

# *Eager to Learn: A Course on Family Literacy*

## 2.0 Literature Review

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### **1.0 Eager to Learn**

Children are born into a world which requires them to read and write, at times very well. They must, in fact, read well for success in school, work and life in general. Long before reaching school, however, children have the greatest opportunities to become literate at home, within the family.

This review of the literature was conducted so that a course of study could be written for adult learners enrolled in basic education programs. Many adult learners have reading problems. Many also feel they were raised in families where reading and writing were neglected or made into a chore. These adult learners are looking for ways to improve the family literacy environment for their own children. In order to write such a course, the literature was reviewed to ensure it included helpful approaches, based on research with families.

### **2.0 The Purpose of a Literature Review**

Dozens of books and articles on family literacy, paired reading, literacy acquisition and other related topics were examined in preparation for the task of designing a family literacy course for adult learners. This material was placed under the scrutiny of two broad questions:

1. From what theoretical perspective is family literacy best approached?
2. What are the practical considerations of implementing such a program?

While the sources included in this review are by no means exhaustive, they are reasonably comprehensive and have provided satisfactory answers to these questions. They have highlighted several philosophical debates in the fields of family literacy and literacy acquisition generally. These sources have also proven to be invaluable for their comments and suggestions on the practical applications of family literacy programs.

Although particular citations are provided, many other authors examined in the annotated bibliography could also have been given credit for making similar points. Giving credit to each would seriously interrupt the flow of the essay, so a *Summary of Findings* has been provided in chart form at the end of the review. Please refer to section **6.0** for the *Summary of Findings*. Please also refer to the annotations in the back of the resource binder for greater detail.

### 3.0 The Theoretical Review

The literature revealed six major areas of theoretical consideration in family literacy: 1) the emergent literacy approach; 2) the intervention-prevention approach; 3) the whole language approach; 4) the skills based language approach; 5) the role of parents; and 6) culturally specific perspectives.

#### 3.1 Emergent Literacy Approach

This is an approach to literacy acquisition which claims that children best acquire literacy through meaningful interactions with other people (Anderson, 1995). Research indicates it is more successful than the traditional skills-based approach to literacy (Butt, 1995; Juliebo, 1995). It is holistic (incorporating the principles of the whole language approach - see below), meaning-centered, and developmental. Basic reading skills are not the focus of emergent literacy. Understanding *meaning* is the focus (Nielson, et. al., 1996) of emergent literacy.

A fundamental assumption of this approach is that children acquire literacy through exposure to print, either through being read to and being involved in discussions about stories, or through exposure to environmental print in a variety of contexts (Spreadbury, 1994). Therefore, parents need to learn the value of different behaviours and ideas such as modeling reading, participating in authentic activities through role-playing, taking their children on educational trips, involving themselves in craft activities, creating literacy-related settings in the home (making use of corporate logos, or building 'pretend' post offices, for instance) and exposing their children to literacy in everyday activities such as cooking and going to the store (Shanahan, et. al., 1995; Spreadbury, 1994).

Sharing literacy experiences on a *daily* basis is extremely important to emergent literacy (Hlady, 1995) since understanding of print is related to the frequency of involvement in literacy events at home (Elster, 1994; Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association, 1994). An emergent literacy approach holds that individual development of literacy is determined by the particular relationships of children, personal histories, and unique interests and needs. Accordingly, parent-child interactions need to occur in a loving and supportive home environment if children are to acquire literacy to their fullest potential (Williams, 1994).

### 3.2 Intervention-Prevention Approach

The link between poverty and illiteracy is explored within an Intervention - Prevention approach to family literacy. The approach assumes that low-income families, who have less access to literacy resources, including conceptual skills, may be inadequately equipped to support literacy development in their children (Auerbach, 1989). Research supporting an intervention approach has shown that child literacy improves considerably if low-income parents are given intensive training to boost skills in reading techniques and to increase understanding of literacy concepts.

Opponents of this approach say that the assumption tends to blame the victim (Taylor, 1993). Furthermore, they claim that the assumption is simply incorrect; although children from advantaged families were found to be more successful in several studies, it has also been found that many poor families have literacy-rich environments. Socioeconomic status alone does not sufficiently account for differences in literacy development, as there are often differences within the same income group (Auerbach, 1995; Smith et. al., 1995; Symons et. al., 1996).

Despite this argument, the approach retains support in the literature. Educators are taught to be aware of the philosophical traps inherent in the approach (such as the tendency to blame the victim) and to make efforts to include parents as full partners in family literacy programs.

Some research has shown, for example, that parents appreciate intervention, especially if they had previously not known what schools expected of them as parents, or their children, as students. If educators recruit parents, respect them, and respond to their needs in a supportive environment that builds self-esteem and confidence, this approach to family literacy can be successful (Edwards, 1995; France, et. al., 1993).

### 3.3 Whole Language Approach

The whole language approach involves children learning literacy through exposure to print and through the building of a word base that will ultimately reveal to them the relationship between letters and sounds. The assumption is that children will best learn to read and write through simply reading and writing in a variety of contexts. They do not need to learn prior skills - these skills will come to them naturally.

This approach asks us to accept that literacy learning comes from the *whole* context of the language with which we live, work and play. It moves from the *whole* to the *parts* of learning.

For example, we start to learn from the whole oral language and move into understanding about letter-sound relationships; word recognition; grammar and sentence structure. The whole language approach asks us to understand that learning is a social activity which is *shared* rather than given to someone.

Methods associated with this approach include: teaching children to comprehend general passages of text, from which they can learn the meaning of specific words; repeating words in similar contexts with similar meanings; making daily *living activities* daily *literacy activities*; teaching words by analogy (learning ‘ball’ after learning ‘tall’); utilizing read-alouds and discussions whenever possible (MacIsaac, 1996; Maguire 1991).

Most parents were taught from a skills-based approach, so their views on literacy acquisition are often incongruent with the whole language approach. Additionally, this approach to learning language assumes it is crucial that children have fun when being exposed to print. Parents and educators alike must work to create a pleasant and fun environment for the learning child (Stone, 1994)

### 3.4 Skills-Based Approach

A skills-based approach is grounded in the belief that children need to learn certain basic skills of printing, and letter formation before they can actually read and write successfully. For example, before children can look at a group of letters and recognize the sounds they make as a word with meaning, they must first understand how to take the letters and translate them to sound. This process of translating letters to sounds is known as the *alphabetic principle*, and proponents of the skills-based approach to literacy argue it is a skill that must take place *before* children can become successful readers.

A phonic or skills-based approach to literacy starts with the *parts* of language and moves to the *whole*. For example, a teacher using a skills-based approach to learning words might teach an

## Whole Language:

- ❑ Learning is a social activity; the learner relies on demonstrations of how things are done.
- ❑ Learning is about making decisions; encourage risk-taking instead of demanding accuracy.
- ❑ Learning happens best when there is a purpose for learning.
- ❑ Reading & Writing are integrated processes; help learners by planning activities that include both reading and writing.

Adapted from: Meredith Hutchings, *Adult Literacy: Reading and Writing Activities*, Dalhousie University (1986) by Educational Planning and Design Associates, St. John's, NF

unknown letter-sound relationship to a student and then proceed to explain or teach how that relationship fits into an overall word, sentence or language structure.

Some authors argue that a whole language approach to literacy learning is inadequate because the approach assumes a direct relationship between writing language and understanding meaning of words.

According to Byrne et, al. (1996), whole language falls short because it overlooks a basic understanding of phonics, which the child would have gained from being taught letter and phoneme skills, or the basic alphabetic structure. Children learning in a whole language context may build up an impressive word base, but have difficulty with unfamiliar words if they do not know the alphabetic principles of how those words are structured. Children need to be taught skills which help them understand the principles of how words are built from letters, according to supporters of the skills-based approach.

Perhaps the best way around the debate between the whole and skills-based approaches to literacy, is to incorporate both approaches in literacy learning. This has met with considerable success for those who have done so (Stone, 1994).

### 3.5 The Role of Parents

Perhaps the most important theoretical element of any approach to family literacy is the role for parents. The literature makes a resounding judgment on this issue: parents *must* be full partners, and be given control and responsibility in programs addressing the literacy of their children (Cairney, 1995). They should be involved in every stage of developing family literacy programs (Come, et. al., 1995). Involvement encourages parents to take control of programs after educators withdraw. Aside from that, if parents are in control (as opposed to teachers or university leaders) other parents may be more inclined to be trustful of the program, and less worried about their own educational shortcomings (Edwards, 1995).

The literature reveals several principles which family literacy programs must incorporate if they are to successfully involve parents:

1. Address the confidence and self-esteem of parents throughout any program, but especially in the initial stages. For example, do not begin by giving parents standardized tests. Parents with low levels of education may feel apprehensive about participating in literacy programs, and their self-esteem is vulnerable when they begin. Supportive environments are crucial (Edwards, 1995).

2. Remember that parents at all income levels are very concerned about their children, and will put considerable time and effort into these programs if made to feel secure and adequate. They want to help their children, but in many cases are seeking direction on how to do this. (Unwin, 1995).
3. Create a *posture of reciprocity* between parents and teachers (including communication and cultural exchanges). In other words, create an atmosphere in which both parents and teachers recognize the value of what the other does to help children, and are willing to work together for the benefit of the children. If parents and educators have differing views on literacy, these views should be shared and discussed (Neuman, 1995).
4. Allow parents to determine the direction of literacy programs through the use of family portfolios or family albums in which they keep a record of their literacy 'work' and their own thoughts about literacy acquisition (Hoffman, 1995).
5. Account for developing literacy in parents as well as in children, as many parents may have weaknesses in literacy (Morrow, 1995).
6. Consider parents in their many different roles as adults (i.e. as parents, students, family members, community builders, and workers) (Cramer, No Date).
7. Provide parents with opportunities to learn from one another (Akroyd, 1995).
8. Explore differing cultural and generational views on literacy (Akroyd, 1995).
9. Use 'hands-on' activities when expanding parental knowledge of literacy development, since lecture-type sessions with parents do not seem to be as successful (Padak, 1994).

### 3.6 Culturally Specific Perspectives

Culturally specific perspectives on family literacy do not contradict any of the points already made. In fact, they are in full support of many. These perspectives are included under a separate heading simply because they have been outlined in the literature with specific principles and recommended actions (Auerbach, 1995).

The first of these two perspectives is the 'Multiple Literacies Perspective.' Principles of this approach are: (a) there should be opportunities for participants to bring with them culture-specific literacy practices; (b) a stance of inquiry should be the starting point in implementing family literacy; (c) there should be culturally familiar and relevant content; (d) there should be learner participation in developing a program; (e) there should be an emphasis on cultural maintenance rather than cultural assimilation; (f) there should be culturally familiar contexts; and (g) there should be use and instruction of the first language (Auerbach,1995).

The second perspective is the 'Social Change Perspective.' Proponents of this perspective argue that literacy is a product of political, social, and economic factors, in addition to parental input. Principles of this approach include: (a) give participants control of family literacy programs; (b) provide ample opportunity for dialogue among peers; (c) incorporate content centering around critical social issues from participants' lives; and connected to this is; (d) take action for social change. Implementing these principles in a family literacy program will allow parents to take control of their children's learning and to challenge social issues with the hope of making changes for subsequent generations (Auerbach, 1995).

Both perspectives respect the prominent role of families in transferring literacy between generations.





## **4.0 The Practical Review**

Virtually every author made practical suggestions concerning the development and operation of family literacy programs. Each comment of this nature made by the authors concerned one of five major topics. The *Practical Review* is therefore divided into observations on: 1) parent-child interactions; 2) literacy as fun; 3) availability of literacy materials; 4) 'safe' environments; and, 5) scaffolding.

### **4.1 Parent-Child Interactions/Modeling**

Fostering literacy development in children requires a variety of teaching and learning methods. If children are to acquire literacy at maximum capability, they must be exposed to parental modeling and reading activities.

*Modeling* is the term used to describe parents engaging in reading and writing, both for functional purposes and for pleasure, in front of children. When children see their parents interacting with print in a meaningful way, they learn reading-like behaviors. Not surprisingly, parental attitude towards reading, reading techniques, and level of attachment to the child, are all factors in determining the effectiveness of parental literacy modeling. The more positive these factors are, the stronger the likelihood that the child will successfully acquire literacy (Brock, 1994).

A pleasurable atmosphere is crucial to the success of reading activities, since children, like adults, learn better when they are enjoying their activities (Fagan, 1998). According to the literature, reading aloud is of particular importance to children. Reading aloud can be accompanied by any number of related activities, from discussions about print, through role-playing and writing activities, to children themselves reading aloud.

### **4.2 Literacy as Fun**

Several authors have shown that children acquire literacy most effectively when they are having fun (Barnhart et. al., 1995; Stone, 1994). Accordingly, parents should offer children extra motivations to read whenever possible (Brenna, 1995), and show enthusiasm for reading themselves, letting their children see them reading for pleasure as often as possible. Several authors recognize the fact that many parents are preoccupied with having their children acquire the skills associated with literacy, as opposed to simply having fun with print. In cases such as this, some authors recommend that educators build on parents' knowledge of literacy acquisition by introducing the vital importance of fun in the whole process (Baker, 1997).

### 4.3 Availability of Literacy Materials

If a family literacy program is to be fun, interesting, and generally good, it must have a supply of developmentally appropriate resources (especially books) available to the parents and children (Barclay, 1995; Morrow, 1993). This is especially important in programs designed for low-income families, who may not have large numbers of books in their homes, as books may be expensive.

If funding is a problem, possible solutions may include: make thorough use of public libraries; get donations of magazines and newspapers; develop a family lending library; loan books to children and to parents; have book exchanges; and, teach parents how to create inexpensive home literacy centres (Brock 1994; Come et. al., 1995; Fagan 1998).

### 4.4 'Safe' Environments

The literature strongly indicates that, if young children are to acquire literacy successfully, they must be exposed to print within an environment in which they feel safe (Bus et. al., 1995).

The extent to which children explore the unknown print environment depends largely upon how secure or 'safe' they feel, especially with regard to the parent-child attachment. Parents must therefore create a warm, accepting atmosphere for children by responding positively to questions children ask about print, or to requests for reading aloud (Williams, 1994). They can also make their children feel safe by sitting close to their children during reading, encouraging them to take risks, and by not criticizing mistakes. Furthermore, parents and siblings must model literacy activities in a positive environment (Spreadbury, 1994).

### 4.5 Scaffolding

*Scaffolding* is a widely accepted approach to literacy in which the child controls the pace of learning. Children learn more difficult things with parents, while learning easier things on their own. In the same manner in which scaffolding is used to build a house from the bottom up, parents continually take children to new levels of learning, as children are continually mastering ascending levels of literacy (Fagan, 1998).

Throughout the scaffolding process, it is important that parents take children through literacy acquisition "little bits at a time" (Brenna, 1995). Parents must continually assess children's "region of sensitivity" (the components that children are capable of understanding, but unable to accomplish without assistance) and adhere to the 'contingency rule' which states that when

children make a mistake, teachers/parents take more control; when children get it right, teachers/parents relinquish control. For example, parents should reread favourite stories with children, and when children are too tired to finish a story, the parents finish. It is also important that, when using this method, parents understand what is developmentally appropriate for the children, for example, two-year-olds learn language and concepts through activity, not from language alone (Connor et. al., 1997).

In summary, this review of the literature demonstrates that numerous approaches to learning, building skills, parental involvement and the use of resources are useful in the development of a family literacy program.

## 5.0 Conclusion: Characteristics of a Successful Program

The sources included in this bibliography have provided insight into both the theoretical backgrounds of many family literacy programs, as well as the practical knowledge required to successfully implement such programs. The sources have answered the two broad questions about theory and practice with which the literature review began. The literature also served to describe several characteristics of successful programs. In summary, successful programs:

1. Are continued over a long period of time.
2. Are intensive learning experiences for both parents and children.
3. Provide daily learning experiences for all participants.
4. Offer multiple routes to enhancing child development.
5. Strive to match children's learning styles.
6. Provide environmental support for children's positive attitudes and behaviour.
7. Offer small class sizes with low ratios of children to adults.
8. Provide teacher training and improvement support.
9. Emphasize ongoing, child-focused communication between parents and formal teachers or instructors.
10. Have curriculum content/processes which are similar to what children will encounter in school.
11. Expand parental knowledge about literacy, teaching parents *how* to help their children acquire literacy skills.
12. Have educators who are committed to a time-consuming project.
13. Remain culturally sensitive and community-based, with parents sharing responsibilities and leadership.
14. Encourage educators to train parents so parents can develop and run literacy programs.
15. Provide a physical space solely for the program.
16. Informally evaluate the program to see if it is working.
17. Have a wide range of literacy materials readily available.
18. Include fun activities.
19. Blend whole language and skills training.
20. Respect individual learning styles.

## 6.0 Summary of Findings

<b>THE THEORETICAL REVIEW</b>		
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Brief Summary</b>	<b>Authors</b>
<b>1. Emergent Literacy</b>	An approach to literacy that exposes children to print in a variety of contexts, utilizing discussions, daily reading, print-related activities, and meaningful interactions to develop language and literacy in a meaning-centered manner.	Anderson, 1995; Butt, 1995; Dunning, 1994; Elster, 1994; Fagan, 1998; France et al, 1993; Hlady, 1995; Juliebo, 1995; Kazemek, 1995; Morrow et al, 1993; Neuman et al, 1997; Nielson et al, 1996; Padak, 1994; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Rasinski, 1995; Shaffer et al, 1995; Shanahan et al, 1995; Shapiro, 1995; Snow, 1993; Spreadbury, 1994; Stone, 1994; Unwin, 1995; Vedeler, 1997; Williams, 1994
<b>2. Intervention - Prevention Approach</b>	Many parents are inadequately equipped to support literacy development, so educators must “intervene.” While many parents acknowledge this and appreciate learning things such as “developmentally appropriate teaching,” this approach leads to the assumption that illiteracy not only evolves out of poverty, but creates cycles of poverty. To avoid “blaming the victim,” educators must be aware of this philosophical danger and the evidence which contradicts it.	Auerbach, 1995; Auerbach, 1989; Butt, 1995; Canning, 1996; Cronan et al, 1996; Cronan et al, 1995; Edwards, 1995; France et al, 1993; Gomby et al, 1995; Hughes et al, 1995; Kazemek, 1995; Nickse et al, 1994; Paulu, 1993; Purcell-Gates et al, 1995; Shaffer et al, 1995; Shanahan et al, 1995; Smith et al, 1995; Symons et al, 1996; Taylor, 1993; Unwin, 1995
<b>3. Whole Language</b>	Children acquire literacy through contextual exposure to print and through the building of a word-base that will ultimately reveal to them the letter-sound relationship.	Butt, 1995; Dickinson, 1993; Elster, 1994; Gadsden, 1994; Lazar et al, 1996; MacIsaac, 1996; Maguire, 1991; Mercer, 1989; Stone, 1994; Strickland, 1994-95
<b>4. Skills Based-Language</b>	Some authors argue that the whole language approach is inadequate. Children may build up an impressive word base, but will have difficulty when they encounter unfamiliar words if they do not know the alphabetic principle. A solution may be to incorporate both approaches.	Byrne et al, 1996; Chaney, 1994; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Shanahan et al, 1995; Stone, 1994
<b>5. The Role of Parents</b>	In developing and running a family literacy project, it is essential to include parents as <i>full</i> partners. Educators must consider parents’ differing cultural and generational views on literacy, possibilities of low confidence and self-esteem, as well as the literacy of parents themselves, in creating a supportive <i>posture of reciprocity</i> that not only respects and responds to parents, but involves them in developing and controlling the process <i>with</i> educators.	Akroyd, 1995; Anderson, 1995; Butt, 1995; Cairney, 1995; Canning, 1996; Come et al, 1995; Cramer, no date (PACE); Edwards, 1995; Fagan, 1997; France, et al, 1993; Handel, 1992; Hoffman, 1995; Hughes et al, 1995; Lazar et al, 1996; Linder et al, 1995; Morrow, 1995; Morrow et al, 1993; Morrow et al, 1995; Neuman, 1995; Neuman et al, 1995; Padak, 1994; Paratore et al, 1995; Rasinski, 1995; Roskos et al, 1994; Saracho, 1997; Shanahan et al, 1995; Symons et al, 1996; Unwin, 1995
<b>6. Other Perspectives</b>	The multiple literacies perspective focuses on cultural differences and how to incorporate them into a literacy program. The social change perspective contends that (il)literacy is a product of political, social, and economic factors, and that the “key issue is the locus of control.”	Auerbach, 1995; Morrow et al, 1993; Morrow, 1995 (other authors’ ideas may fit this model, but none actually discuss it).

<b>THE PRACTICAL REVIEW</b>		
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Brief Summary</b>	<b>Authors</b>
<b>1. Parent-Child Interactions/ Activities</b>	There are dozens of things parents can do with their children to foster literacy acquisition: paired reading, reading aloud, reading and writing for functional purposes, writing stories to/for each other, creating book-related activities, modeling literacy behaviors, and of course maintaining a positive attitude and pleasant, supportive atmosphere.	Practically every author discusses this, at least minimally.
<b>2. Literacy as Fun</b>	Children acquire literacy most effectively when they are having fun. Children not only need to have fun in the learning process; they also need to see their parents reading for pleasure and showing enthusiasm for reading.	Baker et al, 1997; Brenna, 1995; Butt, 1995; Calahan, 1995; Kazemek, 1995; Neuman et al, 1997; Stone, 1994; Unwin, 1995
<b>3. Availability of Materials</b>	If a program is to be effective, it must have considerable resources (i.e. children's books, etc.) available to the parents and children.	Baker et al, 1997; Barclay et al, 1995; Brock et al, 1994; Butt, 1995; Come et al, 1995; Handel, 1992; Juliebo, 1995; Morrow, 1995; Morrow et al, 1993; Padak, 1994; Shanahan et al, 1995
<b>4. "Safe" Environments</b>	Since the extent to which children explore the world of print depends largely upon the parent-child attachment, parents must create warm, accepting environments, respond positively to any interest children show in literacy, encourage them to take risks, and avoid criticism when they make mistakes.	Barclay et al, 1995; Barnhart et al, 1995; Bus et al, 1995; Butt, 1995; Calahan, 1995; Hlady, 1995; Morrow et al, 1993; Spreadbury, 1994; Williams et al, 1994
<b>5. Scaffolding</b>	This involves the parent / teacher continually taking the child a little further in the learning process, taking it "little bits at a time." It is important to let the child do what he/she is capable of, and to step in when he/she has difficulties (the rule of <i>contingency</i> ).	Brenna, 1995; Connor et al, 1997; Fagan, 1998; French, 1996; Williams et al, 1994