

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

## 3. Research

### Report on Focus Group Results

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## Purpose of Focus Group Research

A series of four focus groups was initially planned as part of the primary research for *Eager to Learn*, a family literacy course. The Community Services Council felt that this would be an appropriate method to gather input from local stakeholders. The need to consult these groups became even more apparent as the literature review and bibliography progressed, and we were able to see that a broad range of approaches and philosophies was characteristic of family literacy initiatives. We were also seeking to establish priorities and to adjust the scope of our project to the needs of those for whom it was intended.

Participants were chosen through a largely informal process of contacting stakeholder institutions, explaining the nature of the project, and asking for participation. The exception to this process was the fourth focus group, which attempted to consult parents from the general public on their approaches to literacy. This group was assembled primarily through responses to ads placed in two local newspapers, as well as through word of mouth. Seven to nine participants were present for each session.

When the four initial focus groups were complete and the *Eager to Learn* binder was being assembled, our Research Advisory Committee suggested it might be prudent to consult once more with Adult Educators to gauge their reaction to what had been completed so far, and to obtain further input on the course outline. A fifth focus group was then assembled, largely made up of the same people who had attended the first Adult Educators session, and, therefore, familiar with the thrust of the project. The session gave us a final reorientation on some key points and a sense of closure, as well.

## Focus Group #1

### 1.0 Focus Group with Adult Educators

**Participants:** Seven professionals in the field of Adult Basic Education.

**Introduction:** This focus group primarily addressed the logistics, design and implementation of a new course in the ABE curriculum. Family Literacy projects have become more and more common over the last several years, but the literature indicates that they have rarely, if ever, been incorporated into a formal ABE curriculum. For this reason, the input of Adult Educators was crucial, because this group has the most intimate familiarity with the way courses are organized and how both teachers and students utilize a course outline.

In keeping with the philosophy of self-paced learning, the Adult Educators in this focus group stressed the concept of flexibility in most of the issues addressed, including resources, content, enrollment, format, and evaluation.

**Points Raised by Focus Group:** The following is a summary of specific points raised in this focus group:

- Adult learners want to help their children with reading and homework; the process of offering this help should be meaningful to parents; and family literacy should include all family members.
- Basic learning awareness should be a component of this course, which would include some instruction in how to encourage children, teach children, and create a comfortable, non-threatening environment.
- Include some information about what literacy means (example: everyday literacy, communication and literacy, also a component on self-esteem and literacy).
- A needs-assessment should be included at the beginning of the course to enable the teacher/facilitator to adapt course objectives to the needs of students.
- Reading activities should be as many and as varied as possible; include stories about the lives of the students; avoid the traditional "Dick and Jane" approach; activities should be based on student interests and experiences.
- Parents should discuss real-life experiences with children; parents and children could work on stories together - write about family experiences; on a trip to the grocery store, look at the flyer first, read words, look at pictures, etc.; interview someone in the family; watch a movie, discuss, draw pictures, make a list of words, etc.

- Parents should share information with their preschooler about their own ABE school work, even if the child is too young to understand. It is important that children see their parents interact with written and printed material.
- Course content should not be limited to prescribed resources. The content of the reading material should be left to the discretion of parents and children, more so than the facilitator.
- Environmental print: students should be encouraged to find literacy everywhere around them, and not to depend on books alone. Examples include comics, magazines, street signs, store signs, displays, etc.
- Emphasis should be placed on setting a good example in the home. If children do not see their parents read, then they are less likely to do so themselves. For example, parents should not make a child read a book while they themselves watch TV.
- Children should be brought on-site to demonstrate reading activities, and to allow students to take turns reading to them.
- People not currently enrolled in an ABE program might also be allowed to take the course.
- Credit must be awarded for this course to encourage students to enrol, so that this will not be a lower priority than other courses.
- A decision on the number of credits to be awarded should be made only after the course proposal has been mostly completed, as the credits awarded will reflect the depth of material covered.
- A family literacy course should be a core credit in the Communications Skills category.
- Enrolment in this course should not be limited by any factors such as the age of students' children, or whether or not they have children. Flexibility should be incorporated into the program to accommodate a practicum aspect for those who do not have a child with whom to work.
- The course should be conducted primarily in a group format with flexibility. Smaller groups, pairs, and individual projects should also be incorporated. Even though the course would be offered as a group, individualized plans could be prepared for each student if they have special circumstances or particular needs. Despite the importance of offering this course through a group format, it was felt that even if only one person was interested in taking the course, there should be a way for that person to do so.
- Any evaluation that matches course objectives will suffice. In general, however, tests and major academic assignments should be avoided in the interests of associating pleasure and enjoyment, rather than pressure and work, with reading. This will require a creative approach.

***Suggestions for evaluation:***

- 1) Evaluation structure should be straightforward so that students know what is expected of them.
- 2) Students need to be made aware of progress and grades periodically throughout the course.
- 3) Arrive at a mark with the student in individual meetings. The facilitator could incorporate negotiation/self-assessment based on individual learning objectives.
- 4) Do not mark the success or failure of a parent's activity with the child, but what they learned by doing it.
- 5) Each course group will create some course objectives. The course should have many objectives and broad curriculum guidelines, so that instructors can customize it for the needs of different groups and individuals. This will also allow students to help set the agenda as well.
- 6) Evaluation must be flexible depending on individual needs. Some students have children, others do not, some may not have much access to children, etc. Evaluation should be weighted according to the individual.
- 7) Students should keep reflective journals as part of their evaluation.

***Suggestions for resources:***

- 1) Ask an individual at the library to act as a direct liaison to the course facilitator. Visits to the library should be incorporated into the course.
- 2) Book ownership was considered to be a small but significant factor. Incorporating a small element of book ownership would place more value on books.
- 3) School-age children could probably get books from their school library.
- 4) Hold a book drive, have book exchanges.
- 5) Consider giving a book to those who successfully complete the course.

## Focus Group #2

### 2.0 Focus Group with Adult Learners

**Participants:** Nine Adult Learners from three ABE facilities.

**Introduction:** Participants were generally aware that an early introduction to reading was beneficial to young children, but felt strongly that they needed to be better informed about how to bring this about. They also felt that learners' self-esteem would have to be addressed before they would have the confidence to be pro-active in their child's reading.

Participants made a number of suggestions regarding course content and organization, which highlights findings from the literature that the best family literacy projects incorporate a certain level of parental control. These parents were certainly willing and able to be involved in this process. Interestingly, participants were also very much in tune with the basic philosophy behind family literacy. Many of them were able to pinpoint their own late or poor introduction to literacy as a cause of their own academic problems during their regular school years, a situation they were motivated to avoid in their own children.

**Point Raised by Focus Group:** The following is a summary of specific points raised in this focus group:

- It is very important to introduce reading to children from birth. This allows for exposure to words and pictures, and helps children to know the difference between objects, people, and animals.
- It is important to introduce literacy in the home in order to take advantage of learning over the first five years of life.
- Parents cannot depend on preschools or daycares because there are too many children, leaving little room for individual attention.
- Two children may be just as intelligent and capable, but the one who gets a good background in literacy at home will succeed whereas the one who does not will fail.
- An early introduction to literacy will give children a self-esteem boost when they get to school. Children who get their first introduction to reading in kindergarten may think "I can't do it so I'm not going to try," while those who had an early introduction to literacy would say, "I know how to do that. Can I help?"

- Little or no literacy introduction at home can have devastating consequences later in school. The child will experience embarrassment at not knowing words that her peers know, and this may lead to social withdrawal. Early literacy will help avoid frustration on the part of the child in school; it will be a confidence booster.
- Such a course will allow parents to learn from their children as well.
- When a child is learning, it gives the parent a sense of satisfaction from having taught the child: "To hear your child say 'My mommy' or 'My daddy taught me this', or your child's teacher saying, 'You're doing a wonderful job' is worth a million dollars."
- Parents seem comfortable acting as teacher to their child. They value this role. "We are teachers."
- It is important to adult learners that they teach their children the value of getting a good education.
- Self-esteem is a big factor for adult learners. They want to be able to say, "I can teach my child by what I just learned."
- Parents are wondering, "Am I doing the right thing?" Participants seem to see the course as having an element of parenting skills. One person even referred to it as a 'parenting course.'
- One participant disagreed with the notion that students in a family literacy course could also learn from each other, since most people's parenting models are their own parents, and, "We don't know what's right or wrong until somebody tells us." Parents want to know whether they are doing something wrong. This may be self-esteem related, as parents are not always willing to trust their own judgement.
- Some parents do not feel confident in their own literacy skills. This prompted the suggestion that parents should be able to bring their children in to see Mom or Dad learning too. They felt that this would make learning valuable and important to the child.
- The self-esteem portion of the course should be completed with adults before bringing in children.
- One-on-one is much better; it allows the child and parent to ask and answer questions; this gives the child a better knowledge of language.
- Potential literacy activities: play memory games; learn songs, hand out words; use flash cards; use everyday surroundings to build vocabulary. The example was given of a child who brought home lyrics to 'White Christmas' and was having trouble reading them, but when they started singing the words he went through the song without a hitch.

- It is important for children to see their parents engaged in reading and writing activities. One participant reports a major improvement in his life since he has been able to do his literacy school work while his children do theirs around the same table. They sometimes work on vocabulary and spelling together.
- There seems to be little concern about being 'put on the spot' in front of other adults or children in terms of reading. It was even suggested that a parent might misspell a word to see if the child picks up on it. It was also suggested that it is important for children to see their parents learning from their mistakes as a modelling activity.
- Resources: libraries, flea markets, Good Will, etc. One student asked whether they would have to buy books to take the course.



### Focus Group #3

#### 3.0 Focus Group with Early Childhood Educators

**Participants:** Eight professionals in Early Childhood Education and Development.

**Introduction:** The number of resources being produced in the field of family literacy has multiplied considerably over the last several years. It was therefore important at this stage to consult with professionals in this field to help prioritize the most important aspects of early childhood education as it relates to family literacy.

The relationship between the age of children and their ability to engage in various learning activities was a point of concern for some, in that various stages of development would require age-specific approaches in some cases. This concept was seen to be important in terms of both the mandate of the course and as a topic for learners to cover. Perhaps the point most emphasized, however, was that parent-child interaction should be made as central to the course as logistics could allow.

**Points Raised by Focus Group:** The following is a summary of specific points made in this focus group:

- There is a body of knowledge available from which to provide useful information to parents, but if there is the potential to include children, to have real-life situations, then so many more things become possible. [Whether this means bringing children on-site would depend on a number of factors, including the practical limitations of the facility.]
- A group course rather than self-pacing would be required, because learning about language comes from practice and interaction.
- Family literacy was felt to be extremely important: "It is the way children learn to read and enjoy print."
- Teaching the value of language and reading is important. This would take place early in the course.
- Involving the whole family is a key point.
- The fun aspect should always be emphasized. This will help set the tone and the attitude can be passed on to children.
- Advocacy and self-esteem should be threads throughout the course.
- Parents often do not know about the little things they can do (use environmental print such as road signs, etc.).

- Being able to watch literacy activities being modelled is important for parents. This should be covered at the beginning of the course - field trips to daycares, Family Resource Centre; role-plays within the classroom; things on video.
- Even if each student does not have a child available, they could still take part as an "active observer."
- Reading to children is very important; seeing their parents reading is also very important for children. Books should be around the house from infancy.
- It is important for parents to feel comfortable just telling stories to their children - not having to depend on a book. Parents also need to feel comfortable with language and sharing special times with their child. If not, then they will not be ready to read a book. Just having a special time to share and tell stories can lead into reading.
- Before reading begins, consider language and interaction between adult and baby. Parents and children also need experience, which will help make reading rich when they arrive at it. Example: going to the harbour to see boats will make the word 'boat' important when they later meet it in print. We need to pay attention to things other than sitting down with a book. If the image that a word conjures up in a child's mind is a very rich image, such as a great variety of balls, rather than only one ball, then the excitement of reading that word will be much greater.
- It is important for parents to understand different developmental needs of children (age appropriate activities) and consider the child's attention span. This is necessary to avoid parental frustration at building up unrealistic expectations for the age of a child. Introduce some basic developmental psychology. How and when fine and gross motor skills develop must also be considered before parents can expect children to be able to print.
- It is important for parents not to worry too much about skills-building, but to have fun, and play with words as you would blocks or a sandbox. Very high expectations or pressure to perform given activities can cause bad feelings between the parent and child.
- There is nothing wrong with printing with preschool children. If they take to it, they are ready; if not, they are not ready.
- Be careful that we do not pressure parents into thinking that children have to know how to print before they get to kindergarten. Keep things positive and without pressure.

- Young children who have access to crayons, etc., will come naturally to printing letters and writing their names. The curriculum should include something on the progression from drawing to writing.
- One basic skill for parents is pointing to words as they are read.
- Parents need to get across to children the idea of what reading is for and how it is done.
- Parents need to talk informally about letters and words so that the child who is age five and going to school is not floored by so many new things like letters, words, books, and pages.
- Parents should be educated on what is a good book, but they also need to know that it is okay to read a not-so-good book. Go with the child's interests as well as your own.
- Rhyme and rhythm are important mnemonic devices - the importance of this from the parent's point of view is that even those who are not confident in their own literacy can at least do rhymes and songs with children. This could be a confidence-builder for parents.
- Do not struggle with the child - change activities, learn a rhyme or song such as the Itsy Bitsy Spider. Parent and child should have fun with words - it should not be like homework or a test, but a lifestyle choice. Slip it in whenever possible during the day.
- It is just as important for a child to see a parent writing as reading, because children are very curious about such things. Example: making a shopping list.
- Print should be introduced to the child's environment from the earliest possible age. Parents should understand that even infants will absorb the behaviour pattern of reading and interacting with books even if they do not understand the words or story. This also gets the parents into the habit of reading to children.
- Some suggested activities: label items around the house such as toys and other objects; look at labels of items at the grocery store; use family albums or picture books for discussion; sing songs; go to the library; make up a story, and get the child to fill in the name of the character, what happens next, etc.
- Parents should make family books or books about their children. This helps emphasize the value of reading and books. A group of parents could make a book together.
- It all comes back to interaction - realizing that sometimes the TV goes off and that we have to make time just to talk back and forth using language, playing with words, talking about ourselves, and about things we read and feel and think and hope. Parents can enhance meal time and bed time this way - not just using books.

- A combination of skills-based and whole language teaching methods was suggested in order to capitalize on the advantages of both.
- Parents need to be trained in advocacy. They need to know how to talk to professionals such as teachers - how to say to a teacher, for example, "It's nothing against the child or you personally, but this particular approach is not working." If parents are not confident in their own literacy or educational background, then they are intimidated by institutions such as schools and dealing with teachers or administrators.
- Create a safe, stable, comfortable environment: use routine; keep books in one area; keep things predictable. The best way to deal with this kind of topic is when parents trust one other enough to brainstorm about the issue of safety and security.
- Do not hold communication with your child for ransom. If the child misbehaves, the discipline must fit the offence - do not give 'the silent treatment.'
- Not just a literacy course - cannot separate literacy from parenting skills.
- Television/computers: it is important to deal with the point of view that a parent can sit the child down in front of a favourite childrens' show and assume it is all the enrichment that he or she will need. The issue of television-watching needs to be addressed concerning its inadequacy for replacing human contact and interaction.
- Parents will need to be aware of children's books and where to get them (the library, etc.). Local content should be sought in terms of books and activities in order to make them more relevant to students, and therefore more interesting.
- One participant felt we could accommodate a wide age range by having younger children in one day a week and older children another day. The course activities would change every time it is offered depending on the needs of students and the age ranges of their children.
- Another participant felt that the variables would be too great. Two separate courses might be required if the course covered ages beyond preschool. Most participants agreed on this.
- Participants felt that the course should be limited to parents of preschool as opposed to school-age children. A whole different category of skills would be required for parents of older children once school is involved.
- Parents of children who are in the early school years who take this course would be more likely to do so because their kids are having problems.

## Focus Group #4

### 4.0 Focus Group with Parents

**Participants:** Eight parents who have an interest in early literacy

**Introduction:** This focus group was an attempt to bring expertise from the community at large into the process. Many participants brought a wealth of ideas drawn from experience with their own children, from resources that they have acquired for personal use, and from volunteering in the community. In many ways, this group represented the views of parents who were very well informed in terms of family literacy and early childhood literacy. As a result, a number of good ideas were brought forward.

Participants emphasized quality, constant communication between parent and child, and the need to adapt parental expectations to the unique characteristics of each individual child.

**Points Raised by Focus Group:** The following is a summary of specific points made in this focus group:

- Children will be far behind by kindergarten if they have not received reasonable exposure to reading and books.
- Early literacy helps stimulate a child's imagination and memory.
- Flexibility is a key approach for parents to take when reading to children. Different children will require different approaches to reading.
- The developmental aspect must also be considered - children will perform different tasks and arrive at various stages of development at different ages.
- Parents should be reassured when their child is not as far ahead in literacy development as they would like. The key is exposing children to books and print without pressuring them or feeling pressured as parents. Parents should not set rigid goals for their preschool children in terms of literacy achievement.
- An early immersion in literacy will allow a child to absorb the mechanics of reading: left to right, front to back, that a symbol means a word (the child is not necessarily memorizing specific words, but discovering that there is a pattern or system to written communication).
- Children can also learn through books that pictures are symbols for things in the world. This allows them to begin categorizing and organizing their environment.

- All children have different preferences in how to enjoy reading: some will listen all the way through quietly; others only want to read parts of books. Parents do not have to take the active role. Sometimes children will want to turn the pages and point to things, or they may want to make up a story or read to the parent.
- Sometimes a child will choose a longer or more advanced book than the attention span required to sit through. The parent can then just make up a story based on the pictures.
- Parents should try to make associations, comparisons, and connections between things the child has read and things in their real environment.
- Parents can capitalize on a child's interest in computer or video games, for example, by buying a magazine about video games for the child to read or look at.
- Allow children to control the reading session to a certain extent - go with their preferences.
- Adults can read to each other as well as to their child. This is a modelling activity. It can be done informally, such as one parent reading the newspaper aloud while the other is cooking or washing dishes.
- Parents can help and encourage children to make signs to put around the house naming rooms or giving directions.
- Children can gain pride and self-confidence from learning rhymes and songs. For example, the rhyme "patty cake, patty cake, baker's \_\_\_" can be used in this way, leaving out words for the child to put in. Rhymes also help teach phonics - the sounds of letters and words. For example, if the child knows "hat," then they will quickly learn "mat," "cat," "sat," etc.
- Let the child use and experiment with a tape recorder. Use it to make up stories and songs.
- Parents should allow the child to teach, read to, and show them.
- Being enthusiastic about your child's efforts is important: "when you see something grab your kid, go with it!"
- Some kindergartens require that children know how to spell their name and address before they come to school. Parents may have to deal with this. In general, however, parents should make writing materials available and respond to their child's interest, but not pressure the child. Some children may prefer larger writing utensils (chalk, markers, etc.) or may not do well with writing at all until they get older, based on their level of motor skill development.

- A good rule of thumb for baby talk would be always to respond and acknowledge the child's attempts at communication, while keeping your level of response just a step ahead developmentally in order to challenge the child and keep learning happening. At early stages of development, baby talk is fine, but once the child is capable of more advanced communication, it is important to keep on or ahead of her level.
- Television watching can be of concern, but as long as there is a good groundwork being laid in literacy, it should not be a major problem. It helps if a parent watches TV with the child so that they can discuss the program. There should be some cause for concern where the television is on all day long, every day, to the detriment of interaction with family and friends or other activities.
- Television is a major force in people's homes, especially those that have not been exposed to books very much. It can be used as a bridge to literacy, however, in that some childrens' shows also have books based on the program. This can be used to pique the child's interest. If parents do not find something that kids are interested in and want to do, then reading will be work rather than fun.
- Parents need to maintain quality, constant communication with their child. Whether it is television, books, or any literacy or play activity, it is the accompanying communication that provides the enrichment.

## Supplementary Focus Group #5

### 5.0 Focus Group to Review Draft Course

**Participants:** Seven individuals, most of whom work in the field of ABE, who were asked to review a draft of the *Eager to Learn* project.

**Introduction:** The purpose of this focus group was to obtain feedback as we headed into the final stages of the project. Participants focussed primarily on the practical concerns of implementing the course.

Many of the following suggestions are beyond the mandate of researchers, and could be considered recommendations to the Department of Education in terms of implementation. Many of the specific recommendations in terms of course content and layout have already been incorporated into the existing course handbook.

**Points Raised by Focus Group:** The following is a summary of specific themes presented in this focus group.

- It should be a Communication Skills course provided that the minimum required number of credits in this category be increased from six to eight. There are not enough required courses in this category as it is.
- The problem with offering it as a General Options (G.O.) course is that many students come into ABE with their "G.O.s maxed out." Therefore, many people who would benefit from this course would not be able to take it. "Putting it in G.O. might just put it on a shelf."
- It should be worth at least two credits.
- It should not be a required course.
- The course should be "sold" to instructors so that it will be offered more often.
- The course should be in-serviced to instructors first: "I'd want to be an expert at this before I got at it."
- Include an introductory module: what is family literacy?
- If a resource is not meant for participants but for facilitators, then this should be indicated.
- Keep modules short.
- Be careful not to get bogged down with learning disabilities. It should not be overemphasized, considering that this course is focussed more on pre-school than school-aged children, who may be too young to assess for many learning disabilities anyway.



## 6.0 Summary of Themes from all Five Focus Groups

### Focus Group #1

- The course should be flexible, so that it can be adjusted to the needs of the students.
- Use real-life experience whenever possible rather than “book learning”.
- Environmental print should be part of the course.
- Modelling of literate behaviour by parents is important.
- The course should be conducted in a group format, with individualized activities for those with special circumstances. If someone wanted to do the course individually, however, it is important that he or she be allowed to do so.
- Tests and assignments should be avoided in the interests of associating pleasure and enjoyment, rather than pressure and work, with reading.
- Continue getting feedback from learners to keep the course as relevant as possible to the real experiences of students.

### Focus Group #2

- Parents are interested in helping their children in any way they can. They realize the importance of literacy in child development and in later success at school.
- Parents will gain a sense of satisfaction by helping teach their children.
- Self-esteem must be a consideration throughout the course.

### Focus Group #3

- “Real-life” situations should be incorporated into the course whenever possible.
- It should be a requirement that this course be offered as a group, because learning about language comes from interaction.
- The “fun” aspect should always be emphasized.
- Advocacy and self-esteem should be threads throughout the course.
- Children should be given opportunities to enrich their daily lives with new and varied experiences whenever possible.
- Parents should have an understanding of the basic developmental needs and characteristics of children at different ages.

**Focus Group #4**

- Early immersion in literacy will allow a child to absorb the concept and the mechanics of reading before they go to school.
- Parents should understand that children require a flexible approach, in that each child will respond differently to any given approach.
- Children can gain pride and self-confidence from learning rhymes and songs.
- Parents should emphasize participation and fun rather than skills-building for pre-schoolers.
- Television should be explored by parents in terms of its effect on children and literacy development.
- Parents' priority should be to maintain constant, quality interaction with their children.

**Supplementary Focus Group #5**

- Should be in Communications Skills
- Should be two credits.
- Should not be required of all students.
- Should be in-serviced if the course is approved so that Communication Skills teachers will be ready and comfortable with offering the course.

