



## **PARENTS AND THE LANGUAGE**

### **LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

When we observe some young parents lovingly interacting with their children and providing a stimulating learning environment for them, we might conclude that 'good' parenting comes naturally. We might see such parents in the local park or supermarket, watching, caring for, engaging and communicating with their children. How gratifying it is to see that 'positive parenting' is alive and well. When we consider such observations we are reminded again of the importance of the child's first teachers – the parents.

#### **What Positive Parents Do?**

Parents who are positive, interact enthusiastically with their children and delight in their development. Not only do they provide the necessary love and support for their growing children, positive parents also –

- engage with their children, enjoying quality time spent together
- provide new experiences for their children and give them information at just the right time, so that their children can take advantage of opportunities for incidental learning
- take the time to talk with and really listen to their children
- encourage language growth by talking about words and what they mean
- play with their children, following their lead and stimulating imagination
- read together and tell stories with their children, discussing the events in the story and the reasons why characters acted or felt how they did
- model, respect and teach their children about the 'right' way to interact with others,
- impart core family values and label their own feelings and emotions, so that in time their children will learn to understand the feelings of others.
- offer encouragement as their children tackle new skills and become more independent.
- involve their children in daily routines and activities, finding ways to allow them to contribute to 'real' tasks

#### **Learning to be Positive Parents**

Contrary to popular belief, parenting is not instinctive – it is learned. Of course we learn a lot about parenting from within our own family – both the 'good' and the 'bad'. Our studies at school and at tertiary level or even as part of ante-natal education, will also contribute to our parenting skills as will reading 'self help' materials. We also learn by observing other families and through 'trial and error' with our own children.

Despite a variety of experiences, sometimes people arrive at parenthood lacking confidence and feeling ill-equipped to handle the task. This is especially the case when babies, toddlers and young children do not follow the typical development path for language and literacy. As

educators we perhaps need to question whether or not we have contributed to these feelings in parents.

All parents have strengths, even those who struggled with reading and writing at school. Their contribution to their child's growth and preparation for school, need not be hindered by limited finances or time. All parents need to be encouraged and reassured of the very special and unique role they have in bringing up their children. The value of what they CAN contribute needs to be communicated by professionals to parents.

### **Key ingredients of positive parenting: the 4 Es**

**Engagement:** Perhaps the most vital of the ingredients, engagement sets the stage for all learning, but particularly language learning. Children need the 'give and take' of their parents' interaction, accompanied by words, smiles and laughter. The convenient thing about engagement is that it can occur anywhere! Walking to school, waiting in the doctor's surgery, in the kitchen preparing a meal. Engagement is more easily achieved if parents are willing to follow the child's lead or attention and focus jointly on the activity or situation at hand.

**Encouragement:** Children need to be encouraged to explore and try out new ways of doing things. Persistence in the face of difficulty is a character trait that will assist them throughout their lives so we must remember to praise the child's effort and not just the successes. Children need the ongoing support of their parents as they learn at school.

**Enthusiasm:** Whether it is cooking, gardening, doing homework, sport or eating healthily, children will respond to their parents' enthusiasm. Parents' enthusiasm about sharing the activity with their child, is particularly valuable as the child feels valued and included.

**Enjoyment:** Children are quick to perceive an adult's real feelings! Parents have many duties and demands on their time but the effort of finding opportunities to really enjoy shared time with children, will be rewarded. It may only be for a short time but sharing a special 'exclusive' time with a parent sends a very powerful message to the child.

### **Practical ideas for shared time at home an oral language focus**

- look together at photos or videos of when children were young
- look through a magazine/junk mail - sharing what you find interesting or funny
- alert your child to an article or picture in the newspaper that may interest them
- read books to or with your child. It is important for Fathers to do this too! Children are more likely to value reading if you show you do as well.
- retell a favourite story or one from your childhood
- visit the local library and choose books together both fiction and reference books
- make up a story "out of the mouth" – from your own experiences or from when your children were little. For example: "the day you lost your first tooth"
- Turn off the TV and take turns to tell some NEWS from the day. Be careful not to dwell too much on the negative aspects of your busy day. Perhaps offer a topic such as "the 2 good things that happened in my day."
- Play talking/memory games such as "I went to the zoo and I saw ..."
- Play cards or board games. Give the children opportunities to explain the rules and organize the games.
- Play ready made language activities that don't require equipment. For example: Flips – Fun Language Interactions to Prepare for School Success, (Love and Reilly 2008)

## The Teacher – Parent Partnership

Most children will spend 10-12 years in education of some sort. What is required is a long term and workable relationship between student, parent and school. Fortunately child-care centres, preschools and schools are realizing more and more the importance of forming partnerships with parents. Schools that value and reach out to their communities reap the benefits from parent involvement. On the other hand parents need to be mindful of the often unspoken 'messages' we can give our children about school and learning, and continue to remain supportive of teachers and positive about school. This can be a particular challenge for parents who had negative experiences and feelings relating to their own school years.

It is however, important for teachers to "think outside the square" about the role that parents might have. Many parents enjoy traditional roles such as fund-raising or assisting at the canteen. Others feel confident within the classroom listening to children read for example. There is an underutilized role that parents can play in the classroom or preschool in the area of language. Simple activities that involve parents in talking with and listening to children will be of enormous benefit to the children. Parents in turn will gain confidence in this setting and feel they are playing a valuable supportive role.

## Practical ideas for involving parents in the classroom: an oral language focus

**Objects:** Collect interesting objects and place one or more in a case or interesting box. It could be labeled the "conversation case" or "talking box". With an individual child or a small group of children, an object is selected. Spontaneous sharing of what memories or associations this object triggers follows. There is no goal of a "right or wrong" answer. Rather, each child is given time to express their ideas and opinions. The adult's role may include a general prompt or question that links the object with the child's own experience, such as "Does that remind you of something that happened to you?"

Examples of possible objects: an old shoe with a hole in the sole, a dog's lead that is broken, an empty match box, a baby's bootie, a small bell, an old-fashioned telephone, a dust mask, an old postcard.

**Classroom scrapbook:** Collect pictures, jokes or cartoons from magazines and newspapers and stick them into a large scrap book. You can label the book according to a theme, for example "What's Funny?" or "Interesting!". Children will enjoy looking again and again at the pictures and talking about them within a small group or with the adult. Again parents can prompt with a question or a 'starter' such as "I think that's funny because ....". Children need time to observe and formulate what they are going to say so it is important to allow periods of silence.

**Demonstrate a skill:** Parents have a variety of skills that they can bring to the classroom. They may demonstrate cooking a favourite dish, perhaps from another country. They may bring in a patchwork quilt they are working on or a small piece of woodwork. With a small group, parents can then demonstrate and explain what they are doing. Children can ask questions or comment and join in or try out as appropriate.

**Book Discussion:** Small stick-on notes can be placed at the front or back of story-books with suggestions for questions to ask and discussion points to follow. Parents who are confident to read out loud to an individual child or a small group will be pleased to have the support for follow up conversation about the book. Likewise suggestions on stick-on notes inside the cover of take home books gives the parent at home an opportunity to discuss concepts or reinforce language and be involved in their child's learning.

Examples of questions and prompts: Why did ..... feel so sad? How did .... get around the

problem of.... What might you have done? What happened after ...? Why did/did you not like the story. What was the most interesting part of the story and why?

**Discussion topic cards:** Pre-determined topics for discussion will assist conversation within a group and in one to one situations. Rather than the topic being chosen by the adult, children enjoy the random selection of a topic. Topics should be 'open-ended' with no 'right or wrong' answer. You can make up your own topics and write them on the back of individual cards. Children then select a card from the top of the pack. It is read out and then everyone in the group gives an opinion or comments. *Chatterbox* (Love and Reilly 2003) and *Spot on Speaking* (Love and Reilly 2009) are available for such activities.

## Parent Support Programs

Much has been written about the importance of children's **early years** of life before they go to school and many communities have a range of early intervention programs.

One example is **HIPPY (Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters)** - a two-year home-based parenting and early childhood enrichment program targeting families with young children. The HIPPY approach develops the foundations for learning in the home during children's crucial early years. HIPPY fosters social inclusion, contributes to successful school participation and offers parents, a supported pathway to employment and local level community leadership.

HIPPY's attention to the interactions between children and their parents and its emphasis on supporting early literacy development, is consistent with key policy initiatives across Australia and reflects contemporary understanding of the crucial role of parents in their child's learning. HIPPY seeks to build a sense of belonging for families and children and actively equip parents to support their children and other parents. The HIPPY program is informed by evidence that children's earliest and most powerful learning comes from their family. It is also based on the premise that early learning experiences that encourage literacy and numeracy equip children for lifelong learning. More information about the HIPPY program can be found on their website [www.hippyaustralia.org.au](http://www.hippyaustralia.org.au)

It is interesting to read The HIPPY Mission and reflect on the goals that are broader than the achievement of skills.

### **HIPPY is dedicated to:**

- Increasing the chances of **positive early school experience** among children and parents
- **Empowering parents** to understand their crucial role in developing their child's readiness to learn
- Providing children with **stimulating and varied learning opportunities**
- **Enhancing interaction** between parents and their children
- **Engaging parents and children** in the **joy of learning**
- Creating a learning environment in the home that encourages the development of literacy skills
- **Reducing the social isolation** of parents
- Fostering **parental involvement** in school and community life
- Providing parents with the **opportunity** of becoming home tutors in their own community
- Supporting home tutors to develop the skills and work experience needed to compete successfully in the labour market

## **The School's role in creating the environment**

**Beyond the early years** it is also important for schools to have goals that encompass more than the set curriculum. With this in mind a number of schools have incorporated The Positive Education approach, which employs implicit and explicit teaching of the Positive Psychology principles pioneered by Dr Martin Seligman (2004).

When interviewed by Kerry O'Brien on the ABC's 7.30 Report (7/12/2009) Martin Seligman said that Australian parents, when asked what they most want for their children, answer "happiness, fulfilment, civility, balance". When asked what do schools teach, the parents say "discipline, conformity, literacy". There is no overlap between these two sets of goals. It is everybody's role in the partnership to acknowledge each participants view and find ways to grow healthy happy and balanced individuals who are equipped to face life with confidence. A key tenet of Positive Psychology is building character strengths. Martin Seligman asserts that using one's highest strengths promotes engagement, leads to more positive emotion, to greater meaning, to more accomplishments and to better relationships with others. Parents, grandparents, carers and teachers alike would agree that these are powerful, achievable and wise goals to set for our children.

### **Resources and References:**

<http://www.kidspot.com.au>

<http://www.parent.net.au>

<http://parentingaustralia.com.au>

<http://www.parentingrc.org.au>

<http://www.hippyaustralia.org.au>

Love and Reilly Speech and Language Products

*Chatterbox* (2003), *Flips* (2008), *Spot on Speaking* (2009)

Seligman, M 2004, 'Positive Psychology in Practice,' *Positive Psychology in Practice*, eds P Alex Linley and Stephen Joseph, John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey, pp xi-xiii..

*This article was originally written and published by Sue Reilly and Elizabeth Love in December 2010. It was re-formatted with slight changes by Lucia Smith in May 2012.*