

READING TOGETHER: A PROGRAMME WHICH ENABLES PARENTS TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN WITH READING AT HOME

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Reading Together is a research-based workshop programme which helps parents to support their children's reading at home. It has two decades of research and development in New Zealand and has been successfully implemented on a voluntary basis by many teachers and other literacy educators in various parts of New Zealand since 1982.

Reading Together is a practical, manageable programme which has been shown to be effective in raising children's reading achievement and providing support for parents, children and teachers (Alton-Lee, 2003¹; Alton-Lee, 2004²; Biddulph, 1983³; Biddulph, 2004a⁴; Biddulph & Tuck, 1983⁵). The programme was originally designed to provide additional help for children with reading difficulties (thereby supporting the work of teachers and schools) but the suggestions and helping strategies are also useful for parents of competent readers. The strategies have been found to be effective with children aged 5 to 15, when the workshops are implemented as developed (Biddulph, 1993⁶; Biddulph, 2004a⁷). An earlier adaptation of *Reading Together* for use at early childhood level is currently being revised.

This article:

- summarises the research design and results of the *Reading Together* programme
- outlines its successful implementation throughout New Zealand from 1982 – 2006
- identifies reasons for the programme's success
- links *Reading Together* with current research and the Ministry of Education's *Schooling Strategy 2005-2010*⁸

RESEARCH BASE FOR THE PROGRAMME – THE ORIGINAL STUDY

The *Reading Together* programme was developed, implemented and evaluated in the course of a Masters degree action-research project in 1982 (Biddulph, 1983; Biddulph & Tuck, 1983). It was designed to enable parents to provide their children with supportive and effective help with reading at home. The children involved in the research project were experiencing difficulties with reading, and the research project explored the effects of a partnership between parents and teachers on the children's attitudes to, engagement with and achievement in reading. The attitudes and responses of the parents were also investigated.

Research Design

The children in the original research study were 9 and 10 year olds, with reading levels of 5½ - 8½ years, drawn randomly from seven Christchurch schools across a range of socio-economic and ethnic groups. Twenty-four children were in the 'target' group, and the same number in a 'control' (comparison) group. Both the target group and the control group received the usual, in-school support for learners with reading difficulties, including individual assistance. The difference was that the parents of the 'target' group children (who came from five of the seven schools) attended the *Reading Together* programme which comprised four 1¼ hour evening workshops spread over seven weeks. The programme was designed to be low cost and time effective for parents and teachers. Research and development were closely aligned in the investigation, which was grounded in a strong theoretical foundation. A range of relevant quantitative and qualitative research strategies were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme.

¹ Alton-Lee, A. (2003). *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

² Alton-Lee, A. (2004) *Improving Educational Policy and Practice through an Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis Programme*. Paper prepared for an OECD Meeting on Evidence-Based Policy, Washington, 19 April 2004.

³ Biddulph, J. (1983). *A group programme to train parents of children with reading difficulties to tutor their children at home*. Unpublished MA research report, Education Department, University of Canterbury.

⁴ Biddulph, J. (2004a). *Reading Together: Workshop Leader's Handbook*. Hamilton, NZ: The Biddulph Group.

⁵ Biddulph, J. & Tuck, B. (1983). *Assisting parents to help their children with reading at home*. Paper presented to the New Zealand Association for Research in Education, Wellington.

⁶ Biddulph, J. (1993). *Teacher-parent partnership to support children's reading development*. Paper presented to the New Zealand Reading Association Annual Conference, Christchurch.

⁷ Biddulph, J. (2004a). *Reading Together: Workshop Leader's Handbook*. Hamilton, NZ: The Biddulph Group.

⁸ Ministry of Education. (2005). *Making a Bigger Difference for all Students: Schooling Strategy 2005-2010*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Throughout the workshops, parents were helped to:

- Develop basic understandings of the reading process, and how children learn to read
- Learn and use appropriate strategies to support their children's reading at home
- Gain increased awareness of the nature and effects of constructive support (by watching and discussing demonstrations, and using the strategies by working with their child at one of the workshops and at home)
- Access and select (with their children) suitable reading material from their neighbourhood libraries
- Reflect on and talk about their experiences helping their children



The underlying **processes** of the programme were of critical importance. These were designed to create:

- A genuine, collaborative and non-threatening partnership between the parents, their children and the workshop leader
- A sense of community among the parents, children, teachers and local librarians involved in the workshop programme.

Results⁹

Prior to the research project, none of the 9 and 10 year old children in the study were reading beyond a level of 8.5 years on the study measures, and many were reading well below this level.

Statistical analysis of the data revealed that three months after the workshops began, when measured against the comparison group, the 'target' group of 24 children (i.e. those whose parents attended the workshops):

- made significantly greater gains in reading attainment (average gain = 9 months in 3 months of the study)
- read more regularly and with more enjoyment
- used libraries more frequently
- gained more confidence in themselves as readers and as people
- became more independent in their reading.

In follow-up testing 12 months later the 'target' children maintained significant gains. 76% of the 'target' children had reached a reading age greater than 9.5 years (similar gains to those of average readers), whereas only 10% of the comparison children had reached this level.

Comments from some children who participated in the programme are at www.readingtogether.net.nz, for example:

Mum helps me. She's been to a reading thing. Mrs Biddulph talked to them about reading and us kids went one night. It's better since she has been on the course. I like it more now.
(9 year old girl)

Mum helps me all the time. When we read books, sometimes she reads half of it to me. If I get stuck on a word, Mum waits for a couple of seconds then tells me. Sometimes my sisters and Grandma help me.
(10 year old boy)

As a group, the parents of the 'target' children:

- were keen to be involved in the programme
- gained competence in assisting their children at home
- gained confidence and satisfaction from helping their children (including Pacific Island parents whose understanding and knowledge of English were limited)
- reported that they thought that their own reading had improved (in cases where parents lacked confidence in their own reading ability)

⁹ The findings were elaborated and explained in:

Biddulph, J. (1983). *A group programme to train parents of children with reading difficulties to tutor their children at home*. Unpublished MA research report, Education Department, University of Canterbury.

Biddulph, J. & Tuck, B. (1983). *Assisting parents to help their children with reading at home*. Paper presented to the New Zealand Association for Research in Education, Wellington.

The parents also reported feeling less frustration, anger and anxiety about their children's reading achievement, and noted improved relationships within the families generally. Many parents reported that they had developed more supportive and positive relationships with their child(ren), and that they were using the programme strategies to help siblings of the target group of children. In some cases they were also showing other parents/friends how to help their children. Some migrant parents said that they were also enjoying reading books from their 'own country' with their children.



Comments from some parents who participated in the programme are at www.readingtogether.net.nz, for example:

It has been a time of us spending time together and the interest from home has helped [especially] knowing we will not try to jump in with the right words or push him longer than he can take. It has made him feel important that his teachers care enough to help Mum and Dad help him. Thank you for the time and care you have taken.

He [my son] seems to be tackling more things with confidence because he feels better that he can read.

I think that the programme is excellent, relaxed and friendly - should be compulsory for all parents. I only wish that it was around when my other two children were at primary school.

The involvement of librarians was integral to the programme. Local librarians found that the parents, many of whom had never before used library services, began to visit the libraries with their children, and to seek help to find suitable books to read together at home. The librarians also realised that many of these parents were themselves not confident or competent readers. Some of the librarians reported that being involved in the programme was enlightening because prior to this, they had not fully realised the nature and extent of the reading difficulties that some children (and adults) experience. Nor had they been aware of how difficult it was for these children and their parents to find interesting and manageable material in a library¹⁰.

1983-2006: WIDER IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

During the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s the *Reading Together* programme spread throughout Canterbury and then to other parts of the country as a result of interest from teachers and other literacy educators. Many regional branches of the New Zealand Reading Association initiated Saturday seminars to help interested teachers learn how to run the programme, and after-school courses were also held on request. Many teachers who participated in the seminars and courses implemented the workshops within their own schools or areas, and some then helped others in their schools or regions to implement the programme. *Reading Together* was also incorporated into a range of teacher education courses in Christchurch and Hamilton.

Reasons for the programme's success and wider implementation

There are a number of reasons for the success and wider implementation of the programme. They include:

1. *Reading Together* meets a real need felt by parents and teachers to support children's reading, especially children who are struggling.
2. The programme has a specific focus i.e. reading, which is recognised by all parents as being important.
3. Over more than two decades, hundreds of capable teachers have become involved voluntarily in running the programme. A key strength of these teachers is that they are able to work sensitively with parents and children from diverse backgrounds.
4. The workshops are non-threatening, enjoyable, practical and activity-based.

¹⁰ See also Biddulph, J. (2004a). *Reading Together: Workshop Leader's Handbook*. Hamilton, NZ: The Biddulph Group

5. The programme works across a range of¹¹:
- socio-economic and ethnic groups (including Maori and Pacific families, and parents for whom English is a second language)
 - child and parental literacy levels
 - ages (5-15 year olds)
 - contexts (e.g. parents/whanau helping at home; teacher aides, adult/senior-student volunteers helping at school).
6. Implementation is low cost for schools to run, and incurs no cost for parents.
7. The time commitment required is relatively low:
- for parents: 1hr 15mins per workshop, 4 workshops over 7 weeks
 - for workshop leaders: some time is required initially but less time is needed once a workshop leader is familiar with the programme.
8. *Reading Together* has had the ongoing support and involvement of key principals, teachers, RTLits and other literacy educators, RTLBs, librarians, Reading Associations and other professional associations.
9. The content and processes of the *Reading Together* programme have a sound theoretical and research base in both literacy education and school/home partnerships, as indicated below.



Some comments from those who have been involved with the programme over the years (including children, parents, teachers, senior secondary student volunteers and librarians) are available at www.readingtogether.net.nz – here are two comments from teachers who implemented the programme:

Despite my own initial lack of confidence I found these workshop programmes to be very successful. ... All the parents obviously recommended these workshops to others because other parents have asked me when I will be running more. I am happy to do this... Professionally I have grown in confidence in working with parents... and also I can make them feel comfortable enough to share their fears about reading and see these grow to more positive attitudes. The parents' own self-esteem also showed positive signs of improvement.
(Teacher in a city school in a lower socio-economic area)

Why would you involve parents at secondary? Because parents are thrilled to be able to learn a way of helping, they end up helping more than their own kids, some would join the tutor programme, and then go get a job somewhere.
(Teacher in a large, low-decile city secondary school)

READING TOGETHER, CURRENT RESEARCH AND THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION'S SCHOOLING STRATEGY 2005-2010

The theoretical understandings about literacy and literacy education on which *Reading Together* is based (which are detailed in Section 3 of *Reading Together: Workshop Leader's Handbook*¹²) are consistent with those explicated in a range of research-based literacy education publications¹³.

¹¹ For details please see:

Biddulph, J. (1993). *Teacher-parent partnership to support children's reading development*. Paper presented to the New Zealand Reading Association Annual Conference, Christchurch.

Biddulph, J. (2004a). *Reading Together: Workshop Leader's Handbook*. Hamilton, NZ: The Biddulph Group.

¹² Biddulph, J. (2004a). *Reading Together: Workshop Leader's Handbook*. Hamilton, NZ: The Biddulph Group.

¹³ The publications include:

Biddulph, J. (2000). Guided Reading: Grounded in Theoretical Understandings. In *Steps to Guided Reading: A Professional Development Course Grades 3-5*, pp. 38-46. Wellington, NZ: Learning Media Ltd.

Braunger, J., & Lewis, J. (1998). *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading*. Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Curriculum and Instruction Services.

International Reading Association. (1997) *A Position Statement of the International Reading Association: The Role of Phonics in Reading Instruction – Summary*.

McNaughton, S. (2002). *Meeting of Minds*. Wellington: Learning Media.

Snow, C. (1997). Connecting Home and School: A Conversation with Catherine Snow. Interview in *Harvard Education Letter*, July/August 1997.

Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

The understandings about school/home partnerships which underpin *Reading Together* are also supported by New Zealand and overseas research findings. For example, Alton-Lee (2004¹⁴) reported that findings relating to the influences of families and communities on children's achievement indicate that family/community influences account for 40-65% of children's learning (depending on the aspect of learning). Similarly, *The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children's Achievement in New Zealand: Best Evidence Synthesis*¹⁵ concluded that:

- parents/caregivers can have a significant influence on children's achievement
- parents want the best for their children
- many parents are prepared to learn appropriate strategies to help them.

In addition, the *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis*¹⁶ found that quality teaching effects are enhanced when there are effective school-home partnership practices which are focused on student learning. *Reading Together* creates multiple constructive partnerships: parent-teacher, parent-parent, parent-child, teacher-child, parent-librarian-teacher. Further, the *Reading Together* research findings demonstrate that these partnerships help to raise children's achievement and to bridge cultures, thereby reducing the negative effects that can occur when the child's language and culture differ from those of the school (Biddulph, 1983; Biddulph, 2004a; Biddulph & Tuck, 1983).

The Ministry of Education has recently identified the nurturing of children's learning by families/whanau as one of three key priorities for 2005-2010, and principals, DP/APs, teachers, RTLits and others who are implementing *Reading Together* report that they value the fact that it is a research-based programme which is also a practical, manageable and effective way of meeting this Ministry priority. (Please see *Making a Bigger Difference for all Students: Schooling Strategy 2005-2010*¹⁷. *Reading Together* is cited on page 32.)

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

As a Resource Teacher of Literacy, Jan Allott (the second author) has been running *Reading Together* in the Waikato region and also providing support for others who are interested in implementing the programme. Her comments include:

Personal experience in the key role of workshop leader has convinced me of the immense value of *Reading Together*. Similar outcomes and sentiments expressed by the participants in the original study have been replicated during the more recent implementations using the revised resources.

Experiencing the genuine gratitude that parents express has reinforced the vital need for this type of home support to be in place if schools are to truly 'bridge' the home – school partnership gap which has been recognised in research as significant to successful learning outcomes.

I willingly continue to promote *Reading Together* based on the strong belief that its regular, ongoing implementation must become an embedded practice within schools rather than 'an occasional offering'.

Reading Together can operate as a two-pronged approach. Not only does it allow schools to assist their parent body in helping underachieving readers, but it has the advantage of providing 'proactive' opportunities for targeting all parents of new entrant students as they enter school. I envisage 'good practice' schools providing a twice yearly implementation that would become informative rather than remedial in guiding parents before reading difficulties take hold.

Reading Together is a purpose driven, manageable and cost effective way for schools to build real community relationships, up-skill teachers in such communication and most importantly, provide consistent reading support for students.

¹⁴ Alton-Lee, A. (2004) *Improving Educational Policy and Practice through an Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis Programme*. Paper prepared for an OECD Meeting on Evidence-Based Policy, Washington, 19 April 2004.

¹⁵ Biddulph, F., Biddulph, J. & Biddulph, C. (2003) *The complexity of community and family influences on children's achievement in New Zealand: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

¹⁶ Alton-Lee, A. (2003). *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

¹⁷ Ministry of Education. (2005). *Making a Bigger Difference for all Students: Schooling Strategy 2005-2010*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

READING TOGETHER RESOURCES

In 2004 the *Reading Together* resources were revised and published. They are¹⁸:

1. *Reading Together: Workshop Leader's Handbook*
2. *Reading Together: Suggestions for Helping Children with Reading at Home* (a booklet for parents)
3. *Brock: A 'reading book' for adults*
4. A set of jokes and riddles (for parents and children to enjoy at home)
5. 'Traffic Light' Bookmarks

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¹⁸ All resources are copyright and were published in 2004 by The Biddulph Group, Hamilton. For more information, see www.readingtogether.net.nz