

Family Literacy Examined: A Case Study Exploring the Outcomes of the Reading and Parents Program (RAPP) offered by Kingston Literacy & Skills (KL&S) to Parents and Pre-School Children

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PURPOSE

The objective of this case study was to examine the effect and outcomes of one family reading program, *Reading and Parents Program (RAPP)*, to determine if this program influences parents to read aloud and engage in early language and literacy activities at home with their children. This study aimed to determine if RAPP positively influences parents to provide additional, richer home-based early language and literacy learning experiences for their children.

The findings from this study will be used to: (a) further an understanding of the issues parents may face and assumptions they may make when trying to help their children learn to read; (b) assess the effect of RAPP as a learning tool; (c) guide future revisions to the RAPP program; (d) guide service providers in their presentation of RAPP to parents; and (e) provide supporting evidence for RAPP program expansion or compression.

THE STUDY

A qualitative case study approach was employed to explore the research question: *Does the RAPP program influence and/or change parents' family literacy practice so they read aloud to their children more often and engage in more literacy activities with their children in the home?*

Families of preschool and early primary children took part in RAPP programs that were arranged during playgroups at the Ontario Early Years Centre, Kingston and the Islands and the Better Beginnings for Kingston Children. After receiving ethics approval from Queen's General Research Ethics Board, 21 volunteer parents or child caretakers were recruited and signed letters of consent agreeing to participate in the research. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain the participants confidentiality to the extent possible.

Qualitative data were collected over the four month period January to April 2013 via surveys, interviews, and a focus group. The participants completed a pre- and post-surveys that took approximately 10 minutes to complete. In-depth, semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 minutes were conducted with four of the parent/care-taker participants who were recommended by the RAPP facilitator. Data were also collected with four of the 21 participants via a 90 minute focus group discussion which took place at the end of the RAPP program. Again, these participants were recommended by the RAPP facilitator. The interviews and focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Open coding was employed to categorize the data and inductive analysis was used to search for consistencies and core meanings in the data collected through this study. An iterative process of examining and reexamining the data and revising codes was adopted until as Yin (2009) suggests a full description of the case emerged.



FINDINGS



RAPP Made a Change:

- 72% of study participants, who completed both pre- and post-program questionnaires, indicated that the RAPP program changed their reading habits with their children at home.
- 44% of these same parents rated their knowledge about how children learn to read as improved.
- A focus group parent said: *"Once you've had even just one [RAPP] package your whole style of reading can change."*

RAPP Pack Like a Present:

The parents described that their children recognized the RAPP packs and they got excited; it was as if they had received a present. For example, parents made the following statements:

- My son, *"Just gets excited every week like it's a new book and a new craft."*
- The RAPP pack is like *"a surprise for her."*
- Opening up the pack is like *"opening up her weekly present."*

Different Reading:

Parents reported doing reading previously with their children but they obtained new ideas about how to read differently: engaging with activities, doing labeling for their children, making connections to real life.

- "I'm not very crafty at all and I don't think of things like that."*
- "[Reading] with a purpose...making connections, questioning, linking it to their own life experiences."*
- "It all stems from reading and labeling and you know drawing similarities...[reading in an] engaging way."*

More Time Reading:

Parents reported spending more time reading: *"it made it easier to do different activities with her because it's there, it's ready for me. I don't have to do research and go out and be like okay here's a book what can I do to go along with this and like it just made it a lot easier. So I guess in that aspect yeah for sure I spent more time doing that kind of thing with her."*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children enter school with varying levels of language and literacy development. Those who enter school with poorer emergent and early literacy skills and vocabularies relative to their peers have a great deal of difficulty catching up. Research shows that socio-economic factors or the educational level of parents does not necessarily dictate outcomes for children. Rather, the quality of parent and child interaction - including stimulating early literacy activities in the home environment - has the greatest influence (Syva et al., 2002).

The importance of parenting skills and parental involvement in their children's academic achievement or home literacy is supported by numerous studies. These studies show that children whose parents are actively involved in their children's education perform better in academic activities including language and literacy skills (e.g., Li, 2006; Reutzal, Fawson, & Smith, 2006; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal, 2006). For example, Sénéchal et al., 1998 found that storybook reading by parents correlated to language outcomes such as vocabulary and listening comprehension. Similarly, parents' direct teaching about reading and printing words correlate with early literacy skills such as alphabet knowledge, word decoding and invented spelling. Parents need to learn how to be involved in their children's educational activities and how to motivate their children to achieve (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). By working with both parents and children, the potential for intergenerational transfer of low literacy skills is significantly decreased (Clark 2007).

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RAPP

The RAPP program loans high-quality children's books along with age-appropriate early language and literacy development suggestions based on the book including related rhymes, poems, crafts and activities. Parents sign up to borrow RAPP books at specific playgroups. The RAPP facilitator visits these playgroups weekly or bi-weekly to loan RAPP packs that are tailor-made for individual families according to the number and ages of children in the household. Since 2008 over 3500 RAPP packs have been delivered to families in the Kingston Frontenac and Lennox and Addington areas. The RAPP packs are loaned for one-week or two-week periods and families return the packs along with the books (they may keep the printed crafts, activities, and supporting materials). Once their pack is returned, the family collects a new pack.

Parents in this study consistently reported their children recognized and looked forward to the RAPP packages. One parent said of her daughter's reaction to the RAPP packs: *"She's really interested in it and she's always looking forward for that big package that she gets on Thursdays."*



MORE RAPP

"Should have it more out there for people"

This was a sentiment shared by the parents interviewed for this study. When they were asked what suggestions they would recommend, they wanted to see RAPP more broadly distributed at places like: libraries, YMCA, park programs in the summer, family doctor offices, public health centres.

"If there was a website or there was some way for me to link back and get all these activities and have access to this later...I could go back later or everyone in Kingston could"

Referring to when the program ends, one parent lamented:
"Almost you feel like you've lost something."

Another parent wondered: *"Why can't it run all year?"*

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