Family literacy recognizes the parent as the child's first teacher, and recognizes the role of the parent in sharing their ways with their children through reading and writing.

In addition, according to Ruth Nickse's early descriptions of family literacy programs, intergenerational and family programs retain adult students longer, enhancing adult outcomes.² And parental literacy predicts the literacy achievement of their children. Family learning is powerful. For example, children who participated in the High/Scope family learning program at ages 4 – 8 grew up to have fewer criminal arrests, higher earnings, more accumulated wealth and stronger marriages than those who didn't.³

The motivation to attend family literacy programs is high, as participants come to these programs to improve life for their families, not solely themselves. Participants want to increase their educational levels and learn job skills, but they also want to be more effective parents.⁴ There is also a synergy that exists in family literacy programs that is not found in programs that work with children or adults separately.⁵

¹ Taylor, D., *Family literacy : young children learning to read and write*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH ©1998.

² Nickse, Ruth S., *Family Literacy Programs: Ideas for Action*. *Adult Literacy*, Volume: 1 issue: 5, page(s): 9-28, February 1, 1990.

³ William Raspberry, *The Denver Post*, July 25, 1993

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Anderson, Jean E., *Families Learning Together in Colorado: A Report on Family Literacy*. Colorado State Dept. of Education, Denver. Office of Adult Education, 1994.



The research shows a wide range of measured benefits for all participants in family learning programs⁶:

- Children's achievement in school improves
- Children's general knowledge, including that measured by intelligence tests, improves
- Children's oral language development accelerates
- Children's phonemic awareness and decoding ability improves
- Children's reading vocabulary improves
- Children's comprehension improves.
- Children's writing improves
- Children's math and science achievement improve
- Children's social skills, self-esteem, and attitudes toward school improve
- Children are healthier
- Children's motivation to read increases

Measured benefits for parents in family learning programs:

- Parents persist in family literacy programs longer than in other adult literacy programs
- Parents' attitudes about education improve
- Parents' reading achievement increases.
- Parents' writing ability improves and their math and science knowledge increases.
- Parents' knowledge about parenting options and child development increases
- Parents' social awareness and self-advocacy increases
- Parents enhance their employment status or job satisfaction
- Parents and other family members become more involved in schools.

Measured benefits for families from family learning programs:

- Families become emotionally closer which creates a more supportive home environment
- Families read more and engage in more literate behaviors at home

Family Literacy Software and the Gómez & Gómez Model

1. **Lessons:** In the Gómez & Gómez model, reading, writing, and especially vocabulary development are central in all subject lessons. *Family Literacy* is a team product. It is meant for use by bilingual learning pairs, working together in school or at home to improve their language skills. Second, *Family Literacy* offers learner-selected assignments that allow learners to progress as fast as they are ready; matching the Gómez and Gómez Model's emphasis on independent learning and agency. *Family Literacy* takes that agency a step farther. A template-based toolkit—Activity Builder—allows students to create software learning activities for each other, or for family members. The constructivist task of building a software activity can be applied by students to any subject area.
2. **SVE:** The student-driven software design encourages learners to keep track of their learning progress, and to select activities that will help them along. They can log in from computers in Bilingual Learning Centers, from computer labs, or from home. The software is designed

⁶ Padak, N & Rasinski, T, Family Literacy Programs: Who Benefits? Ohio Literacy Resource Center, Kent State Univ., 2003.



to be accessed from any platform.

3. **CR:** Struggling learners will benefit from the judgment-free extra practice provided by *Family Literacy*. Teachers working with breakout groups can recommend activities, or breakout groups can select their own activities to work in.
4. **BLCs and BRCs:** If computers are available at the BLCs, BRCs or in the home, learners can work together to create software learning activities for each other, or for other family members, using Activity Builder. The constructivist approach of building activities to teach others provides a very different form of learning than other BLC activities, providing additional engagement and success for learners who might not be succeeding otherwise.
5. **Supplementing Alphabets, Word Walls, Bilingual Charts & Content Word Boards:** Especially in 1:1 computing schools, students are accustomed to finding information and practice on computers. *Family Literacy* can "add" to the development of the traditional components by having students generate their words through the software.
6. **Journal:** Once they have mastered the keyboard, students can write, and access their writings, just as easily on the computer as they do in journals. In fact, because they can access their work equally in school and at home, they will be able to write and share more often than they do today. At the same time, they can learn word processing skills such as font use, color use, formatting and other basic elements of modern writing. Finally, they can provide access to their work to relatives and friends who cannot come to their school by providing online access to their writing portfolios.
7. **LOD:** The informal use of Spanish and English throughout the school can be supported by software activities designed to develop informal vocabulary. Some of the existing *Family Literacy* activities are oriented toward informal vocabulary, and both students and teachers can use Activity Builder to create activities using informal language, covering non-academic topics, based on any content from the Pledge of Allegiance to Physical Education.

In sum, *Family Literacy* supports the Gómez & Gómez model, by building on the natural inclination of children to seek literacy in all spoken languages to participate in their families, and by building on the natural inclination of parents and other relatives to support children through the process of learning to read and write. It supports and supplements the work done in the Gómez & Gómez schools by providing a structured practice environment, and by providing a means for adults and older children in the family to interact with children and develop their own literacy skills. The virtuous circle that results will improve outcomes for the children in the Gómez & Gómez schools, and for all of their relatives through family learning.