

# Setting the Foundation for Learning Success: A Brief on Family Literacy

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## Overview

Family literacy—in which multiple generations from the same family engage in learning together—has been at the heart of the National Center for Families Learning’s work for more than three decades. By addressing the fact that low literacy “is not just a symptom but a root cause of so many other societal challenges” (Cacicio et al., 2023, p. 5), NCFL’s family literacy programming has demonstrated its power and efficacy to support family well-being and serve as the catalyst for positive change in communities.

NCFL has long been focused on eradicating poverty through education solutions for families. One significant step toward this goal is to provide holistic learning opportunities through high-quality family literacy programming. This comprehensive, whole-family approach has the potential to create a legacy of impact—what NCFL founder Sharon Darling described as “ripples that start in one generation and continue to touch generations into the future” (Jacobs, 2019, p. 61).

The need for transformational literacy solutions has never been greater. Currently only one-third of American children are proficient readers (NAEP, 2019), and 43 million adults across the United States read at the lowest literacy levels (Hussar et al., 2020). Limited literacy results in decreased educational attainment, employability, financial security, and health outcomes for families.

NCFL’s signature four-component family literacy model was specifically designed to address these needs and set the foundation for families who seek to improve their educational and economic opportunities and expand pathways for multigenerational learning. The research on this model includes a number of sustained positive impacts, including increased parent involvement in at-home family literacy behaviors, increased parent engagement in their children’s schools, improved student attendance, and improved

student academic outcomes. This brief clarifies NCFL’s definition of family literacy, provides an overview of the four-component family literacy model, and highlights NCFL’s extensive efforts to put that model into practice.

## Defining Family Literacy

In alignment with federal law, NCFL defines family literacy as **a continuum of services that address the multigenerational nature of literacy. Family literacy programs integrate (1) interactive literacy activities between parents and children; (2) support in parenting activities; (3) parent or family adult education and literacy activities that lead to readiness for postsecondary education or training, career advancement, economic self-sufficiency, and personal goal attainment; and (4) age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences.**

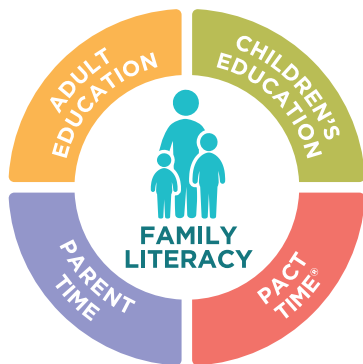
While the term “literacy” often refers exclusively to English language print literacy, NCFL relies on UNESCO’s more expansive definition, which incorporates the “means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world” (UNESCO, 2023). In this context, literacy is understood to have multiple components, of which print literacy is only a part. Also important are numeracy, digital literacy, multilingual literacy, health literacy, and cultural literacy—all required components that “individuals in a modern society need to learn how to construct knowledge from multiple sources and modes of representation” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 43).

To facilitate its family literacy work, NCFL employs a set of foundational equity design principles that ensure the organization joins communities and partnerships ready to listen to the experiences and goals of the people most impacted by our work—families and practitioners.

These principles help NCFL to counteract the implicit biases inherent in many traditional systems by (1) fostering community leadership and building capacity, (2) addressing issues of education inequities, (3) working towards systems change, (4) sharing power and decision making, (5) prioritizing relationships, and (6) practicing inclusivity (McKercher, 2021; Hill et al., 2016).

## NCFL's Approach to Family Literacy

As the foundational element of NCFL's family learning system, family literacy seeks to impact the long-term trajectory of a family's education, financial, health, and social-emotional well-being by providing the time and integrated support families need to realize their goals.



**Adult Education:** Programming that supports parenting adults in achieving their education or workforce goals.

**Children's Education:** Educational programming that supports academic growth, social-emotional learning, and physical development.

**Parent Time:** Opportunities for parenting adults to learn together in support of families' self-selected goals.

**PACT Time:** Multigenerational programming where parenting adults engage in joint learning activities with their children in educational settings, their homes, and the community.

The four-component model of family literacy, developed by NCFL in 1985 and codified into federal law in 1998, is "the most well-known comprehensive family literacy model" (Prins et al., 2020, p. 206), incorporating multigenerational family programming of sufficient intensity and duration to support families in achieving their goals. The four integrated components of the model are detailed below.

- **Adult Education:** Programming for parents that focuses on supporting them in achieving their own goals related to adult basic education, English language learning, workforce development, or entrepreneurship. Adult Education is often provided by partner organizations in the community.

- **Children's Education:** Early childhood centers, schools, libraries, and community-based organizations are already providing high-quality children's education. Family Literacy programs are often embedded in these settings to connect the other three components to Children's Education.
- **Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time®:** Adults join children in their educational setting. The adults learn alongside their children and participate in the activities scheduled during this time. Traditionally PACT Time has taken place in classrooms, but as family literacy has moved beyond schools to libraries, community-based organizations, and other settings, PACT Time has expanded. In some programs,

PACT Time includes parents and children engaging in practice beyond program hours in self-selected spaces.

- **Parent Time:** Parents are supported in their role as their children's first and most important teachers. Parent Time focuses on the needs of program participants as they support their children's physical, social-emotional, and academic growth. Facilitators also prepare to engage in PACT Time activities with their children and debrief with them afterward to discuss experiences and answer questions.

## Family Literacy in Practice

Through decades of programming serving thousands of children and families across the United States, NCFL has repeatedly and consistently proven the efficacy of its four-component literacy model. Three representative programmatic examples are provided below.

**Toyota Family Literacy Program (TFLP):** In 2003, NCFL and Toyota created TFLP to provide services for immigrants in the United States, particularly Hispanic families. The goal of the program was to help adults improve their English language skills, increase their ability to support their children's education, and develop a greater understanding of American workforce culture and educational systems. TFLP sites were developed in 90 Title I elementary schools across 30 cities.

Throughout the 10-year initiative, strong positive impacts were demonstrated for kindergarten through third grade children and their families. This foundational study also clearly illuminated that these impacts could be sustained over time:

- Parents demonstrated significant increases in involvement in their children's schools, buoyed by increases in parents' language skills.
- Parents significantly increased literacy behaviors in the home, including reading more with their children.
- Parents expressed increased self-efficacy about their capacity to support their children's education.
- Children whose parents participated in family literacy programming exceeded comparison peers (parents not in the program) in school attendance; motivation to learn; and academic performance as measured by state reading assessments, grade-level reading benchmarks, and language acquisition.

### **Family and Child Education (FACE) program:**

For over three decades, NCFL has had a strong partnership with the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) through the FACE program. This partnership began in 1991 with six BIE-funded schools and now supports 54 schools across multiple states. Designed as a family literacy program based

in part on the NCFL model, FACE works to strengthen family-school-community connections, increase parent participation in their preschool child's learning, promote lifelong learning, and celebrate the unique cultural and linguistic diversity of American Indian communities (BIE, 2018). Both home-based and center-based settings are utilized and parents receive support for transitions between home and center, as well as between center and kindergarten.

Outcomes for NCFL's FACE programming are overwhelmingly positive, representing thousands of American Indian families and their preschool-age children, including:

- Parents demonstrated significant increases in reading to their preschoolers and supporting their child's learning, particularly in telling stories to their child, listening to their child read, and teaching their child.
- FACE children significantly increased their readiness for school at post-test as measured by the Expressive One Word Picture Vocabulary Test and score, on average, above the national average.
- PACT Time attendance as a measure of family engagement is a direct predictor of improved performance on the Expressive One Word Picture Vocabulary Test at program exit.
- Children in grades K-3 who participated in FACE as preschoolers scored significantly higher on standardized reading and math tests than children who did not participate in FACE.

FACE program participant, Wilphina, has seen positive educational and cultural outcomes as a result of the program: "My kids are off to a great start in their academic careers. I am able to provide for my family because of the opportunities and experiences that I've gained. My family literacy program has always integrated my Diné language and culture, expressed their kinship with me, and acknowledged my Diné traditional upbringing and background. The incorporation of Diné language and culture and what FACE stands for is something that is truly effective for our young students."

## Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFEC)

**program:** NCFL currently leads the SFEC programs in Nebraska, Colorado, and North Carolina and has previous experience leading the Arizona SFEC. Additionally, NCFL has served as a partner on this work in Kentucky and Maryland. As an SFEC lead, NCFL works alongside a consortium of state and local organizations to provide an equitable, coordinated continuum of family engagement and literacy support designed to build the capacity of families, schools, and communities and improve student and family well-being.

Outcomes for SFEC programs in Nebraska and Arizona demonstrated reductions in equity and opportunity gaps and multigenerational literacy impacts, specifically:

- School attendance rates were higher for children whose parents participated in the Family Literacy program as compared to children whose parents did not participate.
- Approximately 40-50% of parents showed a positive change in parental involvement from the beginning to the end of the program. For parents who began in the bottom quartile, approximately 75% showed a positive change.
- Over 50% of parents showed a positive increase in their confidence in decision-making about their child's education. For parents starting out in the bottom quartile, over 80% showed a positive increase.
- Over 90% of parents made progress toward at least one of their adult education or workforce goals.

Nebraska SFEC participant, Rosa Victoria, highlights these impacts in describing how it has benefited her family: "I am more involved in teaching and developing my children. What I enjoy most is the time I spend with my child in her classroom and seeing how she interacts with her peers. It also allows me to have better communication with her teacher. On the other hand, the English classes have helped me a lot in my day-to-day. It has given me more certainty and confidence in myself."

## The Work Ahead

NCFL has an ambitious vision for the next decade that builds upon the organization's legacy work and charts a new course. NCFL's 60x30 Vision aims to establish coordinated and aligned Family Learning Systems in 60 communities by 2030 that will include family literacy, family engagement, and family leadership as key components.

As Lynch and Prins (2021) point out, some critiques of family literacy programs are that they target mothers, ignoring the role that other family members and the community play. Additionally, they note that literacy often refers to print literacy rather than various through multiple modes. Drawing on our 60x30 Vision, NCFL's future work will expand family literacy beyond the singular parent and/or family to highlight how vital coordinated and aligned family learning systems are in supporting family engagement broadly and family literacy specifically. Further, through connections to inquiry-based learning and emerging technologies, NCFL is helping to broaden practices of literacy within and beyond the four component family literacy model.

We invite you to keep abreast of our ongoing family literacy efforts across the country and to follow along as we carry out our 60x30 Vision. Updates are available on the [NCFL blog](#) and through the Family Learning Insider [newsletter](#). Partners, organizations, or educators interested in learning more about NCFL's available family literacy resources can contact [info@familieslearning.org](mailto:info@familieslearning.org) for further assistance.

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