

## Component Three: Family Connections

*“The presence of parents can transform the culture of a school.”*

- S.L. Lightfoot

*“Parents are in many ways like teachers, perhaps even more so,  
for they are the teachers of a lifetime.”*

- Simon Glustrom

Language and literacy development begins at birth and is nurtured in the context of the family. Children’s acquisition of language and literacy is supported through positive interactions with parents, caregivers, and teachers. Examples of these interactions include talking to and listening attentively to children, reading to and with children, telling stories to children, singing songs with children, and writing with children.

Early literacy and language activities are significantly impacted by the emotional response of children to their experiences. Expressions of affection during interactions create a positive, consistent emotional bond that demonstrates learning as a natural and joyful part of life (Becher, 1984; Kellaghan, 1993). When children are in safe, loving environments and have opportunities to observe and interact with others, they learn how language and literacy is used to explore, share information, solve problems, build relationships, and create ideas. They readily engage in their ever-expanding world of communication.

### The Home Curriculum

The home is an ideal setting for effectively enhancing children’s language and literacy development. Research on the home curriculum identifies specific patterns of

family life that contribute to children's learning. These practices include the parent-child relationship, the daily routines of family life, and family expectations (Redding, 2000).

Parent-child relationship. Quality literacy interactions that foster a positive parent-child relationship are active learning experiences involving both parent and child. During these exchanges, parents must be fully engaged with the child in the activity. When interacting with the child, the parent or caregiver should show expressiveness. This includes body language and non-verbal behaviors, as well as, tone and volume of voice. Adult facial expressions should display enjoyment and delight in the child's responses. The child should read pleasure, surprise, and approval from all adult non-verbal behaviors.

Parent-child interactions may be structured or unstructured. They are most effective when they involve authentic literacy activities and move the child toward independence. Parents act as powerful models when their children see them using literacy for real purposes in their own lives such as writing grocery lists, paying bills, and reading the newspaper. Talking to children, expanding children's language, and labeling objects and actions build children's vocabulary and are essential to parent-child language and literacy interactions. Careful listening and attentiveness to children's responses give the parent opportunities to model and expand the child's understanding of language and vocabulary.

Daily Routines. As in a school setting, interactions and activities in the child's home environment should be embedded throughout the child's daily routine. Everyday activities such as sharing a meal, changing a diaper, going to the grocery store, telling a

bedtime story, singing songs, picking up toys, and talking on the phone are all opportunities to increase a child's early literacy and language skills.

Most families, regardless of their background, recognize their child's strengths and abilities, and have hopes, dreams, and high expectations for their children to achieve success in school and life. Parents can provide a supportive home environment that will assist their child in meeting or even exceeding expectations in a variety of ways. For instance, parents can listen to their child and encourage the child to talk about what they are doing and thinking. This can be communicated through verbalizations and physical contact. A hug or pat on the back can help a child to persist and to build self-confidence. Children should be allowed to take initiative, make choices, and lead activities.

Appropriate choices and decision-making are important to the child's developing sense of self. When a child has an opportunity to self-select activities, and when an adult follows the child's lead, an increasing level of child responsibility and independence is achieved.

### Home-School Partnerships

Three decades of research have demonstrated strong linkages between family involvement in education and school achievement. An important role for educators in building home-school partnerships is encouraging and providing opportunities for meaningful family involvement. Family involvement must reflect a family-support philosophy with emphasis on building upon family strengths and developing partnerships with families based on mutual respect and responsibility.

Early Childhood educators can work collaboratively with parents to determine the most appropriate home extension activities. For children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), home activities support attainment of identified goals and objectives,

making the partnership between school and home genuine and effective. This may include assessing needs collaboratively, linking the child and family to available services, and identifying roles and responsibilities for school personnel and parents. Educational materials and resources should also be provided to the family.

### Family Involvement Literacy Activities at School

To ensure optimal support of a child's language and literacy development, materials should be shared with the parents along with an appropriate level of parental instruction. Parent education can take place in the home through a home visit or at the early childhood center. Parent education may include promotion of specific behaviors by parents to enhance their role as effective supporters of their child's literacy progress.

Perhaps the most powerful form of family involvement occurs when parents are actively engaged with their children at home in ways that enhance learning. In a review of literature on parent involvement in education, Thorkildsen and Stein (1998) reported three main themes emerged from the studies they reviewed: 1) A supportive home environment provided by parents with high expectations for their child's success in school consistently has the strongest relationship with achievement; 2) Parent communication with the school is important, as is communication between the parent and child about school; and 3) Parents need strong, ongoing support from schools to provide effective parent involvement.

Suggestions for Involving Families in Classroom Literacy Activities. Some families may be reluctant to come to school events due to lack of time, their own negative school experiences, and cultural incongruity. Effective family involvement activities are those that enhance family/school communication, without putting additional demands on

already overburdened families. These activities go beyond traditional family involvement strategies, reflecting a philosophy of creating inclusive, supportive family-school partnerships. They are activities that are embedded into the school curriculum and community.

The following family involvement literacy activities and events currently take place at Cherry Valley Elementary School and the CO-TEACH Preschool Program. Some, if not all of these activities, can be easily adapted and incorporated into other early childhood settings. To participate in a child's preschool classroom experience family members can:

- ✓ **Observe and visit schools** - Family members are as much a part of the preschool program as the children are. Families are welcome to participate at school as often as their schedules allow. Families may come to school simply to observe, or as they become comfortable, they can assist teachers and children and teach activities or share their special talents. Upon arrival, family members and other classroom visitors should check in with the classroom teacher, put on a nametag, and sign the Visitor Log. (See Appendix C for the Visitor Log.)
  
- ✓ **Teach a learning center, small group, snack table, or circle activity** - Families have many special abilities and talents to share at school. Whether it is teaching an art activity, playing a musical instrument, or cooking a snack, families are welcome to participate at school. Early literacy skills such as sequencing, keeping rhythm, and following recipe directions require adult facilitation and child repetition and practice.

- ✓ **Read books to children in the classroom library** - Parents can read to children individually or in small groups. The library includes the following items that are available for families to check out: board books, paperback books, child-published books, interactive books, big books, photo albums, catalogs, magazines, and books on tape. (See Appendix C for the Classroom Book Check Out form.)
- ✓ **Assist children at the writing center** – The writing center provides an opportunity for children, along with their families, to engage in print awareness activities such as: using writing utensils; writing symbols, letters, names, and numbers; writing letters and addressing envelopes; using stamps and stickers; labeling objects; and making books.
- ✓ **Read and complete the Early Literacy Family Feedback Form** – The Early Literacy Family Feedback Form is a quick, easy questionnaire that asks families to reflect on their literacy practices and their child’s literacy progress at school. (See Appendix C for the Early Literacy Family Feedback Form.)
- ✓ **Attend a puppet show performance** - Puppet Shows at preschool focus on quality children’s literature with repetition and rhyme, repeated readings, imaginary play, language use, writing or print awareness, and family involvement. Children write invitations to be sent home, decorate their puppets and backdrop, and learn their speaking parts. Then they put on a puppet performance at school for their families. Family members are

all welcome to attend or to assist with any of the preparations. (See Appendix C for “We’re Having a Puppet Show” Lesson Plan.)

- ✓ **Make a photo album page with a child for the class family photo album and family bulletin board** – Parents and children design, decorate, and label a photo page together. Each child shares the photo page with the class and uses language skills to “read” the descriptions and tell stories of the events. The pages are collected into a “Class Family Photo Album” and put in the classroom library. (See Appendix C for a Family Photo Album lesson plan.)
- ✓ **Read bi-weekly newsletters** – Newsletters are an excellent way to communicate between school, families, and children about daily early literacy and language activities. Newsletters also provide families with information about daily lessons, new concepts, or target vocabulary. Families can use the newsletter as a discussion tool to prepare children for upcoming school events. (See Appendix A for a Sample Newsletter – “The Very Hungry Caterpillar.”)
- ✓ **Read and relax in the Family Center** – The Family Center is designed to give dads, moms, grandparents, and siblings a place to relax, visit, read, put puzzles together, and play. It provides an opportunity for parents to connect with one another and to exchange ideas and information. The Family Center allows parents to read research materials or magazines, and drink coffee or water, while younger siblings play with toys or look at books.

- ✓ **Recognize and reinforce children for following school rules such as using *Good Talking Words*** (Paulson and van den Pol, 1998) - *Good Talking Words (GTW)* incorporates basic social communication skills to teach young children what interacting appropriately in social settings with their peers and adults looks like, sounds like, and feels like. (See Appendix C for a *Good Talking Words* letter to parents.) Twelve lessons target social skills using puppets, colored pictures, quality children’s literature, posters, and certificates. *GTW* includes a family component that encourages consistent vocabulary and expectations across school and home settings to enhance development of social communication skills in young children.
- ✓ **Attend and participate in “Family Fun with Food” snack activity –** Family Fun with Food snack activities encourage family involvement at school, as well as alliteration skills, by inviting family members to come to school and eat snacks based on the first sounds in names, for example: Muffins for Moms, Garden Soup for Grandparents, Pancakes for Papas, and Sundaes for Siblings. Children write invitations to their family members and address envelopes. All family members are welcome! (See Appendix C for “Family Fun with Food” snack activities.)
- ✓ **Attend and participate in “Family Book-making Night” –** Children and families bring any items from home that they want to include in their books and can choose what type of books they want to make. The school provides the materials such as: markers, crayons, stickers, scissors, paint,

glitter, and construction paper. Families are welcome to make an extra copy or an extra book for someone special. The classroom digital camera is available to check out and take pictures. Make it a potluck event and call it “Family Feed and Read!” (See Appendix C for a sample Family Book-making Night invitation.)

- ✓ **Attend and participate in “Family Fun Nights”** - These informal evenings offer a setting for parents to get to know one another and school staff. They also provide opportunities for teachers to discuss how family members can participate in their children’s education. The goal is to get families involved in literacy activities with their children and to establish a habit that keeps going.
- ✓ **Create “Traveling Books”** – Traveling books are written collaboratively in class, with each child contributing a page on a shared topic. These books demonstrate child progress, individually and collectively as a class. The children then take the traveling book home to read with their parents. The traveling book then returns to school and becomes part of the classroom library.
- ✓ **Volunteer to assist with “Friday Afternoon Clubs”** – Children identify skills that they would like to learn that may not be included in daily classroom activities. Each class lasts for six weeks, includes 10-12 children of different ages and grade levels, and is facilitated by a teacher, an aide, or a community member. Clubs include crafts, needlework, dancing, Native American culture and traditions, hands-on computer,

science, health, drama, sports, games, and art. Students create the activities that meet their individual needs and interests.

- ✓ **Facilitate living books on the computer** – The classroom computer is an excellent tool to promote early literacy and language skills in young children. Families can work with children at the computer and encourage skills such as problem-solving; color, letter, number, and word identification; taking turns; and waiting, just to name a few. At the computer, children have opportunities to create their own interactive stories, to hear stories read, to listen to and sing along with songs, to experience rhymes, and to play with and manipulate words
- ✓ **Accompany class on field trips** – Family members are invited and encouraged to accompany the class on educational field trips. (See Appendix C for a sample Field Trip Release form.) Field trips provide opportunities for children to learn about their communities. Examples include: hiking in the mountains, riding the carousel, visiting the humane society, going to the post office, cleaning up garbage near the school, and going to the public library. Upon returning from a field trip, children write a class thank you note to the community field trip host and engage in a writing extension activity such as making a class book, drawing a picture, or labeling photos taken on the field trip.

### Home and Community Extension Literacy Activities

Recognizing that families have naturally occurring literacy events and strengths is critical to developing appropriate home extension literacy activities. It is necessary to

recognize and consider cultural backgrounds, learning styles, personalities, skills, and interests when selecting family home extension activities. Young children acquire language and literacy best in situations compatible with their home culture. Parents and children alike are inherently curious, intrinsically motivated, self-directed learners who can construct knowledge through interactions with others and their environment.

Early literacy and language activities that are implemented in the early childhood preschool setting can easily be extended to the home environment in a variety of ways. The school or early childhood setting can offer support to the language and literacy development of children by providing education and materials to parents to help create literacy rich environments for children. The home setting can provide a variety of literacy materials that are easily accessible to the child and a space to use them. Materials include books and other forms of print, writing tools and paper, paints, blocks and other toys.

Parents can support their child's literacy development through verbal and non-verbal interactions. Smiling, listening, watching, making eye contact, and being in close proximity are as important as the verbal interactions of talking or asking questions. These behaviors help strengthen the positive emotional bond between parent and child and encourage the child to take risks and build confidence as they try new words and phrases in their emerging communication skills.

Families can further support their children's literacy development by creating a language and literacy-rich home environment and by having the materials, space, and time for quality literacy events and interactions. Parents provide encouragement by giving recognition and by valuing their child's early literacy achievements through praise

and celebration, in much the same way they naturally do for walking, talking, and other developmental milestones.

Suggestions for Including Families and the Community in Literacy Activities.

The following are suggested home and community literacy extension activities. These activities currently take place at the CO-TEACH Preschool and Cherry Valley Elementary school. Some, if not all of these activities, can be easily adapted and incorporated into other early childhood settings.

Family members can:

- ✓ **Read child-published books with children** – Books that the children create at school can be taken home and read with family members.  
Published books are books that the children author and illustrate.
- ✓ **Read books from the home book bags** – Each day, children take home a book in their home book bags to read to parents or other family members. The family member then writes comments about the story and the child's reading.
- ✓ **Check out library books and other educational resources, such as videos, from the classroom** – Classroom library books and other educational resources can be checked out, taken home, and shared with family members. (See Appendix C for the Classroom Book Check Out form.)
- ✓ **Read student portfolios** – Individual student portfolios can be sent home to families twice a year. Portfolios include child work, photographs, favorite activities, and descriptions of child abilities. Student portfolios

are presented to families in a “book” format that can be read by both child and parent.

- ✓ **Invite teachers for a home visit** – Teachers can be invited to visit or meet with families in their homes and can bring literacy extension activities that are fun, easy to implement, and engaging for the whole family.
- ✓ **Attend early literacy conferences, parent education opportunities, and family seminars** – Schools often provide educational opportunities for family members. For instance, at CO-TEACH, a weekly staff seminar takes place each Tuesday at 4:00 PM. Families are invited to attend and sometimes even participate as guest speakers. Educational topics discussed include, but are not limited to: early intervention, inclusive preschool practices, individual student needs, instructional strategies, family involvement, school safety, early literacy and language skills, social communication skills, reducing challenging behavior, providing positive behavioral supports, data collection, curriculum and assessment, and kindergarten transition.
- ✓ **Attend public library nights** – Schools can inform parents about literacy opportunities and events that take place in the community, such as public library nights, book fairs, and theatre.
- ✓ **Include the larger community** – at Cherry Valley Elementary School, parents regularly bring children’s published books to local doctors’ and dentists’ offices. Local residents can not only read the latest student

works, but they can also sign their name and write responses to the book on the comment page.

- ✓ **Floppy Rabbit’s Journal** – Each night, a stuffed rabbit named Floppy goes home with a different child, armed with a reading bag that contains literacy materials such as Picture Story / Word Story journaling activity and colored pencils. On the first page, “Welcome to Floppy Rabbit’s Journal,” it is explained to parents that because Floppy is not too good at writing yet, it is up to the child who takes Floppy home to confer with parents to facilitate the journaling activity. The child draws a picture story about Floppy’s stay, and then “writes” a word story about the adventure. Parents are encouraged to write their own version of Floppy’s stay, so children can see that their parents also enjoy writing.
- ✓ **Intergenerational relationships** – At Cherry Valley, children visit the local nursing home and become friends with one or more residents. Children then interview the residents, who frequently tell stories about their lives. Young children remember as much as they can and then draw a picture and “write” a story about the interview, publish it, and take it back to the nursing home, where they read it to the elderly residents.
- ✓ **Participate in activities included in family literacy bags** – Literacy bags that contain literacy materials including books, puzzles, and writing materials can be sent home with children or delivered by a teacher during a home visit. (See Appendix C for a Sample Family Literacy Bag – “The

Very Hungry Caterpillar.") Below is a description of the Family Literacy Bag development and process.

### Family Literacy Bags

The foundation of children's literacy learning is laid in the home. The Montana Early Literacy Project includes a Family Literacy Bag component to complement each Literacy Tub. Each Literacy Bag is designed around a Literacy Tub theme, contains 3-5 theme-related books, a story extension activity, a writing activity, and supplemental materials such as a craft activity or an educational game.

### Family Literacy Bag Development Process

The following steps provide instructions for teachers and caregivers to follow when developing the Family Literacy Bag activities.

#### **Step 1.** Involve families

- ✓ Learn about family literacy in the region.
- ✓ Survey parents regarding amount of time spent engaged in reading and writing activities with their children.

#### **Step 2.** Select and gather materials

##### Considerations for material selection:

- ✓ Invite parent suggestions about material selection.
- ✓ Use developmentally appropriate resources and materials that encourage family involvement and are easily manageable in the home setting (books, paper, writing utensils, puzzles, computer software, audio tapes, videos)?
- ✓ 3-5 books that relate to the Literacy Tub theme
- ✓ a writing activity

- ✓ a game or craft activity
- ✓ include materials for homes with adults with limited literacy skills (books on tape, videos, wordless book, pictorial directions for crafts)
- ✓ all materials needed to complete the tasks
- ✓ a container to hold all the materials

**Step 4.** Create an introduction lesson for each Literacy Bag activity. This lesson can be shared with the family to introduce a Family Literacy Bag at a home visit.

**Step 5.** Create a family information card for each Literacy Bag that includes key vocabulary, concepts, and tips to involve children in the activities. This card can be given to the family at the home visit.

**Step 6.** Send an information letter about the Literacy Bags to the families, and invite them to sign up for an initial home visit.

**Step 7.** Assess success of the Family Literacy Bags by including a comment card for families to evaluate the usefulness of the literacy bag activities.

### Family Literacy Bag Implementation Process

The following steps provide instructions for families to follow when implementing the Family Literacy Bag activities.

**Step 1.** Designate a time free from distractions to implement one or two of the literacy extension activities. Find a quiet and comfortable place to explore the literacy bag with your child.

**Step 2.** Take your time. There is no need to complete the entire bag in one night. Spread the activities out over a several days.

**Step 3.** Include siblings and make it a family literacy event.

**Step 4.** Encourage your child to choose what he would like to do from the bag. It is okay for your child to choose the same book repeatedly. Children learn and gain literacy confidence from the repetition and familiarity with the text.

**Step 5.** If your child is resistant to an activity, set it aside. Try the activity again another day.

**Step 6.** Before reading, look through the books with your child and talk about the pictures. Try to connect the pictures to something in your child's world. For example, when looking at a book about butterflies, you might say, "Look at the pretty butterfly. We saw butterflies at the park last night."

**Step 7.** Reread stories and repeat activities. Children are soon able to predict what will come next and "read" along with you. When reading a familiar book with a repeated phrase, leave off the last word and encourage your child to complete the phrase.

**Step 8.** While reading the book, periodically ask your child, "What will happen next?" Even if your child is familiar with the story, ask this question because it gives your child confidence and pride in knowing the correct answer.

**Step 9.** At the end of the story, ask your child an opinion question, for example, "Do you think butterflies sleep?" or "Where would you fly if you were a butterfly?"

**Step 10.** Allow your child to decide when you are done working with the materials. If you are having trouble engaging your child, set a simple goal. For example, tell your child, "Today we will read one book from your school bag." Then allow your child to choose which book she would like to read with you.

**Step 11.** Initially, it is not necessary to read every word in the book. Start by just looking at the pictures and labeling objects in the picture with your child. This will slowly capture your child's interest and increase your child's attention span.

**Step 12.** Expand upon themes that interest your child. Go to the library and find additional books and resources.

**Step 13.** Have fun spending quality time with your child (ren)!

Family Literacy Bags encourage families to participate in early literacy and language activities that benefit children by providing materials and educational support. The Family Literacy Bags include extension activities that allow a child to interact with his family members while practicing skills that are being learned at school. This activity increases the likelihood that a child will be able to generalize literacy skills across settings. Furthermore, the Family Literacy Bags serve as a vehicle for schools to communicate with families about how to interact with children in terms of reading and writing.