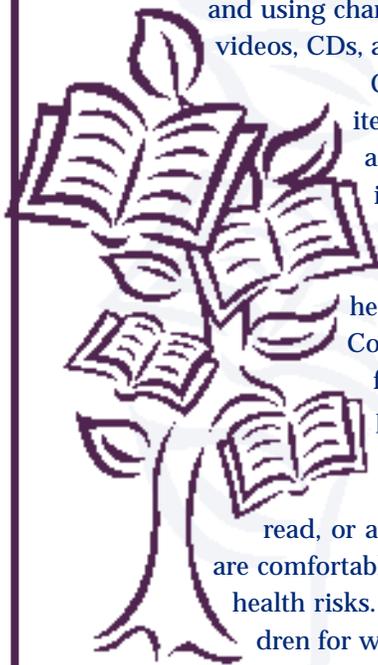


Families & Learning

A PUBLICATION OF THE CONNECTICUT STATEWIDE FAMILY LITERACY INITIATIVE, A PROJECT OF THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Health Literacy: Your Family Depends On It

Literacy plays a critical role in keeping ourselves and our families physically and emotionally healthy and safe. From reading dosage directions to understanding nutrition requirements, family health depends on health literacy. The National Library of Medicine defines health literacy as “the degree to which people can obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services they need.” The American Cancer Society points out that knowledge of concepts related to achieving good health, and communication, reasoning and investigation skills are all essential. Health literacy is about the entire process of exchanging healthcare information, not just through reading and writing, but through speaking and using charts and diagrams or use of technology like videos, CDs, and the Web.



Over 90 million adults in the US have limited ability to understand medicine labels, appointment slips, informed consents, insurance forms, and health educational material. One national organization estimates health care expenditures due to low health literacy skills are at least \$73 billion. In Connecticut where about 41% of adults are functionally illiterate (over 1 million people, see box), this problem is especially worrisome. There is often a gap between what health professionals give people to read, or assume they understand, and what people are comfortably able to read or clearly understand after a brief medical visit. This gap causes major health risks. Understanding medical directions may literally mean life or death for adults or children for whom they care.

Education about health literacy is critical to effective health delivery. Providers and consumers share responsibility for the effectiveness of communication around health issues. Health professionals must be aware of the importance of clear, simple language and should not assume patients read well. Checking for comprehension, repeating and reinforcing, and the use of props and simple drawings can help. At the same time, educators have an important role to play. Because of the importance of health to student achievement, schools increasingly support the health literacy of students and their families. There are many resources for simple health-related activities that enhance health literacy. See below for some ideas about where to start.

HEALTH LITERACY RESOURCES

National Health Education Standards: Achieving Health Literacy. Joint Committee on National Health Education Standards (1997). Available at www.healthteacher.com/teachersupports/literacy2.asp *Exploring Healthy Eating: Activities for Parents and Children Together.* Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy (1997). Order free from Patricia King, Tufts University, 617-627-4051, patricia.king@tufts.edu <http://nutrition.tufts.edu/pdf/publications/hunger/exploring.pdf> *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills.* Doak C, Doak L, and Root J (1996). J.B. Lippincott Co. *Easy Does It! Plain Language and Clear Verbal Communication.* National Literacy and Health Program, and the Canadian Public Health Association (1998).

Where Are They?

Don't dismiss health literacy as a problem somewhere else. Low literacy creates problems for families in every community. An estimated 1 million adults in Connecticut function at literacy levels 1 or 2. They have difficulty with reading, writing and computational skills required in everyday life. Although the largest concentrations of adults struggling with literacy issues live in high-need areas the state identifies as priority school districts, the majority do not.

- 28% (296,140) of these adults live in the state's 5 largest cities (Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, Stamford and Waterbury).
- 43% (460,695) are in the 14 priority school districts, which include the 5 largest cities.
- This leaves 57% or approximately 612,171 low literate adults spread across the rest of the state. Family literacy programs benefit all communities.

Family Literacy: Put the ACTIVE in Activities

Family Literacy is about reading and much more. Families can develop skills they need to be successful lifelong learners while snuggling on the couch together with books, but you don't have to be a couch potato to give your brain a work out.

Take a hike! In the woods or neighborhood. Encourage older kids to follow signs, use a compass or make "field notes." Bring a shoebox or bag to collect interesting things, and paper and crayons to draw what you can't bring home. Afterwards, spread it all out and talk about it. Count things, sort them, learn more about them in the library, or take them apart and look more closely. This encourages scientific curiosity.

That's entertainment! Make musical instruments from things around the house and dance to the beat, or twirl a ribbon while dancing to different types of music. Children practice many skills when they move to music. They learn about rhythm and beat, develop verbal skills by singing along, and master motor skills used to read and write. When children move their bodies, they stimulate areas of the brain related to abstract thinking.

Map it! Try drawing a map of your favorite neighborhood from memory, then take a walk. Did you forget anything? What can you add? How about signs, hydrants or things that move like animals. When you get home, use the map to take someone else on a tour. Talking about things not in the "here and now" helps children's brains develop.

Ready for more? Reading is Fundamental has more fun family literacy activities at www.rifreadingplanet.org.

Innovative Family Learning Practices

The friendly, bright orange, family literacy booklet *Family: Where Learning Grows* is being used across the state in many ways. Here are two examples.

Stamford Adult Education

Inspired by its simplicity, Joan Parris uses *Family: Where Learning Grows* as the basis of family literacy training for students in Stamford's GED and ABE classes. "Adult education students are in a strong position to model for their children the value of learning and doing well in school," she notes. "Children who watch their parents read and study, imitate them."

To break the ice, Joan reads a story, modeling enthusiastic reading, then students read to each other. But reading aloud with children, using props or different voices, is just one way to help children gain literacy skills and academic success. "We discuss examples of using every day activities for learning, such as sorting laundry or making comparisons in the supermarket. Then students generate their own ways to engage their children in family literacy activities."

"My students now see themselves as good role models for their children. They learn about the importance of reading to their children, practice new skills and discover how everyday activities contribute to learning."

To learn more: Joan Parris, (203) 324-4371, studio53@optonline.net.

Manchester Public Schools

Early Literacy Coordinator, Sandy Lambert reports Manchester wants all families to understand their important role in their children's education. Schools use *Family: Where Learning Grows* at almost all family events.

For example, "all family members are welcome to Lunch Bunch," Sandy says, "siblings, uncles, grandparents, whoever can come." Families and students enjoy an activity together, then children return to class and adults discuss the importance of reading together, using the booklets. Staff highlight different sections each time. Families talk about the activity discussed last time, and share feedback and their own ideas. "Now families talk at the bus stop or laundromat. They get the word out much more effectively than we can. As a result, PTA and family involvement have increased."

The booklets are also included in packets sent to new birth families, school readiness transition packets, home visits, and welcome wagon bags "to emphasize the critical role of families as children's first and most important teachers."

For more information:
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