

Families & Learning

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Family Literacy in the Middle School Years

It is around fourth grade that reading becomes difficult for some students. This is the time when children are no longer “learning to read” but “reading to learn.” Books at this level have fewer pictures, are longer and more challenging. Students who become frustrated and do not enjoy reading risk falling behind. If they do not catch up, many of these young people will leave school. Poor literacy is the number one risk indicator for dropping out.

It is also at this time that family support for reading often declines as families struggle with how to remain involved while children are gaining more independence. But, the fact is that when families stay engaged in the literacy process into upper elementary, middle and high school, students are more successful.

What Can Families Do?

Research indicates that students who spend time reading outside of school are more likely to make it over the fourth grade hump and continue on to become strong readers. We also know from research that there are many simple and fun ways that families can influence out-of-school reading and learning.

Families can continue to read to and with children as they move into middle school. A good tool for family literacy at this stage is flip-flopping reading to children and having children read to family members as they become more independent readers.

The types of reading materials can change as the child matures, with magazines and newspapers added to books. It is important that young people have access to reading materials that interest them. It need not be fine literature to still have an impact on reading. Many books and magazines tie in to movies, sports and music that are already grabbing children’s interest. Even “surfing” the internet builds reading skills.

Talking to students about what they are learning at school and encouraging them, as the “experts,” to discuss new ideas promotes achievement, even if parents have problems with reading themselves. Parents can also encourage children to speak in complete sentences. Oral language and writing are closely connected.*

Families can encourage young people to write every day by providing meaningful opportunities. Tasks as simple as making shopping lists, writing thank-you notes or posting messages on a “blog” reinforce literacy skills.

Technology provides a useful and fun approach to family literacy activities in the middle and high school years. Parents and young people can work together using technology for family projects such as documenting a family event with photography or video, or creating a family website.



Schools and Communities Play a Role Too

Schools can partner with parents and children to support family literacy and also reverse the decline in parental involvement which begins at the middle school level. Halting that decline and supporting family literacy require common elements, including the motivation to build a two-way street with parents. Schools can seek out parents to find what is being read in the home and offer resources and support. The school library or media center can offer family literacy resources and extend the hours they are open to parents. Communities are partners too and can promote parent-teen engagement in reading by offering opportunities such as the mother-daughter book clubs described on the reverse side.

*Some examples of “trigger questions” parents can use to start the conversation with teens about what they are learning can be found on the Parent Academic Resources Inc. website at www.academicresources.org/learning.html.

Mother-Daughter Book Clubs

Seven years ago, two mothers arrived at the **Wallingford Public Library** with the idea that schools, families, and the library could work together to support girls, and their mothers, through the challenges of early adolescence. Out of that meeting came one of the first Mother-Daughter Book Clubs in Connecticut.

What began with just a few people is now an ongoing club of 16, with new members joining each year. The participants have primarily been middle school girls and their mothers (or a female adult friend), reading and discussing books geared to the issues teen girls are facing.

Bobbie Borne, head of Young Adult Services at the library has worked with the club since the start. "The success really comes from the girls and their mothers," she said. Borne said that the mothers and daughters often don't know each other and come from different schools in town. Over the years, she has seen the benefit of mothers and daughters discussing sensitive issues in a setting away from home, and the bonding that takes place in the clubs.

As girls get older and leave the club, there are always younger girls and their mothers eager to join. New members hear about the club through the school PTOs, the library and often by word of mouth. The books they read are selected to address the group's interests or concerns, and Borne makes sure that the library has enough copies of upcoming selections on hand.



For more information: Bobbie Borne, Wallingford Public Library (203) 265-6754. More ideas on how to start and run a club: "The Mother-Daughter Book Club: How Ten Busy Mothers and Daughters Came Together to Talk, Laugh, and Learn Through Their Love of Reading" by Shireen Dodson, published by Perennial Currents.

Family Learning Parties

Danbury's Shelter Rock School already had a laudable 100 percent participation rate in parent-teacher conferences. But principal Julia Horne wanted to find a way to get families even more involved in their children's education. She wanted to find a way to help parents better understand what schools were trying to teach and enlist the parents' active participation.

So she turned to Tupperware. The concept of Tupperware parties - fun and sociable, but with a purpose - seemed like it might be something she could use. Last year, Shelter Rock's Literacy and Learning Parties were born.

"We felt the key to participation was to go to the parents" Horne said, "Rather than waiting for the parents to come to school." The Literacy and Learning Parties, for groups of parents and children are scheduled at the homes of volunteer hosts. "The host family is always rewarded with \$200 in books," Horne said. "Our goal is 10 to 12 parties a year. We talk about curriculum, how school was different for the parents, we talk about homework, t.v., the importance of strong male influences on the youngsters. I also read a book each time," Horne said.

Shelter Rock is an urban school that has 366 students in grades K through 5. While the parties are for second and third graders, Horne said the concept could work for any grade. "The goal is to make parents feel welcome and a part of their children's education. After a party, we see more of a buy-in from parents and they are more engaged. Our science fair had a 50 percent increase in participation after we began this program," she said.

For more information: Julia Horne, Shelter Rock School (203) 797-4777.

