The Importance of Parental Involvement in Children's Literacy Development

Puneet Bains

Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University

Correspondence: pba39@sfu.ca

Abstract

This paper explores the critical role of parental involvement in fostering children's literacy development, particularly during the foundational years of early childhood. Drawing from empirical studies and real-life cases, including the Genie Wiley case, the paper examines how factors such as home literacy environments, prenatal engagement, socioeconomic status, school participation, parental beliefs, multilingualism, and the intersection of educational technology and digital mediation shape literacy outcomes (Piasta, 2016). It also addresses the broader ecological influences of how nature and nurture interact in shaping literacy development independent of parental input. Ultimately, the findings underscore that while various external factors contribute to literacy development, consistent and active parental involvement remains a dominant force in shaping children's academic, social, and emotional success. The paper suggests some recommendations for empowering parents through educational interventions and policy reforms aimed at enhancing home literacy environments.

Keywords: *Literacy development, parental involvement, parent-child relationship, positive environments.*

Introduction

Literacy is a major component of life. It encompasses not only the ability to read and write, but also speak, comprehend, and interpret various forms of language (Piasta, 2016). Successful development of these skills is crucial to navigating everyday life, especially during the primary years of learning (ages 0-12), during which children acquire fundamental skills and knowledge (Piasta, 2016; Popli et al., 2013). Factors contributing to literacy development include early exposure to language, quality of instruction, access to books and resources, parental involvement, individual differences, and socioeconomic status (Perry, 2012).

Among these various factors, parental influence emerges as the cornerstone of children's literacy development (Baker, 2013; Cotton & Wikelund, 1989). Children are more likely to develop strong reading and language skills when parents are actively engaged (e.g., reading aloud or active dialogue exposure). Conversely, insufficient parenting (e.g., not paying attention to the child or not engaging in conversation with the child) may lead to difficulties in fluent reading, understanding complex texts, verbal expression, and applying

literary knowledge to real-life scenarios (Baker, 2013; McArthur & Castles, 2017).

Considering the important role that parents play in children's developmental outcomes, this paper asserts that parental involvement is the most important factor in promoting children's literacy development. By doing so, this review aims to help parents recognize the pivotal influence they have on their child's literacy development and highlights why early parental involvement is essential for children's long-term success. It also seeks to inform educators and scholars on how to better support and empower parents, especially through educational workshops, flyers, and other accessible opportunities.

In addition, the paper will examine contradictory views, such as the influence of biological predispositions and environmental factors, which suggest that parents may not be the only influential factor in a child's literacy development. Despite the multifaceted nature of literacy development, this literature review reveals stronger evidence supporting the importance of parental involvement in shaping children's literacy outcomes.

The Genie Wiley Case and Literacy

A prime example demonstrating the importance of parenting in early childhood literacy development is the Genie Wiley case (Fromkin et al., 1974). Genie was discovered in 1970 at the age of 13, after spending most of her life locked in a dark room, isolated and deprived of normal human interaction. The case has many complex elements, but it is widely used to illustrate how social isolation and language deprivation can hinder a child's ability to acquire literacy. When Genie was found, she could neither speak nor understand language at the age of 13.

Cognitive stimulation, including talking to infants, reading aloud, and exposing children to rich verbal interactions, must begin very early in life to activate the brain during its most plastic and receptive stages (Rakesh et al., 2024). Unfortunately, Genie did not receive any of these critical inputs. Her complete lack of exposure to language and human engagement during the sensitive period of development resulted in profound delays.

After intensive therapy, she quickly learned how to talk, read, and write, but at a very limited capacity, as the size of her brain was smaller than average due to halted development (Fromkin et al., 1974). She also struggled to maintain conversations because she had little exposure to the natural flow of dialogue, such as when to speak, understanding of sarcasm, or interpreting humor.

Overall, Genie's story highlights the responsibility parents have in providing literacy development opportunities, and the crucial role of language-rich environments in supporting literacy and cognitive development.

Prenatal Engagement: Language Learning Begins Before Birth

The parent-child relationship begins shaping literacy development long before a child is born. For instance, Jones & Englestad (2004) found that maternal reading during pregnancy has been associated with speeding the emergence of a child's first word utterance. This is due to active auditory stimulation the fetus experiences, which accelerates early neural connections related to language processing.

In addition, prenatal reading introduces the unborn child to various linguistic and cultural nuances, increasing their familiarity with language diversity (Joaquim et al., 2023; Jones & Englestad, 2004). These early exposures of prenatal engagement enrich the child's linguistic repertoire and promote cognitive development, preparing the child for future literacy acquisition (Joaquim et al., 2023; Jones & Englestad, 2004).

Reading to the fetus not only acquaints the unborn child with linguistic patterns but also cultivates parent-child emotional attachment (Joaquim et al., 2023; Martens, 2013). As the mother reads aloud, her voice becomes a comforting and familiar presence for the developing baby, establishing the groundwork for a strong parent-child bond (Joaquim et al., 2023; Jones & Englestad, 2004; Martens, 2013).

Overall, these findings emphasize that prenatal experiences play a foundational role in language and literacy development, reinforcing the value of parental involvement before birth.

Home Literacy Environment and Language Nutrition

After birth, parents again play a central role in cultivating a healthy environment to foster positive literacy development in their children. Home literacy environment, characterized by the available literacy resources or activities used at home to foster children's literacy development, is a critical determinant of a child's cognitive and academic performance, specifically in reading and language skills (Cheng et al., 2024; Dong et al., 2020).

For instance, Baker (2013) indicates that cognitive stimulation through parent-child interactions such as reading, having conversations, telling stories, and singing lullabies are linked to advanced literacy, language, and social-emotional skills. Engaging in simple practices like reading to a child nightly and conversing 10-15 minutes about their toys can effectively foster literacy development.

On the other hand, poor home literacy environments involve disengaged parenting, minimal literacy resources at home, and minimal dialogue between parent and child, which hinders literacy development at the cognitive level (Baker, 2023; Dong et al., 2020). These contrasting outcomes underscore how showing interest in a child's reading and writing contributes to the home literacy environment, further fostering healthy socio-emotional development as the child feels valued and cared for.

A key part of a strong home literacy environment is *language nutrition*, which Zauche and colleagues (2016), describe as rich, responsive verbal inputs children receive from caregivers that fuel early brain and language development. One of the most impactful forms of language nutrition is conversational turns, which is the back-and-forth exchange between adult and child. In infancy, this may simply be a caregiver responding to a baby's coos or babbles.

While these interactions are not structured dialogue, the early vocal interactions stimulate the child's brain and lay the foundation for understanding sounds, patterns, and conversational rhythm (Rakesh et al., 2024; Zauche et al., 2016). Importantly, these early speaking opportunities not only enhance verbal communication but also build oral language skills that serve as a foundation for later reading and writing. Dockrell and Connelly (2009) emphasize that speaking, listening, reading, and writing systems develop in synchrony, and that oral language directly influences compositional quality.

Children with strong oral language skills are more likely to generate well-structured, coherent writing, whereas those with limitations in vocabulary tend to produce shorter texts with more grammatical errors. Thus, fostering rich oral interactions and daily dialogue with children in early childhood greatly supports literacy growth.

Socioeconomic Status and the Mitigating Role of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is so powerful that it can potentially offset the literacy development challenges faced by children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who may have limited access to books, less exposure to vocabulary-rich environments, and reduced opportunities for educational enrichment (Cheng et al., 2024). When parents actively engage in their child's literacy development, they provide critical support and reinforcement that helps reduce the risk of literacy difficulties caused by these socioeconomic disadvantages (Cheng et al., 2024; Ha, 2023). This may look like reading bedtime stories, using online reading resources, and engaging in interactive literacy exercises, which help mitigate the adverse effects of low socioeconomic status on literacy development (Ha, 2023).

Some parents may not be equipped with the knowledge and resources to effectively support their child's literacy development, especially if they themselves have limited literacy skills (St. Clair et al., 2012). However, they can still create a vocabulary-rich environment by engaging in meaningful conversations with their children, such as having the child describe their surroundings during a walk in the neighborhood or discussing their favorite foods during mealtime. These conversations expose children to a variety of words and concepts, supporting their literacy development. (Ha, 2023; St. Clair et al., 2023).

In addition, oral storytelling is a powerful tool which helps children develop listening skills and foster an appreciation for narrative structure in low socioeconomic homes (Ha, 2023; McKeough et al., 2008). When caregivers share stories they model sentence structure, introduce new vocabulary, and help children understand story elements like sequence and character development (Ha, 2023; Maddumage, 2023). Additionally, Maddumage (2023) emphasizes that storytelling fosters creativity and critical thinking, particularly when parents bring stories to life through dramatic voices and expressive gestures. Parents can further encourage children to retell or create their own stories, further pushing their literacy development. These interactions stimulate all domains of literacy development, from comprehension to oral literacy.

Thus, parental involvement emerges as an indispensable factor in mitigating the negative effects of low socioeconomic status on children's literacy development.

Parental School Involvement and Home Literacy Environment

Parental involvement in schools notably influences the extent of home literacy environments and children's literacy development. Active parental engagement in child's education typically involves attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in school events, providing transportation, and participating in extracurricular activities (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014). Families where parents are actively involved in schools often mirror this engagement at home, and vice versa, thus fostering positive literacy development in their children (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014; Sun et al., 2023).

For instance, Sun and colleagues (2023) examined the influence of parental involvement in schools on children's academic achievement and home literacy environment. As anticipated, they found that parents actively involved in their child's school tended to foster a more supportive home literacy environment. The authors also noted that this support, of parental involvement in schools, is prominent across all socioeconomic statuses, but it is slightly more effective in mitigating the influence of lower socioeconomic status on academic outcomes.

Furthermore, Cotton & Wikelund (1989), found that children whose parents were actively involved in their schools reported greater self-esteem and confidence, which was positively reflected in the home literacy environment and strengthened literacy development. Ultimately, active parental involvement fosters a sense of encouragement for children in both school and home settings, underscoring the pivotal role of parents across various domains and how those interconnected factors influence a child's overall literacy development.

Parental Beliefs and Literacy Outcomes

Parental beliefs play an important role in molding the home literacy environment, which, in turn, greatly impacts children's literacy development. Parental literacy beliefs, referring to the parents' wishes or goals that shapes the child's reading comprehension by influencing literacy knowledge acquisition, can be either holistic or skills based (Dong et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2024).

Parents from Western cultures usually encompass more holistic beliefs, encouraging literacy activities like storytelling and active dialogue which enhance intrinsic motivation and positively contribute to literacy development (Dong et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2006). Conversely, parents who hold Eastern cultural beliefs tend to prioritize skill-based learning, characterized by limited active educational engagement and a greater reliance on paper-based instruction, like assigning children worksheets and evaluating them upon completion (Dong et al., 2020). This non-engaging activity of simply assigning tasks to a child without parent-child collaboration does not stimulate the child and thus does not contribute to positive literacy development (Lai et al., 2024; Lynch et al., 2006; Rybak et al., 2002).

To investigate this phenomenon, Dong and colleagues (2020), assessed students on various subjects from a diverse classroom and interviewed their families regarding their literacy practices at home. Interestingly, they found that families with an Eastern cultural background did have more skill-based beliefs,

and their children performed exceptionally on the mathematical component of the assessment, but average on the literacy component.

On the contrary, families with a Western cultural background possessed more holistic beliefs, and their children achieved exceptional marks on the literacy components, and moderate marks on the mathematical portion of the assessment. The importance of parental beliefs in children's literacy development is emphasized by these findings, highlighting the importance of promoting holistic beliefs to cultivate a supportive home literacy environment.

Parent Roles in Multilingual Contexts

English language learners (ELLs) are students whose primary language is not English, so they are often enrolled in additional language support classes to support their proficiency in literacy skills (Statistics Canada, 2024; Umansky et al., 2023). Between 2021 and 2023, 2.1 million students in Canada, and 5.2 million students in the United States from ages 5-18 were enrolled in ELL programs (Statistics Canada, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

For ELL students, the challenges often stem from limited exposure to English outside of school, as shown by Umansky and colleagues (2023), teachers often assign 20 minutes of home reading to help strengthen literacy skills, but in multilingual households where English may not be part of daily communication, this is difficult to sustain (Dixon et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). For instance, in many Asian contexts, English is taught primarily as a foreign language with little opportunity for daily use, making proficiency more difficult to attain and leaving students reliant on formal instruction (Zhang et al., 2023). Due to this, most of these students remain in ELL programs because their progress in reading and writing skills do not improve (Dixon et al., 2025; Umansky et al., 2023).

Furthermore, longitudinal studies indicate that ELL students who begin school with limited literacy skills in the instructional language tend to advance more slowly toward proficiency goals, and many do not achieve the required skills by the end of elementary school (Umansky et al., 2023). However, these literacy challenges faced by ELL students can be mitigated if there is active parental involvement.

Dixon and colleagues (2025) found that bilingual children's literacy development is shaped by the quality and quantity of language exposure at home. Maintaining the native language alongside the instructional language strengthens all areas of literacy development, specifically vocabulary, phonological awareness, and cognitive flexibility, while also preserving cultural identity.

The *one-parent–one language* strategy is effective at enhancing a child's literacy skills in both languages (Dixon et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). In this model, one parent communicates primarily in the home language (e.g., Punjabi) while the other uses the instructional language (e.g., English), ensuring balanced exposure to both languages. Aleksić & Duruș (2025) further highlight that the quality of home literacy activities, including interactive reading, storytelling, and engaging children in meaningful conversations, can have a greater impact on literacy growth than simply focusing the amount of time spent.

In addition, as discussed earlier in the paper, parental collaboration with teachers to align home and school practices is beneficial for the children as they receive consistent support across both environments. This can look like a parent reading the same short story assigned in class and then discussing it with the child over dinner or intentionally using vocabulary from the classroom spelling tests. Such natural applications help bridge classroom learning and daily life, making English practice more engaging and natural.

Thus, parents hold the crucial responsibility of intentionally exposing their child to both languages in multilingual households to ensure successful literacy development for ELL students.

Technology and Literacy Development: The Role of Parental Mediation

In today's digitized society, technology has become an increasingly prominent aspect of children's daily lives. Bautista and colleagues (2024) describe how parents frequently rely on televisions, smartphones, or tablets as convenient tools to occupy or soothe young

children while attending to other responsibilities. This tactic to distract children is understandable given the demands of modern life, but the way children are granted access to digital technologies plays a critical role in shaping developmental outcomes.

When technology use is carefully monitored and supported by adult guidance, it can offer meaningful educational benefits (Bautista et al., 2024; Soyoof et al., 2024). Conversely, unsupervised or excessive exposure is linked to many negative consequences, including diminished attention span, delayed language acquisition, and reduced social interaction (Soyoof et al., 2024; Szabó et al., 2024).

In the realm of literacy development, technology can be highly beneficial when used appropriately. Instead of simply handing a phone to a child to watch videos or play non-educational games, caregivers can engage children with digital tools, such as interactive eBooks that are intentionally designed to support early reading skills (Bautists et al., 2024; Soyoof et al., 2024). Bautists and colleagues (2024) emphasize how the multimodal features of educational technology, such as animations, adaptive feedback, and audio narration, have been shown to support early decoding skills, letter-sound recognition, phonological awareness, narrative comprehension and sustain children's engagement in literacy tasks.

However, parental mediation plays a vital role in ensuring that technology use supports rather than hinders literacy growth. Strategies such as co-use, active mediation, and guided scaffolding can transform screen time into a collaborative learning experience (Soyoof et al., 2024). For example, when parents read digital stories alongside their children, ask questions, and explain new words, they enhance both comprehension and critical thinking (Soyoof et al., 2024).

These mediated interactions turn technology use into a positive outcome for literacy development, once again highlighting the important role of parents in children's literacy development.

Other Considerations

Despite all the evidence presented on parental involvement being central to literacy development, other research suggests it is the accumulation of multiple sources that influence childhood literacy. This includes the interplay between biological predispositions and environmental supports, in other words, the interplay of nature versus nurture. Hart and colleagues (2021) explored this idea and found that children's literacy outcomes were often influenced by both environmental transmission and genetic inheritance, a phenomenon known as *genetic confounding*. This interplay occurs through gene-environment correlations, where a child's inherited traits influence both their exposure to certain environments and how they respond to them.

For literacy, this means that the same parental characteristics that contribute to creating a rich home literacy environment (e.g., love of reading, strong language skills) may also be genetically transmitted to children, influencing their literacy potential before environmental factors even take effect. Understanding this interaction between nature and nurture helps broaden the discussion and provides alternative perspectives, rather than solely focusing on parental involvement in literacy development.

Twin and adoption studies consistently demonstrate that biological parents exert a stronger influence on literacy-related abilities than adoptive parents (Petrill et al., 2005; Stromswold, 2001). For instance, Byrne and colleagues (2005), found that even when adoptive parents create rich literacy environments, engage in reading activities, and provide ample support for their child's education, genetic predispositions inherited from biological parents still exert a great influence on literacy outcomes. Such that reading, phonological awareness, spelling, and rapid naming exhibited notable genetic influences with only minor effects from environmental factors (Byrne et al., 2005; Tucker-Drob & Briley, 2014).

However, orphan studies provide a stronger basis on the nurture side, illustrating how children can achieve comparable literacy levels with strong environmental resources such as supportive caregivers, community engagement,

and quality education (Ebrahimpour et al., 2021; Debebe, 2009). For instance, Ebrahimpour and colleagues (2021) compared literacy development of orphans to children with parents, finding that there is not a substantial difference in literacy outcomes between the two groups. In fact, some orphans showed greater literacy skills, which is likely due to enriched educational environments and the resilience fostered by supportive networks beyond the parents.

Furthermore, Novelle and Gonyea (2016) argue that it is the quality of the home literacy environment, not the provider, that determines literacy outcomes, and that with sufficient support, any child can develop strong literacy skills regardless of genetic factors. This interaction between nature and nurture illustrates the complexity of literacy development.

While genetic inheritance sets the foundation for literacy development, environmental supports can amplify or buffer those predispositions (Hart et al., 2021). A child with strong genetic predispositions toward language might excel with minimal support, whereas a child with genetic vulnerabilities may require a richer home literacy environment to achieve similar outcomes. Orphans who succeed academically often do so because environmental supports are strong enough to counterbalance potential genetic risks, while adopted children's outcomes may more strongly reflect the influence of inherited traits, mediated by the environments they experience (Ebrahimpour et al., 2021).

Ultimately, a similar pattern emerges in both cases: biology may set a range of literacy developmental outcomes, but the environment determines how close a child comes to realizing their full potential. Whether that support comes from parents, guardians, teachers, or community support, an enriched literary environment is vital for fostering positive literacy development. Therefore, parental involvement remains a crucial and adaptable factor, as it can be strengthened through targeted interventions or fulfilled by other caregivers in similar roles.

Conclusion

Parental involvement is a powerful and consistent contributor to children's literacy development, shaping not only their social, behavioral, and emotional growth but also their ability to read, write, and communicate effectively (Piasta, 2016; Popli et al., 2013). From the earliest stages, prenatal engagement provides crucial auditory stimulation that strengthens neural pathways for language, laying the groundwork for literacy understanding (Joaquim et al., 2023; Jones & Englestad, 2004).

Ultimately, rich home literacy environments filled with reading, storytelling, and responsive conversations foster strong language development and cognitive skills. Parents' active participation in schools further reinforces these practices, bridging home and classroom experiences while boosting children's confidence and academic engagement (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014; Sun et al., 2023).

Equally important are parental beliefs and intentional guidance in multilingual households, which ensure balanced exposure to multiple languages and cultivate literacy across diverse contexts (Dong et al., 2020). Finally, in today's digital world, parents' thoughtful mediation of technology turns screen time into meaningful literacy experiences (Bautista et al., 2024; Soyoof et al., 2024).

Collectively, this evidence highlights the robust role of parents in a child's literacy development. While genetic predispositions (nature) and broader environmental factors (nurture) also play a role, the nurturing provided by parents and caregivers consistently proves to be the most influential factor in helping children develop strong literacy skills, making the nurture side of the equation strong (Hart et al., 2021).

Furthermore, these findings provide vital future implications in creating and implementing targeted interventions and support systems to teach families how to foster both traditional and digital home literacy environments. Recognizing the pivotal role parents play in shaping a variety of aspects of a child's literacy journey, educational institutions, policymakers, and community organizations

must prioritize initiatives that empower parents to become effective literacy mentors.

For instance, St. Clair and colleagues (2012), implemented a program for ELL students and parents from low-income families, teaching them ways to foster positive home literacy environments. Findings reflected a positive outcome, indicating that empowering immigrant families with new knowledge and skills on how to foster children's language development results in enduring improvements in literacy skills.

Thus, to promote meaningful parental involvement, it is essential to provide families with accessible resources, culturally responsive training programs, and ongoing guidance. Supporting parents in this way strengthens the home literacy environment and ensures that all children have the opportunity to succeed in their literary journeys.

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