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# Chipping Away at the Monolith: Dispelling the Myth of Father Noninvolvement in Children's Early Literacy Development

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Robert W. Ortiz

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*Current research stresses the importance of parent involvement in their children's academic development. Parents reading and writing with their young children is shown to prepare them for the benefits of formal education. Studies completed on parent participation in early literacy activities have tended to look at mothers' role. Few researchers have investigated the contributions fathers have made. The results of a study completed on father-child early literacy practices are presented. Fathers reported engaging in reading and writing activities with their children for three reasons: To prepare their children for school, to bond with their children, and to assist their children in language skill development. Recommendations are provided on how to encourage fathers to participate in early literacy practices.*

A concern in the field of family preservation is the social workers' role in assisting parents with their children's academic development, while upholding the uniqueness, dignity, and essential role that families play in the health and well being of each member (Ronnau & Sallee, 1993). With the many obstacles that parents face in the course of providing support to their children's daily needs (Meezan & McCroskey, 1996), requests from parents for strategies and techniques they can use to help their children in school often go unanswered. Mothers and fathers can often be assisted in recognizing the communication and social factors that organize the everyday lives of each family member, thus affecting their involvement in children's academic performance.

Because literacy skills are essential components of academic success, researchers have isolated early literacy factors that are associated with reading achievement, such as children having the opportunity to see that literacy can be functional, and parents modeling literacy activities (Mason, 1977, 1992; Teale, 1986; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). As crucial as early literacy experiences are for academic success, fathers' role in this area has not been thoroughly examined. Research on parent-child early literacy development has generally focused on the contributions mothers have made (National Academy of Sciences, 1982; Dickinson, De Temple, & Smith, 1992; Ninio, 1980, 1983; Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, & Brody, 1990; Williams, 1991). A review of the history, dimensions, and determinants of paternal involvement is necessary for understanding the degree fathers will interact with their children.

### Father Involvement Through the Decades

Lamb (1987b) states that to understand the contemporary concern with fatherhood and its impact on children, it is important to examine the changes in the conceptualization of paternal roles that have taken place. Father as “moral teacher” was the prevalent concept during colonial times, followed by “breadwinner,” “sex-role model,” and currently the new “nurturant” father. These phases, adds Lamb, are crucial because in a pluralistic society like ours, “various conceptions of the father’s role coexist” (p.6). Recognizing that fathers fill many roles helps to place “fathering” in multicontext situations, which identifies the various things fathers will do for their children (e.g., bread-winning, sex-role modeling, moral guidance, emotional support, and shared reading).

Other researchers (La Rossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, & Jaret, 1991) state that the image of fathers as competent caretakers and socializing agents of their children has not shifted gradually “for the better,” as is often assumed. Instead, the image of the American father has changed not once but at least twice during the 20th century. The current (1970s-1990s) depiction of father as “involved and nurturant” was witnessed before during the 1930s and early 1940s, when, among other socio-historical factors, similarities in birth rates, rising labor force participation of mothers, and increased advocacy of egalitarianism had occurred. Interspersed between these periods, fathers as “incompetent” and “bumbling” parents were often prevalent themes.

### Dimensions of Father Involvement

Father involvement in the family is not a unidimensional construct (Volling & Belsky, 1991; Belsky & Volling, 1987). Lamb (1986) identified three types of paternal involvement. The first, labeled interaction/engagement, includes time that the father spends in direct one-on-one interaction with his child. The second type, accessibility, includes time spent in child-related housework or time spent in proximity to the child, but does not include actual interaction. The third type, responsibility, refers to the extent to which the father takes responsibility for child care and makes arrangements for such things as baby-sitters, doctor’s appointments, and day care services.

### Determinants of Father Involvement

Researchers have examined father involvement with their children’s moral, physical, and emotional development. Factors that have been found to contribute to father-child relationships have been isolated. These variables include child, father, community, and familial characteristics.

**Child Characteristics.** The child's age, for example, has been shown to be related to differential paternal involvement. Adolescence is often characterized as a "conflict" period between parent and child as they prepare themselves for transition to adult roles. The age of siblings, therefore, can impact the parent-child relationship, with older children being less close to fathers (Davis, 1974; Roberts, Block, & Block, 1984; Jacob, 1974; Steinberg, 1981).

Gender of the child may influence within-family variability (Morgan, Lye, & Condran, 1988). Fathers may be seen as having an advantage in teaching sons sex-typed behavior, thus, initiating greater involvement with male siblings than with daughters. Various studies have shown the importance of gender composition in family research (Morgan et al., 1988; Powell & Steelman, 1989; Harris & Morgan, 1991), demonstrating that fathers assumed more active roles in large families that included one or more boys.

Other studies show that fathers with more offspring spend somewhat more time with their children (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Elder & Bowerman, 1963; Nock & Kingston, 1988). Blake (1989) argues, though, that the "dilution" theory may account for reduced involvement of fathers in larger families because of the spreading thinly of "parents' time, emotional and physical energy, attention, and ability to interact with children as individuals" (p.11).

Another factor found to impact father involvement is sibling position. First and second born children may temporarily benefit from less expenditure of parental energies because of the small family size (Zajonc, 1976). Finally, Sirignano and Lachman (1985) found that fathers with infants characterized as having difficult temperaments experienced a decrease in their sense of efficacy and control as parents.

**Father Characteristics.** Several studies indicate that men demonstrating androgynous tendencies (i.e., male and female characteristics) are more involved with their children than fathers with traditional sex-role orientations (DeFrain, 1979; Feldman, Nash & Aschenbrenner, 1983; Palkovitz, 1984; Russell, 1978). On a similar note, Levy-Shiff & Israelashvili (1988) suggest that fathers described as affiliative, caring, and nurturant appear more playful with their children.

Men with more child-centered attitudes participate more in child care. In addition, men with higher self-esteem before the birth of the baby were more satisfied with the role of care giving than fathers with lower self-esteem, who reported greater stress in their parenting role (Cowan & Cowan, 1987).

Heath (1976) found that fathers displaying greater personality integration, having less depression and anxiety, and considering themselves independent and stable persons were also more affectionate and emotionally involved with their children. Lastly, Mondell and Tyler

(1981) observed that fathers with an internal locus of control (i.e., to think of oneself as responsible for one's own behavior), high levels of interpersonal trust, and an active coping style displayed higher levels of warmth, acceptance, and helpfulness, and lower levels of disapproval during interaction with their preschool children.

**Community Characteristics.** Other researchers have looked at external-contextual influences as possible contributors to increased father involvement with their children. In sum, increasing labor force participation of mothers, social support for the women's movement, and community acceptance of role-sharing between parents are among factors felt to positively impact father-child relationship (Haas, 1982; Radin, 1981; Sagi, 1982; Russell & Radin, 1983; Lamb, 1987a; La Rossa et al, 1991; Pleck, 1985).

**Familial Characteristics.** Familial factors found to affect differential paternal involvement include parents' socioeconomic status, mother's and father's employment situation, the degree of marital harmony, and education of the parents (Mason, Czajka, & Arber, 1976; Nock & Kingston, 1988; Hill & Stafford, 1980; Russell, 1986; Harris & Morgan, 1991; Feldman, Nash, & Aschenbrenner, 1983). Although it can be shown that multiple domains of influence impact the extent and quality of father-child interactions, researchers (Belsky, 1984; Volling & Belsky, 1991) feel that the personality or psychological well-being of the father is probably the most influential determinant of a father's parenting style, since it plays a key role in determining the interpersonal environment of the other relationships he forms with his family and social contacts.

### Father-Child Interaction Studies

There have emerged three bodies of literature on paternal influences on child development: correlational strategies; the effects of father absence; and the impact of highly involved fathers (Lamb, 1987b). Briefly, correlational strategies are concerned with relationships between paternal and filial characteristics. Since most of these types of studies were completed during the 1940s and 1950s, fathers as sex-role models was considered most important. Researchers (Mussen & Rutherford, 1963; Payne & Mussen, 1956; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957) found that as far as paternal influences on sex-role development are concerned, characteristics of the father (e.g., masculinity) were much less important formatively than his warmth, and the closeness and nature of his relationship with his child. Similar findings were obtained in studies concerned with paternal influences on achievement (Radin, 1981), and psychosocial adjustment (Billar, 1971; Lamb, 1981); that is, paternal warmth and closeness is advantageous, whereas paternal masculinity is irrelevant. Father-absence research, the comparison of behavior and personalities of children raised with and without fathers, suggests that households without fathers may be harmful to the child's development not necessarily because a sex-role model is absent, but because many aspects of the father's role (e.g.,

economic, social, emotional, etc.) go unfilled or inappropriately filled (Maccoby, 1977; Glick & Norton, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Rutter, 1973, 1979; Hess & Camara, 1979). Lastly, studies on increased paternal involvement, as exemplified by fathers who either share in or take primary responsibility for child care (Lamb, Pleck, & Levine, 1985; Russell, 1983, 1986; Radin & Russell, 1983; Hochschild, 1990), suggests that children with highly involved fathers are characterized by increased cognitive competence, increased empathy, less sex-stereotyped beliefs, and a more internal locus of control (Pruett, 1983; Radin, 1982; Radin & Sagi, 1982; Sagi, 1982; Pederson, Rubinstein, & Yarrow, 1979; Ninio & Rinott, 1988).

### **Father Involvement as an Accommodated Activity**

It is equally important to recognize that varied contexts may produce different outcomes in parent-child interactions. Wachs and Chan (1986) note, in their discussion of the specificity of environmental influences on behavioral development, that certain parent-child relations and child development may hold in some environmental settings but not in others. In the case of joint father-child activities, under specific contextual and socio-cultural conditions, some determinants may have more of an influence than others in predicting father participation in these events. It may be that certain environmental and interpersonal determinants (e.g., values and beliefs) predict father involvement with his child much better than others. Parent-child literacy interactions, for example, may be the result of a number of “accommodated” factors between family members and environmental variables.

“Accommodation” is defined as the “process of creating a meaningful, sustainable routine of everyday life, one that is also congruent with the abilities, ages and status of family members” (Weisner, Garnier, & Loucky, in press, p.1). For example, a father who believes that taking his six-year-old daughter to the library will help develop and refine her literacy skills, may also require the cooperation of his wife to care for other children, and who also views these activities as an important prerequisite for school success. These mutual arrangements may be the result of parental values that engender planned activities. The premise is that families are proactive as well as reactive bodies, seeking through various “accommodations” to mitigate the impact of environmental factors on daily life (Gallimore, Weisner, Guthrie, Bernheimer, & Nihira, in press; Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989). As a result of these dynamic processes, a child’s learning experience is viewed to be a product of both environmental forces and family proactivity on achieving set familial goals.

Given this framework on which interactive relationships are built, it is suggested that “accommodation” processes influence parents’ involvement with their children’s development (Weisner, Garnier, & Loucky, in press; Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Gallimore, Weisner, Guthrie, Bernheimer, & Nihira, in press). Weisner et al. (in press), in a

longitudinal study, compared—among other family related factors—task sharing and father participation in 207 families. They found that fathers' involvement with household and child care duties is not contingent on one single factor, such as ideological commitment, type of household, or ecological adaptation, but instead is influenced by the overall daily routines that families have established based on a varied set of values and practices. Weisner et al., concluded that, to a large extent, the personnel available to do tasks in the home greatly influences who is doing those tasks. Gallimore et al. (1989), state that the participation of family members in various child care activities may occur because it serves familial purposes in the overall schema of task assignments and performance. "Accommodation," therefore, requires that family members reorganize their plans, resources, constraints, time availability, goals and dreams to establish a daily routine that is meaningful, and sustainable, over time.

### Fathers and Child Care Responsibilities

Research on father-child relationships suggests an increased involvement of fathers, particularly in the child care areas (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987). There is a growing body of research on the nature and extent of paternal involvement (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Mackey, 1985; Pleck, 1983; Radin & Goldsmith, 1985; Russell, 1982), the characteristics of the father and child interaction (Lamb, 1981; Pedersen, 1980), and the potential impact (direct and indirect) of fathers on their children's development (Biller, 1982; Lamb, 1981; Lamb, Pleck, & Levine, 1985; Parke, 1981).

Increasingly, research in other countries is also challenging traditional father stereotypes. Works by Mirandé (1979) and Bronstein (1984) in Mexico contradict traditional beliefs of Mexican fathers as aloof and authoritarian. Jackson's (1987) research in Great Britain suggests that cultural prohibitions against the expression of tender feelings and nurturant behavior by men appears to be weakening rapidly. Hwang (1987) demonstrates the changing nature of the father's role in Swedish society. Russell (1983) shows that, although the prevalent pattern of Australian fathers is one of a traditional type, an increasingly significant amount of fathers are highly involved in child care. Ho and Kang (1984) found that, although there is a strong link with the past, younger Chinese fathers in Hong Kong show a distinct departure from the traditional authoritarian mode of child rearing and are more involved in child rearing. And, in Ireland, Nugent (1991) demonstrates the increasing number of fathers who are substantially involved in infant care-taking.

In the United States, fathers' involvement in their children's development has also experienced a rapid growth. Researchers maintain that public and academic interest in the father role is warranted given the fact that paternal participation may affect the well-being of the family (Lamb, 1986; Lamb, Pleck, & Levine, 1987). Despite the existing studies on father's involvement in their children's development across ethnic and cultural groups, there is a

noticeable lack of research in the area of their participation and contribution to early literacy experiences.

### Fathers and Early Literacy Practices

Because of the traditional roles mothers have played within the context of the family unit and their involvement in the education of young children, there is a general tendency to perceive them as having a major impact on children's early literacy and language development (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). Even as late as the 1970s, when the inclination was for professionals, educators, and researchers to view both parents as "learners and teachers" of their children, the literature of this period contains almost no reference to the role of fathers in their children's early literacy and language development (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990).

Yet, despite the lack of research, some studies have looked at fathers' participation in early literacy development. In one of the earliest efforts to measure the influence of fathers on young children's reading achievement in elementary school, Durkin (1966) attempted to interview both parents regarding their reading patterns. Durkin found it extremely difficult in getting fathers to attend the interview sessions to discuss their role in early reading activities. Their absence at these meetings was often reported due to "being on the road," "working during the day and going to school at night," "spending long hours at the office," and "having two jobs." This phenomenon prompted Durkin to bring to mind the term, "the vanishing American father," referred to in so many titles of popular magazines at the time. Durkin did find that the few fathers who were interviewed tended to have some positive influence over their children's early reading achievement.

Taylor (1983), in looking at the ways that parents shared literacy experiences with their young children, found that through the interplay of the personal biographies and educative styles of the fathers, comparable childhood literacy experiences were mediated in different ways. That is, although some fathers had very similar literacy experiences as children, these same fathers had evolved different styles in working with their own children—an idiosyncratic process that Taylor feels can result in varied reading experiences for individual children.

Reese, Goldenberg, Loucky, & Gallimore (1989) found, in a sample of families, that parents who assisted with their children's literacy development tended to have more education than those who did not. Reese (1992), in examining the reading achievement of fifth grade students, found a family history of literacy shared by mothers and fathers. Other studies show an array of literacy practices engaged in by both parents (Gallimore & Goldenberg, in press; Goldenberg, 1987, 1984; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Ortiz, 1992). The list of activities observed in these homes include literacy for entertainment, daily living, general information, religion, and others beyond activities involving books or schooling per se.

Additional findings suggest that paternal early literacy activities range from fathers who rarely read with their children to those who establish consistent reading and writing patterns (Ortiz, 1992; Laosa, 1982; Reese, Gallimore, Balzano, & Goldenberg, in press). For example, Laosa (1982), in examining linkages between parental schooling and behavior towards their children, states that although spending less time in early literacy practices than their spouses, Hispanic fathers often read with their children on a regular basis. Laosa attributed parent-child early literacy practices to increased years of parents' formal education.

Ortiz (1996) investigated father-child early literacy patterns in a sample of multigenerational Mexican American families. The range of paternal involvement in these activities varied. Demographic variables, such as generation status, education, and income had a minimal relationship with joint early reading and writing events. Instead, early literacy practices were found to be associated with marital relationships, in that, fathers who "shared" child care duties with their spouses, as opposed to "dividing" these tasks, were more likely to engage in literacy interactions with their children. Finally, a study (Gallimore, Reese, Balzano, Benson, & Goldenberg, 1991) on immigrant Mexican families suggests that a positive relationship exists between the amount of literacy fathers engage in and their children's scores on academic reading tests.

### A Current Look at Father-Child Reading Practices

The current study (Ortiz & Stile, 1996) on shared father-child early literacy practices has the following four-pronged purpose: (a) to describe the extent to which two *convenience samples* (Charles, 1995) of 47 Southern New Mexico fathers have been involved in early literacy activities with their young children, and to identify the types of these activities, (b) to describe recurring themes as to why fathers engaged in early literacy activities, (c) to describe three emergent levels of father-child literacy activities, and (d) to make recommendations designed to assist teachers who may wish to initiate and support literacy activities for children and fathers with whom they work.

### Participants

Cohort One (1995-96). Cohort One consisted of 20 fathers (N=20) who completed the authors' survey instrument regarding father-child literacy activities. These fathers had children currently enrolled in three preschool programs. These programs were Head Start (N=4), public school developmentally delayed (N=8), and a preschool for the gifted (N=8) housed at the local state university as a lab school. A total of 85 letters were sent home. All interviews were audio-taped.

**Cohort Two (1996-97).** Twenty-seven fathers (N=27) of preschool-aged children with developmental delays made up Cohort Two. A total of 149 letters were sent home. Of this total, 27 fathers responded. Unlike Cohort One, fathers from Cohort Two were not personally interviewed due to budget and time constraints. Instead, they were asked to respond to a brief six-item survey. Fathers were asked to complete the survey and return them to their children's teachers, where they were subsequently picked up by the researchers.

### Extent and Type of Involvement

**Extent.** Two cohorts of 47 fathers (Cohort One=20; Cohort Two=27) provided information over a two-year period regarding involvement in reading and writing activities with their young (3- and 4- year old) children. **Reading.** Sixty percent (N=12) of the fathers in Cohort One reported that they engaged in reading activities with their children at least *once a day*. Daily reading activities were reported by 26% (N=7) of the fathers in Cohort Two. Daily writing activities were reported by 15% of the fathers in both Cohorts One and Two (N=3; N=4, respectively).

**Writing.** On a weekly basis (i.e., fathers engaging in writing experiences with their children at least once a week), 40% (N=8) of the fathers in Cohort One reported joint reading activities. Weekly reading activities were reported by 60% (N=16) of the fathers in Cohort Two. Weekly writing activities were reported by 70% (N=14) of the fathers in Cohort One, and 23% (N=6) in Cohort Two.

**Type. Reading.** The fathers reported a variety of reading activities. For example, many of the fathers read story books to their children at night. Some fathers took advantage of environmental print found in their community by engaging their children in reading road signs, logos on the sides of buildings, and billboards. Others read TV ads, newspapers, and magazines. Many fathers read dictionaries, maps, phone-books, and manuals. One father read interactive children's stories found on the Internet.

**Writing.** Writing also involved varied experiences. Shared activities included spelling words and defining them, coloring letters, and making use of the chalkboard and computer paper as writing surfaces. Others worked on spelling names and tracing letters on sheets of school paper. One father reported that he helped his daughter spell words on the computer so that she could learn to recognize letters.

## Recurring Themes

Three themes surfaced regarding the rationale for fathers' participation in early literacy activity. First, the fathers wanted their children to be ready for school when they reached school-age and, therefore, were giving them a "head start" by fostering skill development in reading and writing. As one father put it, "He has to be ready for school—he just can't go in there cold!" Another expression of this theme was provided by the father who exclaimed, "Teachers can't do it all! Parents have to help."

A second frequently expressed theme was bonding or parent-child attachment. Many of the fathers engaged in early literacy with a desire to develop a closer relationship with their children. A typical expression of this theme was, "I enjoy just sitting there with him and being together with him reading."

A third theme was bilingual skill development. Typical of parents expressing this theme was the father whose primary language was not English. This father pointed out that he engaged in early literacy activities with his children in order "to teach them different languages." Other fathers felt that it was important that their children develop English literacy skills at an early age because of school reports that children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds began their formal education with few reading readiness skills. Figure 1 describes the proportion of fathers in Cohort One who expressed the three recurring themes.

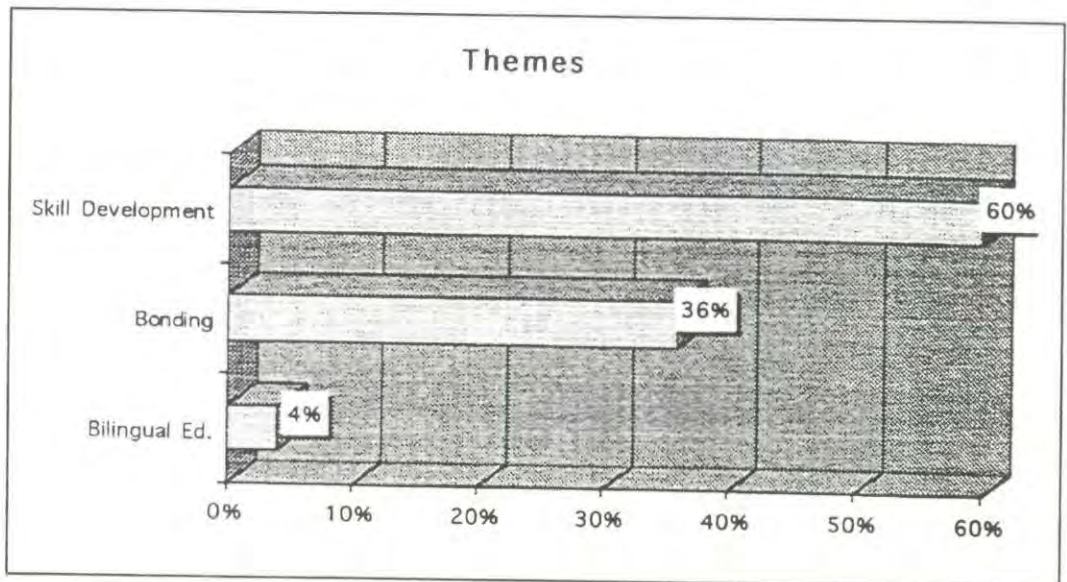


Figure 1. Recurring Themes for Cohort One

Themes for Cohort Two were found to be similar to Cohort One. The themes were obtained verbally from a small number of fathers at a workshop held during the 1996-97 school year. At that time, fathers were asked to state why they engaged in early reading and writing activities with their preschool-age children. Fathers' responses were audio- and video-taped.

### Three Levels of Father-Child Literacy Activity

Three levels of father-child literacy activity emerged from the studies (Ortiz, 1992, 1994, 1996). These levels are described in the next three subsections together with vignettes used to illustrate each level.

#### Level I

As Morrow (1997) has pointed out, it is no longer believed that literacy is something that develops overnight (e.g., suddenly at 75 months). Instead, there is research evidence to indicate that literacy begins in infancy when children begin to interact with others in their immediate environment. Given an underlying assumption that production and consumption of print is social interaction, Level I involvement is adult-child interaction in relation to emerging skills such as those found on the Personal-Social domain of the Denver II assessment protocol (Frakenburg, & Dodds, 1990). For example, "regards face" normally develops during the first month and "smiles spontaneously" by the end of the second month. The following vignette illustrates a Level I literacy activity that might take place when the child is two months old:

Two-month old Hanna was being held by her father while her mother was talking to a friend on the phone. Suddenly, Hanna began staring into her father's eyes. Hanna's father put his face close to Hanna and smiled. He said, "I love you Hanna—you are Daddy's little angel from Heaven." Hanna returned her Daddy's gaze and smiled spontaneously.

#### Level II

As in Level I activities, those at Level II are informal and spontaneous, and usually child-initiated. These activities may take place in the home (e.g., reading books aloud to children at bedtime) but are not limited to that setting. For example, typical Level II activities take place while the father-child dyad is traveling by car through the community as in the following vignette modified from Morrow (1997):

Drew was now four years old and loved traveling by car around town with his dad. As they drove by the mall on this morning, Drew spied the large

sign above a department store and said, "Look Daddy, I can read those letters on top of the store, M...A...C...Y...S. Those letters spell Sears!" Drew's dad said, "That was great reading—you got all the letters right. Now I'll read the sign—it says Macy's. This is another big store like Sears. You read to me like a big boy when you saw that sign."

Another example of a Level II type literacy activity is expressed by this father,

We'll be driving down the highway and Caira, who is five, will ask what the words say on a billboard that has a picture of a lobster. I turn to her and tell her, it says "Red Lobster Restaurant." she exclaims, 'that's how you spell lobster!'

This child now has an idea what the word "lobster" looks like because she has visually made a mental 'bookmark' of the spelling of the word and a picture of a lobster.

### Level III

These are structured adult-directed activities which often take the form of *direct teaching*. One typical example is helping young children learn their letters at home as part of a home-school partnership (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995). In the following vignette, Killian tells his preschool teacher about the direct instruction he received the previous last night from his dad. In Killian's class by prior arrangement with parents, the teacher sends home a book of the children's choosing once a week from the class library together with a journal in a zip-top plastic bag. The journal is a spiral notebook that contains written entries from the children and parents regarding the stories that are read together. The journals also contain short notes written back and forth between the teachers and family members.

Killian was four and enrolled in a gifted preschool class housed in a Sunday school classroom. During the morning snack, Killian told his teacher that he really liked the book *Where the Wild Things Are* that he had read with his dad last night. He then told his teacher, "I asked my dad to help me with my *m*'s and *n*'s so I could help write more in our journal. We pretended that we were in school and worked at the kitchen table. My dad wrote the letters down and then told me to look at them carefully before I copied them. You know what? I bet I could write them for you now. Would you like to see them?" Killian's teacher said, "yes, I'd love to see your letters—let's find a pencil and paper while the other children finish their snack."

Another father, as reported by Ortiz (1994), shares a similar story:

When driving to her grandma's house, my daughter will ask what street she (grandmother) lives on. I tell her to look for Pioneer Street and then ask her what letter does the word start with. I also ask that she try and spell the word. She will spell the word so that when we come to the street she recognizes the sign and lets me know we're there. I do this with other signs or places we go to.

Level III literacy may also be accomplished through modeling. The following father's comment illustrates the importance on having his child learn through this process:

Because I think that's the most important thing for William is to learn how to read. And I think one of the ways to do it is to read to him, so he learns to like it and pick-up a lot of information from reading. I'm a role model.

### Recommendations

As more social workers and family preservation consultants are employed within school districts, it becomes paramount that they assist families in understanding the importance of parent involvement in their children's education. The following recommendations are suggested in helping fathers and mothers participate in early literacy activities.

- It is never too early to begin reading to children. The benefits of very early book experiences include the following as outlined by Kupetz and Green (1997): helping infants focus their eyes and recognize objects, development of language, enhancement of listening skills, building sensory awareness, reinforcing basic concepts, stimulating the imagination, and extending experiences.
- Fathers should offer a *choice* of child-centered, hands-on literacy experiences that they are available to engage in with their children. This is because children learn best when they engage in activities that they enjoy rather than those that are at a relatively low-interest level.
- Start with informal and simple activities that may involve only one parent and the child, such as reading the weekly comic strip section or rented video box. A common misconception is that the entire family must read together to instill in young children the importance of learning to read. Although this indeed is one method of motivating children to read, some parents may find group reading activities uncomfortable, particularly in

families where reading occurs infrequently, where parents work late or off-shifts, or where households consist of a single parent.

- Fathers should take advantage of spontaneous and incidental reading activities that occur within and outside the home. Such activities include reading mail, TV guides, newspapers, magazines, labels, instructions, flyers, letters, and the Sunday funnies.
- Capitalize on environmental print. Children who are learning to read are often curious about familiar signs, logos, and billboards that they see on their way to school or the market. Fathers can read these signs to their children to help them understand that print not only has meaning but that it serves a function.
- Most important, be patient. Allow children to become comfortable in a world filled with print. Children constantly observe adults engage in activities they do not yet fully understand (i.e., reading and writing). As a result, they will ask many questions. Respond with answers at the child's level. Explain to children how print will serve *their* purpose and how they can interact with words in fun and interesting ways. It takes but a few seconds to help children make sense of print and text around them, and the rewards are lifelong.

### Summarization and Implications

Much of the research on parent-child early literacy experiences has tended to focus on mothers' contributions to their children's reading and writing development. Studies suggest an increase of father participation in their children's development, not only in the U.S. but in other countries as well (Russell & Radin, 1983; Lamb, 1976, 1987 a & b; Lewis & Weintraub, 1976; Radin & Russell, 1983). The effects of highly involved fathers seem to have a positive impact on children, such as achievement motivation, language and literacy competency, and cognitive improvement (Radin & Russell, 1983; Blanchard & Biller, 1971; Radin, 1976; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1991; Gallimore, Reese, Balzano, Bensen & Goldenberg, 1991). Moreover, there is evidence that fathers who are involved in early literacy practices tend to motivate children to read (Laosa, 1982; Ortiz, 1992; Ortiz & Stile, 1996).

The implications of fathers as "educators" of their young children in early literacy development can be considered from three perspectives. First, school-based programs addressing early literacy skill building may wish to include strategies in assisting fathers help their young children improve reading and writing skills. Teachers can assist fathers in identifying activities to involve their children in learning experiences, such as sentence

construction, spelling, word recognition, and writing techniques. Fathers can also develop fun and interesting ways to help their children understand the connection that exists between printed words and the words' functions. Fathers can serve as literacy role models and provide the motivation and encouragement to read. They can be encouraged not only to attend PTO, open house, and other school-related functions but to share the significance of these activities by reading with their children upcoming events through letters, flyers, and memoranda sent home by the school.

Second, continual research is needed in father-child early literacy practices. Few data have been gathered on the contributions fathers make in this area. Factors that have been found to affect father involvement in their children's development include socioeconomic status, employment status, marital harmony, and education of parents. Additional research will help shed light on whether these familial variables impact father-child shared early literacy practices as well.

Lastly, with fathers as active participants in early literacy practices, children can view both parents as resources and "meaning makers" of their environment. For many parents, engaging in literacy is an everyday experience. However, parents may not realize the benefits that are associated with reading and writing in the presence of their children. In demonstrating and discussing the meaning in which literacy practices occur, parents assist children in understanding the function and purpose of print. Parents play a significant role in the education of their young children. Encouraging and supporting parents' efforts in helping their children take their first steps in learning to read and write is a goal well worth achieving.

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