

Family Literacy

Families are often to unaware of how much they already do to support their children's literacy learning. Family Literacy Nights are a great way to celebrate those activities, as well as share new ideas.

If you prepare extra sets of directions for all activities, families can collect them and take them home for easy reference.

There are many activities you can use to make Literacy Nights an enjoyable family experience that carries over learning from school to home. Make sure materials are easy-to-find and inexpensive, so that parents can easily replicate activities at home. In your opening, it is crucial that you help parents understand the importance of what they are about to do and how it relates to their children's literacy development. You can prepare a hand-out to underscore this.

Just as with other curriculum nights, you can organize your Literacy Night around a theme, strategy, or book. Organizing activities around a theme/topic allows you to choose a subject that is likely to appeal to parents and children, that will be fairly easy to organize, and that will be an instant hit. Some examples:

- **Cooking:** Invite families to bring a favorite recipe. Compile recipes into a book following the event. Provide an assortment of no-cook recipes, ideally ones that combine pictures with directions so that they will be easy-to-follow for adults who might not be proficient readers.
- **Skipping Rope Rhymes:** This activity pairs literacy with physical activity and fitness. Make sure parents understand the importance of rhyme and repetition, then have them learn the words along with the skipping or hand actions. You can use the gym or schedule this for when you can go outdoors. Teach your students the rhymes in advance and prepare a take-home for ready reference.
- **Games Night:** Board games are making a comeback. Collect a variety from colleagues, friends, or yard sales. Be sure to talk about the many skills children can learn by playing board games: turn-taking, strategy and problem-solving, reading, counting, etc.
- **Making Family Books:** Invite families to bring three to five photos of a family outing, vacation, or celebration. Prepare a storyboard on which families can plan their stories. Have parents transfer their story to a blank book you have prepared—8½" x 11" paper folded in half. When the books are completed, staple them and present them as a take-home.

FAMILY LITERACY NIGHT THEME/TOPIC IDEA: STORYTELLING

For tips and storytelling activities for parents see *Getting Dads on Board* (Baskwill, 2009) pages 33–35.

Storytelling is a perfect fit for families. Begin the night by telling a story to the whole group. If you are a bit nervous about telling a story you make up, you can project the pictures of a favorite story and retell it in your own words. Or you can invite a librarian or community storyteller to kick off the evening. Another way to start is to show a video (found online) of a children's storyteller or author: Robert Munsch (*Mortimer*) and Sheree Fitch (*There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen*) are always crowd pleasers.

After the opening, divide families among the stations you have created or lead them in one activity. Some possibilities:

- **Retelling Stories with Puppets:** Make a set of puppets for a favorite book and retell the story. Puppets can be made from pieces of card stock and glued to a craft stick.
- **Imaginative Stories with Puppets:** Make up a story by creating a set of puppet characters. Each family member makes his or her own puppet, then they all make up a story with all their characters in it. Puppets can be simple sock puppets or made from paper plates, bags, gloves, etc.

- **Conversation Starters:** Make a large picture of two story characters; they can be characters from the same story or from two different stories. Laminate the picture and hang it on a wall or easel where the rest of the materials—paper speech balloons, markers—are located. Invite families to make up a conversation between the two characters. Have them write on the paper speech balloons what each could be saying. Conversations are taped to the laminated board as they are created. Families can take home a smaller version of this activity with a picture of the two characters printed on card stock and smaller blank speech balloons.
- **What’s Happening?:** Cut out interesting pictures from magazines or newspapers. Have families make up the story to go with each picture.
- **What’s Happening in Our Classroom?:** Have a variety of photographs you have taken of your classroom in action. Children and parents tell each other what is happening in the pictures.
- **It’s In the Bag:** Assemble paper bags containing 4–6 common items; it is good to have extra bags prepared so families who finish with one bag can go on to another. Have each family start a story: e.g., *Once upon a time there was a young boy/girl named _____.* *One day, as he was walking to school he came upon a _____.* Someone reaches into the bag without looking and pulls out one object the family must work into their story. The tale continues until all the objects have been worked into the story.

FAMILY LITERACY NIGHT IDEA: USING A PICTURE BOOK

You can choose a topic or strategy you have been focusing on in the classroom—comprehension strategies, picture walks, retelling strategies, writing activities, genre study, etc.—and build activities around a favorite picture book. Choose a picture book that is a hit with your students. Regardless of grade level, picture books allow you to read the entire book and develop home connections for families to try on the Family Literacy Night and then do on their own at home.

Wordless picture books provide a way to involve parents of all literacy levels in the reading of the book and activities that springboard from the reading. One such book is *Tuesday* by David Weisner. *Tuesday* is about how some seemingly ordinary frogs from a pond go on a magical adventure throughout the city. The story comes full circle with everything getting back to normal—almost. *Tuesday* is funny and highly entertaining for adults and children alike.

1. Project the story so all families can see it as you lead them in a reading of the story through the pictures.
2. Select a page from the book. Have families role-play a news reporter interviewing characters about what is happening. Provide simple props, such as a microphone, notebook, reporter’s badge.
3. Have families retell the story from a different point of view. Provide a variety of tools for recording: paper and pencil, computer, storyboard, audio recorder, etc.
4. Assemble an assortment of wordless picture books for families to share together. Make a list of the books and post it on the wall. Ask families to vote for their favorite by placing a sticky note next to their choice.

If possible, have multiple copies of the story on hand, so each table grouping of families can have a copy to which they can refer.

5. Provide materials so families can create a 10 cm square (4" x 4") play-clay tile of their favorite scene from the book. Prepare cardboard squares on which to create the scene. Family members can collaborate to create one scene or, if you have enough clay, have each family member make their own. Empty CD cases are great ways to protect the creations; just be sure to cut the cardboard base so it will fit inside the case.

TIPS FOR FAMILY LITERACY NIGHTS

Special activities don't take a lot of time but can make your Family Literacy Night even more memorable:

- Borrow an idea from Family Literacy Day 2012 (ABC Canada) and create a passport for families to get stamped after completing each activity you have set up.
- Enter family names in a draw for a book at the end of the evening.
- Arrange a book swap: families bring a book and get to take a book home.
- Provide parents and children an opportunity to create a reading journal.
- Arrange a reading by a local author or invited guest – perhaps in costume!—to wind up the night.

For all of your family nights, make sure there are lots of take-homes and lists of URLs, books, and resources parents can consult for more ideas.

If you are interested in attracting male caregivers to your sessions, make the evening “Dads” and Children Only. Male caregivers will enjoy using new technology, such as Comic Life or Photostory, to create books, movies, and visual stories with their children. Creating secret messages, learning car games, and telling silly stories also have appeal for most dads. For more information on these and others workshops for dads, see *Getting Dads on Board* (Baskwill, 2009) pages 88–90.