

Longhorn Literacy Nights - A Celebration of Family Literacy

by Andrea Clonch, Dee Kirby, and Dee Ann Shelton



Living in poverty frequently impacts both the oral and literate language skills of children. While parents do the best they can in their circumstances,

by the age of 4 to 5 years, children from middle- and upper-income families have linguistic advantages and skills that far outweigh those of children from low-income families (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2008). It has been estimated that children from middle-income homes may experience up to 1,700 hours of one-on-one (parent-child) picture book reading prior to entering the first grade; whereas, children from lower-income families may experience as few as 25 hours (Pence, 2007). This research, along with experience in working with children in Title I schools, was the catalyst for the development of *Longhorn Literacy Nights - A Celebration of Family Literacy*. Because parents are children's first and often best teachers, *Longhorn Literacy Nights* was designed to facilitate a partnership between parents, teachers, university faculty and students, and speech-language pathologists to improve the language and literacy skills of children.

Each year the Abilene Education Foundation provides a Supporting Teachers through Academic Resources (STAR) grant program through which teachers in the Abilene Independent School District can apply for grants of up to \$1000. With this in mind, a kindergarten teacher and two speech-language pathologists collaborated to write a grant for a literacy program. Twenty kindergarten/first grade students who showed the greatest need for intervention based on the results of the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) were targeted. During 6 nights of the school year, the children and their families were to share a meal and participate in the reading of a children's book. Afterward, families were to participate in shared language and

literacy activities designed to help develop skills such as phonological awareness (e.g. alphabetic knowledge, rhyming, syllabication, and word segmentation), vocabulary, and fluency. During each group activity, the teacher would model how to present and use the activity so the parent could do the same at home. Child care/alternate structured activities were to be provided for siblings. At the conclusion of each evening, families were to receive a "story sack," which consisted of at least one children's book and several related literacy activities to do together at home.

Now step back to a night in mid-October - the first night of *Longhorn Literacy Nights - A Celebration of Family Literacy*. Plans and preparations for this evening had been taking place since August. Volunteers waited anxiously like children on Christmas morning for the families to arrive. As the parents and children came in, name tags were put on and fluffy plastic leis were draped around everyone's necks. Teachers, volunteers, children, and parents began meeting one another, and, as the talking and laughter rose, it was announced that dinner was ready. The aroma of a Southern kitchen filled the warm evening air in the cafeteria as families and volunteers lined up to fill their plates with fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and green beans. Camaraderie developed as friendships began to form while the meal was eaten. After dinner, children gathered on the carpet area to hear a story. As the children sat down, the reader for the evening began the story of *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*: "A told B, and B told C, I'll meet you at the top of the coconut tree." Giggles erupted as the story continued, and soon the children picked up the rhythm of the story and joined in with the reader. After the chorus of readers retold the story, the families and teachers divided into three groups for participation in some ABC activities to build alphabetic knowledge.

Shouts of delight, laughter, and words of encouragement could be heard down the halls of Jane Long Elementary School as parents and grandparents worked with their children to build alphabet skills. "The first one to get all their cars (ABCs) in order wins. Everyone start your engines! Ready,

set...GO!" Squeals of "I need the letter C!" and "Hurry! We've got to finish first!" rang out as the race began. A little further down the hall, a chorus of "A told B, and B told C, I'll meet you at the top of the coconut tree" sounded while children retold the story to their families using magnetic letters and cookie sheets with palm trees. Even further down the hall, a child caught a beach ball with a quiet thump. The child looked at his/her right thumb to see what letter it was touching and shouted out, "I know this letter! It's a q!" The ball was then tossed into the air for another child to catch, and the game continued.

Exhausted at the end of the evening, volunteers listened as parents talked about how much they enjoyed the evening. One mother talked about how she wanted her children to "do good in school" so they would not make the same mistakes she had made. As the families left and the school grew dark in the warm autumn evening, echoes of "J told K, I'll meet you at the top of the coconut tree" could still be heard.

Longhorn Literacy Nights was successful on several levels. Not only did it help children be more successful and show parents how they could help their child learn using books and simple games, it also forged a strong bond of collaboration between the community and the school. Aside from the STAR Grant, the project received approximately \$2,500 in additional donations from various individuals and organizations, the provision of some evening meals by area restaurants, and over 600 hours of volunteer support.

Establish a literacy night at your elementary school. Contact Andrea Clonch (andc60@gmail.com), **Dee Kirby** (kirbyd@acu.edu), or **Dee Ann Shelton** (das8@sbcglobal.net) for additional information.

Pence, K.L. (2007). *Assessment in emergent literacy*. San Diego. Plural Publications.

Roseberry-McKibbin, C. (2008). *Increasing language skills of students from low income backgrounds*. San Diego. Plural Publications.