

# **Show Me Family Literacy!**

**MISSOURI'S GUIDE FOR ESTABLISHING FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS**

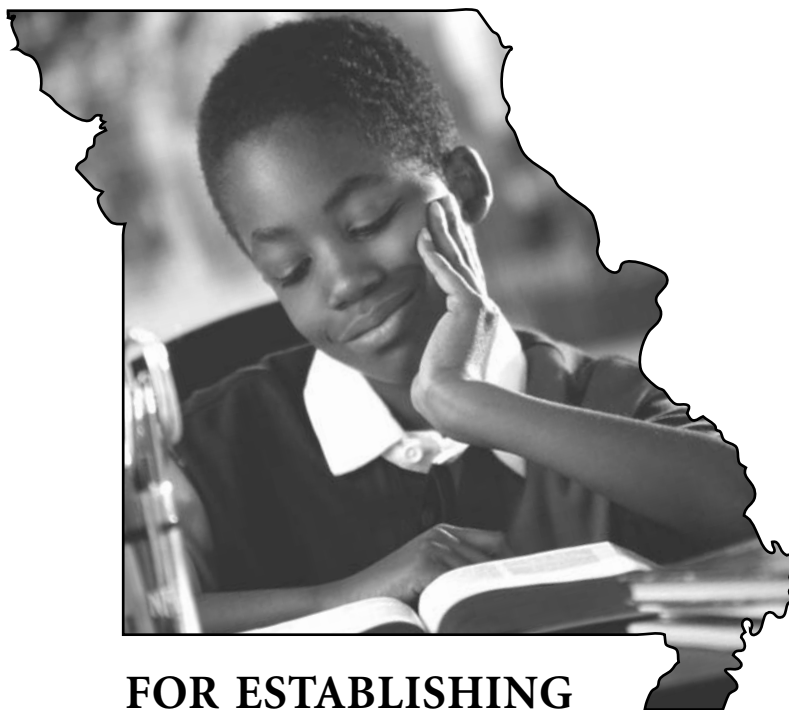
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# Show Me Family Literacy!

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## MISSOURI'S GUIDE



## FOR ESTABLISHING FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS

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## Preface

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Literacy is critical to America's future. In order to meet the challenge of preserving our democratic nation we must pull together in the communities where we live and work to address the problems of low literacy, unemployment, and poverty. These problems are often passed from generation to generation, which creates a demand for local intervention efforts to strengthen the community's capacity to educate both children and their parents. According to Richard W. Riley, then U.S. Secretary of Education, "All across America, communities are pulling together to strengthen education. More and more parents, teachers, and community and business leaders are creating compacts to build and strengthen partnerships for improved student learning" (1999). At the core of these efforts are programs targeting the family as the key unit of promise for a literate nation.

Family literacy is a proactive educational reform strategy. Family literacy programs are based on the common sense notion that if a program provides good early childhood experiences coupled with solid research-based literacy instruction to children and their parents, participating families may liberate themselves from the intergenerational bonds of poverty and low educational achievement. Numerous models of family literacy emerged during the past decade and a half. Common to all are the interrelated goals of helping parents to become full partners in their children's education, assisting children in reaching their full potential as learners, and providing literacy instruction for their parents.

In its 1991 National Literacy Act, Congress defined literacy as:

an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential.

Congress passed the National Literacy Act (P.L. 102-73) which amended the Even Start Family Literacy Program. According to this law, the purpose of the Even Start program is to:

improve the educational opportunities of the nation's children and adults by integrating early childhood education and adult education for parents into a unified program. . . .The program shall be implemented through cooperative projects that build on existing community resources to create a new range of services. (P.L. 100-297, Sec. 1051).

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Other national literacy initiatives such as the America Reads Challenge (Reading Excellence Act) pose a number of propositions about “learning to read” including the facts that:

- supporting language and reading activities in the early years is very important and will require substantial human resources (parents and volunteers),
- nurturing a child’s interests and skills in using language and learning to read as early as possible is essential and America Reads recognizes the unique role that parents play in the early years, and
- initiating and maintaining reading and literacy experiences are critical and America Reads promotes the necessary community partnerships between schools, businesses, and professional organizations to support these experiences (NICHD, 1997).

Although no one contests the critical national importance of literacy, statistics demonstrate the extent of illiteracy as a national concern. This condition is best explained with a review of standards for literacy and estimates of literacy levels for adults in Missouri. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) was commissioned by Congress in 1988 to produce a comprehensive, statistically-reliable source on literacy in the United States. The result was a synthetic estimate of adult literacy by state, county, and city throughout the United States. As the state of Missouri changes and the demands on individuals, families, and businesses increase, the definition of literacy also continues to evolve. While there is a history of local concern about inadequate literacy skills, the nature of the concerns is shifting. According to NALS:

In the past, literacy was considered the ability to read and use printed materials at an extremely basic level. Today, adults need higher levels of basic skills to function effectively in many areas of their lives, and literacy is defined more broadly to include problem-solving and higher-level reasoning skills. Literacy is a range of tools that help people help themselves — and their children. It is not an end in itself, but a means to a better quality of life (State of Literacy in America, 1998. p.1).

NALS reflects this new concept of literacy. Rather than classifying individuals as either “literate” or “illiterate,” NALS created three literacy scales: prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy. Each scale represents a different type of real-life literacy task. According to NALS, literacy tasks include:

- finding information in texts, such as newspaper articles,
- completing forms, such as a Social Security card application, and
- interpreting graphs and charts, such as a table of employee benefits.

NALS makes clear that literacy is not an “all or nothing” situation. It created a literacy continuum on which people may fall at different places for different kinds of skills. NALS divided the continuum into 5 levels, with Level 5 reflecting the highest skills and Level 1, the lowest. Although many Level 1 adults could perform many tasks involving simple texts and documents, all adults scoring at Level 1 displayed difficulty using certain reading, writing, and computational skills considered essential for daily living. A Level 1 individual is able to sign one’s name yet cannot locate eligibility from a table of employee benefits. Concerning newspapers, a Level 1 reader is able to locate one but not two pieces of information in a sports article.

According to NALS, 17% of adults in Missouri score at Level 1. Community rates vary with ranges from a comfortable low of 9% to a disturbing high of 28% of the adults scoring at the first level. The problem is most severe in the City of St. Louis where two in every three adults scored at the lowest two levels of literacy proficiency.

How is the NALS data connected to statewide drop out rates? According to the 1999 KIDS COUNT data disseminated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Missouri continues to have a 12% statewide high school drop out rate, and 17% of children statewide continue to live in poverty. The NALS literacy estimate and census data underscore the cluster effects of extreme need for library and literacy services in Missouri. Simply stated, family literacy is a family-focused, sustained, and community-wide response that echoes the Annie E. Casey Foundation's call for investments that are "grounded in two essential ideas: that families matter and that neighborhoods matter."

Families are a vital support for children's and parents' learning. Family participation in reading activities provides valuable developmental experiences for growing children. Not only does family literacy develop children's interest in reading, children who are read to, told stories, and visit their local library may enter school better prepared to learn than other students. Family literacy also prepares parents to become actively involved in their children's education and in many cases this keeps children achieving their "personal bests," having solid attendance records, and staying in school.

During the five years between 1991 and 1996 the percentage of American children ages 3-5 who participated in various reading activities with a parent or family member increased. Data indicate that over 80 percent of families are reading together and telling stories every week. Children enrolled in some form of preprimary education such as a family literacy program are more likely to visit a public library. Nearly 80% of parents with GEDs are reading to their children and telling stories compared to just over half of the parents who dropped out (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999).

Family literacy programs serve families who are most in need. In 1996-97, approximately 90% of Even Start families had incomes at or below the federal poverty level. Adults enter family literacy programs without a high school diploma, 45% of Even Start adults left high school in the ninth grade. Family literacy programs provide educational benefits for adults. According to national assessments, adults make moderate gains on measures of math and reading achievement. They also improve the literacy environments of their homes which in turn strengthens their young children's language development and school readiness (Educational Excellence Act for All Children, 1999).

To build on the success of Even Start and other family literacy programs, new projects should strive to provide high-quality instructional program for adults and children. Program planners should take into account a review of the best available research on preventing reading difficulties and promoting language development in young children. They need to consider the life roles played by adults. In addition to being learners they must also function as family members,

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employees, and civic participants. This calls for program designs that specify the quality, intensity, frequency of instruction, and the extent and duration of services. This charge mandates well-trained staff members with strong qualifications as educators and child care-givers. Programs have to attract, educate, and retain families long enough to ensure that parents' self-identified goals are achieved.

And finally, when planning a new program, planners must focus on continuous improvement by incorporating collaborative models of program evaluation into its model of informed decision making. Each program must verify its effort and achievement toward meeting high educational standards for children and adults. Clear indicators of program performance are essential for strengthening programs as well as garnering and keeping local, state, and national resources.

*Show Me Family Literacy!* is a user-friendly guide designed to navigate program planners through the course of building and implementing a family literacy program. It provides planning teams with an orientation to a four-component model of family literacy, community resources, planning strategies, examples of programs in Missouri, recent research findings, case study vignettes, and checklists for designing quality programs that achieve their intended goals.

## Acknowledgements

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**Jeri Levesque**, Associate Professor in the School of Education at Webster University, and Programs Evaluator for LIFT–Missouri, has authored, directed, and/or evaluated more than 15 different federal, state, and privately-funded literacy projects. She designed and directed a successful three-year service learning program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services–Corporation for National Service. She has served as a local Even Start evaluator and is currently coordinating Even Start program evaluation for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Dr. Levesque wrote the Missouri Reads Pilot Guide for Tutors (1998) and holds a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Missouri–St. Louis.

**Karen Hinton** served as the Supervisor of Federal Program Assistance for DESE and was State Program Officer for Even Start Family Literacy Programs. Ms. Hinton recently left this position when she moved with her family to Chillicothe in northwest Missouri. Ms. Hinton provided technical assistance and monitored nine Even Start programs in Missouri. She holds a B.S. and Master of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies from the University of Missouri–Columbia.

LIFT–Missouri: Missouri's Literacy Resource Center improves Missouri's response to literacy-related problems by:

- providing quality training and on-site technical assistance for educators,
- providing accessible resources for teachers, tutors, and program administrators,
- integrating web-based technology into adult education and literacy,
- establishing effective collaborations among literacy providers, supporting agencies, and the business community,
- providing a statewide toll-free "Literacy Line" for inquiries and student and volunteer referral,
- maintaining a database of statewide literacy providers,
- utilizing academic expertise and research to improve program effectiveness, and
- coordinating state and federal grant programs which support literacy.

## x Acknowledgements

LIFT leads Missouri's collaborative efforts to implement and sustain quality family literacy programs. Family literacy programs bring together low-literate adults and their children for a family-focused educational experience with support services designed to break the cycle of poverty and low literacy. Parents improve their academic skills while their children build a solid foundation for learning in school. Family literacy gives parents the skills and knowledge to become more self-sufficient, as many transfer from welfare to work.

Missouri Family Literacy Initiative (MOFLI) is a three-year (1999-2001) U.S. Department of Education, Even Start Statewide Even Start Family Initiative project. During the project a formal collaboration was established to work toward two major goals:

- to develop Even Start family literacy programs that can be supported and sustained by state and local resources and
- to institutionalize in Missouri a statewide support system for family literacy programs.

During the first year of the project (1999), the collaborating partners, including:

- Robert Bartman, Commissioner of Education;
- Rebecca Cook, Secretary of State; and
- Gary Stangler, Director of Social Services

and other key state agencies and organizations planned a system for developing, supporting, and sustaining family literacy programs in Missouri. They hosted a Family Literacy Summit in March of 1999 to introduce the Family Literacy Initiative. In addition to top-level state agency officials, MOFLI includes the state literacy resource center, volunteer tutor organizations, and AmeriCorps VISTA workers in the America Reads Challenge.

During the subsequent years of the project, six to twelve model family literacy programs will be implemented — some at existing sites and some at new sites. In developing these programs, the collaborating partners of MOFLI will focus resources and expertise on the parents' role in their young children's emerging literacy. The MOFLI consortium will also develop a specific role for volunteers engaged in the Reading Excellence Act for participating in family literacy programs. LIFT-Missouri will provide program staff with appropriate training and technical assistance.

Working closely with external professional and resource agencies and organizations such as the

- National Center for Family Literacy, National Institute for Literacy,
- National Even Start Association,
- National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, and
- the U.S. Department of Education,

the MOFLI consortium is committed to:

- establishing the Missouri Even Start Statewide Family Literacy Collaboration to coordinate and integrate existing federal, state, and local family literacy services and resources,
- managing the collaboration as an effective family literacy work group,

- building Missouri's capacity to implement quality and sustainable family literacy programs,
- evaluating the project's overall process and program implementation, and
- integrating family literacy within the range of state services offered to low-income, low-literate families in Missouri.

The collaborating partners in this project have demonstrated past success in operating literacy and adult education programs. These include:

- LIFT as the State Literacy Resource Center,
- the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Division of Adult Education, Even Start, Early Childhood Education, Parents as Teachers, Caring Communities, Title I, and Early Childhood Special Education),
- Parents as Teachers National Center, Inc.,
- Webster University School of Education,
- Head Start,
- Practical Parenting Partnerships,
- ParentLink,
- Missouri State Library,
- Department of Social Services, and
- the Department of Economic Development.

## **Family Literacy in Action: Future Plan for Evaluation**

The next four-year evaluation process will focus its efforts toward follow-up data collected from classroom teachers assessing the academic success, social competence, and parent involvement of Even Start families whose children enter the public school system.

Recognizing the importance of high-quality parent-child interaction, the program will diligently assess this dimension of its comprehensive family literacy services in order to optimize services to individual families and provide fiscal accountability.

Several new services that are planned for the next four years may impact the evaluation plan. The on-site Full Start program (Head Start), the Laubach Literacy Tutoring Program, the AFDC volunteer requirement, and the Title I Summer Reading Program will each make positive contributions to the existing Even Start Services.

The evaluator will interview the families, the coordinator, and the partners to determine significant institutional changes needed to facilitate the successful implementation of the self-sufficiency plan. Appropriate documentation of program strengths and participant achievements will be shared with potential supporters.

Educational Consulting Associates. Della Lamb Community Center,  
Kansas City Missouri School District Even Start Family Literacy  
Program. Local Evaluation Summary, 1997-98

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## Glossary of Acronyms

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ABE	Adult Basic Education
AEL	Adult Education and Literacy
ART	Action Research Team
BTW	Beginning Teacher Workshop
CARE	Collaborative Action Research Evaluation
DESE	Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
ECDA	Early Childhood Development Act
EFF	Equipped for the Future
ESL	English as Second Language
ESPIRS	Even Start Program Information Reporting System
ETW	Experienced Teacher Workshop
GED	General Education Development (diploma)
ITW	Intermediate Teacher Workshop
JTPA	Job Training Partnership Act
LD	Learning Disabled
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
MOFLI	Missouri Family Literacy Initiative
NCFL	National Center for Family Literacy
NIFL	National Institute for Literacy
PAT	Parents as Teachers
PPP	Practical Parenting Partnerships