



# the tutor

Summer 2003

## It's All in the Family: Planning High-Quality Family Literacy Events

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**A**sk a few people to do the following: *Close your eyes and think back to your earliest childhood memory of reading or learning to read. Where were you and who were you with?*

— Oh, says one person, *with my Granny on her back porch.* Another says, *My cousin Jake came to stay and we read on the top bunk until late at night.*

Whenever we ask this question, an overwhelming number of people recall reading with a family member in a home setting. See if your own survey confirms that family members predominate in early reading memories. The cycle of learning begins—and attitudes toward reading are shaped—in the home. It's no surprise, then, that family literacy is interwoven with student reading achievement.

### What is family literacy<sup>1</sup>?

In broad terms, family literacy is using language in the home to get things done or share ideas and stories through talking, reading, and writing. Literacy is an essential part of everyday life and all families engage in literacy activities—making grocery lists,

checking the bus schedule, reading stories together, e-mailing relatives—on a daily basis. Family literacy practices vary widely, reflecting the culture and values of individual families.

Family literacy *programs* are designed to intentionally support family literacy development. They may include the following:

- Adult education, such as adult literacy or English as a Second Language instruction
- Early childhood education and school readiness
- Family-child interactive literacy activities
- Family education and assistance (e.g., life skills, parenting, child development)

Together, these services help children and their families improve literacy and life skills and reach their full potential as learners.

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- locate resources
- connect with peers
- brainstorm solutions
- design and deliver training

<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Education defines family literacy 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: (A) Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children; (B) training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children; (C) parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency; (D) an age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences.”

## What is the role of national service in family literacy?

The Corporation for National and Community Service recognizes family members as children's first teachers, and national service grantees support family literacy through a spectrum of programs. Frequently, national service members and volunteers use their skills and talents to plan and implement family literacy events that integrate fun, access to resources, and learning for all.

In this issue of the *Tutor*, we offer a brief look at family literacy research; portraits of five national service projects engaged in family literacy; ideas for family literacy events; an event planning checklist; and print and Web resources to fuel a wide range of family literacy efforts.

While the focus of this newsletter is on planning family literacy events and activities, these are most effective when integrated into ongoing and sustained family engagement efforts. High-quality family literacy events and activities are part of a continuum that may look like this:

**Family literacy events are most effective when integrated into ongoing and sustained family engagement efforts.**

## The Research: What impact do family literacy efforts have on student achievement?

Programs aiming to increase student achievement are more likely to have positive results if they engage families (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Family literacy programs and events are ideal vehicles for doing so.

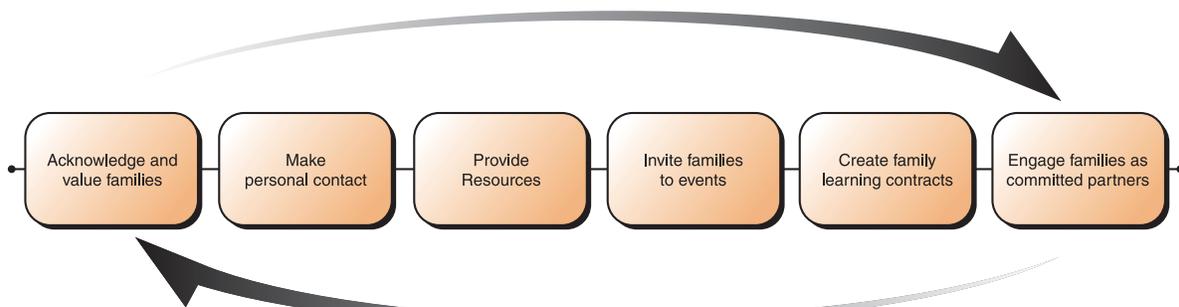
Children whose families engage them in literacy activities show significant improvement in language arts and reading skills (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000; National Center for Family Literacy, 2003; Shaver & Walls, 1998). Especially for children in the elementary grades, the frequency and number of activities in which families participate have a positive impact on promotion to the next grade level as well as on reading scores (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

Family literacy projects also increase the frequency with which parents:

- Talk to their children's teacher
- Engage in extended conversations with their children
- Read or look at books with children
- Visit the library with children
- Volunteer at school
- Help children with homework
- Tell stories

(NCFL, 2003)

All these behaviors help create an educationally supportive and literacy-rich environment for children, ultimately contributing to learning gains.



While these findings remain constant across cultural and socioeconomic groups, the most effective programs honor the traditions, expectations, and values of the families they serve. Family literacy events provide an ideal opportunity to welcome diverse families, build trust, celebrate multiple cultures, and open the door to new ways that families, schools, and volunteer programs can collaborate to promote student success.

### Elements of Successful Family Literacy Programs

Neuman, Caparelli, & Kee (1998) studied a range of family literacy programs to discover what made them successful. Their findings indicated that strong programs:

- Provide literacy instruction to families, broadly defined to include parents, caregivers, siblings, and young children
- Recruit strategically, by word of mouth and local radio and newspaper advertisements
- Involve participants in curriculum planning and development
- Increase retention through creative scheduling, transportation, and child care
- Employ experienced staff members who are knowledgeable about cultural, economic, and instructional diversity
- Engage multiple stakeholders and participants to monitor program quality
- Recognize and celebrate achievement
- Provide opportunities to form family and social networks
- Collaborate with the community and its resources

See these elements in action in the snapshots of family literacy events throughout this newsletter.

### The Big Picture: How does family literacy support current education legislation?

A key principle of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act is parental choice and involvement. In particular, NCLB establishes school-linked or school-based parental information and resource centers that provide training, information, and support to parents—and to individuals and organizations that work with parents—to implement parental involvement strategies that lead to improvement in student academic achievement.

**Even Start.** NCLB supports the Even Start Family Literacy Program, which serves approximately 30,000 families per year. These programs are natural partners for volunteer projects planning family literacy activities. Even Start programs are based on the premise that a strong combination of adult education, early childhood education, parenting education, and interactive literacy activities for parents and children can improve children's school success. To find Even Start programs in your area, contact your state education agency, which distributes the funds to local school districts and other organizations. A directory of state education agencies is online at: [http://bcol02.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org\\_list.cfm?category\\_ID=SEA](http://bcol02.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org_list.cfm?category_ID=SEA)

**Reading First.** In addition, many state departments of education have included family literacy as part of their Reading First applications (for state funding under NCLB). If so, they are committed to making progress in this area, and may welcome national service as a partner in their efforts.

**Other partners.** Your family literacy event will likely support efforts of schools or other agencies that share the goal of working with family education. As you plan, consider collaborating with organizations such as local libraries, community education associations, literacy councils, and programs such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Head Start, and other educational services projects. If you're unsure if these programs exist in your community, contact your local school district or state education agency.

## Snapshots: What do family events and activities look like?

Throughout this issue, you will find descriptions of national service programs engaged in family literacy projects. These snapshots reveal various approaches to family literacy events and activities, and detail contributions members and volunteers can make.

### Snapshot: Partnerships for Student Achievement

Families are lined up out the door of the library at Joseph Gale Elementary in Forest Grove, Oregon. Event planners are sending out for more juice and cookies. Who would have expected such a turnout? AmeriCorps member Jeff Scott visited every classroom to promote *Partners in Print: Helping Our Children Become Better Readers*, generating excitement and making special note of prizes.

**Literacy activities for families.** At the event, families visit four stations, each offering training in specific strategies for reading with children and helping them draw meaning from text. At one station, an AmeriCorps member demonstrates a picture walk. A bilingual teacher translates each point for Spanish-speaking family members. Other stations feature introducing new books, asking good questions, and giving stories new endings.

**Social and family networks.** The event concludes with snacks and a drawing for a book giveaway. This social time gives students, teachers, AmeriCorps members, and family members (including siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles) an opportunity to mingle and talk with one another.

**Input from experts.** AmeriCorps members at Partnerships for Student Achievement, a project of the Forest Grove School District, planned this event. In consultation with Partners in Print, a professional development program for teachers, they identified helpful strategies for engaging parents to support children's literacy skills. Classroom and Title I teachers collaborate with AmeriCorps members to run the event.

"This is a project that our whole team creates together, responding to the unique needs of each school," says project director Jeri Lerwick. "It gives them a good opportunity to practice teamwork, create a flexible design, visit each others' schools, and also offers an extended experience working with families."

## Idea Box: What can my program do?

When it comes to planning family literacy events and activities, the range of possibilities is endless. The following suggestions represent commonly implemented and successful family literacy events, but don't limit yourself to the list here. Remember, the families in your own community and school(s) are the best guide to what will work for your

project. Invite parents and families to participate in all stages of the planning process.

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### Shared Family Stories

All families develop and share powerful stories: Remember the time Pop drove home with the grocery bags on top of the car? Stories may be about everyday occurrences, family trips or reunions, or transitions such as moving to a new city or country. One popular Portland, Oregon, area project, The Power of Family Stories, collected and displayed photographs and stories to document the diverse nature of families in one school district and their goals for education. This type of event promotes dialogue and encourages collaboration between families and schools. For more information, contact Shauna Adams at [consult\\_adams@attbi.com](mailto:consult_adams@attbi.com).

### Reading: A Guy Thing

Faced with the abundance of female role models in early education, a kid might wonder: *Do guys read, too?* Family literacy events can answer with a resounding yes, creating gender-focused events that prove that

guys who read are cool, too! Common themes include father-and-child reading events, such as *Donuts for Dads*, and efforts to bring male community members in to read to children. These initiatives work to level the gender imbalance in the family literacy environment.

### Creating Literacy-Rich Home Workshops

Often parents are unaware of the vast literacy resources that exist in their homes. Literacy specialists can provide training for parents on how activities like cooking or yard work can be literacy-rich experiences.

### Character Parades

Dressing up can be fun—it's as simple as that! For this event, families dress up as characters in one of their child's favorite books, and bring the book along with them. Volunteers organize treats and music for the parade and a Master of Ceremonies announces each family and book as they file by. Afterward, invite families to act out a scene from their story. Everyone becomes better acquainted and enthusiasm for books is shared all around. This program can also include an introduction to school library resources.

### Bedtime Stories

By placing a familiar event in a new context, family bedtime story nights can re-energize child-family reading partnerships. Pitch tents in the school yard just before Halloween, and invite kids and parents to come in their PJs, crawl into a tent, and read scary stories. Make sure volunteers are on hand with

flashlights, hot cider, and cookies, and to demonstrate great read-aloud techniques and questioning strategies for the parents. You can design similar events for a variety of holidays or seasons.

### Snapshot: Thomas Jefferson Elementary School

An audience of more than 100 watches delightedly as two kindergarten classes at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School present a dramatization of *Hush! A Thai Lullaby*. After the presentation, Hmong students perform a traditional dance, and students and their extended families engage in various literacy activities while they enjoy a treat of sticky rice prepared by parent volunteers. It's all part of Southeast Asian Night, just one event in the series known as the Trip Around the World Folk Fair.

Jefferson is a Learn & Serve America grantee in Wausau, Wisconsin. AmeriCorps\*VISTA member Judy Joles (now Jefferson's Parent Liaison) drove the effort to expand the school's bimonthly story nights into events that provide service learning opportunities for students while emphasizing literacy skills and multicultural awareness for families.

**Literacy activities for families.** On a rotating basis, every class in the K–5 school plans one event, each based on a story from a particular country and expanded to include music, food, and other traditional arts. Students have presented stories from Norwegian, Japanese, Native American, African American, Brazilian, and Chilean traditions, among others. Participants practice using different alphabets and even Native American sign language, and every student and family goes home with a book.

**Strategic recruitment.** Joles creates excitement for the events by placing announcements in the local community calendar, on the radio, and in the school newspaper produced by fifth-graders. In addition, she sends home invitations in a weekly parent newsletter. The events have become so popular they require a multitude of interpreters, and the local Sam's Club has pitched in to provide books.

**Ongoing, integrated services.** With the help of a new 21st Century Community Learning Center grant, Joles and Principal Marla Berg intend to keep the tradition alive this year, inviting families to engage in literacy-based activities while learning about an even greater diversity of cultures.

### Family Memory Boxes

Every family has treasured things that bring forth powerful memories. In a special combination storytelling/art project, ask families to bring in a collection of memory artifacts, including something for every family member. If available, local art teachers can provide instructions and supplies that will help everyone display their histories. When they are finished, each family (especially the children) can share their boxes and the stories that go with them with the group.

### Author and Storyteller Nights

Many towns and cities are home to children's authors and storytellers, who are more than eager to meet new audiences. In a very special and more presentational evening, these local assets can model their skills, introduce their works, and even lead parents and children in interactive activities around lively and fun stories. Children can ask questions such as, *How do you get the ideas for your stories? What's it like to be a writer?* Contact local libraries and book stores for recommendations.

### Computers in Family Literacy

In both rural and urban communities, computers are an increasingly essential educational tool and new technology is creating an astonishing array of educational opportunities. Integrating computers into student learning can be a daunting experience for parents who are unfamiliar with them, but family literacy events that pull parents, teachers, kids and computers together go a long way toward assuaging those worries. Take this opportunity to introduce good Web-based literacy resources and provide time for families to practice and learn from each other.

### Family Literacy Event Planning Checklist

Once you've assessed interests and needs in your community, recruited parents, community volunteers, teachers, a librarian or reading specialist, and perhaps even some business partners, it's time to begin planning your event. The checklist on the following page can help:

#### Snapshot: Montana Literacy Corps

Families fill the gymnasium at Washington Elementary in Hamilton, Montana. At one popular booth, children string colorful beads, as a volunteer models bead sorting by shape and color to help children learn about categorization. At another table, families construct a simple game that emphasizes letter sounds.

**Literacy activities for families.** This event, *Ready Set Go*, is for children entering kindergarten in the fall and their families. Montana Literacy Corps members, in partnership with Head Start staff, have organized several Make It Take It stations, where children and parents make a variety of alphabet, phonics, and sorting games to play together during the summer. The principal and kindergarten teachers are also present to lead a tour of the elementary school and answer questions.

**Responsiveness to families.** During the tour, the parent of an English language learner approaches Susanne Meikle, an AmeriCorps member, to share her concerns about the fall. Her child can understand English, but isn't willing to speak the language. How will she ever be able to get along in the class? Susanne finds the right teacher and introduces her to the worried parent. A lively conversation ensues, in which the teacher and parent agree to collaborate on a good summer program to stimulate the child's spoken English.

**Ongoing, integrated services.** Montana Literacy Corps, an AmeriCorps program, places 20 members in 19 schools and one community-based organization as part of a broad-based program focused entirely on family literacy. In addition to events like this one, they operate Family Resource Centers, organize family fun and science nights, conduct parent-child learning activities, publish a monthly newsletter and calendar, and distribute books.

## Event Planning Checklist

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Task	Questions to Consider
<input type="checkbox"/>	Define the event	What is the hook or theme? Does it respond to real community needs and interests? How will it build literacy skills and family connections? How will you involve families in all stages of the planning process?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Create an agenda/list of activities	What/how many activities will you offer?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Assign responsibilities	Who will: Provide the literacy expertise and guidance? Set up the space? Greet and sign in participants? Lead activities? Provide refreshments? Stay and clean up?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Create and distribute invitations or flyers	Who will design/produce them? Are they culturally inclusive? Into how many languages should they be translated? How many will you disseminate? How?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Generate publicity	Who will write a press release? What other outlets are there to increase publicity? Can someone act as event photographer? If so, will you need photo releases?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Secure necessary space and equipment	Where will the event take place? Will you need audiovisual equipment? How will you accommodate special needs (e.g., translators, accommodations for physical disabilities)?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Locate supplies	What supplies will each activity require? Who will bring what? Can any local businesses or organizations make donations?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Plan event evaluation	How will you measure event success? Will you distribute a survey? Who will design, collect, and compile it? Will there be a reflection/discussion at the end of the event? How will this event link with other activities to follow?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Perform follow-up tasks	Who will capture post-event reporting (e.g., to the press, project administration, partners)? Who will write thank-you letters? What is the bridge to the next family literacy activity?

The goals and characteristics of family literacy programs vary widely, and with them the role of national service members and volunteers. Successful programs encourage reading and writing at home and expand learning opportunities for children and families. Well-planned and executed family literacy events are one important way to provide fun, active learning, and foster connections among schools, families, and communities to create meaningful, long-term benefits for everyone involved.

## Family Literacy Resources

### National Center for Family Literacy

Promotes family literacy by improving parents' basic skills and attitudes toward education, parenting skills, children's pre-literacy and school readiness skills, and the overall quality of parent-child relationships. Offers free publications and previews

of publications for sale. Information on the connections between family literacy and welfare reform are also available. Online at: [www.familit.org](http://www.familit.org)

### LEARNS Tips for Working With Families

Provides guidelines to help national service tutoring programs work successfully and respectfully with families. Online at: [www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/familit/index.html#family](http://www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/familit/index.html#family)

### Family Literacy: An Annotated Bibliography

Covers a wide array of topics, including definitions, models, and overviews of family literacy programs. Online at: [www.ed.gov/pubs/Family\\_Lit\\_2000](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Family_Lit_2000)

## Snapshot: Schools, Parents, and Reading Connection (SPARC)

It's Saturday afternoon, and Tosha and her dad are in the kitchen, tying on aprons. Eagerly, Tosha unloads the backpack she brought home Friday from her second-grade class. One by one, she lays the items out on the kitchen table—two books, a magazine, muffin mix, a large print recipe card, two folders, a measuring cup, and spoons. Using the backpack ingredients, Tosha and her dad follow a recipe to make banana nut muffins together for the first time.

**Literacy activities for families.** Tosha's backpack came home compliments of SPARC, a theme-based, family literacy backpack program in greater Madison, Wisconsin. SPARC allows 2,000 preschool and elementary children in 20 schools to explore their favorite topics through learning-rich activities at home and in school. Every five weeks, each child takes home a backpack, stuffed with books, manipulatives, puzzles, games, cards and other family activities to do at home. Typical themes include cooking, pets, families, dinosaurs, the ocean, and wild animals. Children and parents use backpack journals to record their activities and provide feedback to teachers.

**Input from experts.** Other backpacks—checked out through school psychologists—explore sensitive issues such as divorce, moving, incarcerated parents, death of family members or pets, and substance abuse. Each backpack also contains a parent folder with instructions, an inventory list, feedback sheets, and supplementary tips such as effective read-aloud strategies.

**Ongoing, integrated services.** The backpack themes are extended throughout the year, through family literacy nights that offer additional strategies for parents. AmeriCorps\*VISTA Leader Anne Hladilek serves as the “super glue” for SPARC, supporting 18 other VISTAs engaged in several literacy support activities. They recruit and support reading volunteers, write grants for materials, create backpacks, develop and coordinate family literacy events, and participate in training sessions delivered by school reading specialists.

### Family Literacy Online Discussion List

Set up by the National Institute for Literacy, this list is for adult and early childhood education instructors, parent educators, family literacy practitioners, administrators, researchers, policy developers, and any other parties interested in family literacy. To subscribe, visit: [www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/nifl-family/about\\_nifl-family.html](http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/nifl-family/about_nifl-family.html)

### The Connection Collection: School-Family-Community Partnerships Database

Contains annotations for more than 140 articles, monographs, and other literature related to school, family, and community involvement in education. Online at: [www.sedl.org/connections/resources/bibsearch.html](http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/bibsearch.html)

### Midwest LINCS Family Literacy Special Collection

Provides individuals working with families a means to access a variety of resources electronically. Explore parenting issues, children's activities, and classroom materials, as well as professional development topics and current event information. Online at: <http://literacy.kent.edu/Midwest/FamilyLit>

### Reading Is Fundamental: Parents

Includes tips, activities, and articles for parents on topics such as motivating reluctant readers, reading aloud, and creating a literacy-rich home. Visit the Web site at: [www.rif.org/parents](http://www.rif.org/parents)

## Snapshot: The Reading Families Program

A gaggle of three- to five-year-olds chatter excitedly in a Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, Head Start class. A guest speaker from the community has arrived to read aloud this month's book, *If You Give a Pig a Pancake*. Parents crowd the edges of the classroom. The inviting aroma of pancakes, sausages, and syrup wafts in from the center's cafeteria. A stuffed Dalmation named Lucky sits front and center. The Lucky Readers' Club meeting is about to begin.

**Literacy activities for families.** Fueled by the talents of RSVP volunteers, the club has spread during the past eight years to 28 Head Start centers. Six times a year, each child receives a book, helping children and their parents build home libraries. Inside each book is a newsletter of tips for parents in reading aloud and other home literacy activities, developed by Janis Glusman, Adult and Family Literacy Coordinator for the RSVP of Montgomery County. Reading specialists create appropriate materials, and every teacher who hosts three club meetings receives a free "big book" for his or her classroom.

**Ongoing, integrated services.** The Lucky Readers' Club is one of three projects of the Reading Families Program. Two others are designed specifically for parents. 1) Parents who want to improve their own reading skills are referred to local adult literacy and ESL programs. RSVP staff follow up to encourage progress. 2) Reading specialist Eleanor Smith holds 18 Workshops for Parents each year, addressing techniques for supporting literacy development at home. Each parent who attends a workshop receives a free book. Parents can also practice journal writing by creating a Proud Book that documents family events and milestones in their children's lives.

How are RSVP volunteers involved in this innovative program? Based on skills and interests, they read to the children in the centers; write grants to help buy books; create artwork, bookplates, and illustrations (Lucky was cartooned by a retired mailman); create activity sheets to accompany the club's books; host theme events; and create Lucky Tote Bags to send home with children from each class on a rotating basis. These tote bags are loaded with books, a journal, and best of all...Lucky! Parents and children record in their journal what they did when Lucky paid a visit—a fun way to model writing at home.

### National Parent Information Network

Provides access to research-based information about the process of parenting and family involvement in education, based on the belief that well-informed families are likely to make good decisions about raising and educating their children. Online at: <http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/npin/index.html>

### Family Literacy Foundation

Offers resources that facilitate supportive relationships for children through families and friends reading aloud with them. Online at: [www.read2kids.org](http://www.read2kids.org)

### Reaching Out to At-Risk Families

Presents strategies for involving families of at-risk children in education and literacy efforts. Online at: [www.readingrockets.org/article.php?ID=60](http://www.readingrockets.org/article.php?ID=60)

### Family Literacy for Language Minority Families: Issues for Program Implementation

Includes descriptions of family literacy programs and events targeted specifically for language minority families; answers key questions about establishing a program. Online at: [www.ncela.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/pigs/pig17.htm](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/pigs/pig17.htm)

### Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy

Offers the latest news, lessons learned, and free publications, all in support of family literacy. Online at: [www.barbarabushfoundation.com](http://www.barbarabushfoundation.com)

### Effective Practices Database

Provides a way for members, volunteers, and service professionals to learn from each other and more effectively serve their communities. A search for “family literacy” brings up an array of useful ideas and project models. Online at: <http://nationalserviceresources.org/epicenter>

### No Child Left Behind: For Parents

Part of the U.S. Department of Education’s No Child Left Behind Web site, this site provides parents with useful information to assist them in helping their children learn. In particular, parents can download the *Helping Your Child* series in English and Spanish. Online at: [www.nclb.gov/parents](http://www.nclb.gov/parents)

### Ready To Learn

Aids caregivers, parents, and teachers by integrating Ready To Learn television programs into daily care, offering workshops, providing an information-rich quarterly newsletter, and much more. Online at: [www.thirteen.org/readytolearn](http://www.thirteen.org/readytolearn)

### Learners, Language, and Technology: Making Connections That Support Literacy

Offers practical information on using the many tools of technology to support literacy and language development. Free for educational purposes, this document is available online at: [www.netc.org/earlyconnections/pub](http://www.netc.org/earlyconnections/pub)

### Families That Read Together (Baltimore Public Library)

Provides helpful hints for reading aloud to children, book lists, a family literacy bibliography, and online stories. Links to the Children’s Book Council, which provides guidelines for choosing books for children. Remember to check with your own public library for existing resources and programs. Online at: [www.bcplonline.org/info/parenting/prnt\\_readingtogether.html](http://www.bcplonline.org/info/parenting/prnt_readingtogether.html)

### The Reading Families Program RSVP of Montgomery County

An example of a program that brings together educators, literacy professionals, and volunteers to give literacy assistance to low-income families in Pennsylvania’s Montgomery County. It provides free books and reading skills to parents, a reading-incentive program for children, and training in literacy methods for volunteers. Visit the Web site at: <http://gargoyle.arcadia.edu/readingfamilies>. The Proud Book memoir writing book and teachers’ guide are available from New Readers Press at (800) 448-8878 or [www.newreaderspress.com](http://www.newreaderspress.com)

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- Connect with peers
- Brainstorm solutions
- Design and deliver training

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