

# Engaging Families in Need in Their Children's Learning:

## Lessons From the Even Start Family Literacy Program



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All parents want their children to be successful in school and in life. There are innumerable endeavors that parents undertake to support their children, including providing for their basic needs, ensuring their health and safety, helping them learn and develop, and maintaining family and cultural connections, just to name a few. There are several types of programs that help families in their journey to promote children’s learning and development, including parenting education, early childhood training, family support guidance, parent involvement programs, parent empowerment instruction, family engagement coaching, and more. They operate under different systems, including education, health, mental health, social services, justice, community services, and the faith community.

**Research has shown strong positive associations between parenting and a child’s acquisition of language and literacy, a process that begins long before the child enters a formal school setting.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, parenting education as a way to enhance a child’s language development and emergent literacy is well supported by research and theory. Even Start was the first educational program to define and implement parenting education as a vehicle to support children’s language and literacy development on a large scale. This strategy, supported by the First National Evaluation of Even Start, demonstrated that intensive parenting education focused on the parent beliefs and behaviors that support children’s language and literacy, results in improved children’s language and literacy skills.**

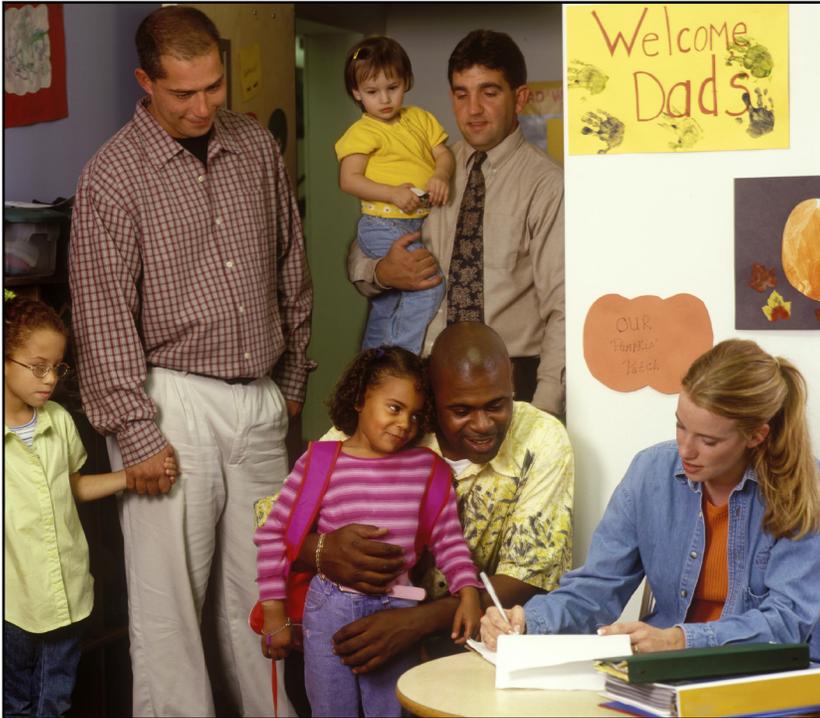
Making an impact on these systems to ensure meaningful and lasting changes is a lofty goal and one that comes with many challenges. The Even Start Family Literacy program was one such program that accepted the challenge and found success in taking a comprehensive, yet highly focused approach to working with families. The program’s primary goal was to build the language and literacy building blocks that children need for success in school and throughout life. The program was designed to support whole and extended families through high-quality educational programs and was guided by a set of core values (see Appendix A), including a focus on literacy and family-centered programming. The parenting education component of Even Start evolved as one of the cornerstones to helping Even Start achieve its goal. This paper describes lessons Even Start learned about parenting education that easily could be adapted by other groups working with families.

Even Start was a federal family literacy program designed specifically for the nation’s most at-risk families. The program targeted low-income families with newborn children up through age 7 and concentrated on children’s language and early literacy, adult education, and parenting education skills. While many different programs provide parenting education, and many early education programs involve parents, Even Start’s approach was different. Using a strong research base about language and literacy development, parent and child interactions, and the influence of the literacy environment of the home, Even Start elevated



<sup>1</sup>Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. (2010). Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (NA). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

parenting education as a key instructional element of the program (parenting education included parenting classes and support groups as well as parenting education integrated into other components of the program). Perhaps most important, parenting education in Even Start included interactive literacy activities; that is, activities conducted with parents and their children together as an opportunity for guided practice, either in the home or elsewhere.



Recognizing that families served by the Even Start program had profound and complex needs, the program was flexible by design, taking a family-centered approach to programming and providing support and connections for families' health, social, and emotional development. To maintain this balance, Even Start programs relied on *family educators*<sup>2</sup> who often had multiple roles with families, including educator, mentor, cheerleader, and liaison to community services.

As Even Start leaders reflected on the 24-year history of building a deep understanding of the parenting education component of Even Start, three themes emerged as cornerstones for

engaging families and providing parenting education, especially to families of very young children who were economically and educationally disadvantaged:

- Help Parents Engage in Their Children's Learning by using program strategies that strengthen parents' abilities to support their young children's literacy development and early school success.
- Express Respect for Diverse Language, Culture, and Life Experiences by understanding family culture as the most important influence on a child's learning and recognize it as a bridge to help children succeed in American schools.
- Foster Learning in the Home Environment by moving the program and school staff to a higher level of understanding about families and demonstrate that there are abundant learning opportunities available via day-to-day family life.

This paper is organized by the three themes previously listed. Each theme is introduced to provide the background and context for understanding, followed by a number of specific lessons and examples other service providers may reflect upon and consider.

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<sup>2</sup>This role was unique in Even Start and many terms were used interchangeably to describe it, including family educator, parent educator, home visitor, home educator, and parent liaison.

## HOW TO HELP PARENTS ENGAGE IN THEIR CHILDREN’S LEARNING

The overall goal of parenting education as it evolved in Even Start programs was to strengthen parental support of their young children’s literacy development and early school success. Early on, most Even Start programs took a broad approach to parenting education and addressed topics such as nutrition and assertive discipline, or set up parent networking groups. They often used existing parenting curricula and materials or brought in guest speakers to present topics of general interest to families. In some cases, unfortunately, these curricula and materials had little or no focus on language development, literacy, or education.

Since parenting education was not clearly defined in the early Even Start legislation, the variety of approaches was not necessarily surprising. At that time, there was little specific research about the effectiveness of the parenting component. As a result, parenting education looked different in every program. Recognizing that parenting education in many Even Start programs was piecemeal and lacked the needed focus, the federal Even Start office commissioned a publication from RMC Research with the purpose of defining parenting education in the context of family literacy. This publication, *Guide to Improving Parenting Education in Even Start Family Literacy Programs*<sup>3</sup> established a content framework for Even Start (outlined in the following chart).

<b>Parents strengthen their children’s literacy development and school-related competence when they:</b>	
<b>Engage in language-rich parent-child interactions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in frequent and increasingly complex verbal interactions with their child</li> <li>• Actively participate in shared book reading</li> <li>• Ask questions that strengthen their child’s problem-solving abilities</li> <li>• Engage in attentive, warm, flexible interactions with their child</li> <li>• Develop and maintain a secure attachment relationship with their child</li> <li>• Maintain a predictable environment through routines and responsive structure</li> </ul>
<b>Provide support for literacy in the family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide easy access to reading and writing materials</li> <li>• Read frequently themselves and use reading and writing to get things done and solve problems in everyday life</li> <li>• Demonstrate an enthusiastic view of reading as fun</li> </ul>
<b>Hold appropriate expectations of the child’s learning and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• View their child as an active contributor to his/her own development through challenging yet achievable interactions in the everyday environment</li> <li>• Know their child’s interests and abilities</li> <li>• Maintain appropriate expectations of their child’s achievements</li> </ul>
<b>Actively embrace the parenting role</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain a positive sense of personal efficacy in the parenting role and in managing relations with their environment</li> <li>• Take proactive steps to establish and maintain positive relations with community resources, including schools</li> <li>• Advocate for high-quality child and family resources in the community (for example, schools and child care)</li> </ul>
<b>Form and maintain connections with community and other resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use effective coping strategies for adapting to changes in family and community environments</li> <li>• Work toward good physical and mental health</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> Powell, D., D’Angelo, D. (2000). *Guide to Improving Parenting Education in Even Start Family Literacy Programs*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.



This guide described a wide array of program activities designed to strengthen families' support for their young children's educational success. These included increasing the quality and quantity of parent-child interactions, encouraging shared book reading, increasing the frequency and quality of literacy resources and activities in the home, facilitating children's transition to school, supporting the interactions of parents with schools and the wider community, and improving parents' understanding of child development.

## What Even Start Learned about Helping Parents Engage in Their Children's Learning

### *Encourage Frequent and Meaningful Language and Verbal Interactions*

A significant lesson derived from the Even Start experience is the importance of frequent conversations and positive informal interactions between parents and their young children. The quality and frequency of parent-child interactions, including the amount and nature of conversation and shared book reading, has long been linked to children's language development and positive school outcomes. Research shows that children have better language comprehension, vocabulary, and cognitive development if their parents have frequent conversations with them, begin reading to them at an early age, and talk to them about what they are reading.<sup>4</sup> Even Start encouraged the use of research-based approaches to parent-child interactions, such as expanding vocabulary, facilitating learning through turn taking and responsive interaction, and shared storybook reading techniques (e.g., encouraging children to think and talk by answering open-ended questions, interactive shared book reading, etc.). Depending on the parent's first language, they were also encouraged to read and talk to their children in their own language as it is important for children to hear good language role models in whatever language the parent is most fluent and comfortable.

#### **Encouraging Language and Verbal Interaction**

**Parents were explicitly coached on how to share books with young children to stimulate conversation and increase complex verbal interactions. Staff would introduce books and work with parents ahead of time to build familiarity and make the discussion process easier during the interactive session. For example, when reading popular toddler picture books with 2 ½ to 3-year olds, parents were coached to ask simple questions such as "What is on the table?," "What are the kittens doing?," and "What do you do before bed?" Parents were also guided to repeat and expand on responses from their child.**



<sup>4</sup> Browning, Andrea (2006). Reading to young children improves language and cognitive development. Society for Research in Child Development.

Even Start staff learned early on that parent-child interactions did not come naturally for many Even Start parents, and the parenting education component was most effective when it included a strong focus on developing parent behaviors that support children's language and cognitive development and providing many opportunities for parents to practice these skills with their children. Fueled by the research in Hart and Risley's *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*,<sup>5</sup> Even Start programs taught parents to provide their children with more interactive language experiences, including:

- Having conversations about everyday life
- Using writing in functional settings
- Story telling
- Hearing and reciting rhymes
- Playing games
- Making crafts
- Preparing food
- Reading and talking about books



### ***Build Intensity and Participation***

Changes in a parent's beliefs and behaviors do not come easily or quickly. The Department of Education learned that children of Even Start families who were intensively engaged in parenting education performed better than children of families with lower levels of participation. Additionally, families participated more often when more parenting education services were offered, when they were scheduled flexibly, and when they were family centered.

An important finding of the First National Evaluation was that programs that provided a rich offering of parenting education that was focused on children's language and literacy development had a positive effect on children's vocabulary. As a result, the Even Start program recommended that local programs offer at least 20 hours a month of parenting education. It was a challenge for Even Start programs to offer parenting education at this level of intensity, and it was an even greater challenge for families to participate at this level. Yet, many Even Start programs were able to find ways to support greater participation in the parenting component through flexible programming, offering incentives, building leadership roles, and recognizing successes. For many parents, the opportunity to meet with other parents in a supportive and non-judgmental environment was the draw. Even Start staff recognized and built upon positive group dynamics to encourage parents to inspire each other, which, in turn, created a sense of community within the program.



<sup>5</sup>Hart, B. and Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*. Baltimore, MD: Brooks Publishing.

### ***Add Value with Guided Practice***

Most experts agree that to master any skill, the most important element is practice and more practice; the same is true for parents learning to support their children's learning. Therefore, the Even Start program required that some program activities occur with parents and their children together (referred to as "interactive literacy activities.") Interactive literacy activities not only added intensity to parenting education, they added the opportunity for much needed guided practice. Parenting education was the direct instructional opportunity for parents to learn skills, and interactive literacy activities were the opportunities to practice what they had learned (with the support and guidance of an Even Start teacher). Interactive literacy activities took place in a variety of settings, including the home, on field trips, at the library, and in centers.

Recognizing that the home environment was an essential opportunity to demonstrate how to embed parenting skills into daily life and routines, Even Start staff used home visits to conduct interactive literacy activities, tailor the activities to individual families, and extend and refine important parenting information. They also modeled positive parenting behaviors and parent-child interactions, and guided parents in practicing these skills within the family setting.

#### **Guided Practice**

**Even Start provided ample opportunities for parents to practice skills and concepts. For example, when exploring the idea of engaging in "conversation" with infants and babies, staff would discuss and model appropriate proximity, gaze into the baby's eyes, respond to cooing and babble, use a warm voice tone, and recognize and respond to signals. Then parents would practice the skills with their child while staff took on a coaching role to guide the parent's practice, make suggestions, and provide encouragement.**



### ***Address the Needs of Families, but Maintain the Focus on Literacy***

Maintaining a literacy focus was frequently a challenge for Even Start programs. Families and Even Start staff were often distracted from education plans by the myriad and complex needs of families. Learning how to establish the right balance between providing education support and addressing other family needs was critical. Program staff working with Even Start parents on parenting education topics learned to keep a focus on language and literacy, while actively acknowledging and finding ways to address other pressing circumstances. However, when life circumstances overwhelmed a family's attention, it was important for Even Start staff to acknowledge that the program may not have been right for the family at that time and help them identify more appropriate services.

Typical Even Start staff members, many of whom were teachers, were not necessarily qualified to address the health and social issues facing Even Start families. Program staff needed the sensitivity to recognize the most pressing concerns of families, and then to recognize that they were not the sole providers of services. Local programs identified and worked with community collaborators who provided support that families needed beyond what Even Start was able to provide. Collaborators included counseling services; substance abuse treatment and violence prevention programs; housing, food and/or nutrition services; and legal assistance. The program worked with collaborators to ensure that families received messages about the value of education and support for children that were consistent with Even Start messages. Even Start staff also learned to be wary of thinking that one program could do it all.

## HOW TO EXPRESS RESPECT FOR DIVERSE LANGUAGE, HERITAGE, AND FAMILY CULTURE

Over the past two decades, Even Start programs served an increasingly diverse population in terms of language, national heritage, and family culture.<sup>6</sup> Even Start found it was essential not only to recognize but to embrace diversity, and ensure that respect for diverse languages, cultures, and life experiences was apparent in all aspects of program practice. By 2004-2005, nearly half of the population enrolled in the program had little or no English-speaking skills, representing numerous language groups and a multitude of countries. By 2008-2009, the percentage had increased to almost 60%. Many programs served a primarily Spanish-speaking group, while others had more than seven languages represented at any given time. As a whole, families served by Even Start were very poor and the parents lacked high school diplomas or equivalents. Even Start program staff recognized that each family had a unique context, culture, and set of traditions that were critical in shaping their children's academic aspirations and social behaviors. Ultimately, parents needed to develop ownership in the program, finding its relevance to their daily lives and building confidence that what they were learning would further their hopes and goals for their children. Staff and program administrators had to take the time to genuinely understand families, learn about family dynamics and traditions, and incorporate that understanding into the program.



In carrying out parenting education activities, the Even Start staff was tasked with helping families build skills to support language and literacy for success in school, while at the same time considering families' language, cultural norms, and traditions. This was often a balancing act for Even Start staff working directly with families. Some families' goals, discipline practices, and beliefs about parental involvement were in stark contrast to what Even Start programs advocated; for example, perspectives differed on the notion that children should be "seen and not heard" or that parents should not interfere with school matters out of respect for teachers. However, Even Start staff learned that building trust and

mutual respect with families was the way to start a dialogue about education goals, hopes, and dreams. Even Start staff found value in being clear and explicit about the programs' goals to strengthen language and literacy for children to be successful in American schools, while helping families set their own goals for their children's academic success and the family's independence. This often meant bringing in social and support networks from the community, seeking out additional resources and materials, and engaging in activities that showcased family cultures.



<sup>6</sup>In addition to state-administered grants, Even Start also served special populations through separate, federally administered funds for tribal and migrant grantees.

## What Even Start Learned about Respecting Diverse Language, Heritage, and Family Culture

### *Get to Know Families and Tailor Services*

Even Start made a point to connect with families at a much deeper level than most other education programs. While maintaining the focus on the program's goals, Even Start staff learned to appreciate the home environment and culture of the families, understand their joys and the challenges they faced, and share in their hopes and dreams for the future.

Knowing families well also meant that Even Start staff learned the importance of tailoring services for each family in the program. In most cases, pre-packaged parenting education materials or programs were not appropriate. Some "canned" approaches did not have adequate focus on education or literacy. In other cases, the materials were not of interest to the families, did not reflect family culture, or were presented at a level too far from a family's starting place. To ensure that families were full partners in identifying their needs and priorities, shaping their goals, and making decisions about the plans to achieve those goals, Even Start staff learned to take a family-centered approach to programming—a unique approach among education programs that are more child-centered.

### *Build a Welcoming Environment*

Even Start conducted programs in a variety of physical settings, for example, in classrooms, living rooms, libraries, and community centers. Regardless of the location, it was important for Even Start staff to ensure that the environment was comfortable and welcoming to the families served in the program. Program staff had to consider culture, language, and literacy in their choice of materials, resources, and signage. They also had to take the time to learn how parents and their children were comfortable learning together, work with parents to plan parent-child activities based on the feedback, and when possible, carry out parent-child activities in the dominant language of the families.



The physical and emotional learning environment also had to be suitable for and respectful of families' home values, beliefs, histories, and experiences. In other words, program staff intentionally created an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance, a safe place where everyone was welcome and supported. Staff found parenting education was an opportunity to celebrate traditions that helped create a sense of community. Even Start programs used these celebrations as language-building opportunities and authentic ways for parents to work with their children on projects rooted in family traditions. There were also simple ways Even Start created a welcoming environment, such as labeling in multiple languages; integrating traditional toys, games, and songs; providing visual cues for non-readers; and greeting parents in their home languages. Even Start learned the best ways to do this from the parents themselves.

## ***Form a Shared Understanding about Use of Home Language***

One of the primary goals of the parenting education component of Even Start was to build multiple opportunities for conversation and interaction between parents and their children. Research shows that children need to hear good language role models in order for them to build a fluid sense of sentence structure and conversation as well as sensitivity to the sounds in different languages.<sup>7</sup>

It was challenging for Even Start program staff to sort out how and when to use English and the home language in the parenting component. Early in the program, staff members were confused about whether parents should attempt to use English when talking and working with their children or strictly use their home language. And in some cases, parents were so intent on having their children learn to speak English that they were reluctant to use their home language, especially in program settings. Some Even Start staff believed that parents should largely use English to help build English vocabulary. Over time and with research-based evidence, Even Start program administrators and staff recognized there was more value to parent-child interactions when the parent was using the language in which they were most comfortable and competent and when Even Start staff served as English-language role models. Programs and staff had to be clear about the intent of educational activities as they related to language and not confuse, for example, the use of language in parent-child interaction with other program and school policies about when and how to use English and the home language. Most important was for the staff members to discuss explicitly how and when to use English and the home language.

### **Use of Home Language**

**In planning activities, Even Start staff might combine use of the home language with English language role modeling. For example, using a pretend play area about pet care, parents engaged in play and communication turn-taking with their children, explicitly named items during play, asked open-ended questions, and expanded talk in the home language. Prior to the session, staff shared a book with parents and their children in English, but used a dual-lingual approach to discuss the book based on the pretend play theme to further reinforce vocabulary. Staff prepared a related activity that reinforced themes from the pretend play in English and the home language.**



### ***Connect with Community Providers and Resources***

Even Start staff understood their role as an ally with other service providers in advocating for families within the larger community. They also paid close attention to the respected leaders within each community. In some cases, leadership came from community-based organizations such as refugee centers, women's shelters, church-affiliated groups, etc. In other communities and family groups, leadership came from one person. For example, in some tribal communities an elder set the tone for all in a tribal group or an extended family. Even Start program staff worked collaboratively with these individuals and groups to ensure they had a visible presence in the program.

<sup>7</sup> Dickinson, D.K. & Tabors, P.O. (Eds.) (2001). *Begining literacy with language: Young children learning at home and school*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

### **Bridge to Formal School Settings**

**Even Start staff worked with elementary school administrators and teachers to build understanding about issues relevant to Even Start families, including language translation needs and methods of communication. They also arranged specific opportunities for Even Start parents to visit schools and meet teachers to learn about the school day and ways they could volunteer at the school. Another service provided was to keep a school calendar and frequently discuss school events with parents. In some cases, Even Start staff went so far as to arrange transportation for parents to attend school events and join parent-teacher conferences.**

### ***Provide a Bridge to Formal School Settings***

Even Start programs and staff often served as a bridge between parents and school staff. Parenting education sessions were used to prepare families to support their children in formal school settings. Communicating with schools can be trying at times for parents, but for families who are unfamiliar with the culture and the expectations of American school systems or who may have had negative personal experiences with school systems, it can be daunting. For example, some cultures believe in a definitive separation between home and school. Even Start program staff provided specific guidance to parents about what schools expect from them and their children, how to advocate for their children, where to go for help to interpret information from the school, and how to reinforce learning at home. Even Start learned that providing explicit support to families to help them understand and navigate the school system was critical to the success in working with families.

## **LEARNING IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT**

Home visiting, usually referred to in Even Start as home-based instruction, increased the intensity and individualization of family literacy program services. This principle was a critical foundation of the Even Start program and a powerful demonstration of the primacy of learning in the home and in context of the family. Home visits gave Even Start staff and families the opportunity to know each other and build trustworthy relationships. Home visits also gave Even Start staff the platform for communicating the respect and acceptance they had for the home and culture of the family. These elements were critical to retention of families and their success in the Even Start program.

The Even Start statute required local programs to provide integrated instructional services to families through home-based services. Some types of early learning programs that include home visiting use this opportunity to address the social service needs of the family. The Even Start program was unique in that home visits were intended primarily to advance the educational goals of the family. Social services and other supports were important, especially given the multiple, complex needs of Even Start families, but social service support was provided primarily through collaborators. Even Start used the home visit to extend and refine important information included in other components of the program, particularly parenting education. It served as a workshop for parents and children to learn and play together, and to build parental understanding that the home is a learning environment. Also, the instructional home visit was an opportunity for the home visitor to model positive behaviors and reinforce what the parents had been learning in other program components. It served as a prime opportunity for the home

**Even Start's home-based instruction was different from a home-based program. In the beginning, many Even Start programs attempted to be entirely home-based with all services and program components being conducted in the home. As valuable as the home visits were for many Even Start families, home visits alone were not of sufficient intensity to make an educational difference for families with low literacy and limited or no formal education.**

visitor to integrate all the instructional components of the program. It also enabled other program staff (e.g., adult education and early childhood education teachers) to use information secured by home visitors about family interests and needs to shape the content and methods of other Even Start components. Thus, the Even Start home visit served multiple purposes and provided a mechanism to ensure the program was responsive to families.

While the purpose of the Even Start home visit was instructional, a critical outcome was strengthened family-staff relationships. The rapport that developed between parents and staff was an invaluable outcome of the home visits. Many Even Start families lived in sub-standard housing, isolated rural areas, or in crime-ridden urban neighborhoods. Yet parents, time after time, welcomed the Even Start home visitor because of the mutual respect and trusting relationship that had developed. It was often because of these relationships that Even Start was able to retain families for a sufficient length of time to affect education outcomes.



## What Even Start Learned about Fostering Learning in the Home Environment

### *Build Instruction on the Family Environment*

A key benefit of home visiting was the opportunity to build on the family environment and tailor the content and style of the instructional visit to the needs and characteristics of children and their families. Many home visitors modified or designed materials and approaches for each home visit that parents could keep as resources. Home visitors built upon and adapted to the family environment, seeking the transfer of home visit activities to daily interactions between parents and children and helping the family incorporate literacy into their home environment and routine activities.

Even Start programs understood that parents needed an active role in shaping the home visit as well as in the debriefing after the visit. In Even Start, all family members were eligible and welcome to take part in appropriate program activities, even if they were not fully participating in the program. Grandparents, older siblings, and other adults living in the home often participated in home visit activities. The home instructor and the parent were encouraged to plan activities that would include the other adults and children who were likely to be present during the home visit.

A starting point for individualizing the content of a visit was to know and understand the goals and concerns of parents for themselves and for their children. The work of the home visit was far more meaningful to a parent when there were shared understandings between the parent and Even Start visitor about what should happen during the session.

### **Build on Family Environment**

**Even Start home visitors emphasized the value of using daily activities and attainable objects to proactively engage and expand on language. For example, home visitors demonstrated and modeled how sorting laundry could be used as a learning opportunity. Staff would prepare parents to include their children by having them engage in talk about concepts such as sorting and matching and then have their child try. Parents were encouraged to point out colors and ask silly questions like, “Do socks go on your head?” and “Where do they go?” and expand on children’s responses. These strategies provided concrete guidance for explicitly incorporating language and literacy into every day routines.**

## ***Ensure Program Staff are Qualified and Receive Training to Work with Diverse Families***

The learning environment in the home was much less formal than a classroom setting, but the home visit was an instructional component of Even Start and it was important for program staff to have the qualifications needed to teach the content. Some successful programs were able to use well-trained teaching assistants working under the supervision of a qualified teacher. Professional development was important for all staff working in the home.



In addition to teaching qualifications, Even Start learned that program staff conducting home visits needed specialized skills and sensitivities. Home visitors needed to be knowledgeable about and responsive to the family's culture and language, including the influence culture has on program participation and anticipated reactions to new information—particularly new parenting information. At least some program staff needed to speak the home language of most families, or involve collaborators who shared the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the families. When recruiting home visitors, Even Start coordinators needed to consider temperament, such as the

ability to stay focused and calm, and commitment to serving most-in-need families. Home visitors were often asked to visit poverty-stricken homes, some of which were in potentially dangerous neighborhoods. When home visitors encountered a dangerous situation or environment, they needed to be non-judgmental while making wise decisions about moving the location of the home visit, either temporarily or permanently, and if necessary, work with the family to make the environment safe or help them relocate to a safer place.

Few home visitors came to the Even Start program with all the skills they needed to work in this unique program. Local programs had to build staff development opportunities that included all program staff working with families, including those who did the recruitment since they were often the first point of contact, and those who conducted home visits since they had the most intimate contact with families. It was also highly desirable to include local school staff in professional development to help prepare them to welcome diverse Even Start families to school.

## ***Support Home Visitors in their Roles***

The Even Start home visitor played multiple, challenging roles. As mentioned above, Even Start needed staff members with the right temperaments and non-judgmental personalities to perform their jobs effectively. It was also important for the home visitor to be connected to all other parts of the program to enable them to extend learning into the home environment and forge the connection between home and Even Start. Home visitors could not be outsiders from another program or hired only to perform the home visit function.

The Even Start program found it critical to give home visitors appropriate support to keep them connected to the rest of the program and avoid home visitor "burn out." Even Start learned that home visitors should not be responsible for all the "leg work" and preparation associated with home instruction, but rather saw home visitors as part of the larger Even Start staff who participated in shared planning meetings. These meetings served as an opportunity for home visitors to obtain help in developing lesson plans and materials, and helped them solve problems and identify community resources to make appropriate referrals. Home visitors not only needed this support from other Even Start staff and the program director, but the involvement of other staff as well to help ensure that the home visit was a natural extension of and integrated with the rest of the program.

## CONCLUSION

Programs working with disadvantaged families strive to make a difference. While the parenting education component of Even Start was only part of the larger Even Start program, it helped parents support their children's learning. The family-centered and language- and literacy-focused approaches to working with parents distinguished Even Start from other similar programs and proved to be effective. A study conducted by the American Institutes for Research<sup>8</sup> of California's First 5 LA-funded family literacy programs (many of which were also Even Start funded) revealed that this approach to working with parents also had lasting effects on how involved they remain throughout their children's education. The lessons in this paper are the features that made a difference in Even Start.

### According to the 2010-2011 Even Start Consolidated State Performance Report:\*

- **89 percent of participating parents showed improvement in supporting language development, reading with their children, and supporting book and print concepts**
- **82 percent showed improvement in supporting their child's learning in educational settings**
- **87 percent of parents demonstrated improvement in using literacy materials, electronic media, home language and learning, and learning together in the home environment.**

**\*Represents programs reporting on the Even Start Family Literacy Parent Education Profile.**

Perhaps the most important lesson Even Start learned was that family development is a journey that takes time, dedication, and trust. Program leadership and staff recognized that parenting is nuanced and has many dimensions; no one program can do it all. Even Start took these principles to heart and focused efforts based on the finding from the First National Evaluation of Even Start that programs providing a rich offering of parenting education focused on children's language and literacy development had a positive effect on children's vocabulary. Even Start stayed true to the principle that literacy and education were the paths to help families break intergenerational cycles of illiteracy and poverty. While it was probably unrealistic to think that

the program could break the intergenerational cycle in a few years, to the program's credit, Even Start was able to significantly improve adult and child literacy skills, prepare children for school, and connect families to needed resources. Importantly, Even Start was successful at strengthening parents' sense of efficacy in terms of their children's language and academic success, and they became lifelong advocates for their children's education rights. It changed the way families valued literacy and education as a route to a better family life as well as the path to a better life for their children.



<sup>8</sup>Quick, H.E., Manship, K., Parrish, D., Madsen, S., Lyman-Munt, E., Ernandes, J., Rojas, D., Helsel, F., Howes, C., & Jung, Y. (2011). Evaluation of the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative: Final evaluation report. San Mateo, CA: American Institutes for Research.

## **Appendix A: Family Literacy Core Values—The Big Picture<sup>9</sup>**

The following seven essential values or themes distinguish high-quality family literacy programs. These values describe the “big picture” in Even Start.

### **Focus on Literacy**

The improvement of literacy skills of family members was the primary focus of Even Start programs. Even Start programs targeted families who were most in need of services based upon low income, low level of literacy and other need-related factors, and who otherwise might not have been reached or helped by other education programs. Literacy acquisition encompassed the four domains of language (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and numeracy. Literacy instruction was woven into the activities of all program components, and presented and practiced in contexts that are meaningful to families’ lives and needs.

### **Family-centered Programming**

As the primary stakeholders in Even Start programs, families were full partners in identifying their needs and priorities, shaping their goals, and making decisions about plans to achieve those goals. Program design was based on the needs, interests, and goals of families. Even Start valued the home and family unit as the most influential learning environment. Successful programs built on families’ strengths and celebrated their successes. Even Start was a safe and supportive place for families to grow and develop.

### **Intensity and Duration of Services**

Even Start programs had high expectations for family involvement and commitment and required that families participate fully in all program components. Programs encouraged families to attend regularly and to remain in the program long enough to meet their long-term goals of academic improvement and self-sufficiency. The program was designed to provide services of the requisite intensity and duration to ensure that families achieved such goals.

### **Flexibility and Adaptability**

Successful Even Start programs fit services to families, not families to the program. Program services were tailored to meet the needs of individual families, both in content and the scheduling of services. Programs remained flexible enough to recognize and accommodate the diverse interests and changing needs of families over time, including changes in support service needs such as transportation, child care, and work demands). Also, programs responded to changing needs and populations in their communities.

### **Partnership of Families and Service Providers**

Respect for the diverse languages, cultures, and life experiences of families was apparent in all aspects of program practice. Program staff viewed themselves as allies with other service providers in advocating for families within the larger community. Even Start staff worked with families and other service providers to create and use social and resource support networks in the community.

### **Continuity of Messages and Services**

Quality programs were characterized by research-based approaches, consistent values, and curricula that were compatible across Even Start components and collaborating programs. The goal of Even Start programs was to provide seamless services for families through the many transitions that families experience over time. To ensure continuity of services, Even Start administrators led efforts to institutionalize family-centered approaches within the larger community of service providers.

### **New Roles and Relationships for Staff**

Even Start programs required staff to operate in new ways and to provide cross-disciplinary and cross-agency training opportunities to support staff roles and responsibilities. The level of staff qualifications, experience, and ongoing professional development was integral to the quality of programs. Staff from Even Start and collaborating agencies worked together in the interests of their client families. This focus required different types of relationships among service providers. Even Start placed a high priority on developing truly collaborative relationships with key agencies to ensure comprehensive services for families.

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<sup>9</sup> Dwyer, C., Sweeney, T. (2001) Guide to Quality: Even Start Family Literacy Program Implementation and Continuous Improvement, Volume I, Revised. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.