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**Research on family reading: an international perspective**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents a summary of international research in the field of family reading, a subject which refers both to the development of the literacy skills of family members, and to their shared process of reading. It begins by defining the key terms in family reading, then introduces the research methods employed in research in this area. Research specifically focusing on parents is presented, with particular reference to young parents and fathers in prison. The issue of intergenerational reading is also introduced, whereby (in this instance) the young and the elderly share experiences via reading. The final theme of the paper is that of families sharing reading for pleasure, and public reading events for families are described. The paper concludes with a series of barriers to family reading, and a suggested model of effective family reading, for families and communities in any country.*

**Key terms:** Family reading, family literacy, intergenerational literacy, family learning, literacy research, reading for pleasure.

I have been asked to speak to you today about research on family reading, an important aspect of the work of libraries throughout the world, but one which can take many different forms. Before I begin to talk about specific work in this area I feel that it would be helpful to go through some of the widely accepted definitions of the key terms, as each of us in this room may understand them in a slightly different way.

## **DEFINITIONS**

‘Family reading’ can be interpreted in two main ways; firstly, as family members supporting each other in the development of their literacy skills, and secondly, as family members sharing their enjoyment of reading and storytelling. We will consider both of these today.

‘Family literacy’ is concerned with literacy activities involving at least two generations. In general a family literacy program will have three components - literacy for children (including study skills), literacy for parents, and guidance for adults on how to encourage the literacy skills of their children or young relatives.

‘Intergenerational literacy’ refers to ‘the efforts of second – and third – generation adults in a family (usually an extended family) to help themselves or others in the family learn to read and write.’ (Harris & Hodges, 1995: 120<sup>i</sup>)

‘Family learning’: although there is a long tradition of parents and other adults encouraging and supporting children’s educational progress, fewer have had the opportunity to develop their own learning alongside that of the young people, as a family.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY READING AND LITERACY RESEARCH**

Relatively recently, reading research has broadened in scope to consider the way in which social contexts influence reading ability. The development of reading skills is now accepted to occur not only in the classroom, but also within social settings, at home and in the wider community.

International research provides powerful demonstrations of the impact of the actions of young people and family members as they combine languages, literacies and cultural practices from a variety of contexts. In many studies grounded in ‘real world settings’, in other words, beyond the school gates, children’s learning is supported and in turn supports the learning of others, in ways that are not necessarily recognised or understood within the school. In a study from 2004 investigating storytelling with Latin American elders and young people, Olmedo<sup>ii</sup> suggests that children and their communities ‘have something to offer which is relevant to what is taught’, and that a teacher could make an effort to understand that he/she is a mediator of a young person’s learning and just one member, albeit an essential one, of that person’s entire learning community.











