

# WE READ AS ONE:

## Strategies for Empowering a Community of Intergenerational Readers



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### ABSTRACT

Immersing children in book-rich homes improves educational outcomes and empowers young children with “life-long tastes, skills and knowledge” (Sikora et al., 2019, p. 1). Yet many children in the United States are living in “book deserts” with little or no access to the books that could shape their young literate lives (Neuman & Moland, 2019). With the goal of stocking home libraries and empowering parents, literacy educators working in a teacher preparation program in the mid-South developed a variety of events that would deepen literacy in the community. Events like Coffee Shop Book-store and dinnertime read-alouds welcomed parents into the classroom, but when COVID-19 closed schools, educators had to strategically problem-solve ways to foster family literacy. Without school libraries, providing children with access to books became even more crucial. The educators created a Literacy Lane event in which families drove through school parking lots to pick up books and then read aloud together in their cars. Other strategies included book swaps and “book fairies” to share used books among families, a Zoom Book Buddies program to deliver matching books to people in different households so that they could connect over Zoom, and utilizing a school lunch bus delivery system to give students books along with their meals. Each of these events included a component to educate parents on ways to help their children’s literacy grow. The programs ensured that all students had access to books, and also provided fun and inspiring ways for families to connect through reading.

### KEYWORDS

***family literacy, read aloud, elementary, book clubs***

IMMERSING CHILDREN in book-rich home environments improves educational outcomes (Sikora et al., 2019). In fact, the presence of a home library may empower young children with “life-long tastes, skills and knowledge” (Sikora et al., 2019, p. 1). Many children in the United States are living in “book deserts” with little or no access to the books that could shape their young literate lives (Neuman & Moland, 2019). For many children, the school library is the only place to gain consistent access to books. When schools shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, book access quickly became a concern.

As literacy educators working in a teacher preparation program in the mid-South, one of our jobs each year is to promote literacy in our local community by hosting family and community literacy events. These events provide education for adults and give away hundreds of books to stock home libraries. The preservice teachers we work with are largely involved in this effort, helping plan and implement the events in local schools.

The one-year anniversary of school shutdowns caused us to pause and reflect on the many ways we adapted to the realities of COVID-19 for preservice teachers and the elementary students we worked with in classrooms across our city. The purpose of this article is to share ways we were able to keep literacy alive in our community with the hope that readers will take these strategies and use them to promote

and empower an intergenerational group of literacy learners in their own communities.

### Family Literacy Programs

Ever since Taylor (1983) first used the term *family literacy*, it has been interpreted in many different ways. For the purpose of this article, family literacy is defined as interactive, intergenerational literacy learning. Parents and caregivers are a child's first teachers. Children who have books in the home and caregivers who read to them show higher levels of literacy skills than children who do not have the same opportunities (Wilson, 2013). A large body of research exists on how important the role of family literacy programs is in developing the literacy skills of young children (Christie et al., 2010; Hannon, 1998; Jaynes, 2012; Morgan et al., 2009; Morrow, 2011; Nutbrown et al., 2005). More specifically, family involvement in literacy programs has been suggested to improve reading and writing skills (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002), phonological and print awareness (Ihmeideh & Al-Maadadi, 2020), and concepts of print, comprehension, and storytelling (Jordan et al., 2000), and to increase vocabulary and help develop writing skills (Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005). Providing these educational opportunities to families, modeling effective literacy activities, and providing parent training will improve the literacy of young learners.

According to the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, family literacy programs integrate (a) interactive literacy activities between parent and child, (b) training in parenting activities, (c) literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency, and (d) age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Family literacy programs in our community vary from school to school as each tries to integrate components of an effective program. Some family literacy programs focus directly on primary grades with the goal of strengthening foundational reading skills and modeling early literacy strategies. Other programs include all grade levels in the school to promote general reading engagement and strengthen comprehension skills. No matter the grade-level focus, these events can be stand-alone, one-time experiences or yearlong commitments that include multiple parent classes, workshops, and community literacy engagement. This article will share in detail about family literacy events hosted at local elementary schools as well as community engagement strategies.

### Family Literacy Events

Before the pandemic, family literacy events offered a unique and nonthreatening opportunity for students to engage with family and literacy in the safe environment of school. In each of these events, families were invited into the schools to participate in an experience that included developmentally appropriate, interactive family literacy activities and parent education, all centered around a theme and a book. In 2019 alone, we hosted 12 family literacy events, providing over 10,000 kids with books and activities.

Each event was unique, tailored to the needs of the families in the school. One school did a "Coffee Shop Bookstore" event in which families came to the school during morning drop-off for coffee, donuts, and book shopping. As families shopped, they were given a printed sheet of paper on a clipboard that supported caregivers in understanding the reading interests of their child (see Table 1). The one-page document included questions for caregivers to ask with the purpose of helping their child choose the best book that day as well as helping caregivers understand their child's reading interests for choosing books in the future.

**Table 1**  
**READING INVENTORY FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**

#### READING INVENTORY

**While you shop for your book, have a conversation with your child about their reading interests. This will help you all choose the best book for your child today and also in the future when you visit the library or bookstore.**

- What kind of books do you like to read? (funny, serious, happy, sad, science, informational, sports, history, biography, adventure, graphic novels, mystery, poetry)
- What type of characters do you enjoy reading about? (musicians, athletes, celebrities, people like me, people not like me, actors, animals)
- What kind of books do you not like?
- Where is your favorite place to read?
- Do you like it when someone reads to you?
- Show me a book here that catches your attention. What do you like about it?

In this bookstore event, the first 30 minutes of the school day were dedicated to reading the new books together throughout the school. The morning drop-off timing allowed more caregivers to participate as they were able to come before work. Each book in the “bookstore” was also stuffed with a bookmark (see Figure 1) to help guide caregivers in leading discussions about the text with their children.

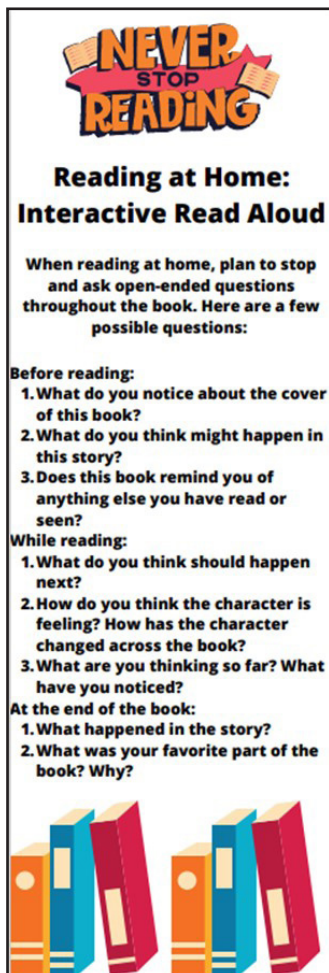
Other events included a more traditional approach by hosting a nighttime experience that included dinner and literacy activities. As a part of the teacher preparation coursework, these events also included preservice teachers who read the themed texts and created high-quality literacy activities from various content areas for the families to engage in. On the night of the event, families and students arrived in anticipation to share a meal in the cafeteria pro-

vided by a local nonprofit organization. Sharing a meal together was a great time for families to pause and engage in conversation, recap the day, and share stories and feelings. During dinner, families were provided with discussion cards to help guide conversation and connection (see Table 2).

After dinner and discussion, a bell would signal time to move to literacy activities in the classrooms. Within each classroom, a themed book was paired with a designated literacy activity where students would engage in high-quality texts, family activities, and critical thinking. Activities in the classrooms were intentional about empowering caregivers to interact with the children through discussion about the book and to work together to co-construct a final product. Upon conclusion, the students and families left with copies of the activities and books to take home. Table 3 shows example themes and activities from family literacy events.

These events provided access to books as well as instruction on effective ways to use these books. The pandemic threatened to shut down these events completely, but with some creativity, we were able to shift the family literacy events into what we called “Literacy Lane.”

**Figure 1**  
**INTERACTIVE READ-ALOUD BOOKMARK FOR CAREGIVERS**



### Literacy Lane

The pandemic provided many challenges in getting books and authentic, high-quality literacy activities into the homes of children and families. Turning our family literacy events into drive-through, COVID-friendly events was one of our greatest successes in book access and family engagement throughout the pandemic. These events had all of the components of our in-person events, but instead of eating together at school and completing activities in the classroom, we shifted everything to home. Families drove through the parking lot of the school and stopped at three stations. The first station provided a literacy kit full of activities to do at home with a brand-new book. (See Table 4 for examples of books and literacy kit ideas.) The second station consisted of tables of gently used books. At this station, students could choose extra books to take home. Siblings were also encouraged to grab a book. The last station was a food truck where families were given dinner. The families could then choose to park and picnic in the back of their cars or go home and eat and read together there. Teachers and college students stood outside, socially distanced, waving and cheering to the families as they passed. Many schools even had a school mascot and

Table 2  
**FAMILY MEALTIME DISCUSSION CARDS**

<b>FAMILY MEALTIME DISCUSSION CARDS</b> Mealtime is a great time to connect with your child. Use these discussion starters to get the conversation going and form lasting tabletop memories.		
<b>Best and Worst:</b> What was the best part of your day? What was the worst part?	<b>Gratitude:</b> Name one thing you are grateful for.	<b>Compliments:</b> What do you like the most about the person sitting next to you?
<b>Hopes and Dreams:</b> If you could go anywhere in the world right now, where would you go?	<b>Imagination:</b> If you could have one superpower, what would it be?	<b>Kindness:</b> Tell us about something nice you did for someone this week. What about something nice someone did for you?

Table 3  
**EXAMPLE LITERACY EVENT THEMES**

THEME	BOOK TITLE	FAMILY ACTIVITIES WITH LITERACY SKILL	PARENT EDUCATION COMPONENT
Communities	<i>All Are Welcome</i> by Alexandra Penfold	Poetry writing with rhyming words; shared invitation writing to invite a new friend to play on the playground or other event (with parent permission)	Dinner conversation cards
<i>Titanic</i>	<i>I Survived the Sinking of the Titanic, 1912</i> by Lauren Tarshis	Discussion questions / thick and thin questions “Sink or Float” science experiment	Interactive read-aloud bookmark Step-by-step cards on the experiment
Dreams	<i>Dreamers</i> by Yuyi Morales	Creating large pieces of art on posters that show the hopes, dreams, and accomplishments of their family	A pamphlet of local organizations that provide adult education and free books

played loud music to add to the excitement. Figure 2 shows an example invitation for one Literacy Lane event.

Each Literacy Lane event included a literacy kit that was sent home with the families. In this kit, there was always a letter (Figure 3) to families explaining the purpose and contents of the kits. We also included a recorded read-aloud of the book to support families who may need help reading the text. We linked this recording with a QR code in the letter.

### Video for Interactive Read-Aloud

When we shifted to Literacy Lane events, we wanted the parent education component to continue, despite the fact

that the families would not be interacting face-to-face with the teachers at the event. Along with the idea of the child's first teacher being the parent or caregiver comes the responsibility of developing good literacy habits. To help a child have clear understandings, improved critical thinking, use of strategies, and motivation to learn, parents themselves need to model these strategies in the home. This type of modeling and instruction can take place within the context of an interactive reading session. Incorporation and practice of specific behaviors during shared reading experiences can promote future academic success for children (De Jong & Leseman, 2001; Morrow, 1983, 2011). Typically,

**Figure 2**  
**LITERACY LANE INVITATION EXAMPLE**



**Table 4**  
**LITERACY KIT EXAMPLES**

BOOK TITLE	CONTENTS OF THE KIT
<i>V Is for Volunteer: A Tennessee Alphabet</i> by Michael Shoulders	A whiteboard and Expo marker were placed in each kit. For each letter in the book, families were asked to write words of their own that start with that letter. A list of future literacy activities families could do with the whiteboard was provided.
<i>Bear in Love</i> by Daniel Pinkwater	Beans, paper plates, and yarn were provided for families to make a paper plate tambourine. This instrument was to be used each time Bear sings in the book, making the story more interactive. Figure 3 shows the letter and scavenger hunt provided.

we are able to model an interactive read-aloud in person for our family literacy events. When our events changed to drive-throughs, we knew we still needed this education component. Knowing the importance of this research and wanting to help parents and caregivers continue the love of literacy within their home environments, we created a free, open-access interactive read-aloud instruction video with the target audience of parents and caregivers. In this video, the basics of the interactive read-aloud are reviewed, as well as tips to help with comprehension, background knowledge, and making personal connections to the text. Scan the QR code in Figure 4 and feel free to use this resource in any of your own events in the future.

Hosting family literacy events is one effective way to engage families and build communities, but it is not the only way. Engaging your community in literacy does not require large, complicated events. Below are some quick strategies that address issues of cost, access, and health.

**Zoom Book Buddies: Connecting Across Place**

Zoom Book Buddies is a great way to connect families and friends across the miles or just across town during a pandemic. The idea is simple: Provide matching books to pairs of people, often intergenerational family members (e.g., grandparents and grandchildren), for them to read together over Zoom or any video-conferencing platform. To do this, we gathered pairs of books and posted pictures on social media (see Figure 5) with an open invitation for readers to find a book buddy and respond to the post with their book pick and the addresses of where the books should be sent. A copy of each book was sent to the designated addresses. The participants then read and discussed the books remotely via video conference.

**Book Swap: A Cost-Effective Option**

Book events do not always need to cost money. Book swaps are a fun and free way for families to gain access to “new to you” books. A simple concept, a book swap is where members of a group (e.g., school, class, neighborhood) trade gently used books. The first step is to set a date for the swap, with a two-week window of time for collection. During the collection period, families are encouraged to sort through their bookshelves to identify books they would like to gift to a new reader. In our school-wide book swap event, families donate as many books as they want, knowing their child and all children, regardless of

donation, will receive at least one new book at the book swap. As books are collected, they are sorted by reading level and/or genre or theme. On Book Swap Day, books are spread out on tables for easy viewing and swappers are welcomed to get their new book(s). School logistics require scheduling, but neighborhood or classroom swaps simply open and close. Bookmarks are a fun addition to tuck inside the newfound books, and clever book swappers even create their own logo to go on labels reminding the new owner where they got the book.

### CHOW Bus Book Drops: Helping With Access

Book access sometimes requires creativity—finding ways to put books where the people will be. During the pandemic, access to school lunches became a concern. School communities immediately rallied to ensure students would have access to food in a variety of ways. In order for children to get their free school lunches, our schools use a “CHOW bus” to deliver meals. We quickly realized we needed to collect books to give away along with the food at the CHOW bus. We gathered new and used books, cleaned them, and placed them in large Ziploc bags. The bags also contained the bookmarks and other family literacy literature such as the mealtime conversation starters. As families came for their lunches, they were also given a bag of books to take home.

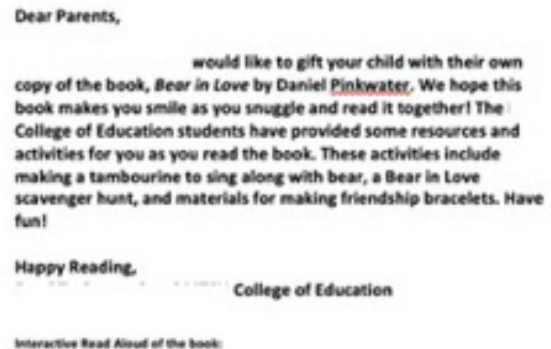
### Book Fairies: Keeping the Magic Alive

According to the website The Book Fairies (<https://ibelieveinbookfairies.com/>), book fairies are “people who, when they’ve finished reading a good book, want a unique and fun way to pass it on to the next person. They pop an official book fairy sticker on it, which reads ‘take this book, read it, and leave it for the next person to enjoy.’ They might even add a ribbon to dress it up as a gift. When they’ve prepared their gift, they will hide it in public to be found.” We have found book fairies to be a fun and easy way to promote literacy and excitement in our community. Figure 6 shows us leaving a book on a park bench for someone to find.

### Lessons Learned Along the Way

Some of the lessons learned along the way involved accessibility, funding, and delivery methods. In the previous year, many different grants for funding of the literacy activities and texts were available. Once the pandemic hit, funding opportunities were no longer available, and we had to redouble our efforts to find funding sources to keep our events from being canceled. We were also forced to think outside the box when

**Figure 3**  
**READ-ALoud LETTER WITH**  
**SCAVENGER HUNT EXAMPLE**



**Figure 4**  
**INTERACTIVE READ-ALoud**  
**INSTRUCTION VIDEO QR CODE**



it came to accessing our elementary school partners with their students. Due to the guidelines of six-foot social distancing, as well as masking, most literacy events were moved to outdoor areas or postponed. Adapting the format to many of the options listed within this article kept the focus of literacy learning a constant during uncertain times. We learned the valuable lesson that when we collaborate for the good of students, it is always worth the work. We can adjust, adapt, and figure out new ways to help children. We do this as teachers every day, and it is worth it every time.

**Figure 5**  
**ZOOM BOOK BUDDIES SOCIAL MEDIA**



## Conclusion

Creating a literacy-rich home environment that improves educational outcomes can occur in a variety of ways during a pandemic. Parents were given a survey after each event. Every event survey indicated the children were very excited about their books and opportunities to read and play with their parents. Parents said the events encouraged them to connect with their children through books. The pandemic has been a stressful time for families. One family said this event was fun and not “stressful like remote learning.”

Knowing that there could be limited access to books, in some instances books may be donated; in others, they may be swapped. Books can be read together via digital platform or in the lap of a caregiver. We have learned in the past year that we may not always be able to read aloud to our students in person, but that does not need to hamper their growth; we can deepen learning in other ways.

The benefits of participating in family literacy programs and events are numerous, including improving comprehension (Jordan et al., 2000), increasing vocabulary (Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005), and improving foundational reading and writing skills (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002). The goal of literacy is to share the love of reading and books with a loved one, no matter where you are. In the end, generations will benefit from the experience. We hope you will use one or some of these ideas, grab some books, and get to reading! •

**Figure 6**  
**BOOK FAIRY EXAMPLE**



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