The centrality of the family to children’s literacy development: a review of research evidence

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Introduction

Family Reading Matters is an evidence-based model built on the following key research findings:

- **Families and parents are critical to children’s attainment.** Parental involvement in their child’s literacy practices positively affects children’s academic performance and is a more powerful force for academic success than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education.

- **The home is crucial.** Parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of young people through supporting their learning in the home rather than supporting activities in school.

- **Early intervention is vital.** The earlier parents become involved in their children’s literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effects. Children learn long before they enter formal education.

In the last three decades, several strands of research have produced compelling evidence justifying a focus on the family with a particular emphasis on early years in order to raise literacy standards. These research findings underpin Family Reading Matters.

Parents are a child’s first educator. A child’s family and home environment has a strong impact on his/her language and literacy development and educational achievement. This impact is stronger during the child’s early years but continues throughout their school years.

Many background variables affect the impact of the family and home environment (such as socio-economic status, level of parental education, family size, etc.) but parental attitudes and behaviour, especially parents’ involvement in home learning activities, can be crucial to children’s achievement and can overcome the influences of other factors.

Therefore, any national strategy aiming to improve literacy standards cannot be limited to formal educational settings, where children spend only a small proportion of their time. On the contrary, it needs to embrace the family as a whole and include parents as partners in their children’s education from the very beginning of their children’s lives. It should aim to raise parents’ awareness of the difference they can make and set up systems that offer constant encouragement and support according to individual requirements and needs.

This paper looks in detail at the range of research underpinning the FRM model.
The research evidence underpinning Family Reading Matters

Key findings of research are the following aspects:

1. **The significance of parental involvement and the home learning environment**

   - **Parents’ attitudes and support** for their children’s learning influence performance on literacy tests irrespective of socio-economic status (Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar and Plewis, 1988; Wells, 1987). Parental involvement in their child’s literacy practices positively affects children’s academic performance (Fan and Chen, 2001) and is a more powerful force for academic success than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004).

   - Parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of young people through supporting their learning in the home rather than supporting activities in the school. It is their support of learning within the home environment that makes the maximum difference to achievement (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

   - Longitudinal studies, such as Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart (1999) and Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart (2001) provide research evidence confirming that parental involvement in learning activities in the home is strongly associated with children’s better cognitive achievement, particularly in the early years (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

   - There is a **link between parents’ and children’s literacy levels:**
     - The interpretation of the ALSBU findings (1993) as evidence of intergenerational transfer of literacy skills, especially in relation to low levels of literacy, was challenged by Hannon (1999) through his key reinterpretation of the data. Hannon pointed out that in the ALSBU study the causal relationship between parents’ and children’s low literacy levels had been assumed and could not be deducted from the evidence collected.\(^1\)
     - Several recent studies found that parents with low literacy levels:
       - are less likely to help their children with reading and writing (Williams, Clemens, Oleinikova, and Tarvin, 2003; Parsons and Bynner, 2007);
       - feel less confident in doing so (Williams et al., 2003);
       - are less likely to have children who read for pleasure (Parsons and Bynner, 2007);
       - are more likely to have children with lower cognitive and language development levels (De Coulon, Meschi and Vignoles, 2008).\(^2\)

\(^1\) Hannon (1999) does not exclude the possibility that other studies might succeed in identifying children with low literacy achievement on the basis of family characteristics. What he contests are the following key points: (a) the tendency to believe that a significant correlation implies an acceptable method of identification; (b) the use of reported literacy difficulties to measure parents’ literacy levels, as very few parents tend to report having reading difficulties - in the ALSBU study only 107 children (out of a total of 2,617) had parents who admitted having reading difficulties; (c) the fact that, in the ALSBU study, data was misleadingly presented in a way likely to persuade that parental literacy difficulties accounted for much of children’s poor literacy achievement.

\(^2\) The study by De Coulon et al. (2003) was based on data from the British Cohort Survey. It found a positive and significant relationship between parents’ literacy skills and their children’s cognitive development, measured in terms of test results on the British Ability Scale Second Edition (which includes “naming vocabulary” for children aged 3-6; “word reading scale” and “spelling” for children aged 7-11). Such a positive relationship is more significant for parents with low literacy levels (below entry level 2). Quantile regressions on the data showed that the intergenerational transfer of basic skills is stronger for children with low levels of skills.
The context provided by parents and their consistent support might be more important than any transfer of skills [for their children’s literacy development] (Auerbach, 1989, p. 171).

**Parental education level has an impact** on young children’s cognitive and language development:
- Parents’ level of education correlates with the cognitive development of babies between 12 months and 27 months of age (Roberts, Bornstein, Slater and Barrett, 1999).
- Data obtained from a study of 16,000 three-year-old children, who were assessed within the framework of the British Millennium Cohort Study (George, Hansen and Schoon, 2007), indicated that children with the most educated parents (who had degree-level or above qualifications) were on average about 12-13 months ahead of those with the least educated parents (who had no qualifications)³.

**Parental attitudes and aspirations play a central role** in children’s language and literacy development:
- Parental aspirations and expectations on their children’s achievements have a strong impact on children’s school results (Fan and Chen, 2001; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).
- There is ample evidence that parents who promote the view that reading is a valuable and worthwhile activity have children who are motivated to read for pleasure (Baker and Scher, 2002).

2. **The significance of parental involvement in their child’s earliest years.**

- Research shows that the earlier parents become involved in their children’s literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille et al., 2004).
- A child from a deprived home has heard on average just 13 million words by the age of four, compared to 45 million in a more affluent home. What starts as a problem with vocabulary rapidly turns into a problem with reading, writing and comprehension, leading to poor exam results (Jim Knight, Minister for Schools)⁴.
- It is now accepted that the link between disadvantage and achievement is cumulative: when poorer children enter primary school, despite early indications of potential, they tend to fall behind (Feinstein, 2003, 2004). Consequently, the chances of breaking cycles of poverty and deprivation are considerably reduced as children get older (DfES, 2004).
- The lack of exposure to letters of the alphabet by school entry among low socio-economic status (SES) children delays their ability to acquire foundation-level literacy⁵ (Duncan and Seymour, 2000).
- The following early years skills have been identified as strong predictors of later achievement:

³ Children’s cognitive skills were measured using the Naming Vocabulary Subset of the British Ability Scales and the School Readiness Composite of the Revised Bracken Basic Concept Scale. The British Ability Scales is part of a set of cognitive assessments designed to gauge children’s expressive language skills. The child is asked to name a series of pictures of everyday items. The school readiness composite measures children’s readiness for formal education in terms of their knowledge of colours, letters, numbers, sizes, comparisons and shapes. The children are required to point as prompted by the interviewer (George et al., 2007).


⁵ Foundation-level literacy is a cognitive framework that consists of the recognition and storage of words and of the ability to decode words on the basis of spelling-sound correspondences.
• demonstrating letter identification before age five (Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar and Plewis, 1988)
• understanding narrative and story (Meek, 1982; Wells, 1987)
• understanding writing functions (Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Hall, 1987)
• knowing nursery rhymes (Maclean, Bryant and Bradley, 1987)
• demonstrating some phonological awareness (Goswami and Bryant, 1990; Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999)
• being capable of explanatory talk (Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992; Dickinson and Beals, 1994).

• Early intervention is crucial “because it is in families that learning begins and it is too late if we wait until children start schools to become partners in their learning” (Literacy changes lives, 2006, p.34).

• The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study found that what parents and carers do with their young children makes a real difference to the children’s development and is more important than who parents are (i.e. than their socio-economic status or educational level). There are a range of activities that parents undertake with pre-school children which have a positive effect on their development in that they engage and stretch the child’s mind. For example, reading with the child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet and numbers, taking children on visits and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home, were all associated with higher intellectual and social/behavioural scores. These activities could also be viewed as ‘protective’ factors in reducing the incidence of special educational needs because children whose parents engaged regularly in home learning activities were less likely to be at risk for special educational needs (Sylva et al., 2004).

• Early stimulation is essential for later reading skills. In cases of severe disadvantage, pre-school environments that alter or compensate for learning poor environments in the home can help prevent learning difficulties (Wasik and Karweit, 1994).

• Parents reading to babies and young children has a strong impact on children’s language and literacy development:
  o Parental involvement in their child’s reading has been found to be the most important determinant of language and emergent literacy (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini, 1995).
  o Children who are read to at an early age tend to display greater interest in reading at a later age (Arnold and Whitehurst, 1994).
  o Story reading at home enhances children’s language comprehension and expressive language skills (Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992).
  o Oral language developed from parent/child reading predicts later writing development (Crain-Thoreson, Bloomfield, Anthony, Bacon, Phillips and Samwel, 1999).
  o Parents’ reading to their children in the pre-school years is regarded as an important predictor of literacy achievement (Weinberger, 1996). This parental activity is associated with strong evidence of benefits for children such as language growth, reading achievement and writing (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini, 1995; Brooks, 2000), the enhancement of children’s language comprehension and expressive language skills, listening and speaking skills, later enjoyment of books and reading, understanding narrative and story (Wells, 1987; Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992; Weinberger, 1996), and precocious reading in young children (Clark, 1976; Stainthorp and Hughes, 1999).
  o The Effective Provision for Pre-school Education (EPPE) study found that the frequency with which parents reported reading to their children and the frequency of library visits had a significant impact on children's cognitive development at pre-school entry regardless of socio-economic status (Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, and Elliot, 2002).
- Parents who introduce their babies to books give them a head start in school and an advantage over their peers throughout primary school (Wade and Moore, 2000).

- **Parental support continues to play a crucial role throughout children’s and young people’s lives:**
  - Although parental involvement has the greatest effect in the early years, its importance to children’s educational and literacy outcomes continues into the teenage and even adult years (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). For example, Feinstein and Symons (1999) found that parental interest in their child’s education was the single most powerful predictor of achievement at age 16.
  - Children spend 15 per cent of their lives from age five to 16 in school and 85 per cent with their families, parents and communities (Literacy changes lives, 2006, p.34).
  - Although adolescents desire independence and time with their peers, they continue to rely on guidance from parents and other adults (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006).
Appendix A: The research background – a brief history of recent developments

Why should we focus on supporting literacy in the home? The rationale for Family Reading Matters can be found in studies in the fields of literacy, language, child development and education in the last few decades (cf. Hannon, Brooks, and Bird, 2007).

Large-scale research studies in both the USA and the UK (e.g. Applebee, Langer and Mullis, 1988; Davie, Butler and Goldstein, 1972) showed the importance of home and family factors (such as the quantity and quality of literacy material in the home and the family social class) in children’s school literacy achievement and investigated the extent and nature of home family literacy practices (Taylor, 1983; Heath, 1983; Hannon and James, 1990; Hirst, 1998).

Studies on parental involvement found that virtually all parents across all social groups do get involved in their children’s learning, at least to some extent (Hannon and James, 1990), and that for disadvantaged groups parental involvement is strongly associated with literacy achievement (Hannon, 1987).

Research on emergent literacy in the 1980s highlighted the importance of pre-school literacy knowledge that children acquire in the family. Such knowledge, which had been previously overlooked, was found to have a strong impact on children’s achievement once they start formal education (see e.g. Heath, 1982, 1983; Goodman, 1980; Wells, 1987).

Findings on emergent literacy in turn lead to a re-evaluation of home learning. Building on such findings, Hannon (1995, 1998) identified ways in which home learning can be more powerful than school learning. Among the advantages of home learning over school learning are that the former:

- is shaped by immediate interests and needs
- is spontaneous and therefore effortless
- is a response to real rather than contrived problems
- is flexible in duration
- has a high adult-child ratio while allowing a teaching role for younger family members.

Hannon also suggested that families can provide children with:

- O - opportunities for literacy activities
- R - recognition of early literacy achievement
- I - interaction with more proficient literacy users
- M - models of language use.

The ORIM framework can be successfully used by programmes and initiatives that support literacy in the home (cf. Pugh, 1996).
References


