

## **Refereed Conference Paper**

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### **Title**

U-CAN READ: A literacy intervention years 3-10 parents, carers and children achieving literacy success

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### **Abstract**

This paper is set within the context of parent education and examines the principles of effective literacy programs for parents. U-CAN READ: Literacy Intervention Years 3-10 provides evidence of the principles at work. The combination of an intensive literature review and data collected from the U-CAN READ informs educators about considerations for future literacy programs for parents. U-CAN READ is a joint venture between the University of Canberra and the ACT Dept of Education and Training. It supports students achieve literacy success by providing parents with knowledge about literacy acquisition and strategies to assist their children at home. Parents receive modelling and guidance through a 12 hour course followed by intensive tutoring with the parent and child. Strategies include the selection of appropriate texts, collaborative approaches to reading and writing and a positive approach to strengthening the parent child relationship. Literacy advisors work with the child and parent to implement the strategies and guide learning. Understanding the impact of parent education on the parent, child and home literacy practices are central to this paper.

### **Keywords**

Literacy program, parents, literacy intervention 3-10, modelling, strategies, appropriate texts, collaborative approach, child and home literacy practices.

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## **U-CAN READ: A literacy intervention years 3-10 parents, carers and children achieving literacy success**

### **Introduction**

This paper is set within the context of parent education and examines the principles of effective literacy programs for parents. U-CAN READ: Literacy Intervention Years 3-10 provides evidence of the principles at work. The combination of an intensive literature review and data collected from the U-CAN READ informs educators about considerations for future literacy programs for parents.

U-CAN READ is a joint project of ACT Department of Employment and Training and the University of Canberra. It is housed at the University of Canberra in The National Capital Centre for Literacy Research. Parents participate in a series of five two hour workshops and a reflective session in order to learn strategies, acquire knowledge and gain support that leads to literacy success of their children. In addition, parents and children attend an Individual Assistance Program (IAP) comprising of up to 12 sessions where a literacy advisor works with the parent and child. The Literacy Centre operates five days a week with extended hours depending on the needs of families. It addresses the needs of 80 families annually. U-CAN READ is based on current best practices in literacy interventions and research in parent education.

### **Parent education and literacy**

Cunningham and Allington, (2003) point out that most parents are unsure of how to teach reading or help their children with literacy development. Collaborating with parents to support the literacy success of their children could be educators' best option for reaching those children regrettably referred to as "falling through the gaps". The literature describes most parent programs as school or cluster-based, under-resourced, directed at children in the early years, and short-lived. Few parent programs, according to Wasik (2004), address the needs of children in the primary grades and beyond.

Research by Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) states that children from homes where parents model the uses of literacy and engage children in activities that promote basic understandings about literacy and its uses are better prepared for school. According to Purcell-Gates (2000), the number of children failing is significantly reduced when parents co operate actively in their children's school education right from the start. Project

ROAR (Reach Out And Read) indicates that parents are eager to help their children and when instructed in appropriate literacy activities can positively affect the academic progress of their children (Gilliam et al., 2004).

Senechal's (2006) intervention studies involving 1174 families showed that overall parent involvement had a positive impact on children's reading acquisition. Parent programs where they were taught specific literacy skills to use with their children were twice as effective as those where parents listened to their children read and six times more effective than those where parents were encouraged to read to their children. Toomey (1993) reinforces Senechal's (2006) findings and states that parents who listen to their children read regularly contributed to reading improvement. Parents who were given simple but specific strategies on how to read books sent home from school fared better than students whose parents were given general strategies.

Sargent, Hill and Morrison (2006) contend that parental involvement, beliefs, and attitudes toward reading exert a profound impact on children's literacy development. This notion of parents promoting a positive attitude is stressed in the research of Snow, Burns and Griffin, (1998) who claim that parent's perceptions, values, attitudes, and expectations play an important role in their children's attitudes toward reading and subsequent literacy development.

Educating parents in ways to assist their children at home has other benefits:

- k-12 schools that have high success rates usually also have high rates of parental involvement (Darling & Hayes, 1996)
- while parents learn about the essential skills for reading and practice those skills with their children, they not only support their children's reading acquisition but improve their own (Darling & Westburg, 2004)
- contribute to improved parent child relationships, particularly with children struggling to read
- support and networking for families often alienated from school. Neuman, Caperelli and Kee (1998) found that families created social networks within the group. Guilt and shame often associated with reading failure was alleviated because the parent was involved in addressing the issues with the guidance of trained literacy educators.

### **Defining parent education programs**

As the structure of the nuclear family has altered over time, so have the support systems available to children. Broadening the definition of parent education to include a diverse range of carers – mothers, fathers, step parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and siblings are essential. Recognizing and valuing different forms of literacy and the many ways literacy is supported in homes and communities means that parent education programs must embrace diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

The role and involvement of fathers in parent programs is overlooked and undervalued. While there is a considerable body of research on the effects of literacy interventions with mothers of young children (Ortiz, 1994, 2004), studies of the impact of literacy programs with fathers is generally neglected. Anderson, Streeelasky and Anderson (2007) studied 100 randomly selected family literacy websites and found that mothers reading a book to her young child were the dominant image.

Three broad types of parent education programs are identified in the literature (Nickse, 1991):

- those delivered directly to adults and children
- those delivered to children only with benefits for parents
- those delivered to parents with expected benefits for children.

### **Overview of U-CAN READ**

Historically, the University of Canberra has had a parent education program in place for 26 years. It was established in 1983 by Max Kemp and was known as the Parents as Tutors Program. In 1992, the program was revised and adapted with an emphasis on age-appropriate reading materials and scaffolding techniques. In 2009, Parents as Tutors was renamed U-CAN READ: A Literacy Intervention Year 3 -10. It is a major research strand and project of the National Capital Centre for Literacy Research (NCCLR).

Currently, U-CAN READ employs a Director, two literacy advisors and an administrative assistant. The literacy advisors are experienced literacy teachers employed by ACT Department of Education and Training.

U-CAN READ works in partnership with teachers, parents and students. In order to attend U-CAN READ, students must be experiencing reading difficulties in Years 3 – 10, enrolled in ACT schools and be referred by a principal or school counsellor.

In Table 1, the principles that guide the implementation of U-CAN READ are summarised.

**Table 1**

#### **Guiding Principles**

<b>When working with parents, the emphasis is on:</b>	<b>When working with students, the emphasis is on:</b>	<b>When working with schools, the emphasis is on:</b>
Collaboration	Meeting individual needs	Consulting with class teachers
Empowering parents to provide effective support	Building self-esteem and motivation	Collaborating with teachers and schools
Providing self-sustaining strategies for parents	Focusing on student interest	Promoting open, regular communication
Building parent/child relationships	Promoting independence and self reliance in reading	Providing professional

Guiding and mentoring parents to use literacy strategies	Respecting parent/child and teacher/child relationships	development for teachers and school communities
Respecting family diversity	Succeeding in all aspects of literacy learning	

### Parent seminars

Parents attend a seminars series of five two hour sessions and one reflective session. The course is offered twice a week, day and evening. A reflective session is conducted approximately five weeks after the final seminar. The seminars provide parents with knowledge, ideas and strategies for helping their child read, write and spell.

### Individual assistance program

After attending the five initial seminars, parents attend the Individual Assistance Program on a weekly basis. This is a one hour session with the child, parent and literacy advisor. With the guidance of the literacy advisor, the parent and child are assisted with reading. The literacy advisor acts as a guide by modelling strategies, encouraging and mentoring the development of the learning between the child and parent. Each child receives up to 12 individual sessions depending on need.

Children, on entry into the program, complete a series of assessments that are ongoing and portfolio-based.

**Table 2**

#### Assessments used with U-CAN READ

DART (pre, post)	Word Recognition test
Student attitude questionnaire	Writing samples and writing rubric
NAPLAN results	Spelling checklist
Miscue analysis	Torch test (mid point)

Summary reflection sheets are completed by literacy advisor after each session. Work samples collected. Updates and feedback is reported to parents and schools.

### Establishing a research base

U-CAN READ is committed to using research to inform its practices and adjust instruction to better serve its clientele. Three phases of research have been completed for the first seminar series held in March-April 2009:

### **Phase 1: Literature review**

A literature review was completed in order to identify the criteria necessary for effective parent programs for the parents of children experiencing reading difficulties.

### **Phase 2: Parent evaluations**

Pre and post evaluations were completed by parents at the first and last seminar series.

### **Phase 3: Documentation of reading logs**

Parents completed reading logs during the five weeks of the parent seminar series. Parents were required to document the time they spent reading with their child, the activities they completed and any comments regarding the reading routine.

## **Summary of findings**

### **Phase 1: Literature review**

From an extensive search of parent education literature conducted in the last five years the following criteria for effective parent education programs were identified:

- practical approach
- an array of activities and strategies to use at home that are easy, enjoyable and comprehensible
- the provision of quality resources that parents can use at home such as authentic reading texts
- modelling and clear demonstrations of strategies
- accessible regarding times, location, child care
- opportunities for parents to be involved in the planning
- relevant literacy practices that reflect what families already know and do in their home and community.

The content of education programs varied and while some emphasised particular aspects of literacy such as storytelling, fathers and literacy, and reads aloud, other course content included:

- strategies for prompting
- modelled and guided reading
- strategies for expanding vocabulary e.g. brainstorming, dramatic play
- story reading at home
- print related concepts
- how to use a variety of text types
- how to select a book
- behaviour management and discipline
- literacy components such as spelling and writing.

Evaluations of the programs researched demonstrate that programs are most effective when parents as well as teachers are trained (Whitehurst et al., 1994) and parent involvement, rather than parents dropping off their children for tutoring, leads to increased outcomes for students. (Wagner, Spiker, & Linn, 2002)

**Phase 2: Parent evaluations**

Based on the initial survey conducted of 46 parents, similarities existed in the types of strategies they had tried previously, their quests to find a remedy, and their feelings of frustration. Before coming to the U-CAN READ program, all parents had tried other interventions including

**Table 3**

**Previous interventions**

Learning Assistance	Reading Recovery	English as a Second Language	Teachers Assistant	Peer Tutoring	Private Tutoring
17	3	2	2	1	6

There were many children in the program who had medical conditions and diagnoses. Table 4 shows the diagnoses given for the 24 children enrolled in U-CAN READ.

**Table 4**

*Diagnosis*

Hearing Loss	Fine Motor	Visual/Irlen Dyslexia	Eyesight	ADHD	Speech Therapy	Heart condition	Auditory Processing
4	1	6	1	3	1	1	1

Twenty-four families, represented by 46 parents attended the first seminar. All but two parents were English speakers. More than half of the parents heard about the program through their child’s school while others heard via word of mouth.

By far the greatest expectation of parents was to learn strategies to help their children read. Most were seeking assistance for their child and stated that poor reading skills were affecting their child’s academic performance and confidence. The second most popular reason for completing U-CAN READ was to promote enjoyment for reading for themselves and their children. One parent wanted to change reading from being a “chore” to something to be enjoyed. Others wanted to understand the reading process and to improve the academic standards of their children.

Most parents said they liked to read themselves and that they found reading easy. The majority of parents stated they had in excess of 100 books in their homes and read for at least one hour a week with their children. All households had access to computer and internet.

Most parents thought children learnt to read by enjoying reading, practicing and picture association. One parent commented, "I have decided I have no idea".

### **Post survey data**

On the final night of the parent seminar series, 46 parents completed a survey to establish the changes that had occurred since undertaking the course. More than half the parents, said that the biggest change in their child's reading was that they were now happy to read and enjoyed reading at home.

She enjoys reading more; she enjoys looking at books more.

My son now wants to pick out certain authors and read their books.

Parents described their children as "confident", "relaxed" and "enthusiastic". Many parents stated that their children were no longer fixating on every word and they were applying strategies such as reading on to gain more information, rereading and predicting. Parents noted their children were self correcting, using suggested websites, sounding more fluent, and reading for longer periods of time.

Of the 46 parents in attendance, 31 claimed that reading at home had become much more enjoyable, relaxed and acceptable.

We are relaxed. We feel we have strategies that will work for us. We now feel that 'reading will happen' – just a matter of practice and patience and working together.

Parents also commented that their reading time is forming stronger relationships with their children and other siblings. They were sharing books as a family and reading had become a special family time rather than continuing to be stressful and "something to be endured". Five parents also stated that their child's reading had improved, there was an increase in reading material in the home and that "reading at home has helped my child to have an appreciation for books".

Parents found the strategies suggested to help their children at home were the most useful aspect of the program. Many parents developed an understanding of miscues and also felt that celebrating the successes of their children, no matter how small, helped to keep reading a positive experience for all.

The emphasis on celebrating success, no matter how small, and to stay positive. It really has changed completely the way I have been helping my son.

He enjoys reading more, now that I'm more relaxed and not correcting him all the time.

Two parents were surprised to realise that their children were not as far behind in their reading as they first thought and now the parents have the confidence in their children to succeed in reading.

When asked if their attitude had changed towards reading and writing, twelve parents commented that their attitude was now relaxed and fun. As one parent explained: "I put myself down as really disliking reading. Now that I know I don't have to be perfect, I have read more". Another parent said that the program "reinvigorated [my] enthusiasm for reading."

Eight parents noted that the most useful strategies were not stopping all the time at miscues and knowing an alternative to becoming the "instant word factory" when their child came across an unfamiliar word. Book orientations, reading on for meaning, and prompting clues also were strategies that parents found useful.

### **Phase 3: Reading logs**

Over a five week period, parents were asked to keep a reading log of reading at home. From these logs the average time spent for reading was 75 minutes per week or about 15-20 minutes per day. The type of material read included fictional stories, picture books, factual books, comics, home readers from school, newspapers, magazines, birthday cards and road signs. Twelve parents shared the reading between themselves and the child, while ten found their children were beginning to read independently. Ten parents wrote that their children had days when they were too tired or reluctant to read.

Ten parents commented that reading was now enjoyable and that they were trying out the strategies taught to them at the parent seminars. While avoiding giving the child the unfamiliar word instantly, proved difficult at first for both parents and children. Parents, by persevering, found that their children became more independent in their reading. Some parents commented:

She got stropy because when she came to a word she didn't know she asked me and I said just leave it, come back to it later.  
Becoming more independent already – not relying on me to give him the word.  
Used strategies of waiting and letting my child realise that meaning was lost. He felt lack of support initially but soon realised that he could figure things out himself.  
Reading has become a lot more fun for both of us and my child is less stressed about reading when with me.

Overall, there had been significant gains in parents' enthusiasm for home reading and children had responded positively to reading together.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the literature review, parent pre and post surveys and the reading logs, the following recommendations are made for the successful implementation of parent education programs in literacy:

- parents are best supported with a repertoire of quality strategies. They also appreciate knowing why the strategies work for literacy intervention. Parents want strategies that are immediately applicable to their home situation. Parents recognise the importance of putting fun into home reading sessions and noted how supporting their children for success resulted in improved family relationships
- parents are keen to assist and all families in Seminar 1 completed the reading logs showing their continued commitment to reading with their children
- parents want to learn new ways for helping their children and willingly seek out options to learn. Programs must be accessible by providing flexible hours and multiple modes of delivery
- parents ultimately want to enjoy reading with their children and want their children to enjoy reading with them. Learning about resources, quality literature, recommended websites and ways to avoid frustration were valued
- a more concerted research effort regarding parent education programs, gender differences in reading failure and the role of fathers was apparent in this study.

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