



New York State
Alliance
for Family Literacy

Learning to Learn Together

AN OVERVIEW OF FAMILY LITERACY

The cost of illiteracy is substantial in terms of both personal and social loss. According to the National Right to Read Foundation:⁽¹⁾

- 90 million adults are, at best, functionally literate;
- the cost to taxpayers of adult illiteracy is \$224 billion a year in welfare payments, crime, job incompetence, lost taxes, and remedial education;
- 85 percent of delinquent children and 75 percent of adult prison inmates are illiterate;
- US companies lose nearly \$40 billion annually because of illiteracy.

In New York State:

- 19 percent of the adult population has less than a high school diploma.⁽²⁾
- The average literacy level of Even Start adult learners is between sixth and ninth grade.⁽³⁾

Family literacy is an intergenerational effort intended to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by enhancing the educational opportunities of all family members. This intervention, which cuts across multiple systems, has a broad reach as is evident in the fact that three federal laws govern family literacy—*Workforce Investment Act* which has a prerequisite for federal funding that requires states to develop strategic plans outlining ways they intend to improve adult education and family literacy services; the *Head Start Act* which ensures that children from low income families have access to high quality preschool programs; and *The Leave No Child Behind Act* which seeks to ensure that every child reads well by the end of third grade and which supports the Even Start comprehensive family literacy program.

Even Start family literacy programs are provided to parents who have a low income, low level of adult literacy or English language proficiency and have one or more children under the age of 8 years old.

Components of Family Literacy

Programs designed to promote family literacy integrate four service components: early childhood education, adult basic skills education, parental education and parent-child literacy activities. Family literacy is defined within federal statute as services that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours and of sufficient duration to make sustainable changes in a family and that integrate all of the following activities:

- interactive literacy between parents and their children;
- training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children;
- parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency and;
- an age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences.

- There are 69 Even Start programs that provide comprehensive family literacy services in New York State.
- Participant demographics:
 - 85 percent of newly enrolled families in Even Start programs are at or below the poverty level.
 - 84 percent of parents have not attained their high school diploma or GED and 46 percent of parents have not attained education higher than the ninth grade level.
 - The average income of Even Start families upon entry to the program is \$9300.
 - 61 percent of adult participants work either full or part-time upon entry into the program.
 - 55 percent of families describe themselves as white; 9 percent as Black/African-American; 4 percent as Asian; 1 percent as Native American; 5 percent as 2 or more races; and 16 percent as other.
 - In 2000-2001, 34 percent of children in the program were under 3 years old, 38 percent were ages 3-5 and 28 percent were 6 and over. 49 percent of children were female and 51 percent of children were male.⁽³⁾

Interactive Literacy Activities between Parents and Children:

features parent and child participation in shared learning. With guidance from program staff, parents and children engage in positive interactions—particularly activities that focus on the development of children's literacy and language. This is intended to place children

on equal footing with children from other income levels since children in low-income families are more likely to be slow in the development of oral language skills, letter knowledge and phonological processing skills prior to school entry.^(4,5)

However, the provision of literacy experiences for children (e.g., buying and reading books) was the strongest long-term predictor of children's achievement in word recognition, vocabulary and reading comprehension.⁽⁵⁾

Parenting Education: fosters parenting skills through parenting classes, parent support groups, and home-based instruction. For example, parents receive training regarding general child development and learn ways to be the primary teachers for their children. This emphasis on parenting skills is important since parenting style can influence children in a variety of ways—parental responsiveness (warmth and support) as well as parental insistence (behavioral control) influence a child's social competence, academic performance, psychosocial development, and problem behavior.⁽⁶⁾

Adult Education: offers parents' opportunities to develop and improve their literacy skills, complete high school diploma requirements and develop basic life and employment skills so parents will be better prepared to ensure family self-sufficiency. For English language learners, it provides the instruction needed to develop fluency in English, as well as building literacy skills in their native languages. Sound educational opportunities for parents are important for children's future well-being since we have learned a parent or other primary caretaker's education is a strong indicator of a child's literacy level.⁽⁷⁾ It has been noted that children whose better educated parent lacks a high school diploma or GED diploma are twice as likely to live in poverty as children whose better educated parent graduated from high school and six times more likely to live in poverty than children with a parent with more than a high school education.⁽⁷⁾

Nationally, we know:

- 56 percent of parents participating in Even Start Family Literacy Programs cite educational improvement (i.e., attainment of General Educational Development (GED) Diploma) as the primary reason for participation; approximately one in five (19%) choose to enroll to improve their child's educational opportunities while 14 percent identify improvement of parenting skills as their primary reason for participation.
- 90 percent of parents in Even Start programs participate in parenting education as compared with 8 percent without the program.
- Between 36 to 54 percent of the parents scored 75 percent or higher on an assessment measuring parenting skills after they participated in Even Start.
- About one in five (23%) of those who were on public assistance when they enrolled in family literacy programs became self-sufficient.^(13, 14)

Early Childhood Education:

provides children with an age-appropriate education that prepares them for success with school and life experiences. Children attend center-based instruction or receive home-based instruction that focuses on literacy skills within a developmentally-appropriate program. The effectiveness of early childhood education for children from low-income families has been documented in numerous studies.

As one researcher explains, "The finding that a well-run,

cognitively oriented early education program will increase IQ scores of low-income children by the end of the program is one of the least disputed results in education and evaluation".⁽⁸⁾ Enrolled children tend to be retained in grade and referred to special education less often, graduate from high school at higher rates than control children and, over time, engage in delinquent behaviors less often than children who were not enrolled.⁽⁸⁻¹⁰⁾

It is well documented that children start learning long before their formal education begins. Recently, the Committee on Integrating the Service of Early Childhood Development stated, "All children are born wired for feelings and ready to learn"⁽¹¹⁾. Typically, children's first learning experiences begin within their own homes as they readily use cues from their caretakers and environment to attach meaning to all they observe and experience. What happens during these early years within the context of the family serves as a foundation for children's future well-being and is the focus of family literacy.

Within New York State:

- Participating parents in Even Start programs demonstrated a 30 percent gain in supporting their children's learning in formal education settings, during the reporting year.
- In addition, 83 percent of participating parents demonstrated a 30 percent gain in supporting interactive literacy activities with their children⁽⁹⁾

Nationally, we know:

- 95 percent of the children enrolled in family literacy programs participate in early childhood education as compared with 60 percent not enrolled.
- 81 percent of participating children made moderate to large sized gains in reading readiness.
- Children enrolled in family literacy programs are better at identifying letters, numbers and words, have higher attendance rates and higher competence than those who are not enrolled.^(12, 13, 14)

Service Integration

Service integration is a unique characteristic of family literacy that sets it apart from other efforts to improve child outcomes. While families might benefit from each service in isolation, an important assumption behind family literacy is the belief that strong service integration can maximize each component.⁽¹⁵⁾ The focus on

families and addressing their needs keeps participants in programs longer. In New York State, over half of the families participating in Even Start have remained in the program for a year or longer ⁽³⁾. The integration of services combined with increased retention of participants strengthens each of the program components (e.g., early childhood, adult education).

Family Literacy Programs in New York State

Currently, there are 69 Even Start family literacy programs across New York State, funded through the US Department of Education. These programs are developed as partnerships between a local school district or BOCES and a non-profit

community-based service provider. The New York State Alliance for Family Literacy, established in 1999, is a coalition that ensures low-income families with low literacy have access to a comprehensive statewide system of high

quality family literacy services. One method for ensuring quality services is through staff development. The Alliance offers Basic Family Literacy Implementation Training to providers interested in establishing or improving family literacy services. In addition, the Alliance is working with 11 communities across the state with high concentrations of low-income, low-literacy families. By developing local alliances for family literacy, organized efforts are underway to establish comprehensive systems of family literacy services where it can make the most difference in the lives of children and families.

Within New York State:

- Upon entry into NYS Even Start programs, 75 percent of the children ages 6 months to 5 years scored below the 50th percentile on one of the PLS-3 subtests.
- After one year of participation in NYS Even Start, 52 percent of children ages 1-5 whose score was at or below the PLS level in either auditory comprehension or expressive communication increased their percentile ranking.
- 62 percent of children in NYS Even Start are reading at or above their grade level.⁽³⁾

Members of the Alliance include representatives from state agencies, early childhood and adult education providers, colleges and universities and other organizations involved in the provision of literacy education.

Nationally, we know:

- 90 percent of the adults in family literacy programs participated in adult education as compared with 35 percent without the program.
- Parents in family literacy programs achieved greater gains in TABE reading and math than parents who were not in the program.
- 22 percent of adults in Even Start attain their GED whereas only 6 percent of non-Even Start adults achieve the same goal.
- About four in ten (43%) of parents involved in family literacy became employed, compared with 14 percent before enrolling; 13 percent enrolled in higher education or training programs and another 11 percent continued in GED programs.^(13, 14)

Effectiveness of Family Literacy

Benefits to Families: The intent of family literacy is to recognize the literacy needs of families and serve entire families rather than children alone, or adults alone, since it is understood that the context of the home strongly influences children's outcomes.^(12, 13, 14)

Benefits to Children: Decades of research have shown that early education helps improve the cognitive and academic functioning of children, particularly children who come from economically disadvantaged families and communities.^(12, 16, 17, 18, 19)

Benefits to Adults: Generally, adults attending adult basic education services have low participation rates and tend to underutilize the adult education services that might help them achieve their education or employment goals. This is a key concern for program administrators since we have learned participation is related to positive outcomes.^(13, 14, 16)

Within New York State:

- 65 percent of all adults in Even Start programs who have completed a 100-hour block of adult education and who pre-tested at 0-8.9 on the TABE (reading or math), demonstrated a one grade-level gain.
- 40 percent of adults participating in Even Start, who scored 9.0 or higher in the reading and math sections of the TABE, attained their goal of earning a high school diploma or GED during the program year. **Note:** Only those adults who had such a goal were figured into this statistic.
- 80 percent of Even Start participants who had the goal of entering post-secondary school, job training or retraining, non-subsidized employment, the military, or obtaining career advancement, did so within the program year. The majority of adults chose employment over furthering their education.⁽³⁾

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For more information/assistance:

NYS Alliance for Family Literacy - www.familyliteracyinnys.org

National Center for Family Literacy - www.familit.org

National Reading Panel - www.nationalreadingpanel.org

READ*WRITE*NOW! - www.ed.gov/Family/RWN/Activ97

Checkpoints for Progress in Reading and Writing - www.ed.gov/pubs/CheckFamilies



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