
Parent Education Overview

Parent education is one of the four components of family literacy. Comprehensive family literacy services are defined as: “services that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family, and that integrate all of the following activities:

- Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children (PACT Time).
- **Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children (Parent Education).**
- Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency (Adult Education).
- An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences.” (Children’s Education).

This standard definition can be found in several pieces of federal legislation, including the Head Start Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, and the Community Services Block Grant Act.

The full power of comprehensive family literacy services lies in the integration of these four components to create a seamless approach to education. Family literacy programs recognize that the education of children and parents is interdependent. Through intensive education of more than one generation, family literacy programs:

- Build upon families’ strengths.
- Provide the tools and support families need to build on their strengths as learners and expand their roles as family members, workers, and community members.
- Create life-long learners.

Family literacy programs have been recognized as a way to help children become successful in school while their parents develop literacy skills. The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, reflects this dual goal in its encouragement of adults to become full partners in the educational development of their children. Family literacy programs have created many learning opportunities for adult English language learners and their children.

To learn more about family literacy, adult education, and ESL education, visit the Verizon Literacy Campus at www.literacycampus.org. This site offers numerous self-paced 30-60 minute online courses at no cost.

Parent Education Goals and Features

Parent education in family literacy programs provides opportunities for parents (or children’s primary caregivers) to discover their own strengths; to enhance their parenting

skills and life competencies; and to learn more about children’s cognitive, literacy and developmental growth. Parent education can take place at home during home visits, as well as in a group setting in family literacy program centers. When parent education occurs in a group setting, it also provides opportunities for bonding with other parents for support and friendship.

Parent education is designed to help parents learn how to improve their skills in being the primary teacher for their children, and to help parents learn how to become full partners in the education of their children.

Although it is important for family literacy staff to respect the cultural differences of the families they serve, it also is important that parents learn how to interact with school personnel in their children’s schools. For example, in the U.S., school personnel expect parents to be involved with their children’s education and to be full educational partners with their children. In many cultures, however, children’s education is viewed as the responsibility of the teacher—not the parents.

Attitudes toward teachers and schools, as well as beliefs about parenting, may be different among individuals from various cultures. Consequently, teachers need to be explicit when teaching parents about school expectations and parents’ roles in enhancing their children’s literacy development. Although foreign-born parents want to support their children’s learning, their expectations about the role of schools and teachers will affect how involved they become in their child’s education.

Immigrant families differ in the characteristics of the primary caregiver, the number of adults in the home, and the availability of stable or temporary housing. Therefore, it is important to know something about the families in the program and the differences within cultures surrounding the parent’s role. It is also important to focus on what parents will need to know to support their children’s success in the American educational system.

How Parents Help Support the Language and Literacy Development of Children

Many studies have shown a link between parental involvement and a child’s success in school. Children whose parents are involved in their school not only have better grades, but also have fewer behavioral problems and are more sociable (National Center for Family Literacy, 2003).

The research-based suggestions in Figure III–1 provide information on how parents can strengthen their children’s language and literacy development. These can be discussed during parent education sessions, either in the parents’ native language or in English. The important thing is to encourage parents to support their child’s learning regardless of the language used.

Figure III–1: How Parents Can Strengthen their Children’s Language and Literacy Development

1. Parents can strengthen their children’s language and literacy development and school-related competence by engaging in language-rich interactions with their children.
 - Engaging in frequent and increasingly complex verbal interactions
 - Actively participating in joint book reading or storytelling—including in the native language
 - Finding recommended book lists on the Internet (refer to *Using Multicultural Children’s Literature in Adult ESL Classes* at www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/childlit.html, and *Database of Award-Winning Children’s Literature* at www.dawcl.com)
 - Posing questions that enhance their children’s problem solving abilities
 - Participating in attentive interactions with their children
 - Promoting a predictable environment through routines
2. Parents can provide support for literacy in the family.
 - Providing easy access to reading and writing materials including those in the native language
 - Modeling using reading and writing to get things done and solving problems in everyday life
 - Demonstrating enthusiasm for reading
3. Parents can gain knowledge of their children’s learning and development.
 - Seeing their children as active contributors to their own development
 - Becoming aware of their children’s interests and abilities
 - Having appropriate expectations of their children’s achievements
4. Parents can strengthen their children’s school-related competence.
 - Viewing their parenting role in a positive manner as they guide their children
 - Establishing and maintaining positive relations with community resources, including schools, community groups, and native language groups
 - Advocating for high-quality child and family resources in the community
 - Developing coping strategies for adapting to changes in family and community environments

(Adapted from Powell & D’Angelo, 2000.)

How to Develop a Parent Education Program

The first step in developing a parent education program is to find out what parents want to learn, and then decide how parents and staff can help develop appropriate parenting curricula. Each person has a role in this development. For example, program staff and parents can work together to:

- Establish cultural diversity guidelines (such as respect for other opinions, ideas and ways of learning) for deciding what is taught and how it is taught.
- Incorporate the native languages into the fabric of the classroom.
- Develop culturally diverse content from a variety of different viewpoints and perspectives across the four components.

- Incorporate in-class celebrations of cultural heroes and holidays.
- Share cultural items such as—magazine pictures, family recipes, dramatic play props, information about holidays and celebrations.
- Share family experiences through stories and artifacts.

Some parent education topics—basic children’s growth and development information, or techniques for how to read to children, can be planned ahead of time. Almost every parent can learn something from these topics. While the majority of the sessions should center on the language and literacy development of children, deciding on all the topics for parent education sessions before the parents arrive may not take parents’ interests and goals into consideration. Parents should have an opportunity to provide suggestions for discussion topics they would find most beneficial. A simple needs assessment can be used to determine parents’ interests, as shown in Figure III–2. Once parents’ priorities have been acknowledged, teachers can begin to gather resources and plan parent education sessions to meet parents’ needs.

Figure III–2: Sample Parent Education Needs Assessment

Parent Interest Inventory. Place a checkmark next to the topic you would like to discuss.		
Health	Nutrition	School
<input type="checkbox"/> Women’s health	<input type="checkbox"/> Dieting	<input type="checkbox"/> Child development
<input type="checkbox"/> Children’s health care	<input type="checkbox"/> Meal planning	<input type="checkbox"/> School Policy
<input type="checkbox"/> Alcohol/drug abuse	<input type="checkbox"/> Children’s eating habits	<input type="checkbox"/> Reading report cards
<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
Children’s Literacy Development	Family	Community and Services
<input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary development	<input type="checkbox"/> Child discipline	<input type="checkbox"/> Local library
<input type="checkbox"/> Reading encouragement	<input type="checkbox"/> Spouse abuse	<input type="checkbox"/> Social services/agencies
<input type="checkbox"/> Literacy expectations	<input type="checkbox"/> Retaining home language	<input type="checkbox"/> Local attractions
<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____

(Adapted from National Center for Family Literacy, 1997.)

Parent education happens in a variety of settings and in a variety of ways. Teachers serve as role models for parents who are learning new concepts. It is important for teachers to be explicit in their instruction, which is designed to help parents help their children. No matter where or when services are delivered, parents should learn new information, new ideas, and new skills; receive encouragement and support; and learn to advocate for themselves and their families.