

Strengthening English Language Proficiency through Parent-Child Collaboration

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The educational system in the world today is facing incredible challenges as it attempts to educate young people to successfully compete in a global economy dominated by the English language. To support and encourage the efforts made by classroom teachers, parents are frequently being called on to take a more active role in their children's English language education (Huerta-Macias and Quintero, 1997). Educators and researchers recognize that the home environment plays a crucial role in the acquisition of literacy and children's success in the schools. Parents are being encouraged to participate in English literacy building activities with their children such as reading English stories and composing letters to help reinforce English skills which are taught in the schools.

Parents provide a wealth of untapped educational resources. They need to feel comfortable using the skills and creativity which they possess to create meaningful English literacy activities which can be practiced in the home. Family activities such as making grocery lists, writing cards and letters to friends and family on holidays, reading the newspaper or English children's stories together provide wonderful opportunities for social interaction among parents and children and are the catalyst for meaningful home literacy experiences (Finders and Lewis, 1994). The important and significant role that parents play in their children's English language development appears to be indisputable, nevertheless, many parents

still are not aware of the powerful influence they hold over their children's learning, nor are they familiar with effective teaching strategies which they could use to help their children at home (Cairney and Muncie, 1995).

Family Workshops

Some parents feel intimidated with the prospect of teaching and communicating with their children in English. They may feel unprepared to deal with the challenges that come from teaching their children in a second, possibly unfamiliar language. One solution which reduces parents' fear is to participate in family workshops where parents are able to learn about activities which reinforce the English language learning skills taught in the schools.

English Family Literacy Night Workshop

One successful English language program in the Midwestern United States invited parents and their children to participate in an English Family Literacy Night Workshop. Many of the workshop participants came from several Latin American countries and possessed limited English speaking skills. The English Family Literacy Night met once every three months on a Friday evening for approximately 2.5 hours. In order to make the English Family Literacy Night run smoothly, workshop organizers needed to follow a carefully designed program to ensure a successful program.

Workshop Organization

Workshop organizers carefully planned the workshops to ensure that logistical issues including location and scheduling of the workshops, workshop mentors and participants were able to meet on the schedule date. Organizers sent flyers home with children informing parents about the workshop or they telephoned parents and personally encouraged them to participate in the English Family Literacy Night workshop. Organizers also arranged to have the workshops at the local school and consulted with the school principal and other administrators to ensure that the building was available for the workshop. Organizers also requested that all participants register for the workshop at least three weeks in advance, so that they would be able to secure enough English reading and writing materials for the participants.

Workshop Goals

Once all the participants agreed on the scheduled date, the organizers focused on several educational goals which they wished to accomplish. The premise of the English language workshop was to provide parents with useful ideas on how to help their children develop effective English language skills and strategies which could be easily taught at home. At the workshop, parents were provided with suggestions and guidelines so that they could practice the English activities at home. Parents became familiar with a host of educational strategies including successful questioning techniques and appropriate incentives for positive academic work in the home. Parents also learned how to engage their children in new and exciting activities to motivate them to read and write in their free time. Parents became aware of skill

building activities like creating English spelling and vocabulary charts and notebooks. Parents learned how to engage their children in collaborative reading, writing and dramatic play activities. Through English language workshops, parents and children learned English language strategies and solutions which they could easily apply to meaningful and realistic situations, thus encouraging them to become more proficient in English.

Night of Magic

One particularly exciting themed workshop, which generated a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm by participants, was the "Night of Magic". Parents and children gathered together at the neighborhood school to watch a magic show with a local, bilingual magician who spoke both English and Spanish interchangeably throughout his performance. To encourage audience interest and enthusiasm, the magician made his performance interactive and asked for volunteers from the audience to help him with his performance. Parents and children eagerly assisted the magician in several exciting "tricks."

Once the magic show ended, the large group was divided into smaller groups consisting of three parents and their children and one English language mentor. The small groups concentrated on building English language skills such as vocabulary and grammar. The mentors included bilingual volunteers from the community and other teachers in the school who agreed to participate in the English Family Literacy Night workshops. During this particular English Family Literacy Night, it was the responsibility of the mentors to help parents and children with English vocabulary related to magic. Mentors

would write the English and Spanish vocabulary on a chalkboard, ask parents and their children to create sentences using the vocabulary and then encourage participants to write the vocabulary and sentences in their vocabulary notebooks.

Once vocabulary skills were taught, parents and children were invited to select English books based on the topic of magic and participate in shared reading activities where they took turns reading the stories to each other. Other parent and children groups decided to visit several small "Magic Learning Centers" where they performed simple magic tricks by following directions which were written in English. Throughout the entire evening English mentors circulated through the workshop assisting and encouraging children and their parents whenever necessary.

As a culminating activity, parents and their children wrote short stories in English based on their experiences during the Magic Night workshop. Several parents and children demonstrated their magical skills during a mini magic show or read their stories at the end of the evening.

Overall, the English Family Literacy Night workshop was a tremendous success and the feedback which organizers received from parents and children was overwhelmingly positive. Parents and children viewed English language training as an enjoyable experience for everyone. Children were proud of their parents' participation and parents were astonished at their children's ingenuity and skills in using the English language. Since both parents and children collaborated together on English language activities, all participants felt important and valued. Parents and children believed that they had made a significant contribution to English

language learning. Parents discovered strategies and solutions which they could easily use at home to encourage and motivate their children to become more proficient in English.

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