

## **Shared book reading as a context for meaningful father-child interaction**

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### **Abstract**

National surveys indicate that 60 percent of 3- to 5-year-old children are read to daily by a family member; however, very few studies have examined the role of the father in this important activity. The purpose of the present investigation was to explore fathers' perceptions of the benefits of shared book reading for themselves and their children, and to examine how shared book reading can influence the nature of father-child interactions. Two-hundred and nine fathers of preschool and early elementary school-age children who participated in a four-week reading campaign targeting fathers completed written surveys. An analysis of fathers' written responses revealed five distinct benefits that fathers perceived to be associated with daily shared book reading with their children. Overall, findings support the idea that shared book reading between fathers and children creates a favorable context for relationship growth.

**Keywords:** fathers, literacy, shared book reading, Fathers Reading Every Day, FRED

### **Introduction**

Reading aloud to children in an interactive style that engages them as active learners is widely considered to be one of the most effective strategies for promoting children's early literacy skills (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini 1995; Halle, Calkins, Berry, and Johnson 2003; Hargrave

and Sénéchal 2000; Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998; Whitehurst and Lonigan 2001). Despite its importance, the frequency with which parents engage their children in this cognitively enriching activity is not so clear. For more than a decade, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has been collecting data on how often parents of 3- to 5-year-old children read to them. The latest statistics, collected nationally using telephone interviews, indicate that 60 percent of 3- to 5-year olds have a family member who reads to them daily (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2007). Hofferth (2006), however, argues that single-item self-report measures similar to that used by NCES are subject to response bias on the part of parents who tend to exaggerate the amount of time they report reading to their children. In addition, it is unclear from the NCES data who within the family actually reads to the children. Results from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), one of the few large-scale studies that has collected data on both mothers' and fathers' participation in reading activities with their children, revealed that 39 percent of resident fathers (compared to 55 percent of resident mothers) read or looked at books with their 3- to 12-year-old children at least once a week (Halle 2002).

With a few exceptions, the majority of empirical research related to parental involvement in children's early literacy development conducted over the last several decades has concentrated on the interactions between mothers and their children (Ortiz 2001; Schwartz 2004; Stile and Ortiz 1999). While this has yielded valuable information concerning parent-child literacy practices in the home environment, relatively little is known about fathers' participation in similar activities. Therefore, the purpose of the present investigation is to examine father involvement in children's early literacy development with a particular focus on their shared book reading experiences. Specifically, this study will explore fathers' perceptions of the benefits of shared book reading for themselves and their children, and how shared book reading between fathers and children can influence the nature of father-child interactions.

### **Father involvement in children's early literacy experiences**

As noted above, it is difficult to ascertain accurate data regarding the frequency of parent-child reading activities. This may be particularly true for fathers, who tend not to be represented in national literacy studies. The sparse amount of data that does exist often seems vague or contradictory due to variations in sample sizes, sampling methods, and data collection techniques. For example, Ortiz (2001) conducted in-depth interviews with a small sample of fathers (35 fathers of kindergarten- through 2nd-grade children) and found that 92 percent reported engaging in school-related early literacy practices on a weekly basis, while nearly three-fourths (73 percent) reported that they participated in recreational reading with their children weekly. Fewer fathers (8 percent) reported involving children in weekly religious reading activities and sharing "work" related reading materials (e.g., office reports, company newsletters) with their children.

In contrast, a nationally random telephone survey conducted with more than 894 participants by the National Center for Fathering (1999) revealed that more than 47 percent of fathers read to their school-age children on a fairly regular basis (24.6 percent, every day; 22.7 percent, once or twice a week). It was discovered in the same survey, however, that a sizeable percentage of fathers (40.2 percent) never read to their children. Similar to the aforementioned NCES study, the National Center for Fathering survey relied upon a single self-report item to assess fathers' reading frequencies with their children. Moreover, the study surveyed men and women, producing discrepant results on the reading frequency item. When fathers were asked how often they read to their children, 34 percent indicated that they never read; whereas, when mothers were asked the same question, 45.5 percent responded that the fathers of their children never read to them. As suggested by Hofferth (2006), time diaries tend to be a much more valid and reliable method for collecting data of this nature; however, few large-scale studies, if any, have collected time diary data on fathers' reading practices with their children.

In addition to the few studies that have attempted to measure the frequency of father involvement in children's early literacy activities, efforts have also been made to investigate the strategies that mothers and fathers use with their children during shared book reading experiences. Pelligrini, Brody, and Sigel (1985) concluded in a study of parents' book reading habits with their children that there was not a significant difference in the strategies used by mothers and fathers (e.g., questioning, verbal and emotional support, or paraphrasing). Similarly, Bus, Belsky, van Ijzendoorn, and Crnic (1997) noted in their study of parent-child attachment and book reading patterns that mothers and fathers displayed a "similar quality" of book reading with their toddlers.

The above finding, however, was not replicated by Schwartz (2004), who discovered in an observational study of mother- and father-child interactions during storybook reading that there were significant differences in the quality of strategies used by parents. Mothers were found to use more interactive strategies that require higher cognitive demand, while fathers tended to use more literal strategies with less potential for stimulating dialogue with the children related to the readings. The author attributes the study's findings to the fact that child care, both in and outside the home, is still predominately undertaken by women, and that women are more inclined to learn from a variety of sources about strategies for caring for their children, including how to read aloud to them (Schwartz 2004).

What motivates fathers to take part in their children's early literacy development? In the aforementioned study conducted by Ortiz (2001), three predominant themes emerged from the data regarding the reasons fathers engaged their children in early literacy activities: curiosity of print on the part of children, fathers' personal values and beliefs, and marital role functions. Fathers frequently mentioned that they involved themselves in their children's literacy activities because of their children's expressed interest in print-related materials. Likewise, many fathers

reported that they were aware of the benefits of learning to read and write, and therefore, felt the need to model reading and writing activities for their children.

The cognitive benefits associated with reading aloud to children are well established; however, there is an additional scarcely mentioned benefit of shared book reading between parents and children that has specific implications for the quality of parent-child relationships: bonding between the parent and child (Schwartz 2004; Sénéchal, Cornell, and Broda 1995). Shared book reading appears to create a favorable context for relationship growth that may be particularly important for fathers. Ortiz, Stile, and Brown (1999) collected data from 60 fathers over a three-year period, assessing their reading patterns with at-risk and exceptional children. Two distinct themes emerged when fathers gave reasons for their involvement in their children's early literacy development: to provide a head start in reading and writing and to increase bonding. The parent-child bonding theme also emerged in a study of middle-class Australian parents' involvement in their young children's literacy development (Nichols 2000). In semi-structured interviews conducted with 56 parents (31 mothers and 25 fathers), Nichols discovered that not only is reading a routine part of family life shared by both mother and fathers, but that fathers, in particular, viewed reading as a significant tool for bonding with their sons.

### **Theoretical/conceptual framework**

The current study is based on a generative fathering conceptual framework that focuses on men's capabilities rather than their deficiencies (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997). Generativity, as a concept, emerged predominately in the work of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, (Erikson 1963) and refers to the developmental task of caring for the next generation. Snarey further described the concept as it relates to fatherhood as "any caring activity that contributes to future generations" (Snarey 1993, 19). Generative fathering emphasizes the developmental growth and potential of fathers, broadens the definition of parental nurturance, views fathering as an ethical imperative, and considers fathering as generative work rather than social role playing (Brotherson and White 2007).

One of the most important contributions that fathers can make to their children's lives is to be highly involved in their early care and education. Engaging in shared book reading on a regular basis enables fathers to contribute to their children's future by equipping them with the skills they need to succeed academically. At the same time, reading together provides an avenue for fathers to spend quality and quantity time with their children in an activity that has the potential to nurture the bond between fathers and their children, allows them to share their values and traditions with the next generation, and enables fathers to fulfill the ethical imperative to provide for and equip their children with the knowledge and skills they need to successfully navigate the challenges of life.

## Research questions

Despite an increased interest in the influence that fathers have on their children's development, gaps still exist in our understanding of the ways in which fathers involve themselves in their children's early education. The present study, which was guided by the following research questions, is an attempt to contribute to our understanding of the role of fathers in their children's early literacy development with a specific focus on shared book reading:

- What benefits, if any, do fathers perceive to derive from daily shared book reading experiences with their children?
- In what ways can daily shared book reading between fathers and children influence the nature of father-child interactions?

## Method

### *Sample and procedure*

Participants in this study consisted of 209 fathers of children enrolled in a series of early childhood education programs and elementary schools in ten counties across a large southern state. Brochures and flyers advertising a four-week reading campaign titled *Fathers Reading Every Day*, or FRED, were distributed by county Extension agents and their partners (e.g., elementary school teachers, school administrators, early childhood educators, parental involvement coordinators) to children, who in turn, took the information home to give to their fathers. Written announcements were included in school bulletins and children were orally reminded of the campaign during class times. The written announcements invited interested fathers to attend an information session with their children to learn more about the FRED campaign, as well as give them an opportunity to participate. Two-hundred and nine fathers participated with their children in the reading campaign from ten separate sites. The mean age of adult participants was 37.0, while the mean age of participating children was 5.9 years. See Table 1 for additional sample characteristics.

**Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 209)**

Variable		Percent
Ethnicity	Caucasian	43.5
	African American	19.1
	Hispanic/Latino	24.4

	<b>Other</b>	6.2
	<b>Missing cases</b>	6.8
<b>Educational Level</b>	<b>Less than high school</b>	7.2
	<b>High school diploma or equivalent</b>	35.4
	<b>Some college</b>	30.6
	<b>College degree</b>	19.6
	<b>Missing cases</b>	7.2
<b>Income</b>	<b>Under \$20,000</b>	19.6
	<b>\$20,000-29,000</b>	12.0
	<b>\$30,000-39,000</b>	15.3
	<b>\$40,000 or more</b>	39.2
	<b>Missing cases</b>	13.9
<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Single (never married)</b>	10.0
	<b>Married (1st time)</b>	55.5
	<b>Separated/Divorced</b>	7.2
	<b>Remarried</b>	19.1
	<b>Missing cases</b>	8.2
<b># Times/Week Someone in Family Reads to Child</b>	<b>0</b>	0.5
	<b>1-2</b>	17.2
	<b>3-4</b>	30.6
	<b>5-6</b>	33.5
	<b>7 or more</b>	13.9
	<b>Missing cases</b>	4.3
	<b>0</b>	7.7
	<b>1-2</b>	40.2

<b># Times/Week Father Reads to Child</b>	<b>3-4</b>	30.6
	<b>5-6</b>	11.0
	<b>7 or more</b>	6.2
	<b>Missing cases</b>	4.3

As noted in the table, Caucasians made up the majority of the sample (43.5 percent), followed by Hispanics/Latinos (24.4 percent), African Americans (19.1 percent), and other (6.2 percent). Approximately 35 percent (35.4) of respondents were high school graduates, 30.6 percent completed some college, 19.6 percent completed a college degree, and just over 7 percent (7.2) did not possess a high school diploma. At the time of the survey, more than 46 percent (46.9) of fathers reported household incomes below \$40,000, including 19.6 percent who reported household incomes of \$20,000 or less. Just over 39 percent (39.2) reported household incomes of \$40,000 or more. The majority of fathers in this sample were currently married (55.5 percent, first-time marriages; 19.1 percent, remarried). Ten percent of fathers reported being single (never married) and 7.2 percent reported being divorced or separated at the time of the survey. Regarding their reading practices, 78 percent of the participants indicated that someone in the family reads to their child at least three or more times a week; whereas, 47.8 percent of respondents noted that they (fathers) read to their child at least three times a week. Slightly over 40 percent (40.2) of fathers read to their children 1 to 2 times a week. Nearly 8 percent (7.7) of the fathers in the study indicated that they do not read at all to their children.

### **Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED)**

FRED is a month-long reading initiative designed to encourage fathers to engage in daily reading activities with their children. Developed by Texas AgriLife Extension Service (Texas A&M University System) faculty, FRED has been implemented in more than 70 Texas counties and in numerous other states. FRED targets fathers (resident and non-resident) of young children enrolled in a variety of programs, including Head Start, Even Start, elementary schools, public libraries, child care centers, and faith-based programs. County Extension agents, collaborating with professionals and volunteers working in the aforementioned organizations, use a variety of methods to recruit fathers to participate in FRED. Typically, key individuals (e.g., principals, male/parental involvement specialists, coaches, librarians) who have contact with children and their parents are responsible for recruiting fathers. Extension educators assist their partners with supplying materials, finding local donors to supply free books and other incentive items, organizing FRED face-to-face information sessions, and administering and collecting the evaluations. Participation on the part of fathers and their children tends to be very strong when Extension educators establish a close working relationship with partners who have frequent and consistent communication with parents.

During the four-week campaign, fathers read to their children 15 minutes a day for the first two weeks and 30 minutes a day for the remaining two weeks. Fathers who agreed to participate in this study were given a booklet containing tips on reading aloud to children, two recommended children's book lists, and a reading log to document the amount of time spent reading during the four-week period. While age-appropriate children's books were recommended to fathers, participants were free to select the books that they read during the campaign and the time and location of the reading activities.

### **Instrumentation/measurement**

#### ***Father involvement in shared book reading activities***

Prior to participating in the four-week FRED campaign, fathers filled out a paper-and-pencil questionnaire distributed by county Extension agents and their partners that assessed a variety of educational and relationship constructs. The following item was used to assess fathers' shared book reading activities with their children: "On average, how many times in a week do you read to your child?" Response options ranged from "0" to "7 or more." To gain a better understanding of how often other family members read to the child, in comparison to the father alone, the following item was asked, "On average, how many times in a week does someone in your family read to the child?" As with the previous items, response options ranged from "0" to "7 or more."

#### ***Fathers' perceptions of the benefits of shared book reading***

To measure fathers' perceptions of the benefits of shared book reading with their children, a paper and pencil self-report questionnaire was distributed to fathers by county Extension agents and their partners upon completion of the four-week FRED reading campaign. Two open-ended questions were included to assess fathers' experiences with daily shared book reading with their children. The first question asked fathers, "What, if anything, did the FRED program do for you and/or your children?" and the second asked, "What did you like most about the FRED program?" Fathers were given an opportunity to respond, in writing, to the questions.

#### ***Father-child interaction***

In order to measure fathers' perceptions of how shared book reading can influence the nature of father-child interactions, fathers were asked to respond to the following statement after having read daily to their children for four weeks: "Please let us know what you thought of the FRED program. (Check the box of all that apply.)" Participants then indicated their agreement or disagreement with the following items:

- Increased the time I spent with my child
- Helped me get to know my child better



- Improved the quality of the time I spent with my child
- Helped me become more involved in my child's education
- Increased my satisfaction level as a parent
- Improved my relationship with my child.

### ***Demographic variables***

The following demographic variables were collected from participants on the initial questionnaire: age, marital status, education level, race/ethnicity, household income, number of children, age of child(ren), and gender of child(ren).

### ***Trustworthiness and rigor***

Efforts were made by the authors to increase the trustworthiness and rigor of the study (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The lead author of the study developed the measures used to assess the results; however, the actual data collection was undertaken by county faculty (i.e., county Extension agents) and those who collaborated with them on the FRED initiative. The two open-ended questions used in this study were intended to give fathers an opportunity to openly share their experiences (positive or negative) with daily shared book reading during the four-week reading initiative. Once the data was collected, completed surveys were mailed to the lead author. The co-author of the study, who was not involved in the survey design or data collection process, entered the data into SPSS.

A multi-stage, analytic induction coding process was used to analyze participants' responses to the open-ended questions (Weigel and Martin 2004; Willms and Johnson 1996). In the first stage, participants' written responses to the two open-ended questions were transferred verbatim from the completed paper-and-pencil surveys into SPSS by the co-author of this study. A total of 392 unique responses were generated by the 209 adult participants. In the second stage, the authors independently examined the responses and attempted to create a preliminary coding scheme based on the responses given. The preliminary coding schemes of the authors were compared, resulting in five distinct qualitative categories. In the third stage, SPSS was used to randomly select 25 percent of the responses so that each coder could independently code a portion of the responses. Based on the results, the authors refined their thematic categories. The newly refined coding scheme was then used to code an additional randomly selected 25 percent of the responses. After comparing the results in the second round of coding, all 392 unique responses were coded independently by the authors. Two statistical procedures (Pearson  $r$  and single measure intraclass correlation) were performed using SPSS to determine inter-rater reliability. The resulting inter-rater reliability coefficients for both tests were identical and very

strong (Pearson  $r = 0.976$ ,  $p < .01$ ). When discrepancies arose, the codes were discussed until agreement was reached.

## Results

### *Benefits of shared book reading between fathers and children – qualitative themes*

The first research question asked, “What benefits, if any, do fathers perceive to derive from daily shared book reading experiences with their children?” An analysis of the written responses given by fathers revealed five distinct benefits that fathers associated with daily shared book reading with their children. See Table 2 for a list of the five categories and their associated percentages.

**Table 2. Benefits of shared book reading for fathers and children ( $N = 209$ )**

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Father-child bonding</b>	16.3
<b>Father involvement in child’s education</b>	48.3
<b>Leisure-time alternative</b>	4.3
<b>Literacy skills improvement</b>	55.5
<b>Time together</b>	41.6

The themes discussed below are ranked according to the frequency with which they were mentioned by participants.

### **Improvements in children’s literacy skills**

A total of 116 fathers indicated in their open-ended responses that daily shared book reading contributes to improvements in their children’s literacy skills in some capacity. As noted in Table 2, this comprises more than 50 percent (55.5) of the entire sample. In their responses, many fathers believed that reading aloud to children would improve their word and letter recognition, enhance their ability to sound out words, expand their vocabularies, and improve their overall reading level. The following quotes illustrate what fathers think about the impact that their participation in their children’s reading activities can have on their literacy development:

- “Helped him [my son] with learning to read.”
- “[Reading aloud together] will help to give a boost in our children’s ability to read.”

- “[Reading aloud with my child] helps me teach my children to read and sound out letters.”
- “[Reading aloud to my child helped] my child to read and understand the meaning of words.”
- “My daughter learned to recognize words from one story in other stories.”

In addition to having a positive influence on their children’s literacy skills, the following written response illustrates how participating in such an activity with children can influence a father’s view of himself as a parent: “For me, it makes me feel great being able to help my child to read and help her understand the sounds and what the words mean. It also helps her to [develop] self confidence in being able to start reading.”

### **Opportunity for father involvement in children’s early education**

As indicated in Table 2, 48.3 percent (101) of fathers mentioned in their responses that reading aloud to children on a regular basis provides an avenue to become more involved with their children’s early education. A participant in the program illustrated this concept when he wrote, “[Reading daily] let me get more involved with my son’s education.” Many fathers were more specific, noting that reading books with their child allowed them to assess their child’s academic progress, made them feel good about contributing to their children’s education, and gave them an opportunity to stress the importance of reading. One father who read daily with his child for four weeks wrote: “I felt that the FRED program made me more involved in my child’s reading. It made [my daughter] even more interested in her books and her schooling. She doesn’t ask me to read books; she tells me to read her favorite books, which pleases me even more. We are even closer now.”

Another father illustrated how reading together daily opened up doors to greater involvement, stating in his written response, “The material I read to my children emphasized the attributes I was trying to instill within them, and this gave me the perfect excuse for me to ‘have’ to read to them and them to ‘have’ to sit down and listen to me.”

### **Time together**

The third theme that emerged from the data was time together. Eighty-seven fathers, or 41.6 percent, mentioned in their written responses that reading aloud to their children provided them with an opportunity to spend time together with their children. One father wrote, “[FRED] gave us a certain time that was just mine and hers to spend together and explore different adventures through reading.” Another father, who spent time reading to his daughter every day during the

four-week period, stated, “It [reading aloud together] helped me get some one-on-one time with my daughter.”

Many others, as indicated by the following quotes, made specific references to shared book reading as an activity that facilitates quality time together. One father wrote, “It [reading together] created quality time and a greater bonding.” Another father indicated that shared book reading can improve time that fathers spend with their children, stating, “[Reading daily] improved the quality of time I spent with them [children].”

Finally, daily shared book reading was perceived by some to be a good way to generate a consistent routine. A father who completed FRED wrote, “It gave us a routine that we could look forward to that was better than just doing things together that happened to be available.”

### **Father-child bonding**

A fourth theme that emerged from fathers’ responses to the open-ended questions was father-child bonding. As noted in Table 2, 16.3 percent (34 fathers) stated that reading aloud to children on a regular basis contributed to a stronger bond between fathers and their children. A number of fathers who read to their children daily during the FRED initiative commented specifically in their written responses about how reading together affected the father-child relationship. One father said, “[Reading together] brought a start for a better father-daughter relationship.” The following quotes further illustrate the bonding/relationship building concept that emerged in fathers’ written responses:

- “[Reading together created] a good bonding time at night. Talking as well as doing things together. Increased communication between us.”
- “Helped us bond as father and son.”
- “[Reading together] built a closer bond between us.”
- “I think it helped improve our relationship toward each other.”

### **Book reading as a leisure time alternative**

As can be seen in Table 2, nine fathers (4.3 percent) mentioned that shared book reading provides fathers and children with a leisure time alternative. Almost all of the fathers who commented on reading as another way to spend their time did so in the context of spending less time watching television. One participant, who apparently considers reading to be a more productive activity than TV viewing, wrote, “It [reading together daily] helped us spend more

time together in the evening. It also took away from TV time in the evening and in the morning. It was ... better time. We were able to choose books and help them [children] understand real things.”

Other fathers made the following comments in reference to shared book reading as an alternative to other activities:

- “Got to spend time reading together and afterwards talking. Less TV.”
- “[My child and I] spend more time together reading, not watching TV.”
- “We spend less time playing video games, and more on books.”

### **Influence of shared book reading on father-child interaction**

The second research question asked, “In what ways can daily shared book reading between fathers and children influence the nature of father-child interactions?” In order to address this question, fathers indicated their agreement or disagreement with a series of six statements after having read to their children daily for four weeks. Items, along with the responses given by fathers (in percentages), were rank ordered and can be found in Table 3.

**Table 3. Fathers’ agreement and disagreement with statements about the influence of daily shared book reading on father-child interaction ( $N = 209$ )**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Fathers who agreed (percent)</b>	<b>Fathers who disagreed (percent)</b>
Improved the quality of the time I spent with my child.	69.9	30.1
Helped me become more involved in my child’s education.	68.9	31.1
Increased the time I spent with my child.	65.1	34.9
Improved my relationship with my child.	64.6	35.4

Increased my satisfaction level as a parent.	64.6	35.4
Helped me get to know my child better.	41.6	58.4

The majority of fathers believed that reading aloud to their children on a daily basis can have a very positive influence on the quality of the interactions they have with their children. Time together (both qualitative and quantitative) is viewed as a beneficial outcome of daily shared book reading. Nearly 70 percent (69.9) indicated that daily shared book reading with their child improved the quality of the time that they typically spend with their children. Similarly, just over 65 percent (65.1) noted that reading aloud together on a regular basis allowed fathers to spend more time with their children.

Many of the fathers in this sample recognized the educational value of reading to children and the opportunities that it provided them as parents to become more involved in their children's early education. Out of the 209 fathers who participated in this study, 144 (68.9 percent) agreed that reading aloud to children on a daily basis helped them become more involved in their children's education.

Finally, the majority of fathers also viewed reading together with their children as an avenue to strengthen the father-child relationship. Nearly 65 percent (64.6) of fathers indicated their agreement with the statement that reading aloud to their child on a daily basis improved the relationship they have with their children. The same percentage of fathers also agreed that engaging in daily reading activities with their children increases their satisfaction level as a parent. A smaller, yet sizeable percentage of fathers (41.6) believe that shared book reading also helps them get to know their child better. (Eighty-seven out of 209 agreed with the statement.)

## Discussion

Many experts argue that the single most important strategy for promoting children's literacy development is to read aloud to them in an interactive style that engages them as active learners (Halle et al. 2003). From the perspective of the fathers who participated in this study, daily shared book reading is clearly a beneficial activity for them and their children. Nearly half of the participants (47.8 percent) indicated that they read to their children three or more times during a typical week, including more than six percent who read daily. In their written responses, fathers identified specific benefits that they and their children derive from shared book reading that are consistent with previous research demonstrating that fathers use reading as way to help their children learn and prepare for school, as well as a way to bond with them (Nichols 2000; Ortiz 2001; Ortiz, Stile, and Brown 1999; Schwartz 2004). Fathers' recognition of the benefits of

shared book reading as a means to nurture and prepare their children for the future is consistent with the generative fathering conceptual framework underlying this study.

The most prominent theme emerging from the qualitative responses was that shared book reading allowed fathers to assist their children in developing important literacy skills. Fathers with preschool age children perceived that reading aloud to their children helped them develop emergent literacy skills (Whitehurst and Lonigan 2001), while fathers of school-age children viewed their involvement as a way to strengthen or expand their children's existing reading skills (e.g., vocabulary development).

A second prominent theme that emerged from the qualitative data was that fathers considered shared book reading with their children as a valuable tool for increasing their involvement in their children's education. Many fathers noted that reading aloud to their children provided them with an organized way to become involved in their child's education, and helped them become more familiar with their children's educational progress. Recent studies indicate that when fathers take an active role in their children's education, both during preschool and their formal school-age years, children perform better academically (Fagan and Iglesias 1999; Nord, Brimhall, and West 1997).

The element of time, both quality and quantity, emerged as a third important benefit of reading aloud to children. For many fathers, establishing a set time to read to their children provided the catalyst for spending more time together. A consistent theme that emerged from fathers who identified time together as a benefit noted that bedtime was the preferred time to read to their children. Reading at bedtime gave fathers and children something to look forward to at the end of the day and, as other researchers have noted (e.g., Nichols 2000), was a way for fathers to establish stronger connections with their children.

Related to the above, a smaller, yet sizeable percentage of fathers identified a fourth benefit of shared book reading with their children: parent-child bonding. More than 16 percent of fathers believed that reading with their children strengthened the bond that existed between them and their children. Fathers, as discovered in previous research (Nichols 2000; Schwartz 2004), alluded to the fact that shared book reading, by nature, promotes strong ties between them and their children by increasing opportunities for communication and relationship development.

Finally, a fifth benefit of shared book reading mentioned by just over 4 percent of fathers was that it provided an alternative to other activities such as watching television and playing video games. Given that children spend a good portion of their waking hours engaged in these activities, shared book reading was considered a means by which fathers could involve their children in an activity, even though sedentary, that is more beneficial to their cognitive development.

Despite the fact that a sizeable percentage of fathers regularly read to their children, there are many fathers who fail to take advantage of shared book reading with their children. Nearly 50 percent (47.9) of fathers in this sample indicated that they read to their children two times a week or less, and more than 7 percent (7.7) revealed that they never read to their children during a typical week. While this is a much smaller percentage than that revealed in the aforementioned 1999 survey conducted by the National Center for Fathering (approximately 40 percent), this lack of participation by some fathers in such an important activity is unfortunate given what researchers have discovered in recent years about the influence fathers can exert on their children's development (Lamb 2004). In addition to the obvious cognitive benefits that children derive from being read to by their parents, shared book reading between fathers and children has the potential to influence the very ways in which fathers and children interact (Ortiz 2001; Schwartz 2004).

As indicated by fathers' responses to the six items found in Table 3, engagement in daily shared book reading with their children was perceived to have positively affected several aspects of the father-child relationship. A clear majority of participants (more than 60 percent for five of the six items) agreed that shared book reading had a positive influence on the quality and quantity of time spent with their children, helped them become more involved in their children's education, improved their relationship with their children, and increased their satisfaction level as a parent. The results in no way imply that shared book reading alone is responsible for altering the nature of father-child interactions, yet they do point to the fact that shared book reading can be used by fathers to establish a context for greater involvement and subsequent relationship growth, two principles that are consistent with a generative fathering perspective.

While the present investigation has yielded important information concerning the benefits of father-child literacy activities, there are limitations worth noting. First, the study is based on data derived from a convenience sample; therefore, the fathers who participated may or may not be representative of the larger population. The sample is respectable in size and in diversity (ethnic, socioeconomic, education); however, in the future it would be helpful to collect data from a random sample of fathers to increase the ability of researchers to make broader generalizations from the findings. Although this study was predominately qualitative in nature, future studies involving random assignment of participants to experimental and control group conditions would shed additional light on the benefits for fathers and children of reading initiatives such as FRED, and would allow researchers to make more definitive statements regarding the specific impacts of the program on those who participate.

Second, the instrumentation used in the this study, including the open- and close-ended questions, could be expanded to illicit a greater depth of information from fathers regarding their perceptions of shared book reading and its role in their lives. Using in-depth interviews, for example, would enable researchers to ask follow-up questions that delve deeper into fathers'



thinking on the subject. Future studies, qualitative and quantitative, are needed to investigate the factors that facilitate or prevent fathers from engaging in shared book reading with children. This type of data could be used to help practitioners modify or enhance their outreach efforts to fathers.

Finally, fathers in this study revealed their perceptions of how daily shared book reading influenced various aspects of their interactions with their children after participating in a four-week reading initiative. Future studies that track fathers and children over a much longer span of time, with appropriate follow-up questions, are needed to determine how shared book reading between fathers and children influences the nature of father-child interactions.

### **Implications**

Given the results of this study, and the growing body of research supporting the importance of parental involvement in children's literacy development, educators and practitioners would be wise to encourage greater father involvement in shared book reading activities with their children. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 60 percent of 3- to 5-year olds have family members who read to them daily. Even if this figure is exaggerated due to response bias on the part of parents, this still leaves at least 40 percent who do not benefit from such an experience. According to the few studies that have been conducted, an even larger percentage of children appear to miss out on the opportunities to share in daily book reading with their fathers. Not only does shared book reading provide an opportunity for fathers to become engaged in their children's early education, it also sets the stage for potential relationship growth resulting from increased quality time together in a meaningful activity.

Initiatives such as FRED, which specifically target fathers and father-figures, can be implemented rather easily in early childhood programs (e.g., Head Start), elementary schools, churches, and public libraries, all of which have access to parents of young children. The timing for such initiatives could not be better, particularly considering the current emphasis on fatherhood issues that began more than a decade ago in the United States (Brotherson and White 2007). For instance, two of Head Start's national initiatives in recent years have focused on increasing father involvement and promoting children's early literacy skills.

FRED has been successfully implemented with thousands of fathers and children in Texas and other states, and continues to grow as a wide range of organizations are expressing an increased interest in reaching out to fathers. Fathers, in particular, have been receptive to participating in FRED for a variety of reasons. First, fathers are attracted to the simplicity of the program. Fathers are asked to make a daily commitment to reading to their children and to document, on a reading log, the amount of time they spend reading each day. If fathers possess basic literacy skills, they are more than capable of fulfilling this commitment. Second, FRED is a non-

threatening approach to encouraging fathers to be involved in their children's early care and education. While there are more in-depth fatherhood programs available that emphasize the responsibilities associated with being a parent and the requisite skills needed to raise children, fathers are often apprehensive about attending such programs because of the time commitment and the format (i.e., group educational sessions). The FRED program can promote some of the same principles (e.g., importance of father-child time, need to be involved in child's education) without directly confronting fathers. Third, shared book reading, the centerpiece of the FRED program, is an enjoyable activity for fathers and their children. Selecting and reading books together provides fathers and children with an opportunity to laugh together, learn together, and share unique interests with each other. Fourth, most fathers are interested in seeing their children thrive, academically and in other areas. As noted in the results of this study, fathers understand that their involvement in their children's literacy development will contribute to their children's academic progress. All of these factors mentioned above tend to increase fathers' receptivity to the program.

For professionals (Extension and non-Extension), the FRED program tends to be equally appealing. First, the program's simplicity enables busy educators and their partners to reach out to fathers without having to make a substantial time commitment that is common to many parenting/fathering curricula. Professionals can learn how to plan, implement, and evaluate the program with minimal training. Second, the program is very cost-effective. FRED relies on fathers to take the initiative to locate and select books that they want to read with their children. Other than some materials that are distributed to fathers before the programs start date (e.g., 16-page booklet containing an introduction to the reading initiative, tips on reading aloud to children, suggested reading lists, and a reading log), tangible materials are kept to a minimum. FRED facilitators are encouraged to partner with public librarians to help fathers find and select quality children's literature to read during the four-week initiative, and to establish relationships with local businesses to acquire incentive items, such as snacks and drinks during the two face-to-face events associated with the program (the information session and celebration event at conclusion of program). With more and more attention being directed toward the importance of children's literacy development, many businesses are supportive of efforts such as FRED. Third, FRED is a program that can be easily adapted to fit a particular target audience. With slight modifications to program requirements (e.g., reducing the number of times per week fathers are asked to read to their children, opening up the program to positive male role models who might or might not be related to the children), FRED has been successfully implemented in prisons, with military dads who are deployed overseas, and with children who do not have a father living in the home.

As results from this study indicate, encouraging fathers to engage in shared book reading with their children for even a small amount of time each day (e.g., 15 minutes) can potentially lead to

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greater involvement of fathers in the lives of their children and the establishment of a tradition that will benefit families for many years to come.

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