Executive Summary

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Tennessee Family Literacy Consortium

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Over the past three years, the Tennessee Department of Education and the Tennessee Family Literacy Consortium, through an Even Start Family Literacy Initiative Grant, have been seeking ways to build on existing local and state capacity to promote quality family literacy efforts. The aim is to strengthen, expand, coordinate, and, as appropriate, integrate existing federal, state, and local resources to sustain literacy programs that focus on families as the unit of service. Consortium membership includes representatives from the Departments of Labor and Workforce Management, Human Services, and numerous programs within the Department of Education; the Commission on Children and Youth; community-based organizations; institutions of higher education; and consultants. The monograph, Family Literacy in Tennessee: A Design for the Future (available from Susan Doughty, 615-532-2717, or at http://cls.coe.utk.edu/tnfamilit/), offers a comprehensive review of family literacy definitions, models and research-based efficacy; state and national policies; existing services and needs; data from statewide surveys and interviews; and policy recommendations. This summary provides a snapshot of that information.

What is family literacy?

Family literacy:
- Offers families facing intergenerational poverty and illiteracy a means to develop self-sufficiency through their own efforts.
- Combines early childhood education programs for children, including infants and toddlers; planned literacy activities with parents and children; and parenting and life-skills development with adult basic education.
- Produces specific benefits for both children and parents, including the improvement of reading, writing, and language skills; improved attitudes toward reading, writing, teachers, and school; and increased respect and valuing of education (Padak, & Rasinski, 1994).
- Supports the role the family plays in helping all of its members grow and develop into educated citizens ready to contribute to the family, the community, and the nation as members of the workforce, as leaders in the community, and as guides for the next generation (Wasik, Dobbins, & Herrmann, 2001).

Is there evidence-based support for family literacy?

Data gathered from more than 60 National Center for Family Literacy sites across 14 states that enrolled more than 2,000 families over a five-year period indicate that families remained active in family literacy programs longer and attended more frequently than those in typical adult-focused programs, literacy activity in the home increased, and adults showed significant gains in language and math skills (National Center for Family Literacy, 1996).

In a comparison study involving over 500 former Even Start families up to six years after program exit (National Center for Family Literacy, 1997):
- Fifty-four percent of the participating adults who were seeking educational credentials earned a GED or high school certification.
- Forty percent continued to make educational progress by enrolling in higher education or training programs.
- Forty-five percent increased their self-sufficiency by reducing or eliminating their dependence on public assistance.
- Teacher ratings indicate that they received support from 83% of the participating parents.
- As measured by teacher rating, 75% of the children were projected to be successful in school.
- Ninety percent of the children earned satisfactory grades in reading, language, and mathematics (National Center for Family Literacy, 1997).

A research synthesis on family literacy programs confirmed that studies have consistently produced results showing that participants experience increased positive parent-child literacy interactions in the home (Tracey, 1994).

Do family literacy programs boost school achievement?

The majority of children struggling with reading problems in school are members of families in poverty with little education (Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2001). Family-based risk factors associated with difficulties in reading for children include:
- Poverty (Children’s Defense Fund, 1994).
- Parents with a history of reading difficulties (Scarborough, 2001).
- Home literacy environments where supportive elements (such as print materials; children’s books; listening and storytelling opportunities; knowledge of narrative structure; literacy as a source of enjoyment; and vocabulary and discourse patterns) are restricted or missing (Watson, 2001; Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, & Angel, 1994).
- Limited verbal interactions within the home (Hart & Risley, 1995, 1999); a language other than English as the primary spoken language (Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000; Tabors & Snow, 2001); or use of a nonstandard dialect within the home (Hess & Holloway, 1984).

Family literacy programs can offset these risk factors. The family literacy model offers a means to improve the
parents' skills in reading and supports them in their efforts to provide literacy activities for their children.

- When parents are shown how to become more responsive and “dialogic” during shared reading, there are gains in their children’s skills (Whitehurst et al., 1994).
- Parent involvement models in schools increase reading skills (Epstein, 1996).
- Family literacy models provide services for both children and their parents so children can motivate their parents to increase literacy for the whole family (National Center for Family Literacy, 1997).
- Family literacy programs support children and parents when families in poverty lack the knowledge, the understanding, the experience of positive role models, or the history needed to build a strong home literacy environment (Whitehurst et al., 1994).
- There is a strong link between parental beliefs and attitudes toward literacy and reading and children’s literacy development (Baker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, 1995; DeBaryshe, 1995; Spiegel, 1994). These values, attitudes, and expectations have a long-term effect on children’s attitudes.

The strong emphasis on high quality early childhood education within family literacy programs increases the likelihood that children are successful in school.

How does family literacy fit in the national picture?

Family literacy appears in multiple pieces of federal legislation including the Workforce Investment Act; the Reading Excellence Act; the Community Opportunities, Accountability, and Training and Educational Services Act (Head Start Reauthorization); and the Family Literacy Federal Work-Study Waiver. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 contains many references to family literacy and parent involvement, including direct support for Even Start family literacy programs; mandatory components of programs such as Head Start, Reading First, and Early Reading First; and approved expenditures for several other programs, including Title I preschool programs, education of migratory children, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Does Tennessee need family literacy programs?

Many factors contribute to the successful attainment of educational, personal, and employment goals. The health and well-being of children, educational opportunities, and resources available to parents all contribute to the context of our lives within Tennessee.

- Tennessee consistently ranks poorly on the indicators of child well-being, as reported in the Kids Count Data Book (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001) with a current composite ranking of 43rd among the 50 states.
- The Rural School and Community Trust (2000) has ranked Tennessee as worst in the nation on a composite Education Climate Index that is based on socioeconomic status, comprised of educational attainment, income, and occupational status of people living within each ZIP code.

Additional factors pointing to the need for and likely benefit of family literacy programs include adult literacy levels, dropout rates, high school graduation rates, teen pregnancy, and rates of poverty.

- In Tennessee, 21% of the adult population has Level 1 literacy skills (National Institute for Literacy, 1998), putting the state behind 37 other states. In several counties that rate exceeds 30%.
- Twenty-three Tennessee counties have high school dropout rates that exceed 15%, with one as high as 48%.
- Over 40% of respondents to a statewide survey on family literacy identified infant care, programs for teen parents, and programs of illiterate or undereducated adults as major needs within their community.
- Over 80% of survey respondents indicated some need for ESOL, infant care, preschool programs, programs for teen parents, programs for incarcerated teens or adults, and programs for illiterate or undereducated adults.
- Approximately 50% of survey respondents identified scheduling for working parents, transportation, and child care as “significant” barriers to their ability to provide comprehensive family literacy within their communities, and approximately 90% viewed these as barriers to some degree.
- The need to co-locate parent and child services was also identified as a “significant” barrier by 38% of the respondents, with 85% seeing it as a barrier at some level.
How can Tennessee increase family literacy services?

The following four policy guidelines are put forth to support effective approaches that lead to successful educational and economic independence of those families facing the complexities of poverty and other potential barriers to these ends.

1. Identify the family as the unit of service of educational and social service agencies.
2. Build on existing resources to create family literacy models of service delivery.
3. Outline a continuum of services that includes components, as well as comprehensive models, with specific, obtainable, and measurable goals.
4. Increase the visibility of family literacy concepts for adult educators, early childhood educators, public health professionals, human services workers, and others.

Policy guidelines must be translated into action. It is the responsibility of public and community agencies throughout Tennessee to make the guidelines a part of state practices.

Family literacy offers a model of services for Tennessee families facing complex, intergenerational economic and educational struggles. For infants/toddlers and preschool children, family literacy offers opportunities to develop pre-literacy, pre-language, and pre-numeracy. School-age children enrolled in family literacy programs find increased opportunities to develop strong literacy skills. For adults, there are new opportunities to develop literacy skills, increase education and work-related skills, and establish a base of support as they face the challenges of parenting. When offered in sufficient intensity and duration, family literacy programs can transform the lives of adults and children as the adults gain proficient literacy skills and establish economic independence through education.

These efforts prove to be most effective when they reflect a high level of collaboration. When staff members from different agencies and programs work together to cut the red tape, eliminate barriers, and address the needs of the family rather than the needs of individual clients, families can stick with the program, feel a sense of hope, and realize their goals. Collaboration across the community between diverse groups has the potential to help families achieve successful outcomes as everyone works to dissolve barriers to achieving success for the entire family — children and adults. That’s family literacy at its best.

References


