

# PARENT LEADERSHIP: A HISTORICAL LOOK AT LITERACY IN THE HOME

JULIE K. NELSON, M.A.

UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

*This article defines leadership beginning with a parent in the home: the first influential figure in a child's life. Good parenting is emblematic of good leadership, and in turn, fosters what kind of leaders their children will become. Historically, the role of parent-educator has been to teach the fundamentals of reading and writing. While public schools have typically shifted the responsibility away from the parent as primary educator, 21<sup>st</sup>-century homeschooling has reinstated the parent's leadership role as educator. Additionally, schools are recognizing the compelling need to collaborate with their students' parents and follow their lead to leverage scholastic success. The article also summarizes literacy approaches and programs available to today's parents for enhancing reading skills and lifelong learning.*

When considering the most influential person in a young adult's life, parents are at the forefront of leadership. Indeed, parents are usually the primary role models during the formative years of a child's life and strongly continue to influence them throughout their lifespan. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1995) posits that children nest within many social contexts, the first and central context being the home and parental mentoring. In Bronfenbrenner's model, the young child first interacts at home with parents in the *microsystem*. The parents' mentorship in the microsystem enlarges to include other groups that impact a child such as school, church, community, and peers. Each sequential

system has a bi-directional influence on each other. It is notable that the *mesosystem* defines linkages between interactions in the microsystem which may benefit or hinder the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

One of the leadership roles parents have assumed is teacher, particularly in teaching a child to read and continuing to tutor scholastic development throughout the school-aged years. Extant research (Hill & Tyson, 2009) confirms that parental mentoring is positively associated with student achievement. For example, a child benefits scholastically if parents take an active role in attending parent-teacher conferences, assisting with homework, and reading with their child (Trelease, 2013). Therefore, the two settings of home and school in the mesosystem are positively linked. Using the ecological model, parents influence children through their leadership practices because positive effects in families induce considerably favorable outcomes for children as they pass through and are shaped by other institutional groups.

### **HISTORY OF HOME LITERACY LEADERSHIP**

In Colonial America, the locus of literacy and moral upbringing was the family. New England parents taught reading as a sacred obligation. Many read the Bible daily to instill Christian virtues and to save the child from sin and ignorance. The Puritan father assumed primary responsibility for reading and teaching literacy to his children; the mother supported and assisted when able. In 1642, Massachusetts enacted the first law that required heads of households to teach children and apprentices to read. Once a week, parents were legally bound to teach catechism to family members. George Washington, Patrick Henry, John Quincy Adams, and Mark Twain are among many notable early American figures who were mostly educated at home by their parents (Winters, 2001).

Following the American Revolution, however, formal schooling began to replace informal home education, and educators *in loco parentis* assumed the parent's role as teacher. Colonies not only established schools but also required attendance. Over time, institutions superseded parental authority, most noticeably by 1918 when every state had enacted a statute for compulsory school attendance. Those who failed to attend were deemed truant and parents were punished. In the course of this transfer of power, the traditional leadership role of parent-educator was supplanted

by the common law doctrine of *parens patriae*, which entitled the state to act as parent to all persons and provide for the common good and individual welfare.

### **HOMESCHOOLING: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

In reaction to governmental control, many parents have slowly re-asserted their leadership rights as their child's primary educator. In the last century, the homeschool movement has grown from a fringe institution to more mainstream. Religious parents who choose to homeschool cite the same reasons as Puritan parents: to integrate their beliefs and moral principles into their children's reading curriculum. Safety and social concerns are currently an exigent cause for homeschooling. In 2012, 91% of homeschool parents most frequently cited "a concern about environment of other schools" as their reason for educating their children at home (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Modern homeschooling became intertwined with the 1960s cause for social justice. The landscape of civil rights and counterculture spawned a shift in educational roles. Parents' rights to educational leadership began to be re-enthroned, fueled by religious convictions, critique of state pedagogy, individual adaptations, or geographical isolation. Philosophical heirs of Jean-Jacques Rousseau asserted the natural setting of the home to be the ideal environment for reading and other interests to flourish.

During the 1980s, a parent-led grassroots network worked to establish legal rights for homeschooling at the state level. The modern homeschool movement began with about 60,000 to 125,000 children, which reflects a significant number of adults taking back the role of academic leadership (Winters, 2001). This mobilization and organization, along with the expansion of the internet to energize the growing movement, created prodigious growth in homeschooling.

In 2012, there were an estimated 1.8 million homeschooled students in the United States, which is an increase from 850,000 in 1999, when estimates were first reported. In addition, the estimated percentage of the school-age population that was homeschooled increased from 1.7 percent in 1999 to 3.4 percent in 2012. (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, "Homeschooling")

Parent-led education became even more widespread and diverse and an important component for early literacy in America.

### **READING AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT IN THE EARLY YEARS**

The contemporary home is the context in which children first develop early literacy skills. Parents become nascent mentors as they sing to their infant at birth, repeat rhymes and activity verses, and engage in playful book-related strategies designed for babies. A 2014 policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) posits that reading daily at home in the early years is essential for optimal brain development and robust language acquisition (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014). Early brain synapse development is use-dependent (Tierney & Nelson, 2009). “However, since infant and toddler children are entirely dependent upon parents and older siblings for their experiences, the fate of the child’s brain development...rests with a parent” (Trelease, 1995, p. 62). Literacy grows as infants’ brains make neural connections in response to repeated sounds and the parent-child emotional bonding. These sounds form word banks that store information necessary for eventual decoding of text and comprehension of meaning. Story reading activates the left hemisphere of the brain, responsible for sound and visual stimuli that promotes imagination and creativity.

Reading aloud with young children fosters a richer vocabulary, phonological awareness, and more complex syntax than child-directed speech. The strength of a child’s vocabulary is determined not by the basic lexicon found in everyday conversation but rather by the rare words gained through reading. Regular conversations with preschoolers include about nine rare words per thousand; a children’s book contains almost 31 rare words per thousand (Trelease, 2013). As a result of listening to the unique language found in books, children can retrieve stored words to use in their own verbal and written productions.

Trelease (2013) urges parents to be a role model by reading aloud to their child, thereby conditioning their child’s brain to associate reading with pleasure, create background knowledge, and increase size of vocabulary. Companionship reading for pleasure and personal enhancement are two of the greatest factors in raising an emergent reader. Bedtime is an optimal time of day to use book reading to connect emotionally and to transition

a child to sleep. Parents today compete with and often relinquish control to technology that delivers books in electronic format. However, the personal and nourishing one-on-one experience of a parent-child interaction cannot be replaced by solitary, passive screen-related entertainment. Leadership, whether in or out of the home, fundamentally succeeds based on the degree of interpersonal relationships.

### **PARENTS AS READERS AND LEADERS**

Literacy leadership in the home depends upon parents as readers themselves. Parental models for recreational reading have a positive impact on their children (Stevens, 2015). They read a wide variety of electronic and print material such as newspapers, magazines, books, and instructional manuals and share their enthusiasm for knowledge acquisition with family members. As conscientious parents interact with everyday print, they point out the efficacy of environmental print to their children.

Cognitive development contributes to learning as well as social development and is a key predictor of educational success, socio-emotional wellbeing, and economic productivity (Center on the Developing Child, 2012). Parents foster cognitive development when they begin teaching basic reading skills to their children and “include repeated practice of skills over time by setting up opportunities for children to learn” through their modeling and reinforcement productivity (Center on the Developing Child, 2012, para. 4).

Although the school setting is often considered the primary environment to teach children to read, educators have long argued that a teacher cannot replace the parent as the most significant influence in a child’s overall educational development. According to the U.S. Department of Education, parent leadership in the home predicts “that a student will receive a high-quality education” (Morrison, 2009, p. 188). Conversely, if parents are poor leaders in the home, external educators will have difficulty reversing the negative effects. Snyder (2011) found that “at the beginning of the school year, if parents are extremely harsh, punitive, and insensitive, even highly supportive teachers cannot counterbalance or repair the damage of harmful parental influences on children’s competence” (p. 329). Snyder’s study underscores the irreplaceable value of at least one supportive parent in the home reading to and with their child throughout the formative years.

The National Education Association (NEA) supports parental involvement in the school system to maximize student achievement. A “how-to” book written by Bob Chase, former NEA president, and Bob Katz (2002) informs parents in selecting quality teachers for their children, evaluating teacher performance, leading parent-teacher conferences, understanding school testing and learning differences, advocating school safety, and accommodating children with special needs. Other authors such as Walsh (2016) promote parents in taking a larger leadership role in school reform, speaking out on parent choice in student school placement, and ensuring public schools are accountable to the tax-paying public.

### **EFFECTS OF HOME LITERACY LEADERSHIP**

Regular reading to children from birth through five years old is strongly linked to kindergarten readiness (Morrow, 2015). Furthermore, reading proficiency by 3rd-grade is the most important predictor of graduation from high school and career success. To that end, the U.S. Federal Government’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that parents participate in a two-way symbiotic relationship with the schools to reinstate them in “full partnership” (Morrison, 2009, p. 192). Indeed, parents’ early priority of reading to children will determine future scholastic success. Trelease (2013) reported “clear positive gains” for preschoolers in phonemic awareness, language growth, and beginning reading skills—when the household engaged in frequent parent-child reading. These gains continued throughout elementary and secondary school achievement rankings by a 15–40% increase of vocabulary acquisition, a 35-point advantage in 4th-grade school assessments, and high school reading scores that correlated with frequency of parents reading to their child in the early years, regardless of income level (Trelease, 2013).

In another study, the breakdown of minutes read at home correlated with academic status. On standardized reading tests, students who were read to for two minutes a day outside of school scored in the 30th percentile; those who were read to for five minutes a day scored in the 50th percentile; those who were read to for ten minutes a day scored in the 70th percentile; and those who were read to for 20 minutes a day scored in the 90th percentile (Morrow, 2015). In sum, test scores dramatically increase in relation to the time a parent reads to their

child. Reading to children for 20 minutes a day has been the tipping point for most at-home reading programs.

### **LITERACY APPROACHES AND PROGRAMS**

Parents guide developing readers by identifying their preferred genre and reading these “high-interest books” to their children (Stevens, 2015). Furthermore, reading to a child is only part of the experience; discussing the plot, characters, conflicts and resolutions, and other contextual themes support involvement beyond the text. Dialogic reading is a literacy approach with a parent asking questions to their young reader and reinforcing comprehension as they read a book together. It enables the parent and child to have an interactive experience to thereby increase interpretive and evaluative abilities.

Literacy programs abound that promote parent-child reading. Public libraries typically offer summer home reading programs with rewards for reaching goals as well as year-round story time and book clubs for parents and children. Free access to print material is especially crucial for at-risk families who tend to be less involved in teaching literacy skills. Lack of parental involvement increases reading deficiencies in children (Hazzard, 2016). A 2011-2012 National Survey of Child’s Health found that of U.S. children ages birth to five years old who were read to daily, 60% came from families with incomes 400% of the federal poverty threshold or greater and 34% came from families with incomes below 100% of the poverty threshold (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014). To address this deficiency, the AAP has promoted Reach Out and Read (ROR), an evidence-based nonprofit organization serving four million children and their families annually since 1989. It has proven effective in increasing the rate at which at-risk parents read more often to their children, in strengthening school readiness, and promoting a positive attitude toward literacy (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014).

Head Start is a federally funded program created to address the achievement gap between high-functioning and at-risk families. From its inception, Head Start acknowledged the integral part parents play in their child’s educational success. It offers resources to parents with many critical issues, including adult literacy programs. Parents learn how to teach better socialization and reading skills to their children, show them stronger

emotional support, and discipline their children more appropriately. Home visits are a staple of the Head Start program. They reinforce the conviction of those invested in the success of children that school is an extension of the home and a teacher is secondary to the parent-educator. Studies have evaluated the treatment effects of Head Start on parents' behavior and report more frequent parent-child reading and cognitive stimulation (Ansari, Purtell, & Gershoff, 2016).

### **LEADING AS CHILDREN GROW**

Research yields consistent results regarding rates of reading as children grow. Common Sense Media published a meta-analysis profiling how parents continue to lead with literacy throughout their child's life. Unfortunately, rates of reading for pleasure drop as children leave elementary school. "Scholastic's survey of youth (2013) found that the percent of children who report reading for fun five to seven times a week drops from 48% among 6- to 8-year-olds to 39% among 9- to 11-year-olds, 28% among 12- to 14-year-olds, and 24% among 15- to 17-year-olds" (Rideout, 2014, p. 12).

Parent involvement reduces dramatically as the child moves to secondary school. Other than helping their teen complete homework, parents often do not continue in a leadership role in daily reading for pleasure with their adolescent (Rideout, 2014). Although outside interests, such as peers and school, seem to eclipse the parental role, the parent remains an influential person during these years. Reading together and discussing themes within books solidifies that kinship bond essential for transmitting values and behaviors.

Fostering a love of reading is essential for a teen's socio-emotional health at a period of identity formation. Books open an understanding of self through others' lived experiences. They give a teen a belief he can, like the characters in a book, make a significant contribution to the world. Fantasy novels offer the promise that "If you have courage and if you persist, you can overcome any obstacle, conquer any foe" (Trelease, 1995, p. 77). Adolescents benefit when their parents take time to discuss complex plots and real-life application to help them develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and problem-solving strategies that will be necessary for their role as future leaders.



## **CONCLUSION**

The impact of early mentors to children cannot be overstated. School, home, and other primary contexts find interaction in the mesosystem and are centralized in the parent-child relationship. After decades of public schools ruling the scholastic arena, many modern parents have taken back academic leadership through homeschooling. School systems today operationalize the vital role of parents by forming collaborative partnerships with them. Research is replete with the positive impact parents can have on their child's success in school and in life. One of the single most effective practices is for parents to read frequently and consistently with and to their children, and many programs incentivize parents to do so. Parent-leaders recognize their role in fostering the kind of leaders their children will be one day. These life-long behaviors and skills are built in the home: the laboratory of learning and socializing.

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