

Partnering with Faith-Based Organizations to Promote Positive Parenting: Example and Lessons Learned

Abstract

We evaluated an early literacy initiative implemented in partnership with faith-based organizations. Heads of the initiative train church leaders to host monthly literacy events during which those leaders educate parents about child development and model dialogic reading behaviors while caregivers and their children follow along. A survey and focus group sessions with caregivers and church leaders indicated high satisfaction with the initiative, a reported increase in literacy-promoting practices among caregivers, and perceived gains in children's literacy skills attributed to participation in the literacy events. Extension educators can use or adapt elements of the initiative to promote positive parenting practices and early literacy.

Keywords: [outreach strategies](#), [early literacy](#), [parenting programs](#), [community-based interventions](#), [faith-based partnerships](#)

Martha Isabel Zapata

Research Scientist
Oklahoma State
University
Tulsa, Oklahoma
martha.zapata@okstate.edu

Amanda Sheffield Morris

Regents Professor and
Extension Specialist
Oklahoma State
University
Tulsa, Oklahoma
amanda.morris@okstate.edu

Amy Emerson

Pediatrician,
Community
Engagement
Educare Beyond the
Walls
Tulsa, Oklahoma
amye@tulsaeducare.org

Jens E. Jespersen

Research Associate
Oklahoma State
University
Tulsa, Oklahoma
jens.jespersen@okstate.edu

Kelly Stiller-Titchener

Bilingual Research
Associate
Oklahoma State
University
Tulsa, Oklahoma
kelly.stiller@okstate.edu

Introduction

Cooperative Extension has worked with faith-based organizations to address a host of topics, including community development and renewal, health promotion, and food insecurity (Greder, Garasky, & Klein, 2007; Hardison-Moody et al., 2011; Jones, Lynch, & Schnepf, 2007; Prins & Ewert, 2002). Additionally, Extension has established relationships with churches to educate hard-to-reach and unique populations such as African Americans, cowboy church members, and newlyweds (James, 1994; Williams, Strong, & Lockett, 2013; Woodson & Braxton-Calhoun, 2006). Extension also has a long tradition of providing programming

aimed at enhancing positive parenting, early literacy, and school readiness through partnerships with school districts, library systems, public television, and other community-based organizations (Brandon, Tsamaase, Humphrey, & Crenshaw, 2018; Kock, 2003; Weigel, Behal, & Martin, 2001). Despite these circumstances, however, Extension partnerships with faith-based organizations focused on delivering parenting and early literacy programs are less common, suggesting an area of opportunity for Extension.

Parental awareness of the importance of talking, reading, and singing with young children and the enactment of daily literacy practices lack for some population groups. On the basis of a national survey, Simons (2015) reported that only 47% of caregivers in the lowest income households had received the advice to read to their children from birth, compared to 74% of caregivers in the highest income households. Simons (2015) also found that only 54% of caregivers with children up to age five read aloud to their children 5–7 days a week.

Those offering parent education programs often face challenges in recruiting and engaging families (Axford, Lehtonen, Kaoukji, Tobin, & Berry, 2012). To address such challenges, it is important to understand caregiver needs. Studies have shown that caregivers participating in parenting programs prioritize working with people they trust, learning new skills, and having a setting and a time that fit their schedules (Mytton, Ingram, Manns, & Thomas, 2013).

We present a model implemented by Tulsa Educare, a provider of high-quality early childcare programs, and evaluated by our research team, led by an Oklahoma State University Extension specialist. The program promotes parent–child interaction, early literacy, and school readiness through literacy events hosted by churches located primarily in low-income, ethnically diverse neighborhoods.

In the program, called the Faith-Based Literacy Initiative, faith-based leaders are trained in early literacy practices and receive ongoing logistic support and materials so that churches can host monthly family reading events open to anyone in the community. Tulsa Educare offers the churches ownership of the events and the flexibility to adapt them while retaining the program fundamentals. The initiative is part of the national-level Talking is Teaching campaign (<http://talkingisteaching.org>), and Educare Beyond the Walls, a component of Tulsa Educare, has adapted free campaign materials and created new ones for the project (<http://talkingisteachingtulsa.com>).

Extension educators can apply or adapt the concept and elements of the initiative in their parenting and early literacy programming to reach underserved families by overcoming recruitment and engagement challenges and leveraging resources.

Description of the Faith-Based Literacy Initiative

Target Population

The intended population of the initiative is low-income families with young children who might enter kindergarten with a gap in language skills, as compared to their peers in households with average income levels.

Recruitment and Training of Faith-Based Partners

The Educare team identifies potential faith-based partners and then provides a 90-min training session to leaders those entities have selected to implement the initiative. Through lectures, videos, props, and demonstrations, the leaders (i.e., trainees) learn how to organize the literacy events and deliver the program. Trainees also are encouraged to visit church sites already hosting literacy events to observe the program in action.

From the outset, the Educare team promotes partners' ownership of the program by delegating to churches the planning, participant recruitment, hosting, and delivery of the literacy events.

Structure of the Family Literacy Events

The literacy events consist of monthly 60- to 90-min gatherings of families with children up to age 5, held at the faith-based facilities. The faith-based partner promotes the literacy events by using a variety of media, including the church's bulletin, Facebook groups, yard signs on church grounds, and word of mouth. The literacy events are open to any family, regardless of faith-based membership or denomination. Leaders agree to refrain from discussing matters of religion during the literacy events and from inviting event attendees to join their congregations.

Primary Components

Each literacy event features three main elements: a family meal, a short discussion of a child development topic, and a reading session in which a facilitator models reading a picture book to children, with caregivers and their children following along. Faith-based partners choose the order in which they incorporate these elements into their events.

Customization

The Educare team encourages faith-based partners to choose a time, a location, and a structure for the monthly events that fit the needs of the families attending and to maintain a regular schedule. Some partners have added dancing, singing, and craft time to their events, all within the 60- to 90-min time frame. Other churches have prepared the food for the events themselves to accommodate their communities' preferences, rather than using the meal provided by Educare.

Technical Assistance

Faith-based partners receive technical assistance from Educare via telephone, email, and periodic in-person visits to the literacy events. The Educare team encourages church partners to regularly access the Talking is Teaching Tulsa website for training videos and resources.

The Educare team prepares curricula for the program. Each month, the team provides the church partner with a curriculum matched with a children's book and a card featuring dialogic reading prompts for caregivers (see Appendixes A and B). Dialogic reading is a technique in which an adult sharing a book with a child or a group of children uses prompts to hold a conversation (i.e., a dialogue) about the book (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994; Flynn, 2011). The technique is modeled at the literacy events while parents and their children follow along.

For each event, the Educare team provides partners with English and Spanish children's books, the monthly child development curriculum and card, and meals for the attendees. The financial support of the George Kaiser Family Foundation ensures that meals are free and that each family with a young child is gifted a children's book to take home after the event.

Program Evaluation Study

Two years into the faith-based literacy initiative, Educare invited our research team to evaluate its impact and outcomes. We designed a mixed-method study, approved by the university's institutional review board, which included a self-administered caregiver survey and focus group research involving both caregivers and church leaders.

Retrospective Survey for Caregivers

Members of our research team visited 12 church sites hosting monthly literacy events after the Educare team had arranged for our visits. Our team members invited caregivers (one per family) to answer a 10-min self-administered survey. The survey questions, which were from those we had developed for a previous Talking is Teaching evaluation, addressed caregivers' demographic information; attitudes toward talking, reading, and singing with children; dialogic reading behaviors with children (see Appendix C); and impressions of the family literacy events.

We used paired-samples *t*-tests to compare participants' recalled attitudes related to talking, reading, and singing with children and dialogic reading behaviors before and after attending the faith-based literacy events.

Focus Group Research with Caregivers and Church Leaders

The Educare team coordinated with churches to recruit church leaders implementing the literacy events and families attending the events to participate in focus groups. Two focus groups were composed of caregivers attending the events (13 participants), and two were composed of leaders hosting the events (11 participants). Our first author, a doctoral level researcher with 10 years of experience conducting mixed-methods studies, led the focus group sessions and data analysis.

The guide for the caregiver focus group sessions addressed satisfaction with the literacy events and perceived outcomes and impact of the events. The guide for the church leader focus group sessions addressed reasons to participate in the program, satisfaction with training and support, challenges of implementing the literacy events, success of the initiative, reasons families attended the events, outcomes and impact of the events, and sustainability of the initiative.

We audiotaped and transcribed the focus group sessions and analyzed the transcripts using NVivo. Using principles of grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), three members of our research team independently coded the transcripts, identified themes, and resolved discrepancies by consensus. Intercoder reliability was 92%.

Evaluation Findings

Findings from Caregivers

Of the 180 family groups present at the 12 events we visited, 173 completed the retrospective survey (one respondent per family group). Of those respondents, 88% were female, and 38% were Black, 36% were White, 7.5% were Native American, 3.8% were Hispanic, and 19% were other races.

In the self-administered surveys and the focus group sessions, caregivers reported that after participating in the family literacy events, they held more positive attitudes toward talking, reading, and singing with their children and more frequently engaged in dialogic reading behaviors. Survey results are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Caregivers conveyed that they felt better equipped and had greater confidence in being their children's first teachers. Caregivers who had been attending events for several months also perceived that implementing what they and their children had learned at the events was making a positive contribution to their children's school readiness.

Table 1.

Paired-Samples *t*-Tests Comparing Caregivers' Recalled Attitudes Toward Importance of Talking, Reading, and Singing Before and After Attending Literacy Events

Activity	Pretest		Posttest		No.	<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Talk to children	4.70	0.68	4.94	0.27	155	4.53***
Read to children	4.74	0.56	4.97	0.18	149	5.10***
Sing to children	4.53	0.81	4.91	0.36	150	6.22***

Note. Scale's minimum score = 1; maximum score = 5. No. = number of survey takers who responded to item.

****p* < .001.

Table 2.

Paired-Samples *t*-Tests Comparing Caregivers' Recalled Dialogic Reading Behaviors Before and After Attending Literacy Events

Behavior	Pretest		Posttest		No.	<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
When sharing a book with my child, I . . .						
1. Allow my child to choose the book.	4.06	1.09	4.40	0.83	156	4.97***
2. Allow my child to turn the pages.	3.90	0.84	4.32	0.76	156	2.78**
3. Point to pictures in the book and name them.	4.38	0.84	4.64	0.64	154	5.46***
4. Ask my child questions about the book.	3.89	1.12	4.37	0.86	150	6.68***
5. Allow my child to fill in the blank to complete the sentence.	3.19	1.40	3.89	1.23	150	8.22***

6. Encourage my child to say something about the story or pictures.	3.74	1.12	4.31	0.90	151	8.14***
7. Ask my child what will happen next in the story.	3.30	1.28	3.93	1.14	151	9.30***
8. Praise my child when he/she figures things out about the story/pictures.	4.35	0.93	4.63	0.78	150	5.57***
9. Make up my own stories as we look at the pictures together.	3.28	1.29	3.80	1.16	152	7.19***
10. Expand upon what my child says about the story or the pictures.	3.50	1.20	4.03	1.04	151	7.66***
11. Ask my child to say the words I pronounce for him/her.	3.80	1.16	4.26	0.97	149	6.62***

Note. Scale's minimum score = 1; maximum score = 5. No. = number of survey takers who responded to item.
 p* < .01. *p* < .001.

Findings from the caregiver focus group sessions are presented in Table 3. Caregivers participating in the focus groups reported that attending the family literacy events had increased the frequency with which they read and sang with their children during the week. Most caregivers said they were prioritizing reading with their children daily, despite busy schedules. Caregivers also mentioned that seeing dialogic reading being modeled, as well as having the opportunity to practice relevant behaviors during the literacy events, had led them to implement dialogic reading strategies at home with their children. Caregivers said that they had observed gains in their children's language skills and socioemotional development, which they attributed primarily to their participation in the literacy events. Two particularly important characteristics of the literacy events mentioned by participants were the eagerness with which host churches welcomed families, regardless of religious affiliation, and the faith neutrality the host leaders exhibited at the events.

Table 3.
 Themes, Findings, and Sample Quotations Identified in Focus Group Sessions with Caregivers

Theme	Finding	Sample quotation(s)
Satisfaction with the literacy events	All caregivers expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the literacy events. They liked the length and components of the events, including the meal, the lesson about child development and the card to take home, the parent-child reading time, and the activities for the children. The elements worked well together and made the events highly engaging for the family.	I like that it's just an hour. You're not sitting there for a long period of time and then waiting for things. You eat so you pass that time. You read. And it's like you're in, you're out because you get those kids where they're just like, "You're losing them! You're losing them!" But they're very good at when to stop and do a song.
Social connections	Caregivers appreciated the opportunities the events provided them and their children to meet	I would say that I feel a connection with the other babies' parents, just

	<p>peers and make friends. Caregivers drew social support and knowledge about parenting from other caregivers at the literacy events, while their children met playmates and made new friends. Some caregivers said that the literacy events helped them stymie social isolation.</p>	<p>because that's obviously how old my daughter is. Being in parent circles is new for me because I've never had to do it before; so I was kind of nervous. But it's been good and kind of fun seeing the babies that were her age as they are getting bigger.</p>
<p>Parental involvement</p>	<p>Caregivers appreciated the opportunity to share quality time with their children during the literacy events. Not having to worry about feeding the family allowed them to focus on enjoying the quality time they spent with their children as well as learning and practicing new parenting and literacy skills with them.</p>	<p>With the literacy events, my family is impacted in the way that it's something we do together. My husband, when he's not traveling, will always come. And we love taking our daughter places where we know that she's experiencing and taking in different parts of the world.</p>
<p>Building literacy resources</p>	<p>Caregivers appreciated the opportunity to build a library at home for their children using the books they received each month. For low-income parents, this was especially valuable. Caregivers also liked the informational cards with parenting and literacy tips they received at the events. Many said the cards helped them remember concepts learned at the events, come up with learning activities for their children, and keep track of the things their children could be learning according to their developmental stage.</p>	<p>Free—it's the nearest thing on my mind [as a benefit of the literacy events]; having access to those books instead of having to go spend four or five dollars on the books—she's got a very large library of all different kinds of books that she can read.</p> <p>[The prompt cards to take home] were really useful to go over some of the things we learned. Whatever I feel like I might not be teaching them, I can look on the card and see if there is something else I can be working on.</p>
<p>Children's literacy skills</p>	<p>Caregivers had enjoyed seeing their children's growing literacy skills, their increasing love of reading, and their attachment to particular books. Many caregivers also said the literacy events introduced them to excellent children's books of which they had not been aware.</p>	<p>I had this personal expectation that [daughter] would have a lot of reading, and a lot of learning, and books; all the good stuff. She is enthralled with books now, and I feel like we have all the books at home, which is part of it. But over the past year it's been really fun to watch her not really interested (she was a little baby) and now she's</p>

<p>Understanding that every moment is a teaching moment</p>	<p>Caregivers attending the literacy events had assimilated the concept that any and every moment is a teaching moment—that they could use everyday activities to teach their children and prepare them for school.</p>	<p>crazy interested. This is a tablet generation, so using those moments, even if it 30 minutes, 20 minutes, 5 minutes, you use that time just to help lead them, to say, "Okay, what do you think about this?," "What are they doing in this movie?" That's the things that [the literacy events have] helped me [with], [to] use those moments.</p>
<p>Prioritizing reading to children</p>	<p>Reading, talking, and singing had become regular activities in caregivers' homes. Caregivers established reading routines, which often were encouraged by their children due to the influence of the literacy events.</p>	<p>I take my time with reading. I make sure I schedule that in every night, even when we're busy. Even when I'm tired, I make sure I schedule reading in with my kids. They're growing up so quick, and they're going to be adults before we know it, and I just want to make sure I have that time, each individual time with both of my kids —and I read a book to both of them.</p>
<p>Learning skills to foster children's literacy</p>	<p>Caregivers said they had acquired skills to foster literacy in their children, particularly dialogic reading. Caregivers were more mindful about reading with their children and doing so in an engaging manner to promote reasoning and language development.</p>	<p>But [I'm] not just reading to my children. I love to read so we've always read, but [I'm] talking more about the books and asking those open-ended questions like, "Why do you think this cow is doing this? Why would he do that?" It's reminding me to do that more; and how important that is to stimulate their minds in different ways other than just the story.</p>
<p>Growing literacy skills among children attending the events</p>	<p>Caregivers perceived a significant increase in their children's love of books, reading and singing, and vocabulary.</p>	<p>I'll say that my son, he wasn't really a big book person, and he's only two; so I didn't really expect him to be really into it, but he carries his books around and say, "My book, my book." And he's so happy that he's got some books he can read. I'm excited that he likes to read now.</p>

We pretty much turn everything into a song [laughter]. I mean she's washing and she's all, "I'm washing my hands, I'm washing my hands." Every moment is a moment to teach. My son won't let me brush his teeth without singing a song [laughter].

Last night we were eating dinner, and he did something with his pizza; made a sandwich out of it. He took a bite and he goes, "This is fascinating [laughter]." I don't even say that word [laughter]. He's five. I think the books really help with the vocabulary.

Primary Findings from Faith-Based Leaders

Findings from the faith-based leader focus group sessions are presented in Table 4. Leaders hosting the events addressed their satisfaction with the program and appreciation for its elements as well as interest in sustaining the initiative.

The leaders reported a high level of satisfaction with the events' structure, initial training, and ongoing support offered by Educare. Leaders appreciated having the flexibility to customize the events while retaining the main three elements (i.e., a communal meal, a short talk about child development, and reading time). Leaders agreed that each of the fixed elements added significant value to the literacy events and contributed to their success. The length of the events fit busy family schedules and children's short attention spans, and the free books helped families build their children's home libraries.

Church leaders also expressed a high level of commitment to sustaining the initiative, even if the funding for the free books and meals from the George Kaiser Family Foundation were to end. Besides the training and technical assistance, the developmentally appropriate monthly curriculum was considered the most crucial element provided by Educare. Partners' commitment to the initiative stemmed from their desire to strengthen the communities surrounding their churches by contributing to better developmental and educational outcomes among children. Offering the literacy events, they said, was a way to support a public educational system faced with increasing funding cuts and teacher shortages.

Table 4.

Themes, Findings, and Sample Quotations Identified in Focus Group Sessions with Church Leaders

Theme	Finding	Sample quotation(s)
Motivation to start the literacy events at their churches	Leaders said that they wanted to be good community partners, provide families in Tulsa with literacy opportunities, remove barriers for families to access valuable parenting information and literacy tools, foster equality and equity in education, and support struggling public schools.	For me, it's been a good reminder that the faith-based community does more than care for the spiritual needs of those in its community. If Little Johnny can't read, that's also something Jesus cares about, and reading is part of wellness in your life too.
Satisfaction with Educare Beyond the Walls' training	Leaders said the program was explained to them thoroughly before they began hosting literacy events. Attending the initial training session, watching the online videos created for the literacy initiative, and attending literacy events hosted by other churches helped leaders grasp the essence of the program, gather ideas for their events, and execute the initiative.	[The training] is very thorough. Abby pretty much walks you through an event and so you get an idea of that. I noticed on their website, Dr. Emerson [the lead pediatrician for the initiative] has a video and [that] also gives you [a sense of] what it looks like. I like both. I want to hear it, but I want to see it too.
Ongoing support from Educare Beyond the Walls	Leaders felt fully supported by the Educare team throughout the implementation of the literacy events. Leaders also appreciated that Educare fully supported their efforts to customize their events as a way to meet the preferences and needs of their churches and the families attending the events.	[The Educare Beyond the Walls team] seem to be willing to do it all, you know? I came and spoke with Abby before and I got some things from her, and she like wants to help me take it to my car [laughter]. They go above and beyond what they really have to do. They try to work with you and do whatever it is you need to get it done. So, I appreciate that.
Challenges implementing and sustaining the literacy events	Putting a team together to start hosting literacy events as well as keeping the team staffed every month were identified as significant challenges experienced by most church leaders. Another challenge was maintaining a consistent number of families attending the monthly events.	The biggest challenge was putting a team together. I had to do everything. I had to wear too many hats. We have about six or seven ladies now that are helping, and they're learning their roles; a couple of them are standing out. And we need that.

<p>Perceived success of the literacy events</p>	<p>Most leaders considered the literacy initiative to be a success at their churches.</p>	<p>I hear that all the time that kids don't want to miss [the events]. They want to know which Wednesday it is. "Is this the Wednesday we're supposed to go get a book and eat pizza?"</p> <p>One night I said, "Well, one of our families is always here [but] they had a baby, a new baby yesterday, so they're not going to be here." Nope. Next of all, here comes the dad [laughter]. He says, "It was reading night and we're not going to miss that. It's very important."</p>
<p>Reasons why families stay engaged with the literacy events</p>	<p>Leaders perceived three main reasons families attended the literacy events. First, adults and children developed social relations with people their age attending the events, which in turn fostered a commitment to future events. Second, the events facilitated parental involvement by providing elements such as a ready-to-eat free meal, curricula, and children's books. Third, the events were convenient and entertaining for children and adults alike.</p>	<p>I think it's probably community because they feel welcomed. [We are] like, "Hey, now you come here," and if your child's loud, that's not a big deal because you can be loud and read a book." I've a friend who has three [children] under three; she doesn't go to our church; she's a part of another church. And she said, "Well, I can't bring them [to my church] because they're too loud." I was like, "No, you can bring them [to our church's literacy event]. It's a night for kids. It doesn't matter."</p>
<p>Perceived outcomes and impact of the literacy initiative</p>	<p>Leaders agreed that the literacy events built a sense of community and fostered fellowship among families. The events offered a nonthreatening environment in which caregivers could practice parenting and literacy skills without being judged. The curricula taught at the events and the cards with prompts provided valuable information on child development, parenting, and dialogic reading. The initiative also allowed families to build free libraries for their children.</p>	<p>In a way, the fellowship doesn't necessarily happen on a Sunday, right? But [the literacy events] can build relationships, and your child doesn't have to have a talent; they don't have to be good at baseball or soccer. . . . [During the literacy events] there's this common bond of, "We're sitting around holding our children, reading [together]." Some of the times, they don't know each other, but I know them from church or the community; I'm thinking, "Some of these people wouldn't come together otherwise." But [I'm] watching them sit there and read, and get excited about books, and laugh [together].</p>
<p>Sustainability of the literacy</p>	<p>Leaders were unanimous in their desire to sustain and expand the literacy initiative.</p>	<p>I think the sustainability to do this type of program beyond what Kaiser has to offer would be basically using the committees and groups</p>

initiative

within the church. The leadership could take on the different roles. You could solicit any of your Scholastic Books and find out if they're willing to donate books or things like that. And you have book drives or something.

Lessons Learned and Implications for Practice

Tulsa's Faith-Based Literacy Initiative can be a helpful model for Extension educators to use to provide programming for underserved populations and overcome challenges in recruiting and engaging families. Training trusted community leaders with the purpose of educating peers and modeling desired behaviors may also empower communities and leverage the human talent and financial resources of Cooperative Extension units.

Faith communities taking ownership of programmatic activities, with ongoing technical assistance from Extension educators, might contribute to the long-term sustainability of parenting and early literacy programs. Extension educators can provide faith-based partners with their research-based curricula and help them identify sources of free or discounted children's books for family literacy events.

Combining a few essential but crucial elements of successful parenting and early literacy programs with partners' ownership of the program and allowing flexibility to customize events according to families' schedules and churches' cultural traditions may foster adherence to Extension programs and ensure their long-term sustainability.

Mixed-methods evaluation studies of any such programs can be helpful in assessing program components and customizing elements that work best for Extension partners and the families they serve.

Acknowledgments and Disclaimers

We thank the George Kaiser Family Foundation for its generous financial support toward the implementation and evaluation of Tulsa's faith-based literacy initiative. We thank Abby Lehman, Tulsa Educare's community outreach manager, for her assistance with recruitment and data collection during the evaluation study. The following members of Dr. Amanda Sheffield Morris's Child and Adolescent Development Lab assisted with data collection and/or analysis: Stephen Ballard, Lizette Merchán, Ada Harwood, Kelly Stiller Titchener, Diane Dudley, Jens Jespersen, and Therese Hubble.

References

- Arnold, D. S., & Whitehurst, G. J. (1994). Accelerating language development through picture book reading: A summary of dialogic reading and its effect. In D. K. Dickinson (Ed.), *Bridges to literacy: Children, families, and schools* (pp. 103–128). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Axford, N., Lehtonen, M., Kaoukji, D., Tobin, K., & Berry, V. (2012). Engaging parents in parenting programs: Lessons from research and practice. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*, 2061–2071. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.06.011
- Brandon, D. P., Tsamaase, M., Humphrey, R., & Crenshaw, K. (2018). Urban Extension's new nontraditional

offering: Parent-child reading enhancement program. *Journal of Extension*, 56(1), Article v56-1rb2.

Available at: <https://joe.org/joe/2018february/rb2.php>

Flynn, K. S. (2011). Developing children's oral language skills through dialogic reading: Guidelines for implementation. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 44, 8–16. doi:10.1177/004005991104400201

Glasser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2017). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Greder, K. A., Garasky, S., & Klein, S. (2007). Research to action: A campus-community partnership to address health issues of the food insecure. *Journal of Extension*, 45(6), Article 6FEA4. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/2007december/a4.php>

Hardison-Moody, A., Dunn, C., Hall, D., Jones, L., Newkirk, J., & Thomas, C. (2011). Multi-level partnerships support a comprehensive faith-based health promotion program. *Journal of Extension*, 49(6), Article v49-6iw5. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/2011december/iw5.php>

James, B. H. (1994). Clergy and Extension networking for newly married couples. *Journal of Extension*, 32(1), Article 1IAW1. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/1994june/iw1.php>

Jones, G., Lynch, P., & Schnepf, M. (2007). Sisters Together—Program increases fruit and vegetable consumption and physical activity of African American women. *Journal of Extension*, 45(4), Article 4IAW1. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/2007august/iw1.php>

Kock, J. A. (2003). Children's literacy: Children's Books for Healthy Families/Libros de Niños Para Familias Saludables. *Journal of Extension*, 41(2), Article 2FEA7. Available at: <https://joe.org/joe/2003april/a7.php>

Mytton, J., Ingram, J., Manns, S., & Thomas, J. (2013). Facilitators and barriers to engagement in parenting programs: A qualitative systematic review. *Health Education and Behavior*, 41(2), 127–137. doi:10.1177/1090198113485755

Prins, E., & Ewert, D. M. (2002). Cooperative Extension and faith-based organizations: Building social capital. *Journal of Extension*, 40(3), Article 3COM2. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/2002june/comm2.php>

Simons, R. (2015). Scholastic 2015 kids and family reading report. Retrieved from <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/reading-resources/language-and-literacy-milestones/scholastic-2015-kids-and-family-reading-report.html>

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 273–285). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Weigel, D., Behal, P., & Martin, S. (2001). The Family Storyteller: A collaborative family literacy program. *Journal of Extension*, 39(4), Article 4IAW2. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/2001august/iw2.php>

Williams, K., Strong, R., & Lockett, L. (2013). Expanding Cooperative Extension's audience: Establishing a relationship with cowboy church members. *Journal of Extension*, 51(6), Article v51-6rb7. Available at: <https://joe.org/joe/2013december/rb7.php>

Woodson, J. M., & Braxton-Calhoun, M. (2006). Techniques for establishing educational programs through the African American faith community. *Journal of Extension*, 44(1), Article 1TOT3. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/2006february/tt3.php>

Appendix A

Sample Lesson for Church Leaders Facilitating Literacy Events

TALKING IS TEACHING | FAITH-BASED OUTREACH

Separation Anxiety/Object Permanence

...and why playing peek-a-boo may be the best brain builder

If you've been attending *family engagement events* (feel free to use the name of your program) here, you know we've enjoyed talking together about the **crucial building blocks** that babies need from the **first day of life!** They are born into the world looking to explore and ready to learn, and **YOU are the best teacher** they could've been given! Even very simple acts of **talking, reading, singing and playing** have been shown to significantly affect a baby's growing brain.

Are there any favorite activities that someone would like to share with us? (may want to prompt with questions.)

This month we want to discuss a very important concept known as Object Permanence. It is a crucial step for every baby's normal developmental process. When you cover a bowl of cheerios with a napkin, what does your child do? When your child drops a toy car off of the table, where does he look? When you leave the room, does your child cry?

Although at first, these questions may not seem entirely related, by the time a baby turns about 5 months old, she will start understanding that even when something disappears, it isn't gone forever. Before your baby understands this concept, things that leave her view are gone, completely gone. Developing object permanence is an important milestone. It is a precursor to symbolic understanding (which a baby needs to develop language, pretend play, and exploration) and helps children work through separation anxiety.

What can you do to help teach your baby object permanence?

(Pause to see if anyone has answers to share)

Playing peek-a-boo is something that comes naturally for many of us, but even if it is something that seems a bit silly at first, playing peek-a-boo with your infant is a great way to start teaching this concept! It's always a hit, because your baby is eager to see his favorite thing...**YOU!** Try holding a dish towel in front of your face and see if your baby will start reaching for it.

Play Hide-and-Seek with Toys

Show your baby his toy and when you are sure you have his attention, slowly hide his toy under a small towel or cloth. To help the baby learn to find his toy, hide it so that part of the toy is peeking out.

Talk to the Baby When You Are Out-of-Sight

Talk to your baby from another room then walking into the baby's view. Babies recognize parents' voices early in development so you can use your voice to help your baby know that you are still there, even when out of sight!

The challenging part about developing object permanence is when your baby gets upset because they know you still exist even though they can't see you. This is what happens when **separation anxiety** hits! Playing these games can help your baby as he moves through this other very natural milestone. Object permanence games help babies understand that even though I can't see my mom, she will come back! They begin to learn things, and people, don't simply disappear when out of sight.

Does anyone have a child who is struggling with separation anxiety...crying when mom or dad walks out of sight? (Pause for comments)

Usually this becomes a struggle around 9 months of age, but often will reappear during the toddler years and even when a child is older.

It's one of the toughest parts of being a parent! No one likes to leave a crying child. Often this seemingly "conquered" fear will come again as children grow older. But don't worry! It is completely normal, and there are things you can do to help. As your toddler grows, it is important to start having conversations with them.

Although they may seem too little to understand, start developing a comforting routine each time you drop off at childcare or Bible class. After giving a big hug, tell your little one that **you WILL be back**, and that you are leaving her with her loving teacher, "Miss Mary" or "Mr. Stephens." **Don't ever try to trick you little one by sneaking out when she is distracted.** This only leads to confusion and makes it more difficult as your child grows older. Your child may cry and that is okay. **Sometimes it's helpful for a toddler to have a "lovey" or a favorite book or toy that they can hold. Leave a picture for you with your child at their childcare.**

In addition, ALWAYS follow through with what you tell your little one.

If you know grandmother will pick them up, go ahead and tell them exactly who will come. You certainly do not want to create distrust with this little person who is learning from you. When you pick your child up remind them that you promised you would return and you did!

Object permanence and separation anxiety are two important developmental milestones that you can help guide.

Appendix B

Sample Card with Tips for Caregivers Given to Families at Literacy Events

Object Permanence and Separation Anxiety

Around 5 months your baby begins to recognize that objects do not disappear just because they are no longer seen. To help your child develop this concept, which is vital for learning, you can:

- > **Play Peek-a-boo**, even before they seem to understand
- > **Hide a favorite toy** under a blanket and help them find it
- > **Speak to them**, even when you are in another room

It is normal for your child to cry when you leave them at safe places; it means that they are understanding that you haven't disappeared...you are going to another place.

It's important to never sneak out on your child. Instead, try to develop a **consistent routine** that signals to your child that you love them and that you will be back to get them. Talk to them about your return to get them and reassure them that they're safe.

Appendix C

Retrospective Survey About Dialogic Reading Behaviors Among Caregivers

Before Attending the Faith-Based

After Attending the Faith-Based

Literacy Events

Literacy Events

Never	Almost	Some of	Most of	Always		Never	Almost	Some	Most of	Always
	Never	the Time	the	Time		Never	of the	the	Time	Time

Allow my child to choose the book.

Allow my child to turn the pages.

Point to pictures in the book and name them.

Ask my child questions about the book.

Allow my child to fill in the blank to complete a sentence, for example: "The cat and the _____"

Encourage my child to say something about the story or the pictures in the book.

Ask my child what will happen next in the story.

Praise my child when he/she figures things out about the story/the pictures in the book.

Make up my own stories as we look at the pictures together.

Expand upon what my child says about the story or the pictures and give more details.

Ask my child to say the words I pronounce for him/her.

Copyright © by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the [Journal Editorial Office, joe-ed@joe.org](mailto:joe-ed@joe.org).

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)

