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**What we learned yesterday will guide us today: How family literacy programs can address the COVID-19 slide**

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Families have been faced with new challenges and uncertainties during the unprecedented times when the world came to a standstill due to COVID-19 in March 2020. Families in the U.S. who speak languages other than English and/or who have adult basic education challenges were hit particularly hard during this time. The shut-down of schools and the shift to a primarily remote learning environment occurred with astounding speed, with little chance to prepare and understand learning expectations from schools and other educational programs. Not surprisingly, family literacy programs were in a unique position to simultaneously support adult and young learners during this extraordinary time.

The purpose of this guide is to highlight changes in education due to the pandemic and to discuss how to support families now and in the future. Recommendations are provided for family literacy programs related to sustaining and adapting adult education, parent education<sup>1</sup>, and interactive literacy in a blended learning environment, while simultaneously supporting the adult's and child's learning.

**The Importance of Family Literacy (Especially During the Pandemic)**

Family literacy programs have existed for decades and target families who may need literacy, education, and language resources and services. These programs help adults achieve educational growth and/or acquire English language skills, learn about the education and development of their children,

to connect to schools and teachers, and engage in interactive literacy activities with their young or school-age children to support their learning and development.

Many family literacy programs have four integrated components that support the family unit. These components include (1) adult education (AE) or English Language Learning (ELL) instruction for adult learners; (2) parent education (PE) to provide suggestions about child development and connecting to the child's school; (3) interactive literacy activities (ILA) that provide ideas and opportunities for caregivers about engaging in activities to foster their child's learning at home; and (4) early childhood education (ECE) in an early childhood or school-age setting.

The adult education component of family literacy typically has been offered in-person. During the pandemic, however, it has also been offered either online or as a blended learning format (both in-person and online) to accommodate social distancing requirements and/or the complicated schedules adults have faced as schools switched to remote learning and distance education models.

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Distance education (classes that are offered via computers, mobile phones, tablets, or digital devices) can be successful particularly because they allow caregivers to work at their own pace while simultaneously attending to family responsibilities (Prins, Drayton, Gungor, & Kassab, 2012). However, many learners are unfamiliar with using technology; Inverso, Kobrin, and Hashmi (2017) discussed that the success of the blended model is often contingent on the instructor-student relationship. This has been mitigated somewhat during the pandemic as adult education and family literacy programs have adjusted to providing classes online (Belzer, et al., 2020; Kaiper-Marquez, Wolfe, Clymer, Lee, McLean, Prins, & Stickel, 2020).

Parent education is often combined with the AE component or occurs as part of caregiver-child ILAs. There is little research on providing parent education and ILA services online, but the limited research does point to some successful practices. For example, Beschoner and Hutchison (2016) compared shared storybook reading of families in an online and in-person parent education program and found that both programs taught parents how to engage in dialogic reading behavior (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). However, researchers found that one drawback was that participants in the online program had weaker relationships with each other because of the lack of in-person interactions.

The interactive literacy component of family literacy programs is a unique part of the model that focuses on caregivers and children learning together to enhance language and literacy skills. Caregivers are provided opportunities to learn about child development and engage in language and literacy activities with their children. A key reason why ILAs are so important, is that parent involvement has consistently been found to enhance children's language and literacy development (Fan and Chen, 2001; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Shared reading between the caregiver and child has also been found to increase language, literacy, and other academic skill development (Bus et al., 1995; Shahaecian et al., 2018).

## Lost Learning and the COVID-19 Slide

The pandemic demonstrated how critical family literacy programs can be to adult learners who are parents. As children were required to participate in remote and/or blended instruction, during much of the pandemic, caregivers were tasked with guiding and participating in their children's learning (McLean & Clymer, 2020). A case study completed by the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy examined how one family literacy program helped adults and children continue learning while also helping caregivers understand schools' reconfigured instructional approaches (Kaiper-Marquez, et al., 2020). This program was able to move swiftly to online learning to continue providing adult and parent education and ILAs. A primary topic of instruction was helping caregivers support their children in this new version of "school." This placed family literacy programs in a fortuitous position during the pandemic because of their preexisting relationships with families and their ability to continue fostering adult and child learning.

ILAs provide opportunities for parents to learn about child development and engage in language and literacy activities with children.

As the pandemic unfolded, schools and programs serving adults and families were faced with the unprecedented challenge of delivering instruction online and nearly all were unprepared for this move (Gross & Opalka, 2020). A nationwide survey of 477 school systems found that beginning in March 2020, 27% of teachers in rural areas were expected to provide instruction to students compared to 51% in urban areas (Gross & Opalka, 2020). Further, teachers' and principals' perceptions of the 2020-2021 school year, as reported in surveys administered through the RAND American Educator Panels (AEP; Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020), found that 31% teachers believed that students in high-poverty schools were less prepared for the upcoming school year.

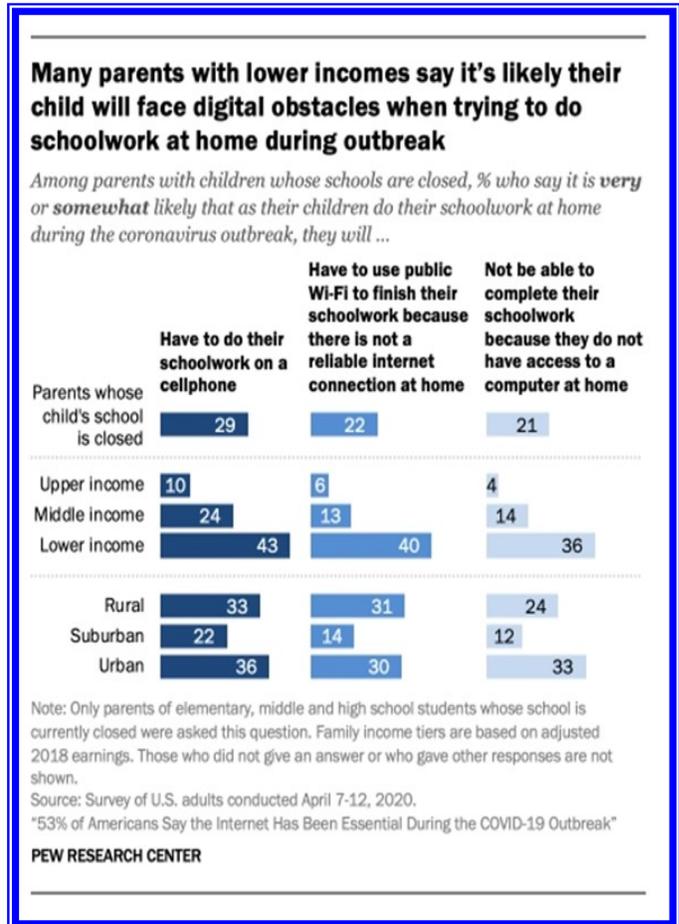
Caregiver were expected to step in to assist in their children’s education and support their children’s remote learning. Caregivers were unequipped for a variety of reasons, including lack of knowledge about computers, inadequate digital access, and the limited understanding of what to do, how much to do, and how to support their child’s learning. The unpreparedness to shift to remote learning spawned the concept of the “COVID-19 slide” (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020) which is similar to “summer slide” where reading skills for children diminish due to time away from the classroom. Not surprisingly, children from low-income families were likely to be more susceptible to the “COVID-19 slide” because of digital and communication challenges (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 slide will only exacerbate the inequities that already exist between black and Hispanic students and white students.

### Digital Challenges

Digital access for families is one major contributor to the “COVID-19 slide.” The digital access issues apply to both hardware and quality of instruction. For example, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey in April 2020 and found that low-income families struggled with finding access to devices and/or the internet for their children to complete their homework. Nearly half (43%) of low-income parents surveyed stated their children would need to use a cellphone to complete their homework, and 40% stated they did not have reliable internet.

In addition, a recent study found that access and quality of remote instruction was a factor in learning loss for high school students. Dorn et al. (2020) created statistical models to examine the impact of school closures on learning based on three types of high school students: (1) those with average-quality remote instruction (progress, but at slower pace); (2) those with lower-quality remote learning (remain at grade level); and (3) those who are not getting instruction (lose significant learning). From the statistical models, the authors estimated that the average remote learners would lose three to four months of learning; those

with low-quality remote learning would lose between seven and 11 months of learning; and those with no instruction would lose up to 14 months of learning. This learning loss would probably be



greater for low-income, black, and Hispanic students (Dorn et al., 2020). This educational crisis speaks to the importance of family literacy programs working with families to support their children’s learning and to foster learning in the home between the caregivers and children to counter the “COVID-19 slide.”

### Communication Challenges

Teacher and school communication with caregivers was also a challenge and this could have exacerbated the COVID-19 slide since caregivers may have had difficulty engaging with schools. Although teachers report that the ability to communicate with families was often tied to internet access or having devices at home, teachers in high

poverty areas, rural settings, or schools with a higher population of students of color reported more difficulty connecting to students, though this varied by state (Stelitano, Doan, Woo, Diliberti, Kaufman, & Henry, 2020). Further, even if teachers could connect with families, not all caregivers have the same ability to talk with teachers, communicate with schools, or understand the lessons their children are learning. Family literacy programs are in an ideal position to guide caregivers about how to stay on top of the educational development of their children now and post-pandemic.

### Strategies to Prevent COVID-19-Slide

Family literacy programs can play a vital role in helping schools improve the educational attainment levels of at-risk families to help address the current repercussions of the COVID-19 slide and to prevent future educational decline. This means that more learning opportunities need to be provided in the home and at school. Moreover, it is essential to increase efforts to involve caregivers in schools as children return to in-person learning. Although family literacy programs are not a direct solution to the COVID-19 slide, they can provide valuable support to adults and children dealing with the educational damage that is a consequence of this unprecedented time.

### Combating Digital Challenges

As we slowly transition out of the pandemic lockdown, it is important to remember that digital access inequities and knowledge about technology will continue to exist for low-income families. Family literacy programs are in an amiable position to support and advocate for families as they address the challenges of the COVID-19 slide.

**Access.** Digital access for low-income families is a continuing issue and one that is difficult to solve (Vogels, 2021). Family literacy programs can develop and/or continue programming that is accessible on a number of devices (tablets, smartphones, computers) so that families can use the resources that currently exist to participate. Programs can also provide guidance about how to

access computers, WIFI, and internet services (e.g., researching low-cost internet providers in the area), while also providing families with digital devices and internet access.

Although, many schools are moving away from a remote learning experience (Perez, 2021), caregivers will still need to access information provided by teachers and schools. Family literacy programs can help caregivers develop and maintain school relationships and ensure interventions to combat the COVID-19 slide are implemented, if needed. In particular, family literacy programs need to continue to incorporate programming about how to effectively use technology to strengthen the home-school partnership and help caregivers be even more vigilant about staying on top of their children's learning.

**Understanding digital content.** In addition to accessing equipment and knowing how to use it, caregivers need to understand the expectations of the school for their child(ren). Many families have successfully navigated the challenges of the pandemic and its aftermath, but low-income or ELL families may still be at a distinct disadvantage because of limited literacy or not understanding English. Schools are still in a state of flux, and caregivers are still likely to have questions about the school websites, information that is

Family literacy practitioners can also inform parents about websites:

To enhance learning:

- Khan Academy ([www.khanacademy.org/](http://www.khanacademy.org/))
- Duolingo ([www.duolingo.com/](http://www.duolingo.com/))
- Learning Chocolate ([www.learningchocolate.com/](http://www.learningchocolate.com/))

Support children's learning:

- Wide Open School ([wideopeschool.org](http://wideopeschool.org))
- Khan Academy Kids ([learn.khanacademy.org/khan-academy-kids/](http://learn.khanacademy.org/khan-academy-kids/))

Encourage interactive learning activities:

- Unite for Literacy (to listen and read books) ([www.uniteforliteracy.com](http://www.uniteforliteracy.com))
- How Stuff Works ([www.howstuffworks.com](http://www.howstuffworks.com))

posted, and who to you call when something is wrong, or how to contact the school or teacher if there is an issue. Caregivers may have learned more about assisting their children with school during the pandemic; but family literacy programs may still need to help caregivers successfully access school resources, particularly to counter the COVID-19 slide.

Further, adults attending family literacy programs to pursue their own educational goals may have been disproportionately harmed by the pandemic as they felt overwhelmed with keeping up with their own studies and supporting their children's learning needs (McLean & Clymer, 2020). Teachers can contextualize adult education instruction to address parent education needs so that caregivers can continue to learn how to access information from teachers and schools. For example, teachers can develop lessons for caregivers to practice how to access school websites and engage in writing and reading lessons while working on their own educational goals and the immediate and future needs of their child's learning.

Family literacy programs can also advise parents of other resources developed by the schools such as webinars that provide the skills and tools necessary to support their child's online learning. For example, the School District of Philadelphia developed an online *Family Academy: Course and Training* (FACT) to provide virtual opportunities for parents to support their child's learning. Families are able to view a virtual course to help them explore literacy activities to do at home (The School District of Philadelphia, 2020). However, as caregivers are informed about educational apps, the apps may provide minimal explanations of *how* to use the technology to enhance language and literacy learning (López-Escribano, Escudero, Pérez-López, 2021). Family literacy programming can integrate the *how* into their adult education, parent education, and/or interactive literacy activity components so families can optimally use available apps.

### ***Communicating with Families***

Families engage in many types of communication

with each other and with the family literacy program. Family literacy programs need to be flexible with families and learn what lessons are important at particular points in their lives (Kaiper-Marquez, et al., 2020). Thus, it is important to be proactive and not to wait for the family to ask for help.

Use a variety of communication methods and formats to reach all families:

- Email
- Social media apps (e.g., Facebook)
- Reminder apps (e.g., Remind ([www.remind.com/](http://www.remind.com/)))
- Texting apps, such as Google Hangouts ([hangouts.google.com](http://hangouts.google.com)), WhatsApp ([www.whatsapp.com](http://www.whatsapp.com)), or WeChat ([www.wechat.com/en/](http://www.wechat.com/en/))

The pandemic also amplified the need to use a variety of communication methods and multiple formats to reach all families. The use of digital media became crucial to reminding caregivers about upcoming classes, availability of recorded classes if the caregiver was unable to attend the live, remote classes, assignments, or other important announcements. These tools should continue to be used to reach families now and moving forward.

### ***Ideas for Extending Learning***

The interactive literacy component of family literacy programs provides caregivers with opportunities and suggestions for learning in the home and is particularly important to combat the COVID-19 slide. Interactive learning opportunities can range from everyday experiences using household items to learning to play games that enhance oral language development and literacy skills. Instructors may have to vary the ILA format to determine what works and does not work with caregivers and children in their home learning environment. For example, the Goodling Institute case study (Kaiper-Marquez, et. al., 2020) provided ILA remotely to families during the pandemic, but attendance was low because of the variability in families' schedules. After several weeks of remote learning, the instructor switched to recorded ILA classes to

better accommodate families' schedules. The provision of remote ILA demonstrated the need for family literacy programs to provide a combination of in-person, hybrid, and take-home ILA for families to ensure ILA participation.

There are several strategies that can promote family engagement in ILAs and that can help combat the COVID-19 slide:

- *Develop a supportive relationship* with caregivers and children so that they want to view and attend the sessions. In the Goodling Institute case study, caregivers and children were eager to view the ILA lessons because the instructor knew them, their interests, and accordingly used related and interesting books and activities in lessons (Kaiper-Marquez, et al., 2020).
- *Incorporate easily accessible books and materials.* For example, find a book that is an e-book so caregivers can access it later, and develop an activity related to the book that requires materials already in the home (i.e., reading about a pizza party and then making the pizza together).
- *Show parents how to explore educational apps and access additional books associated with the activity.* Further, demonstrate to caregivers how to use the educational apps to improve their children's language and literacy skills.
- *Ensure caregivers understand the purpose of the activity* they are doing with their children so that they can better foster language and literacy development. For example, while making pizza the caregivers and children may learn new words after reading the book and engaging in conversations; fractions from cutting the pizza; use of measurement (i.e., tablespoons) to prepare the pizza; diversity of toppings; and respect for individual differences and preferences.

## Conclusion

The pandemic quickly demonstrated the critical role that family literacy programs need to play to

support the educational attainment of at-risk adults and children. The pandemic illuminated many injustices, and one of these was the possible long-term consequences of the COVID-19 slide on children's learning. As we move ahead, we need to ensure that caregivers maintain their involvement in their children's education, including learning activities in the home as well as continued engagement with teachers and schools. This can be done with the support and assistance of family literacy programs now and into the future. Regardless of the impact of the COVID-19 slide, caregivers need family literacy programs to develop their own skills and those of their children. Finally, although it appears that the worst of the pandemic may be behind us, caregivers will continue to need the support of family literacy programs to help advocate for digital access and understanding of digital resources. If family literacy programs incorporate digital literacy into their curriculum and programming, families will be better equipped to handle future challenges.

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<sup>1</sup>The term caregivers will be used to refer to the parents, other adult family members, or guardians who have primary responsibility for raising a child.