

Parental Involvement and Homework

Letters to Parents/Parent Communication

Parent Night Meeting and the Summary for Home Use Hand Stamping

Take-Home Blacklines

Take-Home Tiny Writing Books

Take-Home Vowel-Only Books

Letters to Parents/Parent Communication

The parental involvement component of the Reading Program is the sixth learning station. What takes place at home is nearly as important to the learning of the child and to the success of the Program as what takes place at any one of the five learning stations in the classroom. Even if no specific homework is ever assigned and no parental assistance is ever provided, the attitude of the people at home towards the child's participation in the program has a most decisive effect on the learning that takes place at school.

I once attended a session at a mathematics conference in which a teacher was presenting a program she had developed for use in her own classroom. The program sounded quite interesting, and she was most enthusiastic about how much her students had loved using it. She spoke in the past tense, however, because she was no longer allowed to use her program at her own school. Her fellow teachers had lobbied for and created a rule against using anything but the standard curriculum. Her principal had agreed to the rule posed by her co-workers.

Her fellow teachers felt threatened by her non-standard methods of instruction. Feeling threatened is not unusual. However, her fellow teachers could not have compelled her to alter her teaching methods because of their fears if either her administrator or the parents of her students had been convinced that what she was doing was good for the children.

This teacher's curriculum was well-reasoned and, I am sure, it was quite beneficial to the children in her room. Its own merits, combined with her enthusiasm for it, practically assured its success. However, anything that represents a new way of doing something has the potential to threaten the people committed to the old method. People committed to the old may feel compelled to attack the new. Had this teacher reasoned out the probable reaction of those around her as carefully as she had reasoned out her curriculum, she would not have had to give up her teaching methods.

Effective communication with one's peers can sometimes alleviate concerns about newness in the curriculum. Effective communication with one's administrator is even more important because the administrator can serve as a buffer against concerns voiced by a teacher next door. However, the most important communication of all is with parents. Parents who are pleased with what is being taught to their children are the best answer to teachers and administrators who may doubt a new approach to teaching.

Regardless of the socio-economic background from which the students in a school may be drawn, all parents want the same thing for their children that we do, to receive the best education possible. Conflicts arise between teachers

and parents, however, when parents do not understand the methods being used by the teacher to educate their children. There is a natural tendency on the part of parents to associate school and learning with their own school experiences. If the curriculum presented to their children deviates too much from what they themselves encountered as students, they may become concerned that some new or experimental method is being employed that could be bad for their children.

Newspapers and magazines headline stories of declining test scores and inadequately prepared students. The cry of "back-to-basics" means to parents that the old ways were good and the new ways are bad. Unless we are careful to explain why we are teaching differently than we ourselves were taught, parents have no basis for understanding why what we are doing is an appropriate and effective way to educate their children.

In reality, it is the failure of the old methods that leads to the need for new ways of teaching. All we need to do to verify this failure is ask the parents of our students how well many of us learned mathematics through the old methods. Mathematics was taught to us so poorly that it is considered socially acceptable in our culture to say as a matter of fact, "I'm no good at arithmetic", or "I'm terrible at math!" Is this what we want for our children in math?

While it isn't considered socially acceptable to boast, "I can't read", fifteen percent of our population is functionally illiterate, one third of adults have some form of reading difficulty, and only about one percent of the adult population reads books for pleasure on a regular basis. Is this what we want for our children in reading?

The basic ways we were taught in school involved our memorizing masses of information and then parroting it all back to the teacher. Those of us who had good memories did well in school. Those of us who did not have such great memories did correspondingly less well. Good memories or not, in school few of us were taught to think. Is this what we want for our children?

I want the children I teach to know how to think and to know how to use their thinking to solve problems. At the same time, I want them to know how to learn and how to keep on learning once they leave my classroom. I also want them to know how to add and subtract and do all the other usual operations with arithmetic. I will not make them slaves to rote learning when calculators are everywhere, and computers are now pocket-sized. I want my students to know how to read and to write. However, I will present reading and writing to them in an understandable and enjoyable way, so that they will keep on wanting to read and wanting to write long after my lessons are over and long after their schooling is done.

What I want for my students is just what their parents want them to have, as well. But the only way the parents of my students can discover how much we share in common is for me to communicate my own wants to them both early and often. Along with my desires, it is also necessary for me to communicate equally clearly and equally often exactly how these methods of teaching I have decided to use will help me reach the goals the parents and I

share. Parents want what we want. We have to make sure that they know how much we hold these goals in common.

There are three sample parent letters in the Blackline Masters. The first letter explains the Reading Program to the parents and gives them an initial notice of the Parents' Night that is to come. If you already sent a note home to parents at the start of the year discussing your classroom, the information in the first letter may be merged with your usual communication. The letter should be sent near the start of the school year, since parents should begin receiving information on your education program as soon as possible.

The second letter is the parents' formal invitation to come to a Parents' Night at school to learn about the Reading Program.

The third letter is sent only to those parents who were unable to attend the Parents' Night. The purpose of this letter is to set up appointments with the absent parents so that you may explain the Reading Program to them individually or in small groups.

Parent Night Meeting and the Summary for Home Use

The parents' introduction to the Reading Program should take place after the students have learned many of the sounds and at least a few students can blend two-sound words. Depending upon the time schedule used to introduce the program in class, the parents' meeting usually takes place in October.

Since the parents are to be given specific information about the Reading Program and even taught how to read, the Reading Program presentation needs its own night and should not be combined with a school-wide open house. School open houses tend to divide parental attention between the grade levels of all of their school-age children and encourage parents to drift in and out of the different classes as they make their rounds. The Reading Program presentation should be scheduled at a specific time, and all parents should be encouraged to be at the presentation from the beginning.

At the parent meeting itself, it is useful to have a roll sheet or a guest book of some kind on which parents may sign their names and the name of their child. This makes the parents who come to the presentation know that the teacher knows they came. It also means that the teacher will know who was not in attendance, so the teacher will know whom to visit later on.

In advance of the parents' arrival, the Reading Program materials should be set out on classroom tables. Although the teacher will explain all of the various levels of the program to the parents, only the very easiest levels should be set out for parent use. Two-sound and three-sound materials at the triangle level and a Decoding Chart should be the only materials that the parents actually use. Other materials at other levels may be shown or demonstrated by the teacher, but they shouldn't be used by the parents.

The purpose of the gathering is to give parents both an understanding of the program their children will be using and a positive feeling about the program itself. Reading two and three-sound words at the triangle level is comfortably manageable by any group of parents. Advancing too much farther

with so little time to absorb what has been learned will leave some parents confused. Confusion is counterproductive, so keep the lessons simple.

If an overhead projector is available for the presentation, it is helpful to have selected materials available as transparencies. If transparencies are to be used, good items to make into transparencies are:

1. The Wall Sound Cards
2. A packet of two-sound word cards at the triangle level
3. A packet of three-sound word cards at the triangle level
4. A two-sound worksheet
5. A phrase worksheet
6. The Decoding Chart

For as many classrooms as have used the Reading Program, there have been nearly as many different kinds of presentations made to parents. As a guideline for teachers planning their first meeting, however, the following annotated outline may serve as a starting point:

Parent Meeting - Sample Agenda

Introduction

The teacher introduces himself or herself and any visiting dignitaries (like the school principal if he or she is present).

Parents are reminded to sign the guest register (roll sheet).

A statement of the problems children face when learning to read, taken from the introduction to the program contained in Chapter 1.

Key points that might be mentioned:

- 1) The general problem: In math, the abstract equation $4 + 3 = 7$ can be worked out with concrete materials. When the concept is understood, symbols are introduced. In the traditional Reading Program, however, we start with the abstract letter symbols with no way to back up the child who doesn't understand, to a point before the alphabet symbols are introduced.
- 2) Specific problems for some children, using the word 'cat' as the example. No problem for the children who can see and say "cat". Three general difficulties for children for whom reading poses a difficulty:
 1. Visual discrimination (perceptual) examples from the introduction to the manual.
 2. Auditory discrimination (sound/symbol association) examples from the introduction to the manual.
 3. Blending (child sees cat, says "cow" or "at"?) examples from the introduction to the manual.
- 3) Separate the problem areas so they may be overcome one at a time instead of being allowed to overwhelm many children, as is now the case.
- 4) Show the  and  and  wall sound cards. Discuss how they overcome the three basic problems. See Chapter 1's explanation.
 - a. Visual
 - b. Auditory

c. Blending

- 5) Using the wall sound cards, teach the parents the first eight sounds and discuss *Dekodiphukan* as the reference point for the sounds.
- 6) Have parents as a whole group read the two-sound words at the triangle level, on the overhead, or from the sound blending flipbook cards. Relate this activity to the picture packets on the tables.
- 7) Have parents as a whole group read three-sound words at the triangle level.
- 8) Show the two-sound books. Explain why the words are on one page and the pictures on the next.
- 9) Quickly teach and review all forty-four sounds using the wall sound cards.
- 10) Show the phrase packets, discuss how they relate to the picture packets.
- 11) Show the transition packets.
- 12) Explain how the program reaches the vowels-only level and then phases itself out of existence.
- 13) Demonstrate the decoding process at the overhead using first a two-sound worksheet and then a phrase worksheet. Select worksheets that use only the yellow or red codings. Keep the level of understanding required of the parents at a very low level. Do not overwhelm them with information. The parents may use the Decoding Charts at their tables to follow along with the process.
- 14) Show the Components Chart and discuss briefly the activities covered at each station.
- 15) Explain how children who need more time to learn and children who have a stronger reading background are all accommodated by the program.
- 16) Explain the homework and what parents can do at home to help.
- 17) Hand out the Sound Review Summary Sheets (included in Blackline Masters) to the parents and go over the sounds. Note which sounds the children have learned so far.
- 18) Talk to parents about what in the home environment produces readers: The availability of books and magazines; parents reading to children; seeing parents read; and so on. (Home environment can have a substantial impact on the learning of the child, but there are many parents who do not know what the important elements are in the home.)
- 19) Answer questions from parents. Emphasize during this time, if it has not already been covered, that the program is not experimental. It has been used successfully in classrooms since 1972.
- 20) End the questioning time by asking parents to try reading the two-sound words in the triangle packets on their tables and matching them to the pictures. Parents who wish to may try the three-sound words as well. Encourage parents to work together during this reading exercise.
- 21) Thank everyone for coming, remind them to sign the guest book, and then bid them all goodnight.

The Sound Review Summary Sheet that is sent home with the parents is the same sheet that is to be hand-delivered to the parents who were unable to

Hand Stamping

Hand stamping, first described on page 47, may be begun either before or after the Parents' Night meeting, but in no case should children be sent home with their hands stamped until their parents have been informed in advance. The stamps wash off or wear off after a little while, but parents may not be too excited to see their children's hands all marked up by the teacher if they are not already prepared for what is coming.

There is one problem with hand stamping that will arise if it is not guarded against in advance. Since the teacher is stamping everyone's hands, it is quite reasonable for the students to feel that stamping the sounds all over themselves and their friends is equally reasonable. This, of course, would get out of hand (pardon the pun) almost immediately. Children would spend their turn at the stamping station placing sounds on their foreheads, arms, necks, faces, legs, and maybe even on their hands, too.

If rules for stamping are clearly stated in advance and violators of these rules are not allowed to join the other members of their group at the stamping station for a day or two, there will be little, if any, problem with random body stampers. Only the teacher is allowed to place a stamp on somebody, and that stamping is only performed as a reward for sounds said correctly.

Take-Home Blacklines

See Blackline Masters on the Components Chart.

Sound Picture Coloring Book

The Coloring Book is the only homeward-bound material from the Reading Program that all of the children take home at the same time. It is given to the children after the teacher has finished reading *Dekodiphukan*.

The Coloring Book consists of the pictures of all forty-four sounds. The purpose of the Coloring Book is to allow the children to gain more familiarity with the sound-pictures by focusing on each one as it is being colored in.

The books are made by copying its pages from the Blackline Masters. The pages are then stapled together in books, one book for each student. A few extra books should also be made to be given to the eventual new students who are destined to appear as the school year advances.

The children may color in the pictures in any manner they wish. Faces may be purple, dogs may be green, lines may be ignored, anything is okay. The teacher does not tell the students they may draw purple faces or green dogs. All the teacher tells them is to color the pictures any way they want.

Children who do not have crayons at home may color in their sound-pictures at school during any free period of the day. For the most part, however, the books should be colored in at home, or, if completed at school, taken home when done. The object is to get the sounds into the home, so they can be seen by parents, brothers, and sisters.

Two-Sound Word Take-Homes

Even though all other two-sound activities are meant to be used in conjunction with one another, the Take-Home Worksheets are only meant to be used at the end of each level. In effect, they are only to be sent home with a child after that child has already clearly demonstrated that he or she no longer needs the help the worksheets might have offered.

The prime reason for sending any materials home with the children is to provide their parents with positive feedback on how well their children are doing in school. Rather than send home something the child cannot do and ask the parents' help, this Program sends home something a child can do, to elicit the parents' praise for their child. The Take-Homes are also used to allow the child to teach the parent about the Program.

The Take-Home Worksheets are provided in blackline form so that they may be copied in endless quantities year after year. Just how many are copied each year depends upon how often the teacher decides to send homework home, and with whom. For each sheet that is to be sent home, one or two additional sheets should be copied for use in the classroom. A student who can read two-sound words might still not understand a particular Take-Home Worksheet assignment and end up looking very confused when attempting to display any reading skills at home. The best way to guarantee the child can do the work at home is to have him or her do it at school first. Hence, the extra copies of each worksheet.

Children may practice their homework at the Stamping Station, the Book Station, or even at some other time of the day. It is not important when the practice takes place, it is only important that it does take place.

The worksheets should only be copied and sent home with children if their use is convenient for the teacher. Teachers using this Reading Program for the first time may find themselves too engrossed in teaching the children at each of the five stations to keep sufficient track of which children should be sent home with what worksheet and when. The Take-Homes do serve a useful purpose, but the use of the Take-Homes should not be forced. The usefulness of Take-Homes does not outweigh the teacher's need not to feel overwhelmed with things to know and things to do.

Word Matching

Most of the homework activities are basically cut-and-paste activities, for which the child needs scissors and paste. If it is not likely that scissors and/or paste may be expected to be in the homes of the children, then the activity should be modified from a cut-and-paste to a circle-and-draw-arrow.

For the word matching activity, the child cuts out the four two-sound words at the bottom of the worksheet and then pastes each word below its matching illustration.

Staple Books

The Staple Books are made at school and taken to share at home when completed, since staples and scissors generally require adult supervision for

very young children. The child cuts out the book, stacks up the pages, folds the book, and staples it closed. The child then reads the word on one page and draws an illustration for it on the next. The books are made at school e taken home in their finished form to shared with parents and siblings.

Picture Drawing

This activity makes almost the same requirements of the child as the staple books. The child reads a word and then illustrates it. These worksheets offer the advantage of more room for drawing.

Cut-and-Paste Test Sheets

These worksheets are the most elaborate and the most difficult of the Take-Home Worksheets. These worksheets ask the children to cut and paste the sounds without telling them exactly which sounds are to go in which words. If scissors and paste are not to be expected in the homes of the children, these particular worksheets don't go home. If the necessary materials are available, however, parents should be quite impressed with how well their children can assemble sounds into words.

Three-Sound Word Take-Homes

The Three-Sound Take-Home Worksheets are procedurally the two-sound worksheets. The only difference is that the children are now capable of reading three-sound words.

Tiny Writing Books as Take-Homes - Phrase Level

The Take-Home Blackline Masters start with the Coloring Book and continue through the two and three-sound levels. Once students pass these levels, blacklines are no longer necessary. Instead, the work the students engage in at their learning stations produces material that can easily be stapled into book form for the journey home. The first materials that are suitable for sending home are a product of each child's work with the Tiny Writing Cards.

Each Tiny Writing Card produces one phrase and an accompanying illustration. The teacher can gather the phrases and drawings of individual children in folders and then staple each ten or so drawings into a book for the child to take home. Only the phrases that can be read comfortably and proficiently end up in the books that go home.

Tiny Writing Books as Take-Homes - Transition Level

The procedures used for generating books for the students to take home at the phrase level are the same when children reach the transition level. Children who reach the transition level and who take home books made from their Tiny Writing Card phrases and drawings are, for the first time, taking home something to read that their parents can truly recognize as “reading”.

Student-Authored Vowels-Only Books as Take-Homes

The vowels-only books that the teacher makes from the creative writing efforts of the children can be, and in some cases are, taken home by the students who authored them. Unlike the Tiny Writing Cards that are used to produce materials to be taken home at both the phrase and transition levels, the creative writing activities are primarily intended to be used at school.

The creative writing in which students engage at the final level of the Reading Program is meant to produce an abundance of vowels-only books for children at this same level to read. Most of the books initially produced through creative writing activities have multiple authors and aren't really appropriate to send to only one student's home. As the children become more proficient writers, they begin authoring their own separate books. These books may eventually be sent home, but they are first added to the library station so that they may be read by everyone in class.