

Reading for Children

Increasing parental involvement
in children's learning



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Introduction

Reading books and telling stories is one of the best ways to motivate children to read and expand their imagination and creativity. They are exposed to vocabulary, language forms and ideas, which are important for the development of cognitive, emotional and language skills.

Even before children know what words are, they benefit from watching and listening to parents read out aloud. They are then able to learn basic language and reading concepts such as how to hold a book, and that one reads words, and not pictures. The earlier children grasp these concepts, the easier it will be for them to learn to read.

The Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) through the East Africa Quality in Early Learning (EAQEL) Project, is implementing the Reading for Children (RfC) component to increase parents' active involvement in their children's learning process.



Creating the right environment

The first thing that parents and older siblings do is to make a commitment to read aloud once a day if they can. Reading for children can be done everywhere, anytime with almost any book. It is important to establish a routine, by selecting a fixed time (morning, after school or bedtime) and a quiet and comfortable place (e.g. under a tree, in the house or in the courtyard).

To increase access to children's storybooks, mini-libraries have been established in the communities. Families are free to borrow these books to read with their children at home. They range from picture books, books with a few words as well as pictures on each page, and some that are meant for children with more advanced reading skills.

Apart from these books, parents are encouraged to see to it that appropriate (age and reading level) library books are available at home.



Reading for children

Parents and older siblings read slowly with expression, and try to use different voices for different characters. They follow the words with their fingers as they read, and point to the pictures, asking children what they see (objects, colours and what is happening).

To increase participation, children are asked to describe the pictures; repeat phrases used in the story and predict what will happen. Children help to turn the pages of the books too. Parents take time to answer questions and even encourage children to ask more questions.



Reading with children

Parents and children take turns reading paragraphs or entire pages. They help the child with words s/he has trouble reading by asking which words would make sense in the story or supplying the correct word. This will help the child move on to the next sentence. Positive feedback is vital. The child is encouraged to know s/he is doing a good job. Parents and children talk about the book as they read together

Reading with children is encouraged even after they can read on their own. Children read aloud to parents or other family members, who listen attentively and offer positive feedback. Instead of scolding the child if s/he cannot read some words, it is advised that parents read the book to the child while pointing to the words again.



Storytelling

Giving children the opportunity to listen to stories being told from memory is a good tradition. Parents are taught to identify the most appropriate stories to tell. For example, they should avoid frightening stories and instead tell stories about things that their children are familiar with.

Children like stories about themselves more than anything – and also stories about their families and the everyday things they do, animals and their village.



Selection of appropriate books

The content should be simple, not too long, and easy to understand. It should be relevant to the children's surrounding and daily life, but written in a style that stimulates their curiosity, creativity and imagination. The most appealing are usually short stories about daily life containing words that express the sounds of the animals or the names of the objects illustrated in the story. They also enjoy adventurous and humorous stories and fairy tales.

Young children's stories contain only a few characters so that the children can easily follow the story. The sentences are short and the text large, clear and kept to a minimum. New vocabulary should be used sparingly. should be large and clear, colourful, eye-catching and appropriate to the story content. They should be similar to what children see in real life.



Overcoming illiteracy

Some parents have themselves had limited education opportunities and feel unable to adequately support their children to read. In such cases, older siblings or other family members who can read are also trained, so that they can support the early learners during reading time at home.

Illiterate parents need not feel unable to contribute to their children's learning. They are taught how to successfully guide children through reading sessions, use pictures, storytelling and every day activities within the home to support learning.



Fostering a culture of reading

When a child sees the parent reading, it sends him/her a powerful message – that reading is an important and interesting thing to do! This is why parents and older siblings are encouraged to develop a culture of reading. Setting aside special family time to share great stories, take turns reading or just look at and discuss picture books fosters a love of reading in children. This in turn contributes to their overall development.

Apart from improving access to reading material, community activities such as reading and writing competitions, community socialisation meetings and creation of public awareness help to foster the reading culture in communities.



