Literacy and the Family

The analyses in this chapter examine how parents, grandparents, and guardians with different literacy levels interacted with the children living in their homes around issues related to literacy and school. The analyses also examine the relationship between the literacy of adults living in a home and whether or not the home had educational resources—including books and computers—that encourage children to read and actively engage in other academic and intellectual pursuits.

Throughout the chapter, the word parent refers to parents, grandparents, or guardians who had children living in their household for at least 10 days out of the month.
Parent-Child Literacy-Related Interactions

Reading to Children

Higher percentages of parents with Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy than parents with Basic prose literacy who had children under age 8 reported that they read to their children 5 or more days a week: half of parents with Proficient prose literacy and 44 percent of parents with Intermediate prose literacy read to their children 5 or more days compared with 36 percent of parents with Basic prose literacy (figure 5-1). Additionally, a higher percentage of parents with Basic than with Below Basic prose literacy who had children under age 8 reported that they read to their children 5 or more days a week: 36 percent of parents with Basic prose literacy read to their children 5 or more days compared with 27 percent of parents with Below Basic prose literacy.

A lower percentage of parents with Below Basic than with Basic prose literacy who had children under age 8 reported that they read to their children during the previous week: 41 percent of parents with Below Basic prose literacy did not read to their children at all compared with 25 percent of parents with Basic prose literacy (figure 5-1). Additionally, a lower percentage of parents with Basic prose literacy than parents with either Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy reported that they read to their children at all during the previous week: 25 percent of parents with Basic prose literacy did not read to their children at all compared with 17 percent of parents with Intermediate prose literacy and 14 percent of parents with Proficient prose literacy.

Learning the Alphabet

In addition to reading to their children, parents may participate in other types of literacy-related activities with them. Knowing the letters of the alphabet before starting school is a predictor of a school-age child’s reading level (Adams 1990, Schatschneider et al. 2004; Whitehurst and Lonigan 2001). The 2003 adult literacy assessment background questionnaire included a question asking parents with young children how often they tried to teach their children the letters of the alphabet. Parents were given the option of saying that their children already knew the letters of the alphabet. In this section, results are reported on this question for parents with children ages 3 through 5.

A higher percentage of parents with Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy than parents with Basic prose literacy reported that they had children between the ages of 3 and 5 who knew the letters of the alphabet. Additionally, a higher percentage of parents with Basic, Intermediate, or Proficient prose literacy than parents...
with *Below Basic* prose literacy reported that they had children between the ages of 3 and 5 who knew the letters of the alphabet (figure 5-2). Among parents with children between the ages of 3 and 5 who did not already know the letters of the alphabet, 19 percent of parents with *Below Basic* prose literacy reported that they never tried to teach their children the letters of the alphabet, compared with 7 percent of parents with *Intermediate* prose literacy and 8 percent of parents with *Proficient* prose literacy (figure 5-3).

**Learning to Read Words**

Most parents reported that they pointed out words to their children under the age of 8 and asked the children what the words meant at least a few times a week (table 5-1). Across literacy levels, there were only a few significant differences in the frequency with which parents reported that they tried to teach their children to read words; a higher percentage of parents with *Intermediate* prose literacy than parents with *Below Basic* prose literacy taught their children words a few times a week or more, and a higher

**Figure 5-2.** Percentage of parents whose children between the ages of 3 and 5 knew the letters of the alphabet, by prose literacy level: 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prose Literacy Level</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5-1.** Percentage of parents who tried to teach their children under the age of 8 to read words during the previous month, by prose literacy level: 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prose Literacy Level</th>
<th>Child already reads well</th>
<th>Less than once a week</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Every day/ a few times a week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Totals may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in households. Adults who could not be interviewed because of language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (3 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure. Parent includes parents, grandparents, and guardians who had a child living with them 10 or more days a month.

percentage of parents with Proficient prose literacy than parents with Basic or Intermediate prose literacy taught their children to read words less than once a week. There were no statistically significant differences across parents’ prose literacy levels in the percentage who reported that their children under age 8 could already read well (table 5-1).

**Rhyming Activities**

The ability to hear and understand rhymes is an important skill for children learning to read (Anthony and Lonigan 2004). Parents of young children often engage in a variety of activities that help make their children sensitive to the sounds of rhymes: singing songs, reciting nursery rhymes, or playing rhyming games such as “patty cake” or “ring around the rosie.” The percentage of parents who reported that they had engaged in some type of rhyming activity with their children under the age of 8 during the previous month ranged from 81 to 90 percent across the four prose literacy levels (figure 5-4). Higher percentages of parents with Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy than parents with Basic prose literacy reported engaging in rhyming activities with their children, and a higher percentage of parents with Basic prose literacy than parents with Below Basic prose literacy reported engaging in rhyming activities.

**Talking to Children About School and Homework**

Schools usually encourage parents to be actively involved in their children’s education (Carey, Lewis, and Faris 1998). The percentage of parents who reported that they talked to their school-age children every day about things they studied in school ranged from 56 to 71 percent across the four prose literacy levels (figure 5-5). A lower percentage of parents with Below Basic prose literacy than parents with Basic, Intermediate, or Proficient prose literacy reported that they talked to their children about things they studied in school. Eleven percent of parents with Below Basic prose literacy who had school-age children never talked to their children about things they studied in school compared with 2 percent of parents with Basic, Intermediate, or Proficient prose literacy. Conversely, a lower percentage of parents with Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy than parents with Basic prose literacy reported that they talked to their children every day about things they studied in school, and a higher percentage of parents with Basic prose literacy than parents with Below Basic prose literacy talked to their children every day about things they studied in school.

![Figure 5-4. Percentage of parents who engaged in rhyming activities with their children under the age of 8 during the previous month, by prose literacy level: 2003](image)

![Figure 5-5. Percentage of parents who engaged in homework activities with their children under the age of 8 during the previous month, by prose literacy level: 2003](image)

**Figure 5-4.** Percentage of parents who engaged in rhyming activities with their children under the age of 8 during the previous month, by prose literacy level: 2003

**Figure 5-5.** Percentage of parents who engaged in homework activities with their children under the age of 8 during the previous month, by prose literacy level: 2003

**NOTE:** Data may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in households. Adults who could not be interviewed because of language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (3 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure. Parents includes parents, grandparents, and guardians who had a child living with them 10 or more days a month.

The percentage of parents who reported that they helped their children with homework or worked with their children on homework at least occasionally ranged from 75 to 92 percent across the four literacy levels (figure 5-6). The percentage of parents who reported that they never worked with their children on homework declined with each increasing prose literacy level: 25 percent of parents with Below Basic prose literacy, 14 percent of parents with Basic prose literacy, 11 percent of parents with Intermediate prose literacy, and 8 percent of parents with Proficient prose literacy never helped or worked with their children on homework.

### Educational Resources in the Home

Families' environments differ in the extent to which they provide resources that encourage children to read and actively engage in other academic and intellectual pursuits. The next section of this chapter examines the relationship between parents' literacy and educational resources in the home.

### Reading and Reading Materials in the Home

According to parents' self-reports, parents with high literacy levels were more likely to be seen reading by their children. Ninety percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy, 81 percent of adults with Intermediate...
prose literacy, 73 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, and 60 percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy said that their children ages 2 through 17 often saw them reading (figure 5-7).

The percentage of adults who lived with children under the age of 18 and had no reading materials in their home decreased with each increasing level of prose literacy: 19 percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy and 3 percent or fewer of adults with higher levels of literacy who lived with children under age 18 reported that they had no reading materials in their home (figure 5-8).11

Conversely, the percentage of adults who lived with children under the age of 18 and reported that they had many reading materials in their home increased with each increasing level of prose literacy: 54 percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy, 83 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, 92 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, and 96 percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy who lived with children under the age of 18 reported that they had many reading materials in their home.12

11 Questions about reading materials in the home were not asked of respondents who were under the age of 18 unless there were younger children in the home.

The 2003 background questionnaire asked all adults with children under age 18 living in their home whether they had 25 or more books in their home and also whether they had a variety of magazines and other reading materials in their home. Adults who had both 25 or more books and a variety of magazines and other reading materials in their home were categorized as having many reading materials in their home; adults who had either 25 or more books or a variety of magazines and other reading materials in their home were categorized as having some reading materials in their home; adults who had neither 25 or more books nor a variety of magazines and other reading materials in their home were categorized as having no reading materials in their home.

Figure 5-8. Percentage of adults who lived with children under age 18 and had reading materials in the home, by prose literacy level: 2003

![Figure 5-8](image_url)

NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in households. Adults who could not be interviewed because of language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (3 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure. Adults includes parents, grandparents, and guardians who had a child living with them 10 or more days a month.

Across the four prose literacy levels, 93 to 100 percent of parents said that their children ages 2 through 17 had at least one or two books of their own (figure 5-9). However, higher percentages of parents with Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy than parents with Basic prose literacy reported that their children had their own books, and a higher percentage of parents with Basic prose literacy than parents with Below Basic prose literacy reported that their children had their own books.

**Computers in the Home**

Adults were asked whether they had a computer in their home that could be used for word processing and whether they had a computer in their home with Internet access. Among adults living in households with children under the age of 18, the percentage of adults who said they lived in a home that had a computer with word processing capability or Internet access increased with every increasing level of prose literacy (figure 5-10).
School Involvement

Parents of school-age children were asked whether they had been involved in their children’s schools during the previous year in any of the following ways:

- Volunteered to help out at the school, including in the classroom, on a field trip, or at a school event such as a party or school fair
- Gone to a parent-teacher or other type of meeting at the school
- Spoken individually with a teacher to see how their children were doing in school
- Sent food or other items to share in the classroom

Forty percent of parents with Proficient prose literacy reported doing all four activities during the previous year compared with 29 percent of parents with Intermediate prose literacy, 25 percent of parents with Basic prose literacy, and 23 percent of parents with Below Basic prose literacy (figure 5-11). A higher percentage of parents with Below Basic prose literacy than parents with Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy had done none of these activities during the past year.

Summary

This chapter examined how parents with different literacy levels interacted with the children living in their homes around issues related to literacy and school. In general, parents with higher literacy did more literacy-related activities with their children and had more educational resources in their home.

Specifically, higher percentages of parents with Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy than parents with Basic prose literacy read to their children under age 8 five or more days a week, and a higher percentage of parents with Basic prose literacy than parents with Below Basic prose literacy read to their children 5 or more days a week.

Additionally, the percentage of parents with children ages 2 through 17 whose children often saw them reading increased with each increasing prose literacy level. The percentage of adults who lived with children under the age of 18 in homes that had many reading materials also increased with each increasing prose literacy level. At every prose literacy level, more than 90 percent of parents of children ages 2 through 17 said that their children had at least one or two books of their own. However, higher percentages of parents with Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy

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13 Throughout the chapter, the word parents refers to parents, grandparents, or guardians who had a child living with them 10 days a month and that convention is also followed in this summary section.
than parents with Basic prose literacy had children who had their own books, and a higher percentage of parents with Basic prose literacy than parents with Below Basic prose literacy had children who had their own books. The percentages of adults living with children under the age of 18 who had a computer in their home with word processing capability or Internet access increased with each increasing prose literacy level.

A lower percentage of parents with Below Basic prose literacy than parents with Basic, Intermediate, or Proficient prose literacy ever talked to their school-age children about things they studied in school. Conversely, higher percentages of parents with Intermediate or Proficient prose literacy than parents with Basic or Below Basic prose literacy talked to their school-age children every day about things they studied in school.

At every prose literacy level, three-quarters of parents with school-age children helped their children with homework or worked on homework with their children at least occasionally. However, the percentage of parents who never helped or never worked on homework with their children declined with each increasing prose literacy level.