

Parental Involvement and Homework The Sixth Learning Station

The final column of the Components Chart describes the Parental Involvement and Homework components of the program. The homework activities are all included in the Blackline Masters. Each of the other components of the Reading Program about which you have already learned is carefully interwoven with all other components to form an integrated learning experience. In terms of the academic learning that is to take place, however, it makes no difference if children complete the Take-Home activities or not.

It may seem odd to include materials in a Reading Program that are not vital to the academic learning of the children. When I say the materials are not vital, however, I mean only that the child will learn to read equally well with or without the Take-Homes. There is another body of learning that is equally important to accomplish, and for which the Take-Homes are an excellent resource. For children to enjoy completely the success this Reading Program allows them to experience, it is important that their parents understand fully this particular process of learning to read. The Take-Homes have as a primary purpose, educating the parents on how their children are learning to read. In this context, the Take-Homes are an important component of the program.

Parental support is extremely important for the success of any educational program. Parents are very concerned about the learning of their children. This concern, however, can sometimes take inappropriate forms. The push for a back-to-basics education is an example of one of the forms that parental concern may take. Parents see their children being taught in ways that are strange to them. At the same time, they read of declining test scores. A back-to-basics movement can sometimes be an insistence by parents that children be taught in ways the parents can understand, and with which they are, therefore, comfortable. This insistence takes place even though many of the parents who were taught in these basic ways did not end up achieving the very learning the parents want so much for their children.

Parents want the very best for their children. In this respect, what they want for their children is exactly what we want for their children. The problem comes when we pursue our mission of educating our students in the best ways we know how, and in the process, forget to share our goals and our means of achieving these goals with the parents of our students. Regardless of what programs or methods we select to teach our students, it is of extreme importance that we communicate with parents the reasons why we have chosen to do what we are doing. It is equally important that, where parents are able to assist their children at home, we teach them how to go about accomplishing this assistance.

Communication between teacher and parents is doubly important when the educational approach employed at school is one that seems strange or unfamiliar to the parent. Parents will support us one-hundred percent if they believe in what we are doing. But parents cannot develop much confidence in a program if it remains a mystery to them. The Take-Home Blacklines help us teach parents what their children are learning at school and why.

Letters to Parents

Sample letters to parents are included in the Blackline Masters. They serve as suggested guides for what you might say to parents to acquaint them with the unique experiences their children will encounter in reading.

The first letter is a general introduction to the Reading Program. It also alerts the parents to the soon-to-be-scheduled parents' night at school, at which time they will learn the specifics of the program and how they can best help their children at home. The letter also says their children will soon be coming home from school with their hands stamped with strange pictures.

The second letter is the formal announcement of the special back-to-school night at which the parents are to receive information on the Reading Program. Between the time the parents receive the first and second letters, they will already have begun to be informally introduced to the program, through, among other things, the hand-stamping activities that will be described shortly.

None of the Take-Home Blacklines are to be sent home with the children in advance of the parent meeting at school. It is important for parents to already know enough about the program to understand what their children are doing before anything potentially confusing is sent home.

The third letter is reserved for parents who were unable to attend the back-to-school night. It lets them know that you have some materials to give them with which they may help their children at home. The letter suggests they arrange a time in the very near future when they will be able to meet with you to learn about the program and receive the materials.

It is very important that you meet with all parents. The back-to-school night serves the purpose of allowing you to meet with as many parents at once as you can entice into coming that evening. The goal is to attract as many parents as possible to school for one big meeting. Your reward for a large turnout is having fewer individual meetings to conduct. You can reduce the number of separate meetings even further by arranging appointments with groups of parents who missed the large meeting, rather than having to repeat the explanation of the program again and again for each parent individually.

It is tempting to feel that the parents who do not come to the back-to-school night gathering don't care enough about their children to be worth the extra bother. If they cared, they would have come to the meeting. Since they didn't, the heck with them. Resist this temptation, because it represents a self-defeating view of the parents of our students. In all my years of teaching, I have never met a parent who did not care about the success of his or her child. I have met parents who didn't know how to care or how to help, and who were afraid of the school or embarrassed about their own ignorance. But fear or ignorance or wariness should not to be confused with not caring.

The Reading Program was developed with the goal of allowing all children to learn to read. Whenever we encountered a child who was not learning, we worked with that child until we found ways that allowed that child to learn. If we had proceeded on the assumption that some children simply did not want to learn to read, then we would have greeted the failures of these children as evidence of laziness or of not caring. I have never taught a child who did not

want to learn. I have taught children who had given up thinking they were capable of learning, but giving up is a very different matter than not wanting to learn. When a child does not believe he or she can do something, it is easier not to try than to try and face failure.

The assumption of this program is that all children can learn. If a child did not learn one way, we tried another and another and another until that child did learn. The learning, once started, is self-perpetuating. The assumption I make about parents parallels the assumption I make about children. All parents want their children to learn. All parents, too, will help their children learn, if, as parents, they feel they can. The less well-educated the parents are, the more bad experiences the parents have had with the school, the less apt the parents are to express this desire for the success of their children in ways we might recognize. However, the desire is there in all parents. If it isn't easily drawn out, we are no more excused from seeking out the parent and helping him or her overcome any reluctance about coming to school than we could allow ourselves to be excused from teaching a child if that child were not quick to learn.

The goal is teaching all children. The goal, too, is contacting all parents, so that all parents feel comfortable in helping and supporting their children in reading and in learning. The efforts expended in reaching both goals are well worth it. For the children, our reward is how well and how comfortably they read. For the parents, our reward is how pleased they are with their children and how supportive they are of us.

There are only three parent letters included in the Take-Home Blackline Masters. Please do not assume from this number that you are only meant to communicate with the parents of your students three times a year. The more parents know about what you are doing in your classroom, the more supportive they can be. Frequent friendly messages from school to home keep morale high at both ends of the communication chain. Weekly, biweekly, or monthly class newsletters are a good method of keeping parents constantly informed about what you are doing in all subject areas.

If an administrator chooses to question what you're doing in any subject area, your own belief in what you are doing and how beneficial it is for your students may carry little weight at all, unless the parents of your students also believe in what you are doing. You care about bringing your students the very best learning experiences you can find. Make sure you share this caring with the parents of your children.

Hand Stamping

Hand stamping is just what its name implies, stamping on the hand. Hand stamping accompanies the children's learning of the sounds from *Dekodiphukan*. Before going home at the end of the day, the children line up at the door. As each child passes by the teacher, he or she is asked to look at a sound-picture and say its sound. If the sound is said correctly, then that sound is stamped on the child's hand. If the sound isn't pronounced correctly, the child goes to the end of the stamping line and waits for another turn.

This activity is a vehicle for providing many parents with their first

exposure to the sound-pictures and the sounds they represent. Children have sound-pictures stamped on their hands only when they can correctly say the sound. When they reach home, they show the picture to their parents (and brothers and sisters and grandmothers and uncles and whoever else may be around) and say the sound.

The effect of this on the parents is two-fold. First, seeing the sound pictures and hearing the sounds sparks the curiosity of many parents. They want to know how these pictures and their sounds will help their children learn to read. Second, parents who already know some of the sounds before they come to the back-to-school night have an easier time learning to read with the program when they are shown how to use it. Knowing a little bit in advance minimizes the strangeness inherent in learning about anything new.

A side benefit of the hand stamping is that children have something to show their parents of what they learned at school that day. What they learned is so quick and easy to share that even the most busy and harassed parent has time to look at one picture and hear one sound. It is nice for the child to be able to share with a parent something from school. It is nice for the busy parent when this sharing can be accomplished quickly.

Parent Meeting - Back-to-School Night

The Parent Night Meeting section of Chapter 5 provides a detailed description of a sequence of activities that might be presented at the back-to-school meeting at which parents are introduced to the Reading Program A sample agenda can also be found there.

The parent meeting usually takes place sometime in October. This means that students will already know the sounds, and many students will already have learned to blend two and maybe even three-sound words. Although parents are not encouraged to bring children to the meeting, children are allowed to come. It is much better to permit the parent who cannot find a babysitter to bring his or her child, than to have the parent miss the meeting. At all the parent meetings I have attended, there have always been a smattering of children present. Parents who are themselves learning to blend the sound pictures into words for the first time find it quite reassuring that the children in the room can read the words much better than the adults.

The reading by the children present is helped along quite a bit by the fact that only the triangle-level materials at the two and three-sound levels are set out on the tables at which the parents sit. All higher level materials are explained to the parents and put on display, but only the simplest level of activities are actually used to teach the parents how to read.

It should be kept in mind that this parent meeting is a public relations function. Parents must be allowed to feel successful using the program, so they will feel their children can be successful as well. There will be time enough for the parents to learn in greater depth about the program as their children begin bringing their homework home.

The Take-Home Blackline Masters

I believe homework should only be sent home if a child can do it. Homework that a child cannot do is bad public relations. Unless the parent who is to assist the child has nothing else to do but help children with homework, and is also infinitely patient and exceptionally well-trained, the parent won't be able to teach the child if the child doesn't already know. If work is sent home and the child cannot do it, no one comes out looking very good. So, no homework goes home if the child cannot already complete it successfully. The work to be sent home should only reinforce what the child already knows.

If the children have already mastered the work they take home, they can impress their parents with how much they have learned and how well they are doing. Children can complete their work without parental assistance and then read what they have done to their parents, who can listen with satisfaction and pride. This makes the parents feel good about their children, who, in turn, feel good about themselves. As the children read what they have done, their parents are subtly or not so subtly being taught to read with the sounds, as well. As a tool of public relations, homework has much to be said for it. Children whose parents are pleased with their progress are much more apt to keep on making progress. This is the best result we could expect from any kind of homework.

The Take-Home Blackline Masters include:

- 1) The Sound Picture Coloring Book
- 2) Two-sound activities at all five levels
- 3) Three-sound activities at all five levels

For children to successfully complete all of the Take-Home activities, their parents will need to have available:

- 1) Crayons
- 2) Scissors
- 3) Glue or paste
- 4) Pencils
- 5) Patience

Sound Picture Coloring Book

The Sound-Picture Coloring Book may be introduced immediately after the Back-to-School night meeting. Subsequent Take-Home activities are given to children only after they have already demonstrated they can successfully complete the tasks involved. However, the Sound-Picture Coloring Books may be given to all students at once since there is no way to fail at coloring. Children take their coloring books home, color the pictures in any manner they wish, and keep the end product of their efforts for themselves.

The Coloring Books serve two purposes. The first purpose is to make the children more familiar with each of the sound-pictures. The second purpose is to make the parents more familiar with each of the sound-pictures. Parents will already have seen the sound-pictures stamped on their children's hands. They

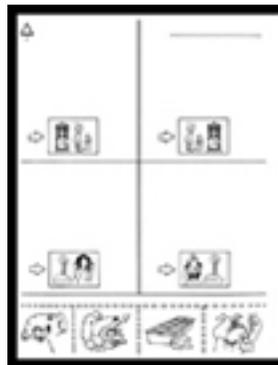
will also have seen the pictures at the Back-to-School 1 meeting and on the sound summary they received at that meeting. The Coloring Book is just another way of making the pictures more familiar to the parents.

Since the parents do not visit the classroom each day, they do not have the same opportunity to become familiar with the sound-pictures as do their children. The Coloring Book offers an easy way to let the sounds lie around the house for a while and be noticed. This, of course, is based on the assumption that papers children take home from school lie around the house for a while.

Two-Sound Word Take-Homes

There are thirty-three Take-Home Blacklines at the two-sound level. Nine of the Blacklines are at the triangle level, and six each are for use at each of the remaining four levels (circle, square, triangle, star). Within each coding, there are four different activities. At all levels of the Two- and Three-Sound Take-Homes, the procedures for completing each of the four kinds of activities remain the same. The activities that comprise this Reading Program are kept as consistent as possible from level to level, to minimize the need for explaining or re-explaining how something is to be done.

Word Matching



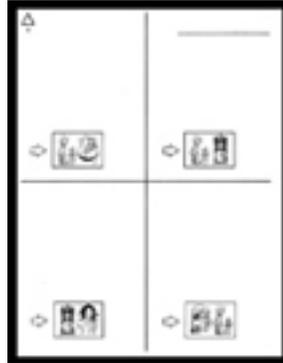
For this activity, children cut out the appropriate illustrations and paste them above the two-sound words on the page. Once they have completed their work, they seek out a parent or older relative and read the page to them.

Staple Books



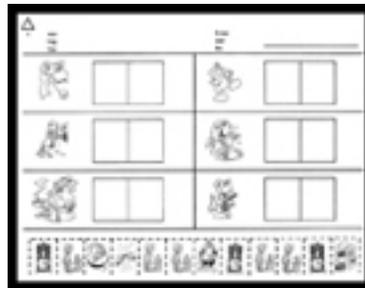
Children cut apart and staple their books at school and then take them home to be illustrated. It is reasonable to require parents to have crayons, glue, and scissors at home. Parents cannot be expected to be too excited about allowing their young children unsupervised access to their stapler, if they have one at home. Stapling, therefore, takes place at school under the watchful eye of the teacher.

Picture Drawing



For this activity, children read the word and draw a picture above it to show they have understood what they have read.

Cut-and-Paste Test Sheets



This activity is much more difficult than the three previous ones. In each of the earlier activities, the words were a single unit, with all the appropriate sounds placed side by side. Now, however, the child is expected to find the appropriate sounds with which to form each word from a wide assortment of sounds.

Because this page is so much more difficult than its three predecessors, it comes with hints for the parents in case the child encounters any difficulties. Clues for the words that are to be cut and pasted alongside the illustrations appear in parent-readable form above each column of illustrations. If a child can't remember which word an illustration represents, the parent, or some older brother or sister who can read, can provide the appropriate clue by looking at the printed words.

Three-Sound Word Take-Homes

There are twenty-two Take-Home Blackline Masters at the three-sound level. The word matching, staple books, and picture drawing activities that were introduced at the two-sound level of Take-Homes are repeated at each of the five coding levels for three sounds.

The only difference between the sequence of activities at two-sounds and the sequence for three occurs at the cut-and-paste test sheets. At the two-sound level, each coded sequence (triangle, circle, square, rectangle and star) ended with a cut-and-paste test. At the three-sound level, the cut-and-paste test sheets wait until all of the other Three-Sound Take-Homes have been completed at each of the five levels.

Tiny Writing Cards as Take-Home Books - Phrase Level

The Tiny Writing Cards (see page 36) become books when clusters of them are stapled together. Each page a child stamps out and then illustrates becomes a page of a book that is to become part of that child's home library. In case the child isn't yet completely ready to sound out all the words without the availability of help from classmates, the illustration that the child has drawn above the stamped phrase serves as a reminder of what the words in the phrase might be.

Tiny Writing Cards as Take-Home Books - Transition Level

The words that appear on the pages of the transition books made from the Tiny Writing Cards will be much easier for the parents to recognize and read quickly. At this level, even the most skeptical parents can now recognize that their children are becoming readers.

Student-Authored Books

Student Creative Writing (see page 37), the bottom square in the Stamping and Writing column of the Components Chart represents the culmination of all that has gone before. When students have reached this point in the program, they have learned to read and they have learned to write. If we, as teachers, have been successful in allowing the parents of our students to share in their child's learning, then our students have also found that learning isn't just for school, it's for everywhere.