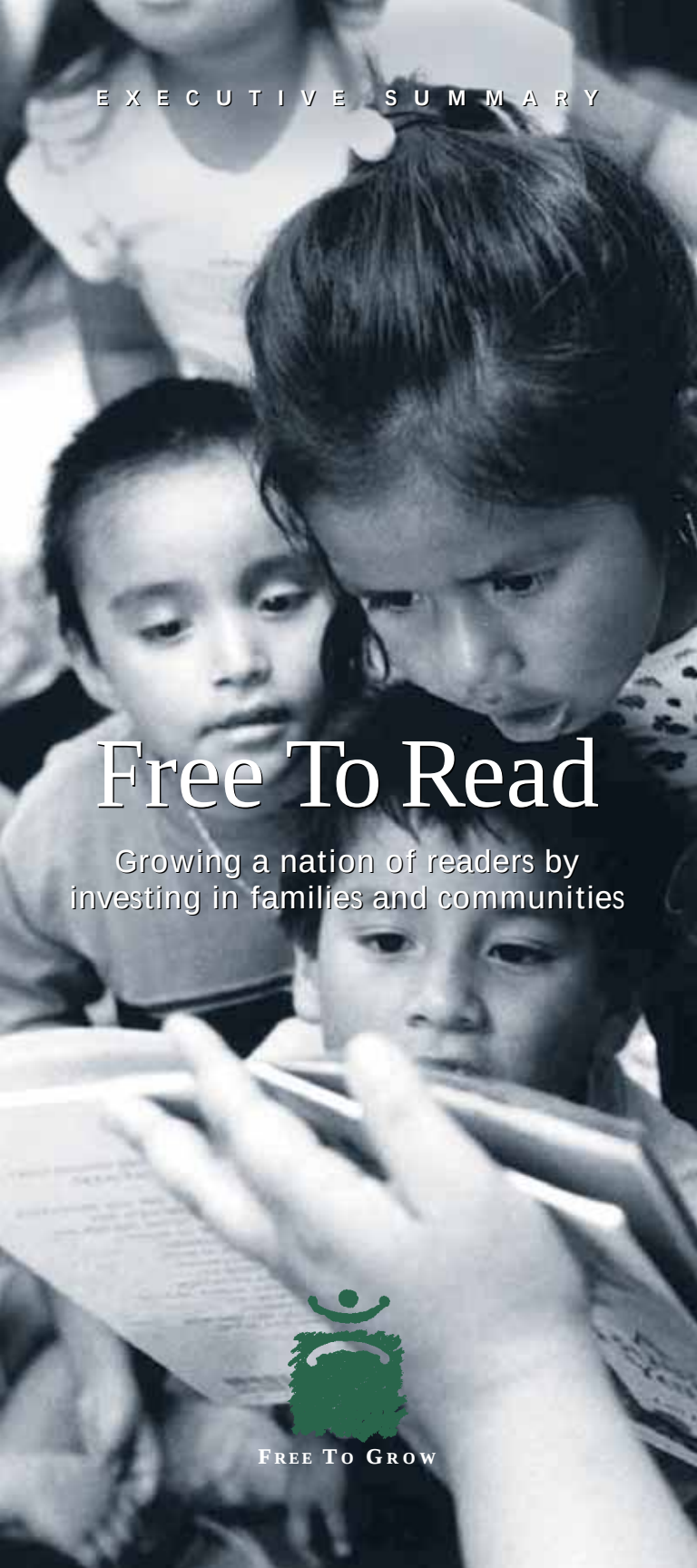
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Free To Read

Growing a nation of readers by investing in families and communities

FREE TO GROW

WRITERS:

Rima Shore

Lori Levine

EDITOR:

Barbara Shore

PHOTOGRAPHER:

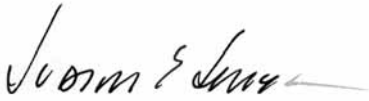
Stephen Shames

FOREWORD

In 2003, responding to the early childhood field's intense policy focus on reading readiness, the Free To Grow National Program Office asked Rima Shore, a noted writer in the field, to help us explore the relationship between Free To Grow's efforts in family and community strengthening and literacy outcomes. But why were we, a public health focused prevention initiative, interested in contributing to the ongoing national conversation about reading readiness? Our work with Head Start was not directly focused on classroom outcomes, but rather on the family and community environments that made children vulnerable to substance abuse.

The answer can be found in the growing body of research upon which Free To Grow is based. This research shows that family and community contexts matter in young children's development – and suggests that the narrowing focus on early literacy will not get us where we want to be – with all children ready to learn and capable of school success.

The emerging research underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the relationship between family and community environments and reading readiness. This literature is quickly growing and each day brings new contributions to our body of knowledge. But even now, the evidence suggests that Free To Grow, and the public health foundation on which it rests, may hold important lessons for policy-makers seeking to strengthen reading readiness. It calls for a broader approach – one that moves beyond the classroom and addresses family and neighborhood contexts in which children grow and learn. It highlights the need to work towards settings where all children will truly be "Free To Read."



Judith Jones

Director and Clinical Professor

Mailman School of Public Health

Columbia University

THIS REPORT ENVISIONS A NATION WHERE ALL CHILDREN ARE FREE TO READ

It envisions homes, schools, and communities where progress toward literacy begins early and is free of the stumbling blocks that have impeded achievement for millions of students. It makes a case for public investment in a wide range of supports—in schools, homes, and communities—aimed at ensuring that all of our children become eager, able readers in the primary grades.

Elementary school reading scores tell us that millions of children face stumbling blocks on the path to literacy. When children have trouble learning to read, it is important to look to schools and teachers for some of the answers. Increasingly, however, studies are linking specific pre-reading skills with the characteristics of the families and neighborhoods in which children live.

PUBLIC INVESTMENT IS NEEDED IN ALL SETTINGS WHERE CHILDREN LEARN

The research presented in this report shows that a significant number of our nation's children face multiple family and community risk factors, and need more intensive supports to become able and enthusiastic readers. Simply doing more of the same is not enough. Families and communities must have the capacity to support reading readiness as well.

To ensure that these children are on the right path, doing more means thinking more broadly and boldly about reading readiness. It means thinking more systematically about the wide range of factors and conditions that can be roadblocks to reading, as well as those that foster healthy learning. Doing more challenges policymakers and early educators to use existing resources differently, in a more integrated way, to engage people from all walks of life to work together to improve reading. And doing more means advocating for significant public investment in all of the settings in which children learn and grow—in families, schools and communities.

I. A Broader Strategy for Improving Reading Achievement

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT LEARNING TO READ

Standing on tiptoes, a small child reaches for a storybook. The book is on a shelf, in a room, in a home, in a neighborhood. Wherever they may be, that child and that book do not exist in a vacuum. They are situated in a context—or more precisely, a set of contexts. Each one has an impact on the child's relationship to the book, and to the letters, words, images, and ideas that fill its pages.

Getting children off to a good start as readers has always been an important aim of elementary education. Today, there is an even stronger emphasis at the federal and state levels on reading as the key challenge of elementary schools, and on getting children ready to read as the major goal of kindergartens and preschool programs. Today's emphasis on reading readiness reflects new insights into how children learn to read—the specific pre-reading skills that prepare children for elementary school instruction and the competencies that underlie those skills. This research has produced three key findings:

- **First, learning to read is a developmental process.** It begins with newborns' first exchanges with important adults, with their earliest experiences with sound, gesture, and meaning, with mimicked nonsense syllables, songs, rhymes, and picture books. It proceeds gradually, taking different forms at different stages.
- **Second, good quality preschools and schools can make a difference.** Competence in reading is not just a matter of innate ability or intelligence, as some believe. It can be taught—beginning in the early years.

- **And third, schools alone cannot raise reading achievement.** Children's mastery of reading readiness skills hinges on their overall development—the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional competencies that underlie those skills. And those competencies are significantly affected by the contexts in which children grow up—including both homes and neighborhoods. Boosting achievement will therefore require a broader strategy—one that focuses not only on instructional strategies, but also on approaches that strengthen families and communities.

II. What Does It Take to "Grow" Good Readers?

CHILDREN NEED A RANGE OF READING READINESS SKILLS

Over time, diverse, repeated, enjoyable experiences with oral and written language lay a foundation for literacy, imparting the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that children need to become able readers. And in fact, children who enter school with this foundation tend to encounter fewer problems as they learn to read. Each type of skill is important. When all are in place, children can benefit from the reading instruction they receive in the primary grades and the road to reading is generally smooth and predictable.

Oral language skills

To become good readers, children need to have a sense of what spoken language is, how it works, and how it can be used. Children who have a general lack of language ability in the first five years of life tend to struggle with reading in the primary grades.

Knowledge of letters and the sounds associated with them

Reading experts say that children learn to read more easily when they enter school with some knowledge of letters and the sounds associated with them. The alphabetic principle—that letters stand for sounds, which in turn make up words—takes time to master.

Familiarity with the conventions of print

Preschoolers who pretend to read are more likely to become successful readers later, because as they turn pages and recite familiar stories, they are becoming familiar with how print works and with the format of books.

Contextual knowledge gained from a rich variety of experiences

To mature as readers and succeed as students, children also need strong conceptual understanding and contextual knowledge. These skills may not affect reading scores until well into elementary school, but need to be developed much sooner.

CHILDREN'S MASTERY OF THESE SKILLS HINGES ON THEIR OVERALL DEVELOPMENT

It depends on their growth across the developmental spectrum—especially physical and motor development, cognitive development, and socio-emotional development.

Physical and motor development

Children's physical development and health affect their chances of avoiding reading difficulties. Access to good health care, including preventive care, can prevent the kinds of nutritional problems that make it hard for children to think clearly, remember, or pay attention. Learning to read requires physical dexterity and the visual motor skills needed to coordinate their eye and hand movements. For all of these reasons, family health conditions affect outcomes for children.

Cognitive development

Good readers must first be good thinkers. Reading challenges children to process information, drawing upon cognitive skills associated with focusing attention, planning, and remembering. They need the kind of analytic abilities that allow them to associate the people, events, and ideas they encounter in texts to their own prior experience, either in other books, in the media, or in real life.

Socio-emotional development

Scientists now confirm that reading readiness calls upon both cognitive and socio-emotional development. If children cannot regulate their impulses well enough or long enough to take in what is going on around them, they are less likely to benefit from classroom experiences. Researchers say that indicators of self-regulation ability are independent—and may be equally powerful—predictors of school adjustment.

III. How Families Foster Reading Readiness

Data collected by Child Trends suggest that family characteristics have a major impact on children's reading readiness skills. For example, preschoolers (ages 3 to 5) living in poverty are much less likely than non-poor children to be able to recognize the letters or the alphabet, write their name, or read or pretend to read. Preschoolers whose mothers' home language is not English are much less likely than other children to have these three skills.

Families foster language development

From the very start, parents structure children's experiences in ways that foster language development. Parents exchange glances, expressions, gestures, and sounds with babies, and later play simple turn-taking games like peekaboo, preparing the way for the give and take of conversation. By teaching children rhymes and songs and playing word games with them, parents help children think about and manipulate sounds and words and help them gain phonological and phonemic awareness. Parents actively help babies and toddlers learn new words through a collaboration that researchers call "joint attention." Young children's vocabularies are also affected by family dynamics.

Families share stories and books

Researchers say that children experience books and other print materials in all kinds of homes, including those of low-income and economically stressed families. However, the quantity and variety of these materials does depend on family income. Parents' availability to read to children hinges as well on their work schedules, level of stress, and their own literacy and comfort with books. Low-income households often face challenges, financial and otherwise, in exposing their children to books and reading.

Families introduce a wide variety of experiences

Whether visiting a library or a laundromat, parents may chat with children about their impressions, thoughts, and plans. These kinds of experiences are quite ordinary, but many parents find them hard to arrange. As one first-grade teacher said, "My biggest obstacle in teaching reading is the lack of experiences that some children are bringing to school…Experiences like having your mother explain the types of fruit at the grocery store or playing with funnels in the bathtub. Experiences that come with having been talked to and read to."

HOW FAMILIES FOSTER THE BASIC COMPETENCIES THAT UNDERLIE READING READINESS SKILLS

When children arrive in elementary school with good reading-readiness skills, they usually make good progress. However, according to the NRC researchers, "Children from poor neighborhoods, children with limited proficiency in English, children with hearing impairments, children with preschool language impairments, and children whose parents had difficulty learning to read are particularly at risk of arriving at school with weaknesses in these areas and hence of falling behind from the outset."

How do families influence these underlying competencies?

No influence on children's development and learning is more important than that of families. A strong early attachment to parents or other primary caregivers scaffolds many kinds of learning. To be sure, many factors affect young children's lives, but it is early relationships with parents that lay the foundation on which social competency and peer relationships are built.

Children are influenced by who families are

Scholars have shown clear links between family characteristics and children's development. For example, when families are better off economically and when mothers have higher levels of education, and when they grow up in harmonious, two-partner families, children have better developmental outcomes. Researchers have also shown that when working mothers hold jobs that are challenging and interesting, children appear to do better; when jobs are tedious and repetitive, children can be adversely affected.

Children are influenced by how families are

Children are also affected by how families are—by adults' responsiveness to them, by the social and emotional climate in a household, and by the kinds of learning experiences provided at home. Researchers say that when families are able to create more positive family processes and family management strategies, children do better academically, have fewer behavior problems, and are more involved in outside activities. This is true even for children who live in high-risk environments.

And children are influence by what families do together

Researchers studying school success say that the single strongest predictor of achievement scores and rates of behavioral problems is the amount of home-based family meal time. Meal time proved to be a more powerful predictor than time spent in school, studying, attending religious services, or taking part in sports. The result held even when controlled for race, gender, parents' age or education, income and family size.

Children are influenced by parents' mental health

Research consistently shows that more responsive parenting in the early years predicts greater success in reading and higher overall achievement in school. Mental health problems impede parents' capacity to pay attention to their children, read their children's cues and signals, and provide responsive care.

They are influenced by parents' substance abuse problems

Parents who are addicted to alcohol or drugs are less likely to provide good nutrition and responsive care to young children. Smoking, drinking, and drug abuse by mothers can affect babies even before birth. Many studies show that smoking and heavy alcohol use during pregnancy have detrimental effects on the growth, health, development and behavior of newborns and children.

IV. How Communities Foster Reading Readiness

Communities affect the capacity of families to be effective on behalf of their children. At the same time, there is evidence that communities affect child outcomes, over and above family characteristics, and that this influence matters. Researchers say that even modest neighborhood effects are meaningful and present opportunities to improve results for children and families.

HOW NEIGHBORHOODS FOSTER THE BASIC COMPETENCIES THAT UNDERLIE READING READINESS SKILLS

Children attending school in high-poverty districts are at especially high risk for poor pre-reading skills and reading achievement. A recent Rand study of children in Los Angeles County found that children who live in the county's poorest neighborhoods have the lowest levels of school readiness on multiple dimensions.

Children are influenced by "who" communities are

Outcomes for children are certainly affected by their own families' economic circumstances, but neighbors' circumstances can make a difference as well. In tough neighborhoods, children's development and learning are jeopardized not just by the concentration of low-income residents, but also by the absence of people with good jobs. Other studies have found that when adults in the neighborhood have steady work, children are better off.

Children are also affected by how communities are

When people experience strong social support, they enjoy better physical and emotional health, recover faster from illness, and live longer. When children living in tough neighborhoods have sturdy connections with supportive adults in their communities, they are more resilient—better able to survive and thrive despite conditions that adversely affect many other children.

And children are affected by what people in communities do together

Children and families benefit from lively social networks, but so do whole communities. Neighborhood social organization and interaction are important because they make it easier for residents to establish social networks, to agree on values needed to exercise social control, and to work together on common goals.

V. Free To Read: A Framework for Action

For many children, the road to reading is straightforward and predictable. Their home and community environments provide the supports that all children need to be successful learners. At the same time, large numbers of our nation's children face multiple family and community risk factors, and need more intensive supports to become able and enthusiastic readers. The research also suggests a broad framework for moving forward. This five-part framework urges us to take the following actions to secure the investments that will make it possible for all children to be truly "free to read."

1. MOVE BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

While schools cannot address all of the issues beyond their walls that affect achievement, they can do a better job building relationships with families and the community to support school success. They can help children transition from home or early education programs to kindergarten. They can help primary grade teachers better understand resources and problems in households and communities that can affect reading readiness and achievement. They can help parents and guardians better understand how to support children's classroom learning, and when appropriate, point them toward adult literacy or English as a second language programs.

2. ASSESS SCHOOL READINESS IN THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

States all over the country are setting school readiness indicators to guide program and resource decisions. Unfortunately, too many of these indicators relate only to children, resulting in program interventions and funding priorities that are too narrowly focused to address the broader barriers to school readiness raised in this report. Experts say that comprehensive assessments of school readiness must consider not only the characteristics and abilities of children, but also the conditions supporting children's development. Such assessments should also consider community conditions, including the quality and accessibility of health services, neighborhood safety, parenting education, child care and early education services, and the "readiness" of the schools.

3. ENGAGE FAMILIES AS MEMBERS OF COMMUNITIES

Engaging families as members of communities requires a finely tuned understanding of the factors that contribute to a family's capacity to foster healthy child development and school readiness. Looking through a "one-family" lens often leads to

missing opportunities to craft systemic solutions that could benefit many families within the community.

Systemic solutions begin with a "both and" perspective that views children in the context of their families and communities. They also typically require the participation of multiple agencies and organizations that interact with families. By working together, policymakers from different organizations or fields can pursue an integrated approach to improving outcomes for children and create more seamless ways of providing ongoing support to families in need.

Supporting families in children's learning also means creating opportunities for parents to improve their own skills in fostering healthy child development. Research-based parent education should be an integral part of each educational institution's repertoire of support for children's learning and development. In addition, centers and schools can play a crucial role in creating and sustaining the networks that support families and build social capital. Even relatively small additions to the budgets of centers and schools can strengthen community and family engagement, thereby helping to strengthen the social fabric that is so often frayed, even within our country's more affluent neighborhoods.

VULNERABLE FAMILIES, VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Researchers say that children's mental health needs cannot be adequately addressed without taking into account the family context. These findings suggest that efforts to address family mental health issues and other challenging life situations can be considered reading readiness strategies. Early childhood programs and schools must partner with substance abuse, mental health and other counseling organizations to support families affected by high risk behaviors. Such collaboration requires professionals to "think outside of the box" in order to address conditions and stressors that jeopardize young children's development and learning.

4. BUILD DIVERSE PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT READING READINESS

Increasingly, individuals and organizations representing diverse community stakeholders have been sought out as champions of the early childhood agenda. Organizations like Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a national network of law enforcement officers, have become leading advocates for enhanced funding for high-quality early education. Economists and business leaders have proven to be strong allies as well. The role of these partners as champions of public investment in early childhood programs can serve as a foundation for engaging these groups more broadly as active participants in community collaborations to improve reading readiness. Economic and housing development groups, code enforcement, alcohol control entities, neighborhood watch groups and many others, all have roles to play in creating safe, positive environments for young children.

The diverse programs serving families and young children within a neighborhood also have the capacity to throw a broader net, reaching families beyond the usual boundaries of their programs. By working together, early childhood programs, schools, community centers and others located in the same neighborhoods can help forge relationships among neighbors who might not know one another, enhancing the social connections that foster neighborhood health.

5. MOVE BEYOND "PROJECT THINKING" TOWARD A MORE INTEGRATED APPROACH

Each wave of educational policy brings a flurry of new interventions, program models and demonstration projects, many of which vanish as funding cycles shift. Experience on the ground suggests the need to move beyond "project thinking" toward a more integrated approach—one that infuses into the agendas of existing organizations consideration of family and community effects on young children's development and school readiness.

The tendency to think in "field silos" is reinforced by the way that funding decisions are made. Too often, categorical funding streams for education, mental health, substance abuse treatment, community development and law enforcement act as a barrier for integrated work. Yet, the kinds of integrated approaches needed to improve outcomes for children require that staff learn new methods of problem-solving and collaborating, and that time be committed to institutionalizing these practices over the long term.

FREE TO CHANGE

Children learn to read one at a time. For each boy or girl, the "aha" moment—the realization that letters represent sounds and that sounds can link up into words—comes at a different time. While learning to read might appear to be an individual challenge, the research presented in this report shows that learning to read is a process that begins in the earliest days and weeks of life and is shaped by children's experiences in both their homes and neighborhoods. The research also sheds light on the significant number of our nation's children who face multiple family and community risk factors and need more intensive supports to succeed in school.

The challenge—ensuring that children's early experiences and supports get them off to a good start as readers—is both clear and compelling. Studies show that families have a profound impact on children's reading readiness and that children from different neighborhoods are likely to have different developmental outcomes. However, focusing on family and community contributions to strengthening literacy in an "equal but separate" fashion is not enough. Growing strong readers demands an approach that brings all partners in the process to the table—the same table—to craft a common vision, a common vocabulary and a common message.

Over the past 12 years, the lessons learned through programs like Free To Grow and the public health model on which it is based have underscored the potential of a more integrated, holistic approach to promoting reading readiness. Historically, policy-makers from different fields often have operated under different assumptions about what children and families need and how change can be created and sustained. A more integrated approach may call for educators to advocate for environmental and systems change strategies that are not usually part of their repertoire or expertise. By the same token, law enforcement and community development professionals may also have to stretch to see their role in this larger picture. Yet it is these broad-based efforts that will support the partnerships at the local level which are needed as the first step in systems change on behalf of a better future for all of our nation's children.

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For more information on Free To Grow Initiatives contact:
Judith E. Jones, M.Sc.
Clinical Professor
Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University
722 West 168th Street
New York, NY 10032
212 305-8120
jej3@columbia.edu

FREE TO GROW
Head Start Partnerships to Promote
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MAILMAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
Columbia University