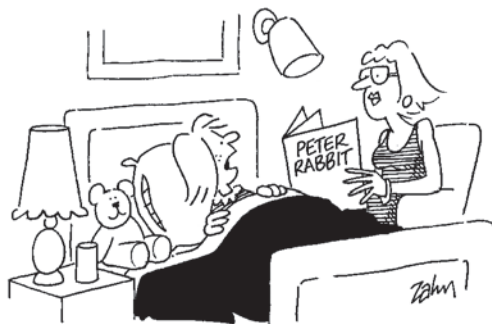




2

Read Your Children a Story

Parental involvement in a child's education should start at birth – and never stop. This chapter shows how telling stories or reading books to children when they are very young is strongly related to how well they read and how much they enjoy reading, later on.



"I'm getting bored, Mom – let's cut to the chase."



Parental involvement in a child's education begins at birth. Singing lullabies or cooing tender words introduces the world of language to an infant.¹ And that is – or should be – just the beginning.

PISA wanted to find out whether 15-year-old students whose parents were actively involved in their education when they were just entering primary school perform better at school than peers whose parents were not as involved. PISA asked parents whether they read books to their child at that age, told stories, sang songs, played with alphabet toys, talked about things the parent had done, talked about things the parent had read, played word games, wrote letters or words, or read aloud signs and labels.

Results from PISA show that some types of parental involvement when children are entering primary school are strongly associated with reading performance and even more with instilling a sense of enjoyment of reading in children. These types of involvement emphasise the value of reading and using words in contexts – such as reading books or talking about what the parent had done – rather than treating words and letters as isolated units – such as playing with alphabet toys.

While most of the activities listed above are to some degree related to better reading performance when the child is 15, by far the strongest relationship is between reading to a child during his/her early years and better reading performance when the child is 15. PISA found that, in all countries and economies except Lithuania, students whose parents read books to them as they entered primary school are more likely to have higher reading scores at age 15. The relationship is particularly strong in New Zealand and Germany, where students whose parents read to them in their early school years show higher scores on the PISA reading test – by 63 and 51 points, respectively – than students whose parents had not read to them. To put that in perspective, in PISA, 39 score points is the equivalent of one school year. That means that 15-year-olds whose parents had read to them when they were just starting school read at least as well as their peers one grade above them.

Often, the relationship found between certain parent-child activities and student performance simply reflects the family's socio-economic background and the resources available to the family. But PISA results show that even among families with similar socio-economic backgrounds, reading books to young children is still strongly related to better performance when those children reach the age of 15. This association is particularly strong in New Zealand, where there was a 44-point difference in reading scores between those students whose parents read to them regularly when they were younger and those whose parents didn't, Germany, where the difference was 29 points, and Qatar (27 points).

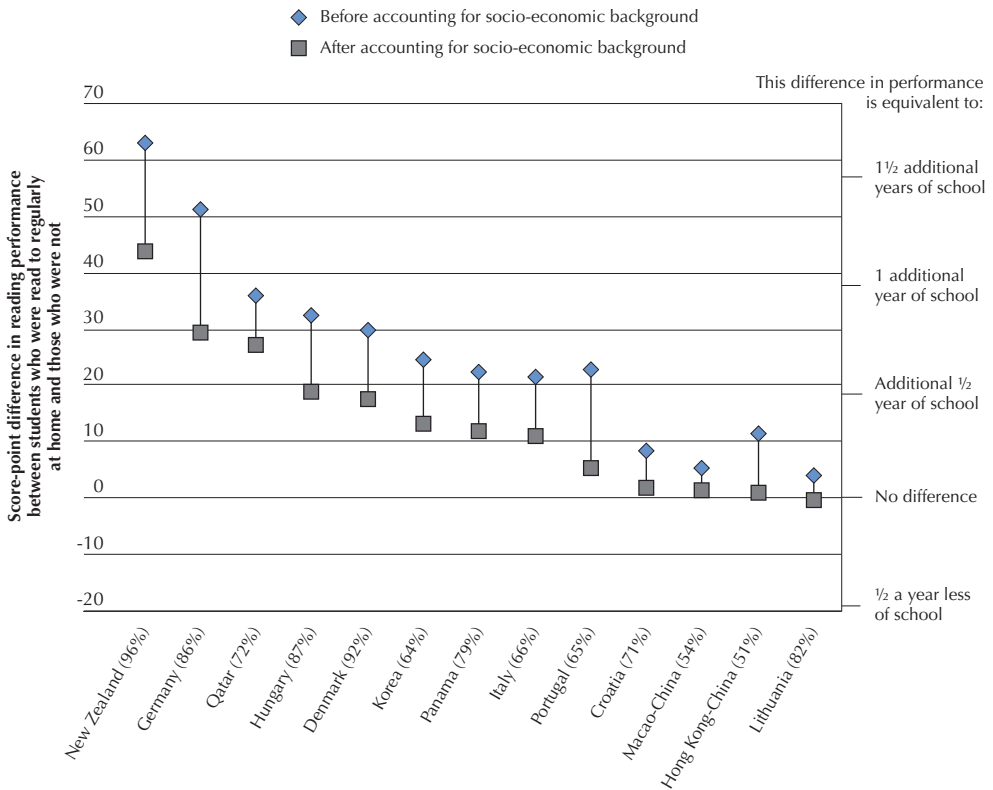
PISA also found that parent-child activities that involve putting words into broader contexts, such as telling stories or singing songs, as compared with activities that isolate letters or words, such as playing with alphabet toys, help to instil an enjoyment of reading in children. In all the 13 countries and economies that administered the parental questionnaire, 15-year-old students whose parents read books and sang songs to them in early primary school reported significantly higher levels of reading enjoyment than students whose parents did not engage with them in these ways. This relationship is particularly strong among students in Denmark, Germany, Hungary and New Zealand.

Regardless of a family's income, children whose parents read to them when they were just starting school develop a greater sense of enjoyment of reading than those whose parents did not read to them or read to them infrequently. The relationship is particularly strong among students in Germany, Hungary, Korea and Portugal.



Across the countries and economies examined, the level of parental engagement varies widely, depending on the specific form of engagement. For example, while around 75% of parents, on average, reported reading books to their children, this percentage is especially high in New Zealand and Denmark, where over 90% of parents reported that they read to their children, and relatively low in Hong Kong-China and Macao-China, where 51% and 54% of parents, respectively, reported so. And not all parents are equally involved: in most countries and economies, fathers are less likely than mothers to engage with their primary school-aged children in most of the activities examined. This reflects the finding in other studies that fathers generally participate less in caring activities and assume fewer household responsibilities than mothers.²

Figure 2.1
Children who were read to when very young are better readers at age 15



Note: The percentage of parents who reported that their child was read to at home during the child's first year in primary school is shown in parentheses after the country/economy name.

Countries/Economies are ranked in descending order of the difference in reading performance after accounting for socio-economic background.

Source: Table A2.1.

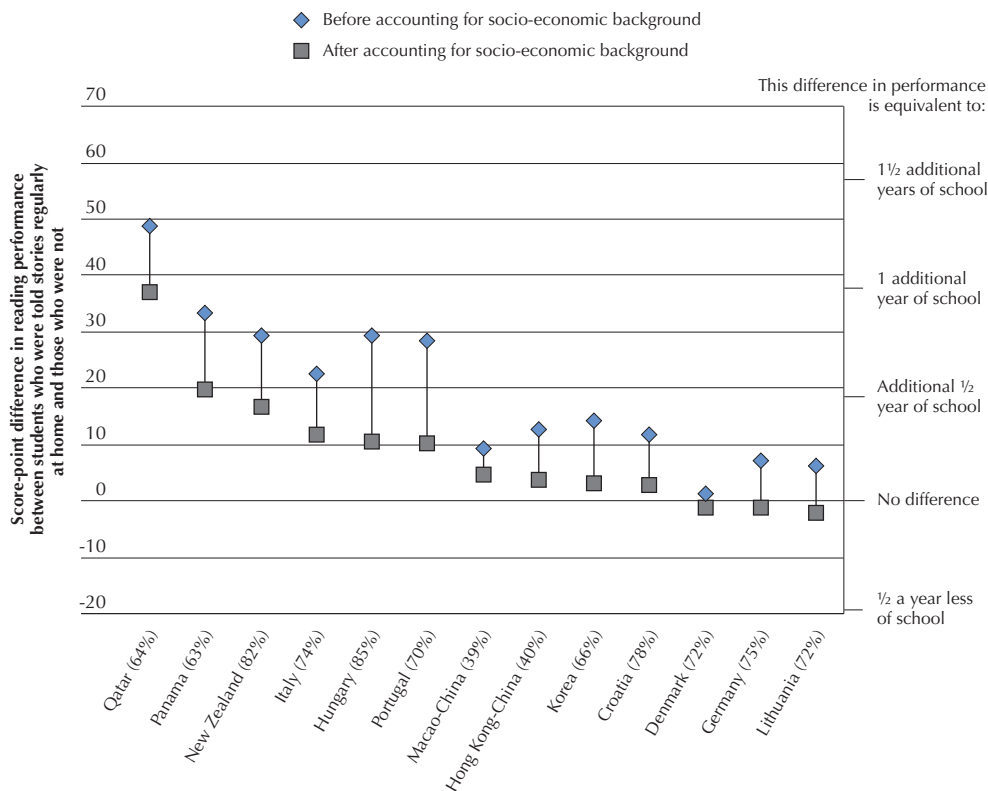
StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932606378>



PISA also found that more socio-economically advantaged parents are more likely than socio-economically disadvantaged parents to have read to their children regularly, sung songs, talked about what they had done during the day, and read signs aloud to their children. This difference is found consistently across the countries and economies examined. On average, socio-economically advantaged parents are 14 percentage points more likely to have engaged in the kinds of activities that are associated with positive outcomes for their children, such as reading books to their very young children. An analysis of PISA results suggests that this involvement may be one of the reasons why students in these families tend to perform better in school later on than their disadvantaged peers.

■ Figure 2.2 ■

Fifteen-year-olds whose parents frequently told them stories when they were young are better readers



Note: The percentage of parents who reported that their child was told stories at home during the child's first year in primary school is shown in parentheses after the country/economy name.

Countries/Economies are ranked in descending order of the difference in reading performance after accounting for socio-economic background.

Source: Table A2.2.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932606397>



Box 2.1 **Poland: All of Poland Reads to Kids**

The broad objective of the All of Poland Reads to Kids Foundation is to create a culture that values reading, particularly reading to young children. In 2002, more than 150 villages, towns and cities participated in the Foundation's first **National Week of Reading to Children**; by 2010, 2 500 municipalities were participating in the event, during which well-known figures in the arts, politics and local municipalities visit kindergartens, schools and libraries throughout the country and read to children. To reach an even broader public, the Foundation produced **music videos, television advertisements and short films showing celebrities reading to their own children or to their fictional children from television shows and soap operas**. As a measure of its success, the programme has been replicated in the Czech Republic ("Every Czech Reads to Kids") and has been adapted into the "All of Europe Reads to Kids" programme.

The Foundation also supports libraries and, through its lobbying work, has also helped to win additional public funds for the nation's libraries. It established a writing competition to encourage authors to produce high-quality children's books, and launched reading programmes in kindergartens and schools to help parents become more adept at creating environments that are conducive to reading. In addition to conferences and workshops for parents, teachers and others, the Foundation and the Academy of Social Psychology in Warsaw launched a post-graduate course for teachers on "Reading as a Method of Development in Education". The Foundation also runs programmes targeted to specific groups or regions, such as one held in a prison that accommodates women and their young children, one that provides free reading materials to schools, libraries and other cultural institutions in disadvantaged rural areas, and one that unites children from orphanages and seniors from third-age universities through reading.

www.allofpolandreadstokids.org/

Box 2.2 **United Kingdom: Bookstart**

Bookstart is a national programme that encourages all parents and care-givers to enjoy books with children from as early an age as possible. It provides **free reading material** to families to encourage them to enjoy books together. The Bookstart Baby Bag, which contains two books, is given to babies at their 8-12-month development check by health visitors. The Bookstart Treasure Chest is distributed to three-year-olds through children's centres, nurseries, preschools and other settings for young children. Each year, around 3.3 million children – around 95% of all children in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – receive the packs. To be as inclusive as possible, Bookstart provides dual-language books and guidance materials. There are also packs available for deaf children (Bookshine) and blind and partially sighted children (Booktouch). The Bookstart Treasure Chest contains a GBP 1 book token, accepted in most bookshops in the United Kingdom, that children can use to buy books.

(continues...)



Box 2.2 **United Kingdom: Bookstart** (continued)

Bookstart packs contain **guidance material** for parents that explains how children benefit from reading, or being read to, at different stages in their lives, and how to choose age-appropriate books for their children. The two Bookstart packs contain invitations to join local libraries and many libraries offer Bookstart-related programmes, providing a way for involved parents to meet each other and share their experiences. In fact, while Bookstart encourages parents to read with their children, it also aims to create a **community of readers** that spans the generations.

Bookstart, which began in 1999 with initial funding from the private company Sainsbury's, is now funded by Booktrust, an independent charity. Around 25% of overall funding comes from the devolved administrations in Wales, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and the Department for Education in England. A range of children's book publishers and booksellers supports the programme and, with its charity status, Bookstart can accept donations from the general public. Indirect support also comes from those who distribute the packs, including libraries, health professionals and early childhood professionals.

www.bookstart.co.uk

Box 2.3 **Sweden: Las For Mej, Pappa**³

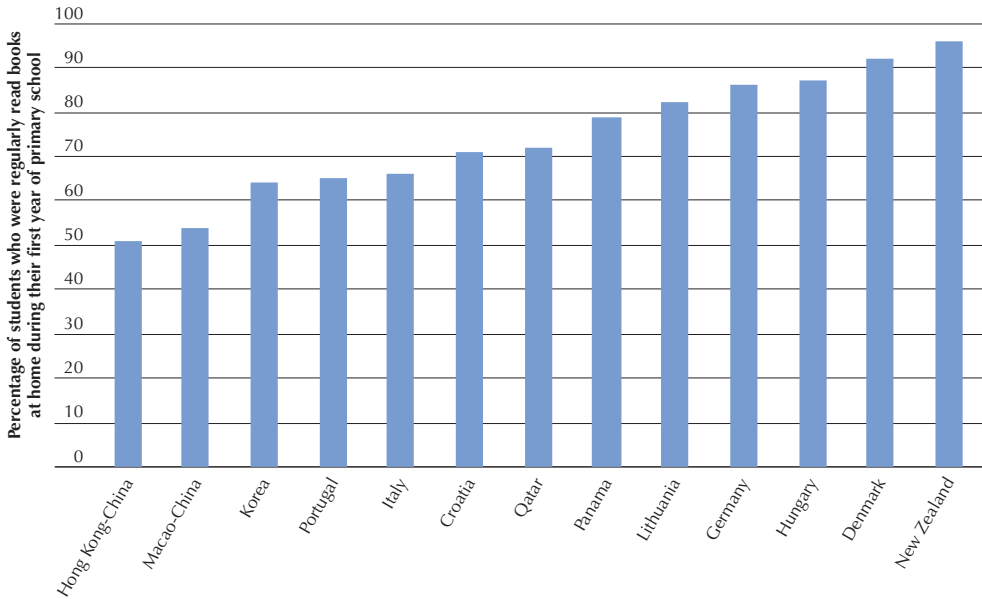
Las For Mej, Pappa ("Read to Me, Daddy") is a literacy-based project in Sweden targeting working fathers, most of them immigrants, who are part of local trade unions. It reflects the belief, prevalent in Sweden, that **literacy is everyone's responsibility**, not just that of the education system. Begun by national unions in 1999, the project was a response to the observation that men at the local unions were not reading sufficiently and thus were not helping their children to read. The unions perceived the lack of reading as a threat to democracy.

Local union branches are responsible for **disseminating information** about the programme among their members and for stocking books of interest to both union members and their children. Each local union organises "daddy days", when a working-class author, who presents his book, and a child-development expert discuss the importance of writing and reading, and explain to fathers how they can help to improve their child's reading habits.

All local unions in Sweden now run the programme, and as of June 2008, around 1 500 fathers had participated.



■ Figure 2.3 ■
Read to your child; not all parents do



Countries/Economies are ranked in ascending order of the percentage of parents who reported that their child was regularly read to at home during the child's first year in primary school.

Source: Table A2.1.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932606416>

PISA also reveals that socio-economic differences in reading performance may be related to parental involvement not only because socio-economically advantaged parents tend to be more involved, but also because children in these kinds of families may benefit *more* from *equal* forms and *equal* amounts of involvement.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

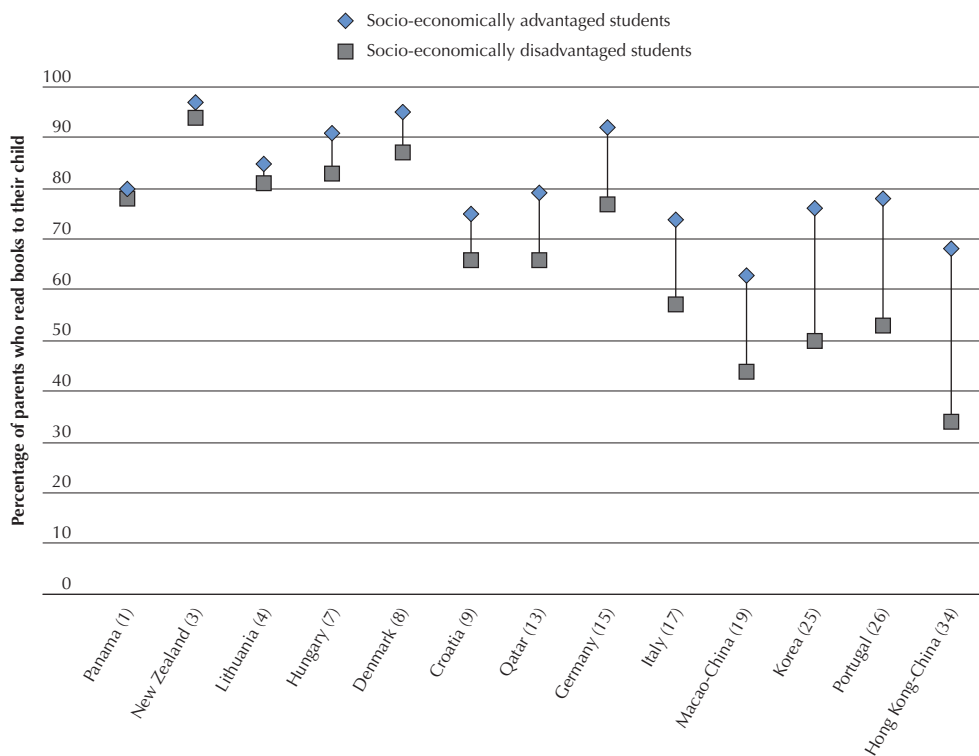
As a parent, you were probably just as excited as your child on the very first day of school. You may have spent weeks thinking about what school bag to buy, what kinds of pens and pencils to get, how you were going to protect the first reading book from inevitable wear and tear and juice spills. But according to results from PISA, most parents do not spend enough time thinking about an even more important school accessory: developing a habit of reading. During their first year in school, around a quarter of children, on average, do not have someone in the household who reads to them regularly; and, as they struggle to make their way through reading their first words and sentences, only around 40% of young children will look up from their first book and see their parents enjoying a book of their own. Since parents are a child's most important role models, it is crucial that parents show their children the value of reading by reading with their children when they are young and demonstrating positive attitudes towards reading.



Many parents lament the fact that stocking up on books for young children to provide new and engaging reading material regularly is an expensive proposition. But reading regularly does not have to be costly: parents can use libraries with their children, and even make going to the library over the weekend a special family activity. Many libraries organise special events for young children and their families. Parents can support local libraries, and school libraries too, by donating books.

PISA results suggest that children who had open conversations with their parents from an early age, conversations that required them to reflect on their experiences, learn to process and communicate information better by the time they are 15. It is neither difficult nor time-consuming to help children

■ Figure 2.4 ■
Some young children, especially disadvantaged children, have little or no access to an adult who reads to them



Note: The difference between the percentage of socio-economically advantaged parents who reported that their child was read to at home during the child's first year in primary school and the percentage of disadvantaged parents who did not appears in parentheses after the country/economy name.

Countries/Economies are ranked in ascending order of the difference between the percentage of socio-economically advantaged parents who reported that their child was read to at home during the child's first year in primary school and the percentage of disadvantaged parents who did.

Source: Table A2.1.

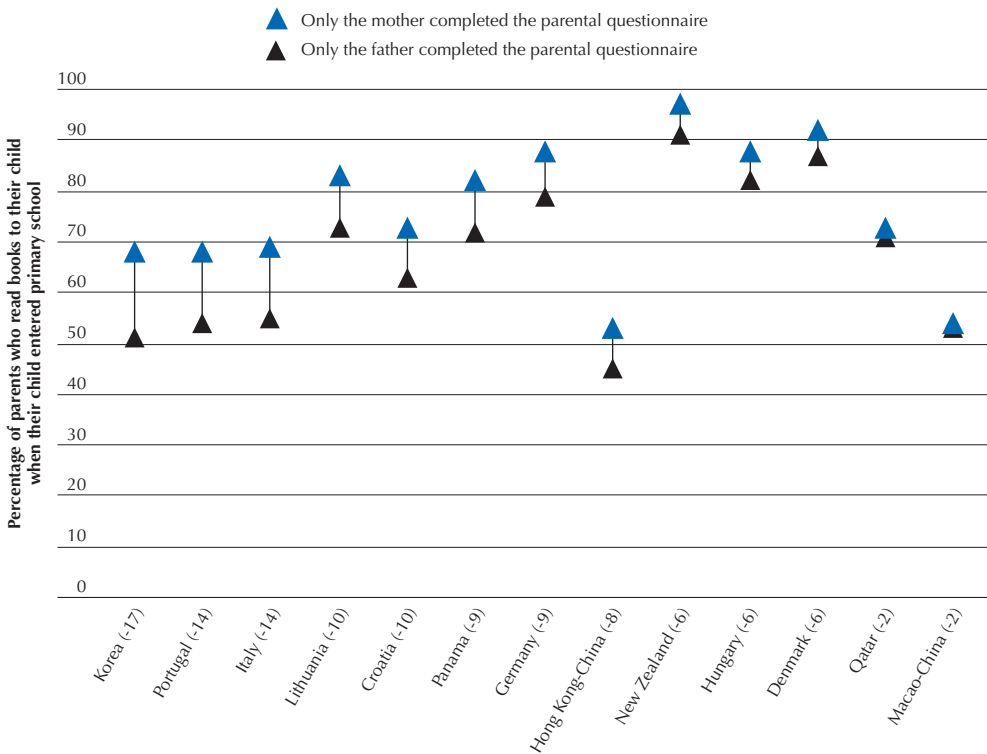
StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932606435>



begin to develop these cognitive skills early in their lives: all it requires is for parents to discuss with their children some of the things they did during the day, and to ask their child what he or she did. Keeping the conversation open encourages children to reflect on what they want to say, put their thoughts in a logical order, and find the words to communicate their thoughts. One place this kind of engagement can occur easily and naturally is at the table, over daily meals. Pretty soon, these kinds of conversations will become a habit, something that everyone in the family looks forward to, no matter how old they are. It becomes a welcome, even necessary, opportunity to express oneself, to connect deeply with other family members, to feel close, cared for and respected.

■ Figure 2.5 ■

Reading to a child is neither a mother's nor a father's job; it should be a joy for both



Note: The difference between the percentage of fathers who reported that their child was read to at home during the child's first year in primary school, and the percentage of mothers who did is shown in parentheses after the country/economy name.

Countries/Economies are ranked in descending order of the difference between the percentage of fathers who reported that their child was read to at home during the child's first year in primary school, and the percentage of mothers who did.

Source: Table A2.1.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932606454>



WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

Teachers can encourage parents to play a more active role in their child's education by emphasising that schools are only *one* of the many places where children learn. They can disseminate research findings, best practices and what is known about which forms of parental involvement are particularly beneficial to children. In order to do so, teachers need to form strong and trusting relationships with all parents, especially those who may be less willing to develop partnerships with schools.

Because of the many constraints they face, some parents may find it impossible to provide extensive, active support to their children. For example, in many households parents have to work long and, increasingly, irregular hours to support their families financially. PISA shows that socio-economic status is strongly related to student proficiency.⁴ So many parents feel they must choose between providing financial security for their children and spending time with them. While results from PISA show that, in fact, the amount of time spent reading or talking with children is less important than simply engaging in these activities as much as is feasible, teachers can help to support families by ensuring that all children have some kind of individualised attention. This can come either directly from the school or through partnerships with local community groups and non-profit organisations. For example, school buildings and facilities can be opened to local communities and, under the supervision of teachers and school principals, volunteers can be enlisted to work with individual children. Or teachers and school principals can provide information on existing programmes in their community, and work with local groups to ensure that these programmes are available after school hours and during school holidays, and that they complement the material that is covered in school.

Box 2.4 **Romania: Parenting programme in early childhood education**

The National Parenting Education Programme in Pre-School Education was launched in 2001 by a partnership composed of UNICEF, the Romania's Ministry of Education and Research, and MATRA, a financing programme of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Netherlands in response to research that showed that many Romanian parents were not well-equipped to participate in their child's education. Initially, the programme provided **training on parental education** to specialists in the country; later, it expanded to include training to teachers. By 2005, the programme was incorporated into Romania's National Strategy on Early Education.

The programme, still supported by UNICEF, trains trainers in the 41 Romanian counties. The trainers then train pre-school and school teachers who, in turn, train parents. Teachers are provided with manuals, video tapes and additional materials for their work with parents. The lessons focus on understanding early childhood and on knowing how to praise and support children, and how to avoid using physical punishment. Generally, two instructors teach 10 parents over five weeks, with a two-hour lesson each week. Parents are evaluated at the end of the course, and a follow-up session is offered six months later. In 2011, more than 90 000 parents were trained in some 5 000 kindergartens and more than 600 schools.

www.unicef.org/romania/education_11760.html



Box 2.5 **United States: 826 Valencia**

826 Valencia is a non-profit organisation based in San Francisco, United States. Founded in 2002 by Ninive Calegari, an educator, and Dave Eggers, a writer, the organisation aims to help students from age 6 to 18 to develop their writing skills, and to help teachers to inspire their students to write. The organisation relies on trained tutor volunteers – around 1 700 in 2011 – and serves over 6 000 students a year. The success of the 826 Valencia project led to the opening of seven more organisations across the country based on the same principles.

826 Valencia offers a wide array of programmes, all free of charge, for students and schools. Projects include after-school individualised tutoring, in-school projects that support teachers during regular class time, one-off special workshops, and organising writing-based school field trips to the organisation’s “writing lab”.

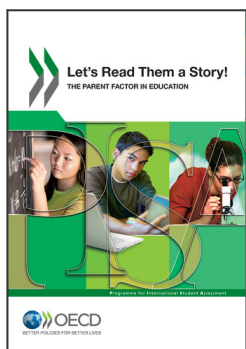
<http://826valencia.org/>

Teachers can develop a host of programmes to nurture the desire to read. Programmes such as “Drop Everything and Read”⁵ show children that reading, especially reading for pleasure, is a valuable activity. Teachers can encourage both students and parents to use libraries, support book clubs among students and among parents, maybe even linking the two groups from time to time, and establish periods dedicated to reading during the school day. The ultimate goals are that parents begin to regard reading to their young children as essential as feeding and clothing them, and that children grow up with the deeply ingrained sense that reading is both a valuable pursuit and a pleasure.



Notes

1. Hart and Risley (1995) find important differences in cognitive development between infants whose parents talked to them frequently and parents who talked to them less frequently. See Hart, Betty and Todd R. Risley (1995), *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, P.H. Brookes, Baltimore.
2. For more information on parents' level of engagement in household responsibilities, see Indicator LMF2.5 in the *OECD Family Database* available at www.oecd.org/dataoecd/1/50/43199641.pdf. OECD (2011), *Doing Better for Families*, OECD Publishing.
3. Wright, A., M. Bouchart, K. Bosdotter and R. Granberg (2010), "Las for Mej Pappa: A Swedish model for addressing family literacy", *Childhood Education*, pp. 399-403.
4. OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background (Volume II)*, PISA, OECD Publishing.
5. Examples of Drop Everything and Read Initiatives can be found at the following links:
<http://dropeverythingandread.com/>
www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/daily-dear-program-drop-55.html



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