

In recent decades, findings from a growing body of scholarly research have led to an awareness of the important role that fathers occupy in their children's lives (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Parke, 1996). Children who grow up with warm, nurturing, and actively involved fathers (as opposed to uninvolved fathers) reap tremendous benefits, including better school performance, increased self-esteem, healthier relationships with peers, healthier sex-role development, and access to greater financial resources (Lamb, 1997; Pruett, 2000).

An important area in which fathers can have a powerful impact on their children's lives is in their academic success. In a recent study conducted by the United States Department of Education, researchers discovered from surveys of over 20,000 parents that when fathers took an active role in their children's education (e.g., attended school meetings, volunteered at school, helped children with homework), children were more likely to receive A's, participate in extracurricular activities, and enjoy school, and less likely to repeat a grade (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

According to research, children's potential for academic success begins long before they enter into formal schooling arrangements (Wells, 1985). An activity that parents can engage in with their young children that is consistently linked with better school performance is reading. Parents who read to their children on a regular basis tend to raise children who are superior readers and who perform better in school.

Why is reading so beneficial to children? Educators contend that reading and story telling:

- Stimulate the imagination,
- Enhance children's vocabularies,
- Introduce them to components of stories (e.g., characters, plot, action, and sequence), and
- Provide them with information about the world surrounding them.

Reading also tends to be an activity that is very child-centered and allows for warm and positive interaction between parents and children (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

FRED Overview

FRED is a 4-week program developed by Texas Cooperative Extension to encourage fathers to read to their children on a daily basis. The program is structured so that fathers read to their children a minimum of 15 minutes a day for the first 2 weeks and minimum of 30 minutes a day for the last 2 weeks. Fathers are presented with a participant packet that contains an introduction to the program, reading log, tips for reading aloud to their children, and recommended book lists.

During the program, fathers daily record the number of books and the amount of time they spend reading to their children on the reading log that is provided. At the end of the 4-week period, fathers total up the number of books and the amount of time spent reading

to their children over the course of the program. Upon completing the program, fathers and their children are invited to attend a party to celebrate their participation in FRED. At that time, they turn in their reading logs and complete an exit survey.

The FRED program is currently being pilot tested in over 45 counties across the state of Texas.

Target Audience(s)

The target audience includes fathers of children in Head Start, Early Head Start, Even Start, elementary schools, child care centers, and churches. The FRED program was initially developed to reach fathers of pre-school age children; however, the program can easily be adapted to fathers with school-age children. Children who are reading independently can still benefit greatly from having a parent read to them.

FRED Implementation Sites

FRED can be conducted at public libraries, school libraries, Head Start centers, Early Head Start centers, Even Start centers, elementary schools, churches, child care centers, and Extension centers. Conducting the program at a public library encourages fathers to sign up for a library card, familiarizes them with the library, and provides fathers and children access to books without having to buy them. In addition, for those who prefer to read in non-English languages, many libraries have a selection of children's books in other languages.

Materials

- *Leader's Guide* (contains introduction to the program, script, overheads, pre-survey/registration and post/exit survey forms, and certificate of completion)
- *Father's Guide* (contains introduction to the program, tips for reading aloud to children, recommended book lists, and reading log)
- Marketing brochure
- Marketing flyers

Evaluation

Outcomes from the FRED program are measured using pre- and post-surveys. Fathers fill out a pre-survey/registration form that asks them to respond to a variety of questions, including:

- Reading efforts with their children,
- Level of involvement in their children's education,
- Quality of the time they spend with their children, and
- Quality of the father-child relationship.

Upon completion of the program, fathers fill out a post-/exit survey that asks them to respond to the same questions on the pre-survey and a few open-ended questions to assess their opinion of the program. Fathers also turn in their reading logs, which provide an indication of the number of books read and the amount of time they spent reading to their children over the course of the four-week program.

Alternatives to Traditional Program

The FRED program can be modified to meet the needs of a variety of target audiences. Some fathers cannot physically be with their children to read to them on a daily basis (e.g., fathers in the military, non-custodial fathers, and incarcerated fathers). In such cases, fathers have other options available. Fathers can read books to their children over the phone, or they can record themselves reading books on audio or videocassette and mail them to their children.

In instances where a child does not have contact with a father, other positive male role models (e.g., uncle, grandfather, neighbor, family friend, mentor) can participate with the child.

For more information about the FRED program, contact the author at the e-mail address above, or call (979) 458-4224.

References

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