Parents Participating in Family Literacy Programs Show Positive Changes in Home Literacy Practices

This research brief explores changes in parents' knowledge and use of home literacy practices while participating in the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative. After participating in a family literacy program, parents demonstrated an increased understanding of the importance of reading to their children, they read to their children more often, and they reported using interactive reading strategies more often with their children. These findings are based on the initiative's Year 5-6 evaluation report, which can be found in full on the First 5 LA Web site: www.First5LA.org/Family-Lit-Eval.

Background

A home environment that is rich in literacy resources and where parents read to their children and engage them in literacy-related activities supports children's learning and school success. Not all children have equal access to these early literacy experiences at home though. In 2005, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 86 percent of U.S. children aged 3 to 5 years had a family member read to them at least three times per week. This figure was lower for poor children (78%), Hispanic children (72%), and children of mothers with less than a high school diploma (64%).

One of the primary goals of the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative's programs is to help parents recognize the importance of providing their children with language- and literacy-rich experiences at home, so that their children will be ready for school and prepared for educational success.

These family literacy programs, all located in Los Angeles County, specifically target at-risk families, serving predominantly low-income, Hispanic/Latino families with low parent education levels and children birth to age 5. In 2007-08, 784 families participated in all four components — adult education classes, parenting education classes, parent-child interactive literacy activities (PCILA), and early childhood education classes — of the family literacy programs funded through this initiative. This research brief focuses on outcomes specifically related to the parenting education and PCILA components. Although these components vary across programs, parenting education classes typically focus on strategies for parents to support their children's learning, and PCILA provides parents semi-structured one-on-one time with their children to practice these strategies.


Studying Parent Outcomes for the Initiative

To measure parent learning, parents participating in the family literacy programs were surveyed by program staff at the beginning and end of the 2007-08 program year. Their attendance in each of the four components was also recorded during this period. Programs were required to survey all participating parents when they enrolled in the program and again at the end of the year; 577 parents responded to the survey at the beginning and end of the year in 2007-08.\(^3\) These data were used to characterize changes in home literacy knowledge and practices over time. We also linked individual parents’ level of participation (hours of attendance in each component) to their level of change on these outcomes to determine if greater participation was associated with greater change.

Evidence of Parent Learning

Results from the parent survey suggest that parent beliefs and practices changed over the course of the 2007-08 program year, reflecting increased knowledge of the importance of and use of home literacy practices to support their children’s learning.

First, parents showed a greater understanding of the importance of reading to their children after participating in the family literacy program (Figure 1). For example, more parents reported following a regular reading routine with their children at the end of the year (68%) compared to the beginning (53%), indicating an increase in parents’ recognition of the importance of integrating reading activities into the daily routine. Additionally, we find evidence that parents have learned about the importance of reading to children at an early age. Although many parents reported at the beginning of the year (80%) that they believe that the best time to begin reading to a child is during the child’s first year of life, still more parents reported holding this belief at the end of the program year (86%).

Parents also reported having better access to literacy materials in their homes (Figure 2), thus providing more opportunities for children’s literacy experiences. For example, at the end of the program year, more parents (72%) reported having more than 25 children’s books in their home, compared to the beginning of the year (56%). There was also an increase in parents’ use of the library to provide additional reading materials for their children — at the beginning of the year, 62 percent reported visiting the library to borrow children’s books at least monthly; 77 percent reported doing so at the end of the year.

\(^3\) Of these 577, 493 participated in at least 50 hours of parenting education + PCILA over the course of the year, the minimum amount required for inclusion in the analyses that follow.

\(^4\) It should be noted that all outcomes discussed here are based on self report which may result in somewhat inflated reports of positive parenting behaviors. However, we focus on change over time within individuals, which minimizes the impact of potentially inflated self ratings.
In addition to recognizing the importance of reading and having access to children's books, parents also reported reading to their children more frequently by the end of the program year (Figure 3). Specifically, the percentage of parents reporting reading to their children daily increased from 49 percent to 58 percent. Even more parents reported reading at least three times per week. Whereas on a national level, only 78 percent of poor children and 64 percent of children with mothers without a high school diploma have parents who read to them at least three times per week (noted on page 1), after one year of participation in the program, 88 percent of family literacy parents (who also have low income and low education levels on average) reported reading to their children at least three times a week (data not shown).

Literacy is more than just reading; and parent engagement in other language- and literacy-related activities with their children also increased over time for family literacy participants (Figure 4). For example, at the end of the program year, more parents reported telling their children stories regularly (52%) compared to at the beginning of the year (41%). Parents were also more likely by the end of the year to report helping their children learn about the letters of the alphabet by the end of the year — 78 percent of parents reported regularly talking to their children about letters, for example by pointing out letters on signs or in books, compared to 67 percent at the beginning of the year.

Parenting Classes and PCILA Support Different Aspects of Parent Learning

As noted at the beginning of this brief, parents in family literacy programs participate in both parenting education classes and parent-child interactive literacy activities (PCILA). Topics covered in parenting classes vary across programs, but they often address stages of children's development, discipline techniques, and other topics such as nutrition. PCILA is a time set aside during the week for parents to directly engage with their children. PCILA takes different forms at different programs, but it typically involves parents working one-on-one with their children on activities designed by the teacher or that children choose themselves. This time provides an opportunity for parents to practice the skills they are learning in parenting class and receive feedback and coaching from a parent educator or early childhood education teacher.

Although all parents participated in both parenting education and PCILA, in 2007-08 there was some variation in the number of hours parents participated in each component. This enabled an examination of the relationship between changes in parent knowledge and behavior and attendance in each of these components individually.
As shown in Table 1, more time spent in parenting classes is associated with changes in parent knowledge — specifically, recognizing the importance of reading to children early and following a routine for reading. Greater participation in parenting education classes is also associated with greater access to children’s books at home. More time spent in PCILA was also associated with increased parent knowledge, as well as changes in actual home literacy practices — that is, more visits to the library, increased frequency of parent-child reading, increased duration of parent-child reading, increased frequency of telling children stories, talking more about letters of the alphabet, and asking children to make predictions while reading.

Thus, it appears that while participation in parenting education classes is associated with improvements in parent knowledge and the availability of children’s books at home — the basic building blocks for positive home literacy practices — greater participation in PCILA is associated with changes in actual parent behaviors that support children’s language and literacy development.

Summary

Results from the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative evaluation suggest that parents participating in family literacy programs funded by First 5 LA are learning to better support their children’s learning and development, ultimately supporting later school success. Specifically, results indicate that, compared to the beginning of the year, by the end of the year, more parents in family literacy programs reported the following:

- A recognition of the importance of reading, by reporting the use of a regular routine for reading (68% compared to 53%) and the belief that it is best to begin reading to children in their first year (80% compared to 80%).
- Regular access to children’s literacy resources, including having more than 25 children’s books at home (72% compared to 50%), and monthly visits to the library to borrow children’s books (77% compared to 62%).
- Reading to their children daily (58% compared to 49%) and for more than 10 minutes per day (75% compared to 63%).
- Engaging their children in a variety of language and literacy activities, such as talking to their children about letters of the alphabet at least three times per week (78% compared to 67%) and telling their children stories at least three times per week (52% compared to 41%).

In addition, there is evidence that participation in parenting education classes and PCILA support different aspects of parent learning. Specifically, more time spent in parenting classes was associated with an increase in parent knowledge and access to literacy resources, and more time in PCILA was associated with an increase in parent knowledge and access to literacy resources as well as increases in home literacy practices supportive of their children’s learning.

These results point to the potential benefits of families’ participation in the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative. Moreover, there appear to be different benefits for parents associated with participation in each of the parenting components. The changes in parent home literacy behaviors associated with greater participation in PCILA highlights the importance of incorporating this unique family literacy component. This hands-on learning lab provides parents with the opportunity to practice what they are learning with their own children in an encouraging and supportive environment, and this, in turn, appears to better enhance their early literacy-related practices in the home. The evaluation will continue to examine parent learning this year, with a focus on longer-term changes in parenting practices through a follow-up parent survey for Family Literacy Initiative alumni. A final report will be submitted in the fall of 2010.