

Presentation to the National Strategy for Early Literacy

by

Bookmates Inc.

Family Literacy Defined

- Literacy can be defined as “the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” (Literacy, Economy and Society 1994).
- Family literacy reflects the belief that literacy develops as a result of shared social experience.
- Family Literacy refers to the many ways parents, children and extended family members use literacy to accomplish every day tasks within the context of their own culture and community. (Foundational Training in Family Literacy, 2002)

Family Literacy

- **Family Literacy** weaves through all aspects of family and community life - through health, employment, social welfare, and justice.
- A child's chances of becoming literate are directly related to the quality of family life. The home provides the emotional, physical and interpersonal climate to support early literacy development.
- **Family Literacy** is about developing:
 - increased literacy for both parents and their children.
 - stronger relationships between parents and children.
 - the child's as well as the parent's knowledge and potential to the fullest, and helping participants achieve their life goals and reaching their full potential as functioning members of society.

The Future

- Today 48% of Canadian adults cannot read and write well enough to function effectively in their daily lives (CCL, 2008).
- Communication by electronic mail, facsimile and the Internet now dominate (IRA/NAEYC, 1998), placing inordinate demands on literacy.
- We must reason, think critically, problem-solve and be able to absorb information from a continually developing knowledge base (Braunger & Lewis, 1998).
- “The proportion of Canadian Adults with low literacy skills will remain virtually unchanged through 2031” (CCL, 2008).

The Key

- “Integrated early-childhood development programs [the hallmark of family literacy programs,] may be the single most effective way to help poor children, families, communities and nations break the intergenerational cycle of poverty (Guide to Evaluation for Family Literacy Projects in Alberta, 1977).
- Parents rarely have a say in program design, development, delivery or evaluation (Invest in Kids 2008). Bookmates’ community development approach to program and training development has broken this mold.
- Training of early literacy and learning practitioners must be a central part of any early literacy initiative.
- Adequate funding of family literacy and learning programs should be the first step in developing an effective early learning strategy.

Advantages of Family Literacy Programs

- Parents directly influence their children's growth and development. The whole family is supported and all benefit.
- Experience-based activities in the early years enhance brain development and help establish neurological and biological pathways. Such links, formed early, affect lifelong health, learning and behaviour (Mustard, 2007).
- The presence of adult role models leads to the well-being of children-emotional control, the ability to attend, effective learning and problem-solving behaviours, and academic success, reducing the cycle of poverty that cripples the country's economy and ability to compete on a global basis (Stanley, 2004)

Social Constructivism

- We learn in a social context
- Both the children and the parents learn
- *“I learned so much!!! Food ideas, presentation ideas for children, giving choices with food, never to assume. How to sneak in important pieces of info while doing something that seem little.”*

Efficacy of Bookmates' Programs

- Bookmates Inc. has dedicated the last 25 years to closing the gap that exists between children entering school ready to learn and those who lack early experiences with print.
- “Community capacity building means enabling local people to make programs their own—for example, by training parents to help deliver services. Parents participate as volunteers and facilitators in programs like Alphabet Soup, and they are trained to augment home visiting services that work to catch problems early and reduce family stress.” (Health Council of Canada, p.32/33).

Bookmates Family Learning Principles

- Programs and training are developed using a community development model.
- Program elements are designed to facilitate carry over to home activities.
- Parents develop skills and are more actively involved in their community.
- Increased parental literacy results in increased literacy for children as parents have more confidence about both their own reading ability and their ability to support their children's learning.

Community Development Model

- Our programs impact the factors that have been proven to affect literacy development from infancy through early childhood to school readiness and beyond.
- Family literacy is inclusive. It is not about developing one national curriculum to create a uniform literacy, it is about diversity, multiculturalism, many languages and local community leadership.
- All of Bookmates programs are created using this community development model.

Bookmates Program Development

- Purpose: to ensure community involvement at the embryonic stage-- in the development of all new programs and training.
- Participation, feedback and subsequent program adjustments helps members of the community:
 - develop a sense of ownership
 - feel more comfortable in the setting
 - increase their own learning and their attachment
 - become more confident about their own literacy skills as well as their ability to support their children's early literacy
- Ultimately the community itself is changed and strengthened.

An Example: Alphabet Soup

- Bookmates engaged community parents and family centre staff as well as experts (Winnipeg Regional Health Authority) in developing this program in four pilot sites through funding support from The Winnipeg Foundation.
- There is often a perception that vital knowledge can be transferred via resources. Our family literacy approach demonstrates **a process, and engagement versus just a resource.**
- The success of Alphabet Soup is evidence that families learn key concepts and can achieve lifestyle changes through participation. Families increased their interaction with books and improved their healthy eating habits.
- Our collaborative approach to the development and training resulted in parents taking ownership and being some of the first to become Alphabet Soup program facilitators for their communities!
- Over 400 people, including parents and staff have now been trained to facilitate Alphabet Soup across Canada through the support of OLES and Healthy Child Manitoba.

The Bottom Line

- Time is passing, children are growing up in environments that could be enriched through cost effective programming.
- We need stable funding to implement what we know works well for families.
- We need continued research to improve our practice and ensure optimal outcomes for families and children. Research must recognize the complexity of the issue and use a variety of approaches to gather meaningful data.
- It just makes sense that when families have welcoming places to go to where they can connect with other families, be supported by well-trained staff to learn new ideas, and access books and learning materials, that they – the families and their children - will do better.

Responsibility

- The community, the province, and the country need to invest in families in an efficient, effective way = family literacy and learning
- Kudos to community groups who out of necessity create partnerships with others who care about families.
- Kudos to provincial organizations including family resource centres, education, literacy, health, childcare, immigration and justice.
- Kudos to national organizations who support initiatives such as this National Strategy for Early Literacy.
- Let's build on these strengths. This issue is a responsibility that has a national impact.