



## FISHYRHYTHMS PUBLISHING, LLC

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"There is no single effort more radical in its potential for saving the world than a transformation of the way we raise our children."

--- *Marianne Williamson*

### Building Family and Community Relationships

#### Executive Summary

Because young children's lives are so embedded in their families and communities, and because research indicates that successful early childhood education depends upon partnerships with families and communities, early childhood professionals need to thoroughly understand and apply their knowledge in this area. During the Families Unite through Literacy (FUTL) program, interventionists engage children and their parents in a six-week reading adventure. We focus on marginally literate parents and their young children.

The program is designed to reinforce the role of the family as a major social economic unit. We work with families through weekly group sessions and one-on-one home visits by interventionists to help parents and children unite and communicate around the act of reading and exploring literature together to improve skill and achievement for the children. Books are provided by the First Book Campus Advisory Board ([www.firstbook.org](http://www.firstbook.org)) to address ethical and values issues. Between nine and twelve books were given to the children to take home and keep to begin a library of their own at home. Not only does ownership in a book create reading self-efficacy in the children, but the books also gave the parents motivation to join and remain in the program. Our weekly sessions involved reading together and discussing weekly topics such as history, literature, cultural, and ethical issues through character traits like fairness, honor, courage, kindness, resilience, and perseverance.



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**A little history** – The design began with a program originally conceived by the Mississippi Humanities Department called “Family Reading Bonds.” As a facilitator and storyteller with this group, I noticed repeatedly that parents weren’t participating with their children in reading the books. I then decided to engage my students in Child Care and Family Education in the process by having them visit with the families to work through any reading problems they might have. What we found was that the family difficulties went much deeper than reading issues. The issues were in the area of communication and emotional intelligence. Further, I realized that my students who came from similar backgrounds to the target families didn’t understand these emotional issues either. I then changed my focus from undergraduate students to graduate students in the Early Childhood program and began a new project which we called Families Uniting through Literature.

In our first session during 2007, we partnered with a summer program at the Progressive Baptist Church. Masters candidates in the Families in a Cross-Cultural Perspective class acted as interventionists. There were 28 candidates in the class. Of these, only 24 were in a posture to act as interventionists. We had whole group sessions every Thursday evening at the church with the parents, children, and students for eight (8) weeks. The project investigator acted as facilitator and storyteller for the programs. Candidates were paired with families, and they were expected to meet away from the group at least once per week. Some parents of our candidates and the Chairman of the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education expressed concern for the candidates meeting in that particular area of Jackson – an urban, lower economic, higher crime neighborhood. We persevered, and the results were somewhat successful. Participant recruitment was easy since the church brought in the families. There was a question as to the participation of the candidates because some parents noted in their Post Program Inventories that they were never contacted by the interventionists (candidates). Upon reading the description portfolios of the candidates, the project investigator further noticed that some candidates did not comprehend the purpose and goals of the program. Many thought that their job was to work with the children of the family on phonics or other skill based reading problems.

The candidates who were responsible for the group programs, door prizes, and snacks did an excellent job. They were encouraged to seek donations for snacks and door prizes. When donations could not be found, the project investigator subsidized the necessary ingredients through his publishing company. Still, the candidates showed good planning and follow-through skills to make for successful sessions.

During this version of the project, we learned an important lesson regarding giving the books to the children. The investigator hired a project assistant who was responsible, among other things, for the dispersment of the books. During the first group session, she brought all of the books for the program into the hall. The families swarmed her to grab books for their children, nieces, nephews, and neighbors. We were forced to order more books to cover those lost for the completion of the project. We have never brought the entire supply of books to a program since then. Books are now given to the interventionists to take to the families.



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The second rendition of the program during the fall of 2007 was entirely unsuccessful. The candidates were required to recruit families for the program. They were to bring them to the first session held at the Jackson State College of Education Building. Books were again donated by the First Book Campus Advisory Board for the participating families. Of the 29 students enrolled in the class, only one candidate successfully recruited a family and brought them to the session. After stern reprimand by the instructor (project investigator) and repeating the instructions to find students from their own schools or churches who were at risk to recruit, more students brought families to the second session. Unfortunately, the candidates brought their relatives, friends, or colleagues contrary to their instructions. Candidates who worked for the Jackson Public Schools informed the project investigator that they were not allowed to bring students from their own schools because it was against the rules to meet with parents during off-hours. Snacks and door prizes were subsidized by the publishing company with only a few donations. Candidates were unable to successfully motivate parents and children at the group sessions with renditions of the books or discussions about the themes. The emotional intelligence component to the program was incomprehensible to the candidates. Through reading the visitation logs and family descriptions, it was determined that the majority of the candidates still interpreted the program as a reading skills program for the children. Even though Post Program Inventories were sent to the families, the inventories received were not usable since they were from friends, colleagues, or family of the candidates.

After reflection of the first and second programs, the investigator sought to revise some of the operational components to include funds from an outside source, hiring interventionists, the addition of a project coordinator to help train and supervise interventionists, recruitment, and other details, and the addition of a project assistant to keep track of records and data. The coordinator and assistant had both successfully completed the program as students. Funds were obtained through the gracious efforts of Mississippi Learning Institute (MLI).

We sought to begin contacting parents prior to the end of the school term because we wanted to enlist the help of the teachers in contacting the parents. We began by contacting the principals at MLI schools to ask for lists of P - 1 children who were deemed "at risk" by their teachers or school literacy coaches. Two schools responded – Isable and George. We then contacted French and Sykes Elementary Schools because the Project Coordinator (PC) worked there formerly and/or knew the literacy coach. One other family was recruited by the PC because she thought that they needed and would benefit from the program. We then advertised for interventionists who had either completed the Families in a Cross-Cultural Perspective coursework or had experience working with families. We received seven replies and chose four who had the qualifications we desired.

From our list of 67 possible children, we were able to contact twenty (20) parents. Of these, sixteen (16) agreed to participate. After a brief training sessions on May 17<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> with our interventionists, we began meeting with the families. Each interventionist worked with four (4) families. We decided to reduce the number of whole group sessions to three for the summer.



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We hoped that our interventionists effectively demonstrate the knowledge and skills needed to support and empower families through respectful, reciprocal relationships. We found that more training was necessary. Assessments centered on affective/emotional literacy, parenting styles, and values help interventionists to develop an inventory of skills to encourage parents and children to communicate. With help, parents and children can develop skills at making healthy choices in life and learning. We hoped to develop in low-literacy; low-income parents the desire for self-initiated learning to achieve educational and life goals.

The bases for this program were derived from information gained through the research of Betty Hart and Todd Risley. They determined that certain variables were salient in the development of literacy skills in children which led, in time, to successful academic matriculation. Among others, these variables were:

- Time spent with their children
- Responsiveness to children's questions and concerns
- Quantity of words used in conversation
- Expression of approval/affirmation of child's thoughts and feelings

They arrived at these conclusions by placing observers in the homes of families from different socio-economic backgrounds and noting the types and numbers of parent/child interactions. The research is outlined in the following book:

Hart, B. and Risley, T. 1995. ***Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children***. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.

Thus, children who come from homes in which there is a lot of conversation, reading, and writing learn to value literacy and are motivated to learn academic skills. Family Literacy refers to the ways parents, children, and other family members use reading and writing in their home and community to share ideas and information, get things done, tell family stories, and teach about cultural values and practices. Through working with families to encourage voluntary reading and talking about what they read, our interventionists will learn how these families function. Then, they can help families move from functional to thoughtful literacy.

Each interventionist was responsible for at least one family during the entire program. They worked with the parents on parenting styles and emotional literacy. During their weekly visits with the family, they learned about the functioning of the family, helped with read-aloud skills, encouraged parenting skills, and helped them get library cards or other social services. They called the family to remind them to come to the sessions. If the family needed help with transportation issues, they contacted the appropriate community resource agency to arrange for this. They became part of the extended family for six to seven weeks. The families learned from the interventionists, and the interventionists learned from the families.



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## Themes and Books

### Week 1 – Perseverance

*The Itsy Bitsy Spider Blues* by Dr. Rhythm (aka – B L Fish)  
*You're Amazing* by Dr. Rhythm (aka – B L Fish)  
*Abiyoyo Rocks* by Dr. Rhythm (aka – B L Fish)

### Week 2 – Friendship and Coping

*Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon Draper  
*Best Friends for Francis* by Lillian Hoban  
*The Very Best of Friends* by Margaret Wild  
*The Stone Soup Book of Friends* by  
*A Color of His Own* by Leo Lionni

### Week 3 – Life isn't Fair

*Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by  
*The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Alexander Wolf (Jon Scieszka)  
*Why Mosquitoes Buzz in Peoples' Ears* by Verna Aardema  
*The Invisible Man* by H. G. Wells

### Week 4 – Greed

*A Fish Tale* by Dr. Rhythm (aka – B L Fish)  
*Anansi, the Spider* by Gerald McDermott  
*The Talking Eggs* by Robert San Souci  
*Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe

### Week 5 – Goals

*Follow the Drinking Gourd* by Jeanette Winter  
*Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch



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## Week 6 – Courage

*Lon Po Po* – Ed Young

*Flossie & the Fox* – Patrick Mckissack

*Stuart Little: Stuart hides out* – Susan Hill

Remember – the important factors to stress to the parents are:

- Time spent with their children,
- Responsiveness to children’s questions and concerns,
- Quantity of words used in conversation, and
- Expression of approval/affirmation of child’s thoughts and feelings.

### Constructs of Emotional Intelligence

- Enhancement of emotional literacy
- Recognizing patterns of behavior
- Applying consequential thinking
- Navigating emotions
- Engaging intrinsic motivation
- Exercising optimism
- Increasing empathy
- Pursuing noble goals.

### **Four Styles of Parenting**

#### **The Dismissing Parent**

- \* treats child’s feelings as unimportant, trivial
- \* disengages from or ignores the child’s feelings
- \* wants the child’s negative emotions to disappear quickly
- \* characteristically uses distraction to shut down child’s emotions
- \* may ridicule or make light of a child’s emotions
- \* shows little interest in what the child is trying to communicate
- \* may lack awareness of emotions in self and others
- \* feels uncomfortable, fearful, anxious, annoyed, hurt, or overwhelmed by the child’s emotions
- \* fears being out-of-control emotionally
- \* focuses more on how to get over emotions than on the meaning of the emotion itself
- \* believes negative emotions are harmful or toxic
- \* believes focusing on negative emotions will “just make matters worse”
- \* feels uncertain about what to do with the child’s emotions
- \* sees the child’s emotions as a demand to fix things
- \* believes negative emotions mean the child is not well adjusted



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- \* believes the child's negative emotions reflect badly on their parents
- \* minimizes the child's feelings, downplaying the events that led to the emotion
- \* does not problem-solve with the child; believes that the passage of time will resolve most problems

**Effects of this style on children:** They learn that their feelings are wrong, inappropriate, not valid. They may learn that there is something inherently wrong with them because of the way they feel. They may have difficulty regulating their own emotions.

### **The Disapproving Parent**

- \* displays many of the Dismissing Parent's behaviors, but in a more negative way
- \* judges and criticizes the child's emotional expression
- \* is over aware of the need to set limits on their children
- \* emphasizes conformity to good standards or behavior
- \* reprimands, disciplines, or punishes the child for emotional expression, whether the child is misbehaving or not
- \* believes expression of negative emotions should be time limited
- \* believes negative emotions need to be controlled
- \* believes negative emotions reflect bad character traits
- \* believes the child uses negative emotions to manipulate; this belief results in power struggles
- \* believes emotions make people weak; children must be emotionally tough for survival
- \* believes negative emotions are unproductive a waste of time
- \* sees negative emotions (especially sadness) are a commodity that should not be squandered
- \* is unconcerned with the child's obedience to authority

**Effects of this style on children: Same as the Dismissing style.**

### **The Laissez-Faire Parent**

- \* freely accepts all emotional expression from the child
- \* offers comfort to the child experiencing negative feelings
- \* offers little guidance on behavior
- \* does not teach the child about emotions
- \* is permissive; does not set limits
- \* does not help children solve problems
- \* does not teach problem-solving methods to the child
- \* believes there is little you can do about negative emotions other than ride them out
- \* believes that managing negative emotions is a matter of hydraulics; release the emotion and the work is done

**Effects of this style on children: They don't learn to regulate their emotions; they have trouble concentrating, forming friendships, getting along with other children.**



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### **The Emotion Coach**

- \* values the child's negative emotions as an opportunity for intimacy
- \* can tolerate spending time with a sad, angry, or fearful child, does not become impatient with the emotion
- \* is aware of and values his or her own emotions
- \* sees the world of negative emotions as an important arena for parenting
- \* is sensitive to the child's emotional states, even when they are subtle
- \* is not confused or anxious about the child's emotional expression; knows what needs to be done
- \* respects the child's emotions
- \* does not poke fun at or make light of the child's negative feelings
- \* does not say how the child should feel
- \* does not feel he or she has to fix every problem for the child
- \* uses emotional moments as a time to
  - \_\_\_\_\_ listen to the child
  - \_\_\_\_\_ empathize with soothing words and affection
  - \_\_\_\_\_ offer guidance on regulating emotions
  - \_\_\_\_\_ set limits and teach acceptable expression of emotions
  - \_\_\_\_\_ teach problem-solving skills

***Effects of this style on children: They learn to trust their feelings, regulate their own emotions, and solve problems. They have high self-esteem, learn well, get along well with others.***

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