



Case Study #7

California Families for Literacy

Program Helps Improve Literacy with the LEAPPAD® Home Connection

A preschool child asks her father to read a book to her. The father sits down and slowly begins to read aloud. After a few minutes, he gives up, frustrated and embarrassed because he does not know some of the words. The next day, when the child asks him to read another book, he says he is too busy. With each day that passes, the father loses another opportunity to help assure that his daughter enters school ready to read. He also loses the opportunity to open the world of books and reading to his child before she begins formal schooling.

To help break the cycle of illiteracy, the California State Legislature created the Families for Literacy (FFL) program, a statewide family literacy initiative based in public libraries. Established in 1988, the FFL program enables libraries providing adult literacy services to extend their services to the families of adult learners with preschool children.

Now, 13 years after implementing FFL, the California State Library has added an exciting new twist to the program—"talking books"—to help introduce adult learners and their families to the joy of reading, without the fear or embarrassment of making a mistake.

"The Families for Literacy program addresses the families most 'at risk' of continuing the cycle of illiteracy—those in which the parent or primary caregiver has limited literacy skills," said Carole Talan, library programs coordinator for the California State Library. "With the LEAPPAD® Home Connection, we provide another opportunity for parents and caregivers to have a fun, lively, enjoyable experience with their children around a book."

Introducing the Joy of Reading with Talking Books

Using funding from the Library Services and Technology Act, a federal grant program, the California State Library has equipped each of the state's 77 FFL programs with the LEAPPAD Home Connection. Developed by LEAPFROG SCHOOLHOUSE, the LEAPPAD Home Connection includes five LEAPPAD platforms and carrying cases, and 11 interactive books.

A compact, notebook-sized electronic tool, the LEAPPAD platform allows books to spring to life thanks to an innovative technology that enables the books to "talk." Using LeapFrog SchoolHouse's patented NEAR TOUCH® technology, any part of a page can be made touch interactive. With the LEAPPAD platform's electronic stylus pen, adults and children can touch images and hear sounds on any part of the page. This allows learners to read and hear specific letters and words, to sound out words, or to read entire pages.

Currently, 77 of California's 179 public library jurisdictions provide FFL programs in more than 250 communities across the state. The FFL program works to break the cycle of illiteracy by addressing adult literacy needs, the emerging literacy needs of children, interactive and intergenerational literacy and parenting. To be eligible to participate in the FFL program, the adult must receive literacy services and have a child under five years of age. Once eligible, the entire family is included in the program.

At each library, adult literacy instruction is usually delivered by carefully trained and monitored volunteers through one-on-one or small group tutoring. Through the FFL program, the library then extends those literacy support services to the entire family through a variety of activities and resources, including the LEAPPAD platform.

"Because we work with adults who are not good readers themselves, they often feel uneasy about reading aloud to their children," explained Dr. Talan, "They fear they might miss a word or not know how to pronounce it right." The LEAPPAD takes away their apprehension and fear of making a mistake. It provides a very easy, non-threatening way for adults to introduce books to their children, and creates an enjoyable learning experience for both the parent and child.

Experiencing the LEAPPAD Platform

In fact, it was Dr. Talan's own "learning experience" with the LEAPPAD platform that helped integrate the platform with the FFL program.

"I borrowed a LEAPPAD from a friend who was very enthusiastic about the product," Dr. Talan said. "I took it back to my office and tried it out, and then gave it to some of my colleagues to try. We all took turns taking it home to use with our children and grandchildren. Everybody just loved it!"

“What I like best about the LEAPPAD is that it still uses a book, which is very important to libraries,” she added. “While we love technology, we don’t want kids to forget the value of a book and the excitement of turning a page. We also want to be sure that young children know some of the basics about books before they enter school, such as left to right progression and using pictures as clues to content. These can only be learned by practice with an actual book.”

Recognizing the Vital Roles of Parents

Through the FFL programs, parents and caregivers not only learn *how to* read aloud to their children but *why* it is important to do so.

“Children who are talked to and read to by adults learn to read better and have an improved opportunity to become more successful as a result—thus, breaking the cycle of illiteracy,” explained Dr. Talan. “The intention of FFL is not to have parents and caregivers teach their children to read, but to recognize and foster the vital roles they play in preparing their children for a lifetime of enjoyment and success in reading.”

“The adults who participate in our programs truly want to do what’s best for their children,” she continued. “They want to improve their children’s lives and make sure their children have an easier time than they did, but they don’t know how to make this happen. Too often, parents miss the opportunity to build love, excitement, and joy around reading during their children’s early years. Parents think that will all happen after their children get to school. We firmly believe that if we can help children learn to see the value, fun, and enjoyment in books before they reach school, they will want to read more. The more they read, the better readers they will become.”

Delivering Literacy Services on Wheels

In addition to the library-based programs, FFL is expanding to 11 new mobile units. The 32-foot-long vehicles are funded by Proposition 10, the California Children and Families First Act. The act increases tobacco excise taxes to provide funds for early childhood development and smoking prevention and cessation programs.

The California State Library will equip each mobile unit with three LEAPPAD Home Connections, again using funding from the Library Services and Technology Act. The 11 mobile units will travel the state from inner cities to remote rural areas to provide literacy services and a variety of health, human service, and education programs covered under the California Children and Families First Act.

“The LEAPPADs are ideal for both the library-based programs and the mobile units,” said Dr. Talan. “The LEAPPADs are very durable, which is an important feature since they’ll be checked out and handled by multiple families with small children. We particularly like the fact that each LEAPPAD includes an AC adapter so we don’t have to rely on batteries. That can be a financial issue for our low-income families.”

Exploring New Programs

In addition to FFL, Dr. Talan sees the potential to expand the use of the LEAPPAD platform to the California State Library's new English Language Literacy Intensive Program. Introduced in 2000, the program provides literacy services to families with children in kindergarten through grade 12 whose first language is not English.

"The LEAPPAD would be an ideal solution for families participating in this program because it allows parents to learn alongside their children and build their English vocabulary in a fun, non-threatening environment," said Dr. Talan.

Looking Ahead

Through the 77 library-based FFL programs and the 11 mobile units, Dr. Talan expects that the LEAPPAD Home Connection will be made available to as many as 8,000 families in 2001.

"The response so far has been wonderful," she said. "Our FFL program coordinators love the LEAPPADs. I'm constantly getting comments, letters and notes back from them saying how wonderful they think they are. Our volunteer tutors love them. Our families love them. And we love them. We have never had a tool like this."

