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## Children's Literacy: Children's Books for Healthy Families/Libros de Niños Para Familias Saludables

Jo Anne Kock

University of Nevada, Reno, [kockj@unce.unr.edu](mailto:kockj@unce.unr.edu)



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## Children's Literacy: Children's Books for Healthy Families/Libros de Niños Para Familias Saludables

### Abstract

"Children's Books of Healthy Families/Libros de Niños Para Familias Saludables," which reached more than 2,500 parents and more 4,700 children, promotes positive parent/child and caregiver/child interaction, assists in parent/child bonding, and promotes school readiness. Evaluations revealed that the 2-year project increased positive parent/child interaction, that parents had a substantial increase in the number of books in the home, and that parents and caregivers increased the time spent reading to children and established regular reading times. By extending educational programming to at-risk and Hispanic audiences, Extension educators can make a difference in the well-being of the family and the community.

### Jo Anne Kock

Area Extension Specialist, Children, Youth and Families  
University of Nevada, Reno  
Las Vegas, Nevada  
Internet Address: [kockj@unce.unr.edu](mailto:kockj@unce.unr.edu)

### Introduction

The first three years of life are a crucial time in a child's social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development. This is a time of dramatic change. In a relatively short amount of time a dependent newborn becomes a sophisticated child who walks, talks, solves problems, and manages relationships with adults and other children. What factors influence that development? What can parents and caregivers do to promote positive development and child wellbeing (The Future of Children: Caring for Infants and Toddlers, 2001)?

If parents and caregivers can be educated to establish daily "reading to children" activities, it would promote school readiness and foster positive parent/child and caregiver/child interaction (Gesell, 1995). Because the family is one of the most powerful indicators of success for future generations, actions of parents as the child's first teacher will affect the paths open to their children and the choices children will make during their life span (King & McMaster, 2000).

Newborns have a natural capacity for discriminating speech sounds. They also prefer the appearance of human faces to other sights and the sound of human voices to other sounds. DeCasper and Spence's (1986) study found that newborns prefer the sound of their mother's voice reading a story that she had repeatedly recited late in her pregnancy.

A young child begins by learning words, progresses to putting words together into simple sentences, and then learns to master grammatical rules. By the age of six, a child has built a vocabulary of more than 10,000 words. Parents and caregivers can stimulate this growth by implementing a literacy-rich environment that includes daily reading.

Reading to a child is a part of a child's healthy start. Reading promotes bonding with a child. Research (Eisenberg, Murkoff, & Hathaway, 1996) has shown that this bonding can assist in preventing and help remedy neglect, abuse, and exploitation of children unable to protect their own interests while preserving, rehabilitating, and reuniting families. By cooperating and building on the existing Extension Partners in Parenting program, Clark County, Nevada's "Children's Books for Healthy Families/Libros de Niños Para Familias Saludables" adds a positive educational aspect. The program builds family strengths through teaching reading methods and providing culturally appropriate reading books for vulnerable Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parents and their children.

## Methods

The foundation for literacy is set during the preschool years, and it is during this time that young children develop the skills that will help them be successful. Parents and caregivers play a key role in the literacy abilities of their young children. Children develop many literacy skills long before they begin formal reading or writing instruction.

Just a decade ago it was thought that young children learned to talk and listen and then, when they got to be six years old, they learned to read and write. Research (Thompson, 2001) now shows that the foundations for talking, listening, reading, and writing are all developing from birth, if not before. "Emergent literacy" is the term used to describe young children's developing literacy skills. These skills are critical for later school success.

With a Nevada Title XX Block Grant, "Children's Books of Healthy Families/Libros de Niños Para Familias Saludables" programming was implemented in 1999. After a needs assessment that showed over 60% of vulnerable parents in Las Vegas were not reading to their children, an advisory group was formed to address the issue. With University of Nevada Reno Cooperative Extension (UNCE) taking the lead role, the advisory group consisted of representatives from:

- Channel 10 Public Television's "Ready to Read" Program
- Clark County School District
- Family to Family Infant Support Districts
- LifeLine
- Nevada Association of Latin Americans (NALA)
- English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents
- University of Nevada Reno Family Life Specialist
- North Las Vegas Library
- Clark County Child Care Licensing

The advisory group:

- Refined the program coordinator's position description.
- Participated in the search and hiring process of the program coordinator.
- Reviewed existing literature and curriculum in infant and young children's reading methods.
- After reading the existing literature, decided that the main focus of the program was positive parent/child interaction and how that involves the child's emergent literacy
- If grant funding continued or resources sustained, planned to conduct a longitudinal study on school readiness of participating children.
- Helped identify and rewrite curriculum.
- Reviewed and selected culturally appropriate children's books to be purchased and distributed.
- Met regularly to identify strengths and weaknesses, issues, and needs in working with non-English speaking parents and vulnerable first-time parents.
- Was instrumental in advertising the program as well as seeking other partners in the community such as churches, health clinics and hospitals that accessed and supported Spanish-speaking families.

The existing UNCE bilingual Partners in Parenting staff and the newly hired coordinator were trained in teaching infant and toddler reading methods to parents either one-on-one or in a group setting. The reading program was added to the regular Partners in Parenting home-visiting curriculum. The first year, program emphasis was on reaching parents of children birth to 1 year of age, but so many of the participating families brought other children to the sessions that the program was expanded the next year to include parents of toddlers.

It was important to teach parents and caregivers that reading to infants is not a waste of time. The curriculum taught the importance of sharing books with infants as well as emphasized the fact that infants need to hear language, to be stimulated by words as parents and caregivers talk and read to them (Segal, 1998).

As the curriculum was pilot tested, it became apparent that parents and caregivers wanted a children's literature resource list. With the help of the advisory group, the Extension coordinator reviewed and compiled a 25-page resource list of books for infants and toddlers. Ninety-four infant books and 155 toddler books were listed by author, title, publisher, and number of pages. A short description of each was also included.

All books that were to be distributed to families with infants were reviewed for:

- Simple text and art,
- Repetition and rhymes,
- Bright colors,
- Pictures,
- Familiar photos (e.g., faces, babies, animals),
- Sturdiness (e.g., vinyl, cloth, board book),
- Rounded corners,
- Size and shape for little hands, and
- Appeal to parents/caregivers as well as the child.

All books for toddlers were reviewed for:

- Age appropriateness,
- Ease of reading,
- Cultural diversity (English and Spanish),
- Sturdiness,
- Fun and simple story line,
- Colorful illustrations,
- Humorous twists and turns,
- Topic of interest to child,
- Rhyme and repetition,
- Easy-to-follow sequence,
- Predictable events,
- Illustrations matching text,
- Exciting ending, and
- Appeal to book parents/caregivers as well as the child.

The staff received training in program curriculum as well as how to conduct observational evaluations, group programming evaluations, and follow-up phone evaluation methods. The program received participant referrals from:

- 11 Libraries,
- 10 Social Service departments,
- 7 Churches,
- 4 Television stations,
- Local newspaper,
- Nevada Literacy Association,
- Family Resource Centers,
- Childcare centers, and
- Local community college.

### **Program Goals**

The program goals for the first year of the "Children's Books for Healthy Families/Libros de Niños Para Familias Saludables" were:

- Goal 1: To prevent child abuse and neglect for 1,000 families while building family strengths through providing 2,000 culturally appropriate reading books for vulnerable Spanish and English-speaking first-time parents and parents of children under 1 year of age.
- Goal 2: To strengthen and help first-time families and families with children under 1 year of age by teaching methods that emphasize the benefits of reading to their infants.

After the first year, the two above goals were modified to include children birth to 3 years of age.

- Goal 3: To provide books written in English or Spanish via home visits to 40 vulnerable first-time parents.
- Goal 4: To teach the most effective infant and toddler reading methods to approximately 480 Hispanic-speaking and 480 English-speaking parents via group classes.

Some of the measurable outcomes were:

- Number of Hispanic families reached,
- Number of Anglo families reached,
- Number of babies and children read to,
- Number of books distributed,
- Knowledge gained measured by class pre-post tests,
- Outcomes as indicated by use of the observational scale, and
- Positive changes within the family as measured by observational scale and follow-up telephone surveys.

### **Program Evaluation**

To evaluate the program a number of indicators were used. These included the number of families reached, the number of children read to (by parents or care givers), and the number of children's books distributed. The staff kept anecdotal records as well as attendance records.

Participant rating of usefulness of different aspects of each group class used an innovative technique of evaluations with figure drawings that had been extensively field-tested with low literacy audiences. The evaluation was administered in both Spanish and English. Classes with higher literacy participants were evaluated with pre-post tests to measure knowledge gained during the class session.

One-on-one (home visits) classes were evaluated by the staff completing an observational scale ("In Your Home" developed by Caldwell and Bradley, 1984). The scale was filled out immediately after the first and second home visit and measured the mother's emotional, physical, and verbal responsiveness to her baby and acceptance of child behavior by the parent. It also noted how

many appropriate children's books were visible in the home.

Participants in both group classes and home visits were randomly selected for a quarterly follow-up phone survey that asked if parents read to their children, how often, how long, and how many children's books were in the home.

## First Year

- Exceeding the goal of reaching 1,000 families, the program reached 1,013 families with 1,114 children and distributed 2,224 children's books.
- Six hundred seventy-two Spanish-speaking families and 341 English-speaking families attended 58 classes.
- Nineteen fathers participated in the program.
- One-on-one and in-home visits included 114 Spanish-speaking and 58 English speaking parents.
- The average age of Hispanic mothers participating was 23 years of age, with a range of 15 years to 44 years.
- Forty-eight percent of the mothers had an education below 12<sup>th</sup> grade.
- The average age of English speaking mothers was 16 years, with a range of 12 to 31 years.
- Eighty-two percent of the mothers had less than a high school education.

Pre-post-tests administered at the group classes showed 88% of the participants had a significant knowledge gain. (A comparison of Spanish-speaking and English-speaking participants in year one and year two can be compiled by comparing Figure 1 and Figure 2.)

## Second Year

- Of the 1,408 parents reached during the year, 510 were non-English speaking Hispanic parents.
- Seventy-eight fathers participated in the program.
- Four thousand one hundred and four books were distributed to 2,052 children. Less than 50% of the books distributed were in Spanish, because many of the Hispanic families preferred books written in English rather than Spanish even though the class was taught in Spanish.
- Sixty-nine classes on reading to infants and toddlers were held. Forty-eight of the classes were taught in Spanish to Hispanic Parents.
- One-on-one and in-home visits included 86 Hispanic and 61 English-speaking parents.
- The average age of Hispanic mothers participating was 19 years old, with a range of 15 years to 42 years.
- Sixty-four percent of the mothers had an education below 12<sup>th</sup> grade.
- The average age of English speaking mothers was 16 years, with a range of 13 to 32 years.
- Eighty-two percent of the mothers had less than a high school education.

All group class participants were asked to fill out a sign-in sheet with their names and phone numbers. They were all informed that some of them might be randomly contacted at 3-month intervals to assess their reading involvement with their child. Some of the classes received pre-post tests measuring knowledge gained during the class, with 89% showing a significant gain of knowledge.

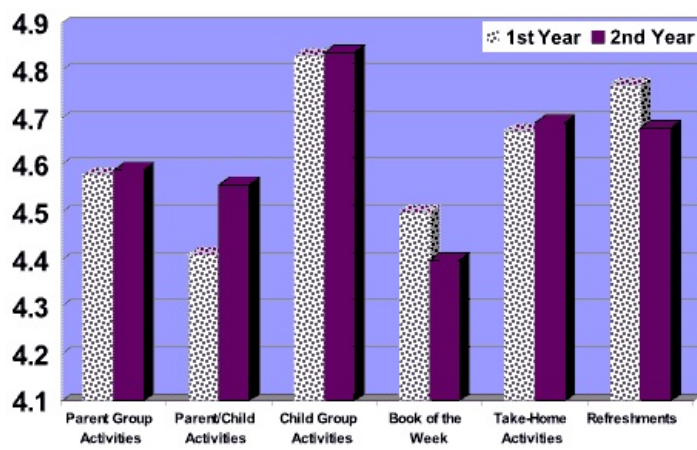
## Some First and Second Year Comparisons

All group class participants were asked to fill out a "picture" evaluation (results Figure 1 and Figure 2). The evaluation instrument had six squares with five different faces. Participants were instructed to circle the face that best represented their opinion of the class. The evaluation was available in both English and Spanish. Class instructors also read the evaluation questions to the class because many of the participants could not read either English or Spanish. This was a way to prevent the participant from being embarrassed or ashamed of being illiterate.

The picture evaluation instrument for English-speaking participants consisted of questions asking "How did you like the different parts of this meeting?" Participants were instructed to circle a face to "show how much you liked each part." (The five faces ranged from frowning, which was assigned a number 1 for evaluation, to a happy face, assigned a number 5 for evaluation.)

### Figure 1.

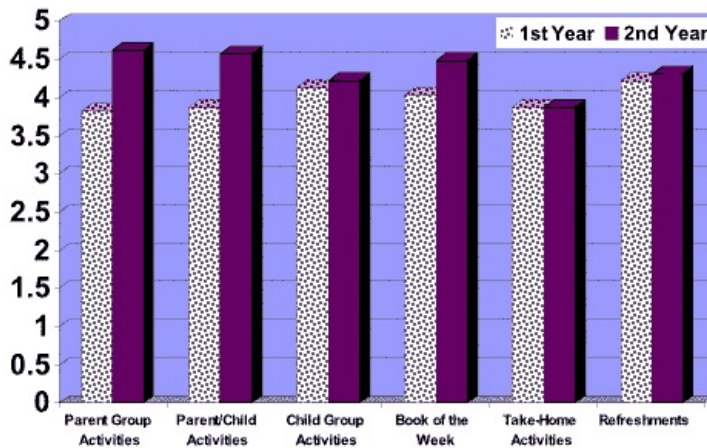
First- and Second-Year Evaluations from English-Speaking Participants



Program satisfaction increased in four out of the six categories the second year the classes were taught to the English-speaking participants. Child group activities rated high both first and second year. The decrease in satisfaction with refreshments was evident the second year when refreshment funds were not available towards the end of the program.

For classes taught in Spanish, the evaluation was written in Spanish and asked the same questions as the English. The bilingual staff read the instructions and questions to the participants because the majority could not read either English or Spanish.

**Figure 2.**  
First- and Second-Year Evaluations from Spanish-Speaking Participants



Class satisfaction increased in five out the six categories for the Spanish-speaking parents. Overall satisfaction for both years was significantly high.

**Observation Scale**

One-on-one home visits were evaluated by the home visitor (staff) filling out the "In Your Home" observation scale. The observation scale was administered at the initial visit and after the second visit to assess if there was an increase in positive parent/child interaction. The initial assessments showed a significant difference in non-English speaking Hispanics and English-speaking parents. Of the 16 questions on the observation scale, 6 of the more significant changes are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Initial and Ending Responses Using the Observation Scale During In-Home Visits

Indicators Observed	% Marked Yes			
	Hispanic		English	
	Initial	End	Initial	End
Parent spontaneously vocalized to child twice.	91%	98%	73%	86%

Parent initiates verbal exchange with visitor.	13%	56%	54%	58%
Parent does not shout at child.	53%	74%	83%	81%
Parent neither slaps nor spansks child during visit.	13%	72%	67%	87%
Parent does not scold or criticize child during visit.	47%	81%	59%	76%
At least 10 books are present and visible.	11%	98%	19%	100%

There was significant improvement for both English and Spanish participants in "neither slaps nor spansks child." There was a significant improvement in the number of children's books present and visible in the home.

At the end of the second year of the program, 207 follow-up telephone surveys showed that:

- 89% of the parents increased the reading time with the child from "never" to "every day."
- 75% increased the duration of reading time from "15 minutes or less" to "16 to 30 minutes."
- The average number of children's books in the home increased from 6 to 27.
- 96% of the parents said the reading program made them more aware of the importance of reading to children.
- 99% could name a "favorite" children's book.

### Discussion

By necessity or lack of opportunity, for some families, education may take a back seat to priorities such as financial well being, health, and safety. Yet research has shown that education can lead to economic and physical security, as well as to help define outcomes in children such as confidence, self-value, and empowerment (King & McMaster, 2000). By exposing children to literature at a young age, not only are language, social, and developmental skills enhanced, but important family foundations are established. Family literacy can work to break the cycle of undereducation. Parents and children working together help families build a legacy for future success.

As family literacy works for the family, it works for the community, the nation, the economy and society at large. As one Hispanic mother said, "Of course I will read to (my daughter) so we will have a smart family. Our family will be strong, so our community will be strong."

This programming has implications for all Extension educators. By emphasizing the importance of extending basic educational programming to at-risk and Hispanic audiences, Extension educators can make a difference in the well-being of the family as well as the well-being of the community. Even though Extension often deals in subject matter, the final outcome is disseminated to the people of the community, and their well-being is the ultimate goal.

### Conclusions

Although the initial grant was not renewed, the success of "Children's Books of Healthy Families/Libros de Niños Para Familias Saludables" has been instrumental in incorporating this reading curriculum into the existing Southern Nevada Parenting Educational Programming. The curriculum is easily replicated and can be taught as a stand-alone program or incorporated into any parenting curriculum.

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