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## ABSTRACT

Designing and delivering literacy programs that benefit both parents (or other family members) and children makes sense. But do family literacy programs really work? And if so, who benefits? The concept of family literacy is firmly rooted in a substantial research base from several disciplines, including adult literacy, emergent literacy, child development, and systems analysis. A review of literature from each of these disciplines showed that family literacy programs do work and that at least the following four groups benefit: children, parents, families as units, and the larger society. Some of the benefits include the following: (1) children's achievement in school, reading achievement, social skills, mathematics and science, health, and confidence improves; (2) parents are more likely to persist in family literacy programs than in other types of adult literacy programs, and their reading, writing, and parenting skills increase; (3) families learn to value education, become more involved in schools, become emotionally closer, and build foundations for lifelong learning; and (4) family literacy programs affect nutrition and health, teen parenting, joblessness, and social alienation programs positively. (Contains 85 references.) (KC)

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# Family Literacy Programs: Who Benefits?



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Designing and delivering literacy programs that benefit both parents (or other family members) and children makes sense. But do family literacy programs really work? And if so, who benefits? School administrators, community leaders, and funding agents want to know the answers to these questions before deciding to support family literacy programs.

The concept of family literacy is firmly rooted in a substantial research base from several disciplines, including adult literacy, emergent literacy, child development, and systems analysis. We reviewed research from each of these disciplines to find research-based answers to questions about the benefits of family literacy. The results are summarized below. In brief, the results show that family literacy programs do work and that at least four groups benefit: children, parents, families as units, and the larger society. [Note: The numbers following statements refer to the research studies listed in the bibliography. This is an update and revision of our 3/94 and 4/97 documents by the same name.]

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## **CHILDREN BENEFIT** **FROM FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS**

- Children's achievement in school improves (1, 5, 16, 19, 33, 34, 36, 37, 41, 63, 64, 75, 76, 77, 83). One review of 53 studies showed, beyond dispute, that student achievement results from increased parent involvement in education (33).
- Children attend school more regularly and are more likely to complete their educations (16, 36, 47, 58, 59, 63). This has been a persistent finding for more than 30 years.
- Children's general knowledge, including that measured by intelligence tests, improves (5, 34, 48, 63, 64, 73). One major research review found that the learning environment in the home accounts for more than half the variance in children's IQ scores (48).
- Children's oral language development accelerates (11, 63, 69, 74, 76, 80). Reading aloud to children is the single most effective parent practice for enhancing language and literacy development (30).
- Children's overall reading achievement improves (7, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, 24, 34, 35, 42, 43, 50, 58, 60, 69, 71, 79, 80). One study of more than 38,000 children found that those who reported home environments that fostered reading had higher reading achievement (24).
- Children's reading vocabulary improves (11, 69, 73, 80). Even Start children, for example, gain at double the expected rate on a standardized vocabulary measure (73).
- Children's decoding ability improves (29, 51, 63, 66). They become more able to recognize unknown words in print.
- Children's comprehension improves (7, 29, 51, 63, 82). These separate factors—vocabulary, decoding, and comprehension—combine to support overall achievement in reading.
- Children's writing improves (20, 31, 69, 78, 80).
- Children's math (20, 58) and science (61) achievement improve. Gains in these 3 areas—writing, math, and science—are particularly impressive because so few family literacy programs address these subjects.
- Children's social skills, self-esteem, and attitudes toward school improve (4, 7, 26, 43, 46, 50, 58, 84). All these have the potential to support children throughout their lives.
- Children are healthier (28, 46, 68). Aside from its general importance, good health is related to higher achievement in school.
- ESL children and their parents learn English (7, 17, 38, 40).
- Children's understanding of print (forms and functions) grows (66).
- Children gain confidence and independence as literate people (7).
- Children's motivation to read increases (7).
- Young children's phonological sensitivity increases (9).



## **PARENTS BENEFIT** **FROM FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS**

- Parents are far more likely to persist in family literacy programs than in other types of adult literacy programs. Those who persist have more opportunity to learn (2, 3, 30, 32, 46, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 62, 63, 64, 81, 85).
- Parents' attitudes about education improve; the value they perceive in education increases (2, 22, 53, 57, 64, 73, 77).
- Parents' reading achievement increases (20, 30, 40, 54, 62, 64, 84, 85). This finding, which is one of the most persistent in the research, also applies to English as a Second Language (ESL) parents (7, 17, 38, 40).
- Parents' writing ability improves (20, 30, 50, 63). More research needs to be conducted in this area, but preliminary results are very promising.
- Parents' math (20, 63) and science (61) knowledge increases. This is especially true when family literacy programs include focus on these areas.
- Parents' knowledge about parenting options and child development increases (30, 40, 63, 64, 85). For example, parents in one project became more confident about their abilities to foster their children's positive development (85).
- Parents enhance their employment status or job satisfaction (6, 46, 57, 63, 72, 73). Several large-scale studies, including the national Even Start evaluation, have shown this to be the case.



## **FAMILIES BENEFIT** **FROM FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS**

- Families learn to value education (4, 17, 26, 37, 46, 55, 57, 63, 65). This finding has emerged from studies of children, parents, and families.
- Families become more involved in schools (18, 22, 33, 58, 63, 65). Family involvement in schools leads to better achievement for children (33).
- Families become emotionally closer (4, 25, 30, 46, 49, 50, 61). Family literacy activities bring parents and children closer together.
- Families read more and engage in more literate behaviors at home (7, 25, 26, 27, 39, 40, 46, 52, 61, 63, 81).
- Families build foundations for lifelong learning (67).

## **SOCIETY BENEFITS** **FROM FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS**

Parents persist in family literacy programs, and persistence leads to literacy achievement, which in turn can break cycles of economic disadvantage. In particular, family literacy programs positively affect (or have the potential to affect) several major social problems:

- Nutrition and health problems (19, 28, 49, 77).
- Low school achievement and high school dropout rates (6, 30, 57).
- Teen parenting (6, 44, 57).
- Joblessness and welfare dependency (6, 19, 21, 57, 63, 72).
- Social alienation (1, 17, 53, 65).



**Family literacy programs do work, and their benefits are widespread and significant.** The existing body of research points to the enormous potential of high quality family literacy programs to influence the lives of parents and children positively through family support and education.

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