

Parent Involvement and Children's Reading

The PUP Toolkit is built on decades of research that has documented the effects of parent involvement in developing children's skills on the path to strong reading. Parents are a key ingredient in laying the foundation for reading success.

Why is it the case that a big part of reading success has to do with parent involvement? Well, there are two key ways that parents influence children's reading success:

1. Through "daily learning" opportunities. Because of the bond between parents and children and because of how much time they spend together, children can learn a whole lot of language and a lot about the world.
2. Through "stage setting." Because parents set the tone of the home environment, they are in an ideal position to create an environment that includes strong signals about the importance of reading activities and reading practice for school and life success.

What are the key research findings by child age?

Infants and Toddlers. Studies with parents of infants and toddlers show that the way parents talk with their babies influences children's brain development and their ability to learn sounds and words (including how sounds are interpreted and how thoughts get translated into speech). The studies show that gesturing, especially pointing, towards objects while talking to their babies ("Look, a ball!") is especially important for helping babies learn sounds and words—the evidence shows a direct connection between the sounds babies hear and how they speak. From there, we know that babies' understanding of sounds and how they speak relates to their vocabulary growth and development, which is critical for understanding stories and books, and also relates to how they are able to match letters to sounds when a child is learning how to read the words on the page. Here are some snapshots to give an idea of research in this area:

- One study found that when parents label objects during play, rather than just play with the object, the infant was more likely to learn the label for that object.
- Another study measured the number of "wh-" (who, what, where, when, why) parents asked during their interactions with their toddlers and found that the amount of these "wh-" questions asked was linked to children's growth in vocabulary and verbal reasoning skills one year later—key skills for later reading success.

Preschoolers and Kindergartners. The studies with preschoolers and kindergartners highlight the importance of parents engaging in certain kinds of reading activities, especially reading to children, visiting the library, and having conversations that build children’s vocabulary, make a big difference along children’s path to reading success. For example, in a study with 1174 families, researchers found that the following parent-child activities had positive effects on children’s reading development: parent-child joint book reading, whether the parent is reading to the child and talking about the book, or the child is “reading” to the parent, as well as parents’ explicitly teaching their child about the sounds that letters make, and even using word cards to help with vocabulary learning.

Early Elementary Grades. During these years, the research shows that the parent’s role in helping to develop their child’s reading-related skills can and should take two different forms:

1. Engaging in Reading-Related Activities. To keep engaging in the kinds of reading-related activities that have been shown to be effective with preschoolers and kindergartners—but of course the topics and ideas in the books and the conversations and learning experiences can and should become more challenging and complex, to match children’s growing minds and knowledge about the world.

2. Setting up a Home Environment for Reading Success. The second way that research has shown parents can promote their young reader’s skills doesn’t look and feel anything like the activities described above—it’s about setting up the home environment and routines in a way that emphasizes the importance of reading. For example, recent research shows the following are all key steps in promoting children’s reading and academic success:

- setting up a desk with books in the children’s bedroom or in a place in the home that’s clearly for reading time and homework;
- leaving books and magazines around the house; and
- establishing daily routines and/or set times for reading with children

What’s important about this home environment is that it helps children create a positive reading identity, regardless of background or socio-economic status, and it signals to children the importance of reading in daily life and the importance of organizing for reading and school success.