

STUDY CIRCLE DISCUSSION GUIDE

Families and Literacy . . .



Where Learning Grows

Written by
The Connecticut Family Literacy Initiative &
The Study Circles Resource Center
April 2001

DRAFT GUIDE FOR PILOT PROGRAMS

What is a Study Circle?

Study Circles are small, democratic, highly participatory discussions that provide ways for people to build community and resolve local problems. In cities across the country, thousands of citizens meeting in Study Circles are making real progress on some of the most difficult issues of our time.

There are just a few defining characteristics of Study Circles:

- A Study Circle is comprised of 10 to 20 people who meet five times over a period of weeks to address a critical public issue.
- A Study Circle is facilitated by a person who is there not to act as an expert on the issue, but to serve the group by keeping the discussion focused, helping the group consider a variety of views, and asking difficult questions.
- A Study Circle is open to many perspectives. The way in which study circle facilitators are trained and discussion materials are written gives everyone "a home in the conversation," and helps the group explore areas of common ground.

Imagine sitting down with my neighbors to discuss an important issue like education reform. This is what this country is looking for.

Citizen Participant
Education Study Circle
Yarmouth, Maine

By participating in Study Circles, citizens gain "ownership" of the issues, a recognition that there can be a connection between personal experiences and public policies, and a deeper understanding of their own and others' perspectives and concerns. They discover common ground and a greater desire and ability to work collaboratively to solve local problems - in this case, how to address adult, child and family literacy issues in their community.

This Study Circle Guide was developed for purposes of conducting community discussions on Family Literacy. It was written to facilitate a four-part dialogue to foster connections among community members that lead to new levels of community action.

Other Study Circle Guides are available on issues including education, violence, race relations and youth. See the Appendix of this document for more information on Study Circles Resource Center.

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Connecticut's Family Literacy Initiative is supported by an Even Start Grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Family Literacy: Survival Versus Success

Session 1

This session provides an opportunity to share personal experiences, stories and opinions. It lays the foundation for the rest of the study circle, and sets the tone for open, thoughtful discussion. Participants are encouraged to describe assets and share visions; to create common definitions of literacy, family, and success. We are all here as members of this community.

Part 1: Introductions

Participants introduce themselves and say a few words about their role in the community. (For example, are you a parent in the community; do you work in the community, etc?) What do you want participants in the study circle to know about you?

The facilitator will help the group set some ground rules to make the time together productive and enjoyable.

Part 2: Our Experience with Family Literacy

A. Literacy

- ◆ What is literacy?
- ◆ What does it include other than reading?
- ◆ What does a person need to know to function in our society?
- ◆ What are the experiences that make someone literate?
- ◆ What does literacy mean in your life?

Worldwide, experts agree that literacy is an essential part of education – and many believe it’s the most important part. *In fact, the United Nations has declared that literacy is a basic human right along with the right to food, housing and health care.*

How important is literacy to you?

B. Family

- ◆ What is a "literate family?" What makes a "literate home environment"?
- ◆ "The family is the center of learning." How true is this for you today or when you were growing up?
- ◆ How does culture influence family literacy?

Literacy puts people in touch with their culture's history, and with scientific and technical knowledge. It allows people to preserve knowledge with a written record. It gives them "the power of the pen".

Do you agree or disagree?

Why?

C. Success

- ◆ What do you want for children and youth in our community?
- ◆ When you think of success, what role does literacy play?
- ◆ What are the skills and knowledge your family needs to be successful today - personally, as community members, at work?

The better the reader, the experts say, the fewer academic problems the child will have.

Part 3: Creating a Vision for Family Literacy

- ◆ Describe a community that values literacy and families.
- ◆ Imagine that in 10 years our community supported ALL families' learning. What would it be like to live here?
- ◆ How would the schools be different?
- ◆ What about the shopping areas, community centers, places of worship, businesses, government, gas stations, bus terminals, etc?

Society requires an increasingly high level of literacy for success. While literacy achievement in our public schools over the past 25 years has been stable, the demands for higher literacy skills are increasing faster than ever. Literacy is especially important then for our youngest learners, but many observers believe that we are in the midst of a *literacy crisis*.

Do you feel that you are keeping up with the demand for increased literacy? Is our community?

Everyone should feel free to add an idea. Use your imagination!

Part 4: Wrap Up and Prepare for Session 2

These questions will help us reflect on our discussion and some things we might do differently.

- ◆ What were some of the main ideas of our discussion today?
- ◆ What did you learn from others?
- ◆ What worked well in today's meeting? What changes would you like to make for next time?

Before our next session, ask family members, school staff and community members some of the same questions you answered today.

- ◆ What is a "literate" person?
- ◆ What does literacy mean in your life?

Also, share your thoughts and ideas with them!

Family Literacy: What Challenges Do We Face?

Session 2

Are there any thoughts about Session 1 you want to share?

What did you learn from family members and others when you talked with them about literacy after the last session?

This session is intended to show different views on family literacy. Discussing a range of opinions helps people see the strengths and weaknesses of each and to thoughtfully explore each one. Don't feel that you or the group must choose one. Rather, use the differences to start your discussion and develop your thinking about what is important.

- ◆ What challenges do we face to become more literate in our home and our community?
- ◆ Is literacy an individual family problem, a community problem or a shared problem?
- ◆ Given these challenges and responsibilities, what supports are needed to help the whole family be life-long learners and be successful?

Some challenges might be...

For Individuals:

- ◆ People are embarrassed to admit they need help. They may feel others will look down on them.
- ◆ People are just too busy to take time to go back to school.
- ◆ Parents don't know how to help their child with learning and aren't sure where to go for help.

For Families:

- ◆ Parents do not see literacy and learning as their job once children start school.
- ◆ Parents no longer make their children's school work a priority. Families used to respect the teacher and school more than they do now.
- ◆ Parents do not spend enough time with their children. There are too many working mothers in this community. When parents are home, they let their children watch too much television and use it as a babysitter.

- ◆ Parents do not know how to “parent” anymore. Many families do not have the support of the extended family.
- ◆ There are too many teen parents. They have not completed their own education and are not good role models for their children.

For Schools:

- ◆ Schools are not fulfilling their basic mission of teaching children how to read and write. If schools did their job, there would not be a family literacy problem.
- ◆ Schools do not communicate enough with families about how children are doing until it’s too late.
- ◆ The school already has enough to do with just the students. Schools cannot be concerned with parent’s literacy too.
- ◆ School staff are not prepared to take on new responsibilities and don’t know how to work with families.

For Communities:

- ◆ Communities don’t support families like they used to.
- ◆ Too few community resources are dedicated to “family literacy.” For example, some libraries are not open as many hours as they used to be.
- ◆ Our taxes are too high already and are needed for other services. We can’t afford more family literacy programs.

Some ways to support families might include...

- ◆ Increase funding to create more family literacy services in our community and better coordinate existing services.
- ◆ Offer family literacy services at child care programs, schools, libraries, colleges, and job sites.
- ◆ Train family support workers in family literacy.
- ◆ Provide information and ideas about family literacy to families. TV and radio public service announcements can give families literacy information.
- ◆ Make sure elected officials have a track record in support of families.
- ◆ Support families through before- and after-school programs.
- ◆ Connect more families to community resources through better referral systems.
- ◆ Use the faith community to reach families.
- ◆ Sponsor programs for families, such as trips to museums and aquariums, poetry readings, musical events, plays, etc.

Preparing for Session 3

These questions will help us reflect on our discussion today.

- ◆ What were some of the most important challenges we discussed today?
- ◆ Were there any ideas that surprised you?

Before our next meeting, find out how communities deal with literacy.

- ◆ What is already happening in our community?
- ◆ Are other communities doing things that seem like they could work here?

Exploring Possibilities: How Can We Address Family Literacy?

Session 3

First, is there anything you would add or change to our notes from sessions 1 & 2?

In doing the homework from the previous session, what did you find out about what is happening in our community regarding family literacy? Did you learn about things taking place in other communities that may work for us?

In this session we explore different ways to help families access programs and support to create a literate home environment. Talking about different approaches will help us get ready for our next meeting when we will identify specific actions we can take.

Now we're ready to discuss possible ways to address family literacy.

- ◆ How can our community get better at promoting families, literacy and success for all?
- ◆ How do schools communicate with families and the larger community? Does the communication go both ways? How might communication be improved to promote family learning?
- ◆ Where can we find resources for families in our community?
- ◆ How can people and organizations in our community be supportive of adults and/or children who are just learning to read?
- ◆ How have communities similar to ours successfully helped families?

Some different views of family literacy issues are presented on the following pages to get you thinking.

Possible opinions to discuss:

View 1 - We should strengthen our community support to families and make sure organizations and schools respect and support families and help them become successful.

Hospitals, libraries, schools and businesses all affect families and their success. As they plan their projects or services, they should ask how they will affect families. Those serving families should be trained to treat others with respect and to be helpful so that families will feel comfortable seeking out these services. They should listen to families, and find out what they need and want. Find out ways families would like to be informed and what support they will need to help them take advantage of opportunities (e.g., transportation, childcare, translators, etc.). It is better to show than to tell. It is best to involve!

We need to work with local colleges, universities, businesses, youth organizations and nonprofit groups to develop before- and after-school programs for students and families. Public facilities like schools and libraries should be open and available for use evenings, weekends and summers. Businesses should offer flextime to employees. Local media should do more to publicize family literacy issues.

View 2 - We should hold schools, agencies and elected officials accountable to families.

Accountability is key. Lots of local and state tax dollars go directly to schools to educate children and to programs to help families. Communities need proof that these funds are being spent wisely. That includes programs in police departments, parks and recreation, health and social services, and libraries. Schools must demonstrate to businesses and colleges that a high school credential has value and that graduates have the knowledge and skills to be successful in the workplace and in society. Before we spend money on new programs, we should make sure the programs we're already paying for are working.

View 3 - It is not the community's job to help families succeed; families need to take responsibility for themselves.

Families can look out for their own well being. Parents know what is best for their children - from discipline to literacy. Families must do things like limit TV viewing and monitor what kids watch. Too many families leave children on their own before- and after-school, and don't tell their children how important education is. No community agency can take the place of a family.

View 4 - We need to make better use of family services in our community.

There are already many services to help families in our community. Public agencies, libraries, schools, religious groups, businesses and others all offer them. Families just need to take better advantage of them. Support services like school breakfasts, health clinics, WIC programs, adult education and other outreach efforts increase the likelihood that families will be better able to support the learning needs of their children. These must be publicized more broadly and frequently.

View 5 - We must devote sufficient resources to the families that face the greatest challenges.

We need to make this a priority. And if existing resources aren't enough, we need to start looking into innovative ways to improve the situation. We must support families during their children's important learning years. If young children have supportive home environments and positive learning experiences, they are much more likely to succeed in school and in life. We must support the families and professionals in our community. This may mean paying higher taxes for community services.

View 6 - We should work to highlight family literacy in our community.

We need to make family literacy a part of everyone's way of doing business. We should direct all of our efforts to programs and activities with proven track records for improving literacy in the community - through community bookmobiles, training for childcare providers, giving information to pediatricians and health clinics, providing information at local supermarkets, through public access TV, and through messages from religious leaders.

Preparing for Session 4

These questions will help you think about our discussion.

- ◆ What new ideas came up during this session?
- ◆ Does our study circle seem to be “leaning” in one direction? What approaches seem to make sense to most people in our group?
- ◆ Which ideas seem most important to work on?
- ◆ Which seem like ideas that we can work on together?
- ◆ How is our study circle going? Are there things we should do differently next time?

Before our next session think of other terms for “family literacy.”

- ◆ How would you describe it to friends or family?
- ◆ Can you come up with a description that would fit on a bumper sticker?

Family Literacy: What Can WE Do?

Session 4

Are there any thoughts about our last session that you would like to share?

What are some of your ideas for describing family literacy to others? Does anyone have a bumper sticker they want to share?

There are many ways to make a difference. In this session, we will talk about possible action. We will look more closely at some of the most promising ideas from past sessions, and use what we have learned about our community.

How can local schools help?

How can health care providers help?

How can libraries support family literacy?

How can community colleges help?

Who else can volunteer?

How can local merchants help?

How can the faith community help?

How can government agencies help?

How can senior citizens help?

How can YOU help?

Consider the following discussion questions as you begin generating action ideas for yourself and our community. Remember to consider 3 levels of participation - individual, small group, community.

- ◆ What can we do in our own homes to improve family literacy?
- ◆ What is already happening to improve family literacy in our community?
- ◆ Which organizations - businesses, civic organizations, non-profits, government agencies - are already involved in family literacy activities? What other groups might help? How can we approach them?
- ◆ What, if any, gaps exist in our current services to families?
- ◆ Are there services that are duplicative?
- ◆ How can we locate families who need services, but who are not getting them?
- ◆ How have communities similar to ours effectively solved similar problems? How can we learn more about those efforts, and how can we use what we learn?
- ◆ What are the strengths of our families, our community, our schools? What assets are unused? How can we put those assets to work?
- ◆ What steps do we want to take? What type of support or help do we need to take these steps?

The Action Ideas below are just suggestions to get you started.

These ideas reflect different strategies for supporting families, enhancing the well-being of their children, and creating a literate community environment. You might start by asking yourself which action idea best fits your views and our community.

Sometimes it seems that one person can't do much to make a difference. We often overlook or take for granted the simple, everyday things that each of us can do.

What are simple things that each one of us can do?

- ◆ Read and talk to your children every day. After they can read by themselves, keep reading together, and talk with them about what they are reading and what they think.
- ◆ Set an example for children by reading; explain how you as an adult use reading every day in your life.
- ◆ Spend time with children in your family and community.
- ◆ Attend parent-teacher conferences and family nights at your child's school. Contact your child's teacher between meetings to check in and find out how your child is doing.
- ◆ Participate in community adult and continuing education classes.
- ◆ If you have difficulty reading, tell your stories. Hearing about family history and experiences will help children develop an appreciation of language, storytelling and the past.
- ◆ Volunteer at neighborhood schools, community centers and other local organizations.
- ◆ Listen and talk with young people you know - about their activities, friends, concerns, what is happening in school, what they are learning, homework, what they are watching on television.
- ◆ Take advantage of learning opportunities for yourself and your family at your job.

What could a few of us do as a group?

- ◆ Organize volunteers to read to children - go to schools, hospitals or day care centers. Share your skills and talents with children. Tutor children who need extra help.
- ◆ Link senior citizen groups to children to read to each other.
- ◆ Get together with other families and talk about your concerns and ideas on family literacy.
- ◆ Go to teachers and administrators with your questions and concerns on a regular basis. Ask about what children in our schools are learning and what you can do to help.
- ◆ Promote after-school and summer programs in our community that foster literacy-related skills and opportunities.

- ◆ Join or develop local partnerships (such as Literacy Volunteers) to support students and families who want or need more learning time beyond what the school offers.
- ◆ Advocate for family literacy at the local and state policy level. Let policy makers know that a highly literate population is important to keep our community thriving.
- ◆ Familiarize yourself with the academic standards in our state.
- ◆ Get real data on the level of adult literacy in our community.
- ◆ Find out whether our schools have high standards and clear expectations for students.
- ◆ Ask for real data and information about student performance and progress.

What could a local business do?

- ◆ Join Adopt-A-School programs.
- ◆ Provide a work environment that allows employees to increase their own achievement and involvement with local schools (e.g., flextime, employee-led tutoring, workplace literacy programs, mentoring).
- ◆ Provide opportunities for students and teachers to visit your workplace to learn about applied job skills.
- ◆ Share business or management expertise with school principals and other education leaders; provide leadership training.
- ◆ Talk to students and school staff about the skills required to be successful in your work place.

What could a community group or organization do?

- ◆ Organize, sponsor or fund more local Study Circles on family literacy.
- ◆ Create more branch libraries in the community.
- ◆ Set up donation boxes for books to be given to families.
- ◆ Organize family literacy programs focusing on computer technology.
- ◆ Sponsor and promote family cultural events through dance, music and storytelling.
- ◆ Organize "Book Buddy" programs.

Appendix

Source of some information above:

The Reading Pathfinder

A service of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

<http://readingpath.org/index.html>

Selected resources: Organizations

Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy

1112 16th Street NW
Suite 340
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-955-6183
Fax: 202-955-8084

Email: sooc@erols.com

<http://www.barbarabushfoundation.com>

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Even Start Family Literacy Program

Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
US Department of Education
600 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202
Phone: 202-260-0991
Fax: 202-260-7764

Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc.

635 James Street
Syracuse, NY 13203-2214
Phone: 315-472-0001
FAX: 315-472-0002

<http://www.literacyvolunteers.org>

National Center for Adult Literacy (NCAL) International Literacy Institute

3910 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104
Phone: 215-898-2100
FAX: 215-898-9804

Email: ncal@literacy.upenn.edu

<http://www.literacyonline.org>

National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL)

Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
105 Smith Level Road, CB#180
Phone: 919-966-7168

FAX: 919-966-7532

<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/>

National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy and Learning (NCSALL)

Harvard Graduate School of Education
101 Nichols House, Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138
Phone: 617-495-4843

Fax: 617-495-4811

Email: ncsall@worldedu.org

<http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/>

National Center for Family Literacy

325 W. Main Street, Suite 200
Louisville, KY 40202-4291
Phone: 502-584-1133
Fax: 502-584-0172

Email: ncfl@famlit.org

<http://www.famlit.org>

National Even Start Association

123 Camina de la Reina, #202 South
San Diego, CA 92108
Phone: 800-977-3731

Fax: 619-297-9107

<http://www.evenstart.org>

National Institute for Literacy (NIFL)

800 Connecticut Ave, NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20006-2712
Phone: 202-632-1500
Fax: 202-632-1512
<http://www.nifl.gov>

PO Box 203
Pomfret, CT 06258
Phone: 860-928-2616
FAX: 860-928-3713
Email: scrc@studycircles.org
<http://www.studycircles.org>

The Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Kent State University
PO Box 5190, 414 White Hall
Kent, OH 44242-0001
Phone: 800-765-2897
<http://literacy.kent.edu>

Bureau of School-Family-Community Partnerships

Connecticut State Department of Education
PO Box 2219
Hartford, CT 06145-2219
Phone: 860-566-5620
Fax: 860-566-2957
Email: sde.partnership@po.state.ct.us
<http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dsi/sfcp/index.htm>

Study Circles Resource Center**Selected resources: Books****Helping your Child Become a Reader.**

US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (2000).
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/hyc.html>

Really Reading! 10 Simple and Effective Methods to Develop Your Child's Love of Reading. Gardner, J. & Myers, L. (1997).
Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corp.

How to Read with Your Children. Wilken, P.A. (1996). Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success. Burns, S., Griffin, P. & Snow, C. (Eds.) (1999). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

NOTES





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Literacy Initiative