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A Family Strengths Approach to Early Language and Literacy Development

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Abstract

Language and literacy skills are an essential element of young children's development and allow them to interact meaningfully with other people and to develop knowledge in all subject areas. Despite the importance of language and literacy development, however, more than one third of children in the United States enter school with significant differences in language, early literacy skills, and motivation to learn that place them at considerable risk for developing long-term reading difficulties. The quantity and quality of language interactions children have with their parents and exposure to print in their home environment prior to entering school have an important impact on these individual differences. This paper provides teachers with guidelines and tools for helping families identify and create language and literacy opportunities in their home environment that reflect their unique strengths and routines.

Key Words: Language, Family, Literacy, Family Strengths, Routines

Serena Aguilar is a 3 ½ year old girl in Ms. Kelly's preschool class at Hyde Park Children's Center. She is always dropped off in the morning by her mother, Kim, who is usually in a hurry to get to work on time. Most mornings, Kim carries Serena into the classroom, signs her in on the student sign-in sheet, takes off her coat and puts it in Serena's labeled cubby with her lunch box. Kim finds that it is easier and quicker to take care of the arrival tasks (e.g., sign-in, put belongings away) than to wait for Serena to do them.

Kim would like to discuss some concerns she has about Serena with the teachers, if only there was more time when she drops Serena off. Serena seems to have difficulty following directions. She also gets easily frustrated when trying to communicate her wants and needs. Both Kim and her husband Dave have noticed that Serena does not talk much and that when she does she seems anxious and frustrated.

Understanding that Kim is usually in a rush in the mornings, Ms. Kelly made a point to call Kim when she would have a chance to talk so that she could ask about Serena's language and communication at home. Ms. Kelly had noticed Serena's lack of interaction in the classroom with other children and with her and the assistants. Serena often chose to play alone during free play, getting easily frustrated and tantruming when another child tried to play with her. The teachers had also noticed that Serena had a difficult time finding her name label in the classroom (e.g., on her cubby, on her chair, on her color spot at circle). She also rarely played word games at circle, looked at books in the library corner, or chose the writing center. Ms. Kelly feels that if she, with the help of Kim and Dave, could help Serena develop her language, Serena might find it easier to communicate her feelings with others, as well as become more engaged in the 'academic' center areas.

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Many families, like Serena's, find it challenging to help their children communicate effectively. Communication challenges represent more than difficulties in early childhood; they pose potential problems that may extend into later childhood and adolescence, affecting later language and literacy development. To successfully function in a literate society and culture, children need to be able to communicate effectively with both oral and written communication (Otto, 2006). The costs of illiteracy affect every aspect of an individual's life from communication to employment to following directions and raising children. In fact, literacy has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of academic success (Werner & Smith, 1992), and has been referred to as "the energy supply of the Information Age" (Brandt, 2001, p. 171).

Despite the importance of language and literacy development, more than one third of children in the United States enter school with significant differences in language, early literacy skills, and motivation to learn that place them at considerable risk for developing long-term reading difficulties (Hart & Risley, 1995; Neuman, 2006). Differences in the amount of language and experience that children have at the start of schooling lead to further differences as children with greater experience and skill access more opportunities to engage with language and print. A "rich-get-richer" phenomenon occurs whereby "the very children who are reading well and who have good vocabularies will read more, learn more word meanings, and hence read even better" than their at-risk peers (Stanovich, 1986, p. 381).

Children's individual differences in language and early literacy skills at the start of school have been attributed to the quantity and quality of language interactions with their parents and exposure to print in the home environment (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Hart & Risley, 1995). In fact, variables in the home that contribute to children's early literacy success may even outweigh those in the school setting (Al-Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006; Wigfield & Asher, 1984). When children are exposed to naturally occurring language and literacy activities in the home environment, they develop many skills and concepts, as well as attitudes and behaviors that will positively affect their interest in and knowledge about literacy (Purcell-Gates, 2000; Weigel, 2006a). For children like Serena who demonstrate possible risk for language and literacy development, efforts need to be made to ensure that their home experiences maximize their opportunities for language growth.

Parents and caregivers typically know their children better than anyone and have many opportunities to interact with them each day. The context of children's early literacy experiences and the values and attitudes that parents and caregivers hold toward literacy greatly influence children's motivation to learn (Britto, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006; DeBaryshe, Binder, & Buell, 2000; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006b). Parents, therefore, play an essential part in encouraging language and literacy development, creating opportunities to engage with language and text, and reinforcing early literacy development (Brandt, 2001; DeBaryshe, Binder, & Buell, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to provide teachers with a tool for helping individual families identify and create language and literacy opportunities in the home environment that reflect their unique strengths and routines. We begin by presenting a conceptual model on family strengths that describes a process for assisting families to address their children's language and literacy needs. Then we will describe how to implement this model and share examples of how this can be done effectively in home settings.

The Family Strengths Model

Children's early language and literacy opportunities are embedded throughout the social and cultural contexts in which they live. Identifying the unique context and culture of an individual child allows us to better understand their strengths and the literacy learning opportunities available to them. Embedding teaching and learning within the culture and context of the child's life makes it more meaningful and applicable to the individual child. We propose a model for improving early literacy skills that (a) recognizes children within the context of their unique family system and natural home environment, (b) focuses on family strengths, and (c) identifies a system for embedding learning opportunities within meaningful and contextually relevant everyday experiences.

The Family Strengths Model starts with identifying the unique routines, strengths, and resources of an individual family as a way to better pinpoint natural and meaningful opportunities for embedding early language and literacy experiences. Through the application of four family strategies: (a) creating opportunities, (b) modeling reading and language, (c) interacting with their child, and (d) providing recognition, families can create multiple meaningful opportunities for their child to engage with language and print. Specifically, these family strategies foster positive relationships between children and their families as well as provide children with literacy-focused opportunities. Implementation of family strategies can also provide children prompts and reinforcement that will encourage the use

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of literacy skills. Increasing children's opportunities with language and print as well as their attitudes and success with literacy will result in improved literacy skills. Figure 1 depicts *The Family Strengths Model* for embedding early language and literacy opportunities within unique family environments.

<See Figure 1>

Family Routines & Strengths

Children in a literate society are surrounded by language in their homes, their neighborhoods, their churches, schools, and other communities to which they belong. The language and vocabulary that they hear in each context is influenced by the language and vocabulary in the other environments as well as by the child's reactions and participation. When planning supports for early literacy experiences, it is important to consider the child within the framework of the larger social environment that surrounds them and create literacy-learning opportunities that are relevant and meaningful to those environments.

For young children, the home environment typically represents a large portion of their social and cultural experience and it makes sense, therefore, to focus on identifying and utilizing the strengths and assets of the individual family to develop skills within the family context. *The Family Strengths Model* begins by acknowledging the daily activities and routines of an individual family as a means of identifying opportunities to embed literacy learning.

Family Strategies

Hannon (1995) identified a theoretical framework for understanding the importance of the parent's role in children's literacy development. Within this framework Hannon identified four strategies that parents can utilize to support their children in developing reading skills: (a) creating opportunities for learning, (b) providing recognition of the child's achievements, (c) interacting with their child around literacy activities, and (d) providing a model of literacy. Hannon's framework emphasized applying these strategies across three important strands of literacy: (a) reading, (b) writing, and (c) oral language. This framework for involvement provides a useful tool to conceptualize the activities many families already do on a day-to-day basis, and also to identify opportunities within the cultural context of a family's everyday life to promote and encourage early literacy development.

The Family Strengths Model emphasizes the application of Hannon's four family strategies across unique routines and strengths of individual families. Specifically, families will create opportunities for modeling reading and language, interacting with their child, and providing recognition for literacy skills throughout their daily activities. Following this model will help families increase the number of opportunities their children have to engage with language and print, encourage and support their children's use of literacy skills, and build positive relationships with their children.

Outcomes

Experiences with written and spoken language prior to formal schooling are "often unrecorded and transient but nevertheless powerful and cumulative in their effect" (Weinberger, 1998, p. 39). As families create opportunities for children to engage with language and print through modeling and interacting with their child, children's early literacy skills such as oral language, vocabulary, print awareness and letter knowledge will grow. As children's literacy skills grow, they will experience increased success with language and print. This increased success, paired with positive interactions around language and literacy will increase children's enjoyment of literacy and lead to positive attitudes toward literacy.

Process

To facilitate implementation of this model, we have organized activities into three steps:
Step 1: Identify family routines.
Step 2: Identify family strengths.
Step 3: Identify language and literacy opportunities.

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Step 1: Identify Family Routines

At the next parent-teacher conference, Ms. Kelly talked with Kim, Dave and Maria (Serena's grandmother) about their routines at home. She completed a Routines Assessment Form with them, asking about what a 'typical' day looks like in the Aguilar home. She also asked them to rate how well each particular routine meets their expectations.

The first step in embedding early language and literacy opportunities is to gather information about the family's routines. Walking through a typical day with the family is a simple and effective way to gather information and to help families identify opportunities to engage their child with language and print. Encourage the family to go through their day chronologically, identify specific activities and rate how well the activities meet the family's expectations. It is also helpful to discuss other common routines that may not occur every day. Figure 2 provides an example of a simple form Ms. Kelly completed with Serena and her family.

<See Figure 2>

The Aguilars reported that their evenings went fairly smoothly from dinner to bedtime and that they really enjoyed their weekend visits to Grandma and Grandpa's house. Kim, who was home with Serena in the mornings said that morning routines of waking up, having breakfast and getting Serena to the center did not go as well as she would like. She also shared concerns about Serena playing alone and watching television in the evening while she prepares dinner and challenges with taking Serena to the grocery store.

The next step is to talk with the family further about those activities they rated as not meeting their expectations (i.e., received a score between 1-3). Discuss with the family how interested they would be in making changes to these activities. It is important to communicate that the goal is not to create *new* activities or make major changes to their typical routines, but to identify ways they can build on the things they are already doing to support their child's language and literacy development. By identifying activities during the day when families are interested and able to look at changes you can focus your suggestions on strategies they will be likely to try. Further, we can learn from those activities that are already going well for the family.

Ms. Kelly pointed out to the Aguilar family that it seemed their evening routines were meeting their expectations and she acknowledged their strengths in this area. She also pointed out those routines that Kim and Dave were most concerned with, including: (a) wake-up and get dressed, (b) breakfast, (c) depart for center and drop off, (d) Serena plays independently, and (e) grocery shopping. Ms. Kelly asked the family which routines they might be interested in focusing on as they developed and identified learning opportunities. Kim said that mornings were difficult, that she always felt rushed, and that she did not have the time or energy to add anything extra or make changes to the routine at this time. However, she did say that once her and Serena get in the car to head to the center that she would be willing to try some new things. She also said that she would really like to interact with Serena instead of having her play alone and watch television in the evening and that unless she made some changes to their grocery shopping routine she was considering finding a baby sitter for Serena during this time. Ms. Kelly said that it would be wonderful to focus on those three routines and that they could talk more about creating opportunities in the other morning routines later on if they would like.

Step 2: Identify Family Strengths

The information gathered about family routines is used to guide conversations about creating language and literacy opportunities around already frequently occurring activities and the family's unique culture and strengths. Asking the family more information about a few typical routines that they indicated did not meet their expectations and that they were willing to consider altering assists the teacher in identifying opportunities to embed language and literacy

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activities. The following four questions about each routine can help guide this discussion: (a) Who participates?, (b) What does this activity look like?, (c) What goes well?, and (d) What is challenging?

Figure 3 provides a sample of the strengths assessment form completed for Serena and her family across the three routines they selected: (a) depart for center and drop off, (b) Serena plays independently, and (c) grocery shopping.

<See Figure 3>

When describing dropping Serena off at the center in the morning, Kim said that Serena was able to play independently in the car and went straight to the carpet to get a puzzle when she arrived at the center. Kim said that she used to try to help Serena sign in but that she would get frustrated when Serena would struggle and would often end up doing it for her.

Kim also reported that Serena is able to play independently at home in the evening while she prepares dinner but that she would prefer to interact with Serena during this time.

Kim was particularly concerned about grocery shopping and said that Serena had difficulty following directions and often ended up trantruming in the store. Ms. Kelly encouraged Kim to also think about what went well during their grocery shopping routine and Kim said that Serena seemed to enjoy helping put things in the cart and take things off the shelves.

Step 3: Identify Language and Literacy Opportunities

Once unique family routines and strengths have been identified, the teacher can work with the family to identify opportunities to embed language and literacy activities within their daily life. Identifying activities that families can do within the context of their unique social world is an important step in creating rich emergent literacy environments. A goal of this model is that the emergent literacy opportunities identified can be embedded within the context of the family environment and the existing social and cultural practices of the family. We are not asking the family to do new activities but to make minor adjustments to the opportunities they are already creating for their child.

Figure 4 provides an example of a framework for providing opportunities, modeling language and literacy, interacting with children and recognizing achievements within family routines. In the left column, Ms. Kelly listed several activities that were part of Serena's typical schedule that Kim and Dave agreed would be good times to embed learning opportunities. Then, Ms. Kelly talked with Kim and Dave about how they could provide opportunities, model language and literacy, interact with Serena and recognize her achievements during these activities. Information shared in the discussion of family strengths to guided the strategies.

<See Figure 4>

Kim and Dave said they wanted to begin by focusing on the grocery shopping routine since they were most concerned about this activity. Ms. Kelly began by drawing attention to Serena's interest in helping to load items in the cart and asked the family if there were ways they could create opportunities for Serena to do this. Maria excitedly shared that she used to let Kim mark the items off the shopping list when she was just a girl. Ms. Kelly shared that in the classroom they have pictures of some grocery items that the children sometimes use to make pretend lists in the dramatic play center. Kim thought these both sounded like wonderful ideas and that she could even have Serena help her make the list at home and maybe even find some of the items on the shelf. Ms. Kelly also noted that giving Serena choices between two items would give her an extra chance to use language. Ms. Kelly pointed out that the family had thought of some wonderful strategies to provide opportunities for Serena and then guided the conversation to focus on how they could model the use of language and literacy. Kim said that she could read the names of items off the grocery list while Serena was checking them off and also read the aisle labels in the store. When Ms. Kelly asked about interacting with Serena, Dave pointed out that it seemed like they already had some great ideas. Kim would be talking with Serena about the list, providing her choices and could even talk about

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the colors and tastes of the items in the store. Ms. Kelly mentioned that while Serena was working to develop these new skills it would very important to recognize her achievements and let her know when she is doing a good job. Kim said this would be very easy as she was incredibly excited to try these new strategies with her daughter. Finally, Ms. Kelly guided the family through a discussion of the other two activities they had chosen and the family took an even greater role in developing strategies.

Putting it All Together

We have proposed a *Family Strengths Model* for identifying and creating language and literacy opportunities in the home environment that reflect the unique strengths, routines and social and cultural environments of individual families. If families and practitioners begin by recognizing the common routines in their life and their own unique strengths, they are able to identify activities and learning opportunities that fit within the context of their life. By making these activities and opportunities relevant to the life and the social context of the child and the family we are in turn making these activities and opportunities more meaningful. Guiding interventions in this way by the family's culture, preferences and routines will lead to respectful partnerships and enhanced literacy outcomes (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). While the ultimate goals of early literacy learning are the same, the methods and contexts in which they develop for individual children are as varied as the children and families themselves.

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Figure 1. Family Strengths Model

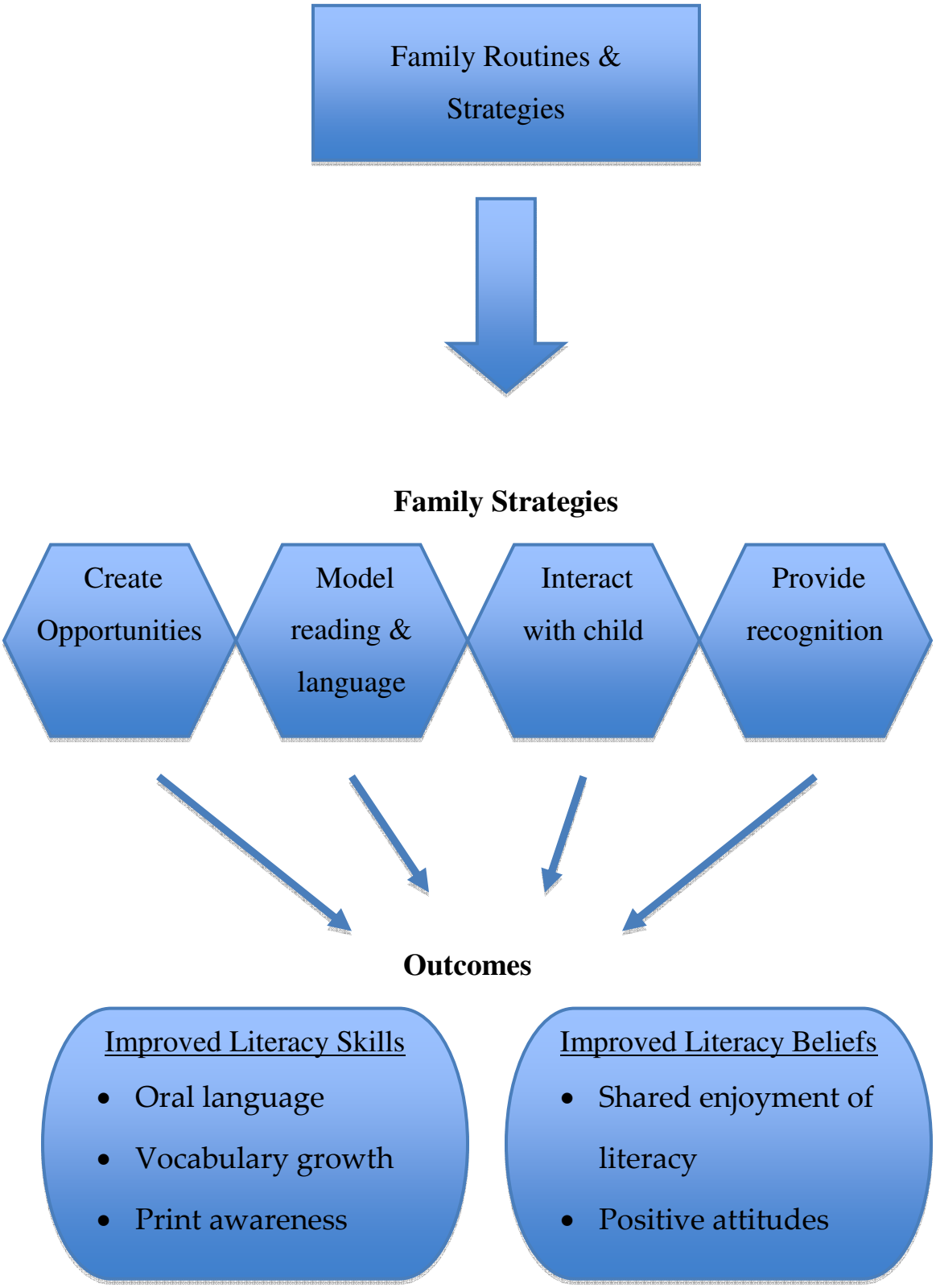

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Figure 2. Routines Assessment Form

Routines Assessment Form

Name: Serena **Age:** 3.5 **Date:** September 10, 2008

Respondent(s): Kim & Dave (parents) Maria (grandmother)

Typical Daily Routines:

Time	Routine/Activity	How well does it meet expectations? Not well — Well
6:45 am	Wake-up & get dressed	1 [2] 3 4 5 6
7:00am	Breakfast	1 2 [3] 4 5 6
7:45am	Depart for center & drop off	[1] 2 3 4 5 6
4:00pm	Pick Serena up from center	1 2 3 [4] 5 6
4:15pm	Serena plays independently	1 [2] 3 4 5 6
6:00pm	Dinner	1 2 3 4 [5] 6
6:45pm	Television with mom	1 2 3 4 5 [6]
7:30pm	Bath time	1 2 3 4 [5] 6
8:00pm	Bed time	1 2 3 4 5 [6]

Other Common Routines:

1-2 x/week	Grocery Shopping	[1] 2 3 4 5 6
Weekends	Visit to Grandma and Grandpa	1 2 3 4 5 [6]

Figure 3. Strengths Assessment Form

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Strengths Assessment Form

Name: Serena **Age:** 3.5 **Date:** September 10, 2008

Respondent(s): Kim & Dave (parents) Maria (grandmother)

ROUTINE: Depart for center and drop off	
Who participates? Kim & Serena	**What does the activity look like?** Kim puts Serena in her car seat in the backseat directly behind her. She turns on the radio and drives. When they arrive at the center, Kim signs Serena in, takes off her coat and puts her things in her cubby and rushes to work.
What goes well? Serena plays independently and is usually quiet in the car. When they arrive at the center, Serena goes directly to the carpet and selects a puzzle by herself.	**What is challenging about this routine?** Kim reports that she is usually frustrated during this time and worried about being late. She reports she would also like to have more communication with Serena's teachers in the morning.

ROUTINE: Serena plays independently	
Who participates? Serena. Mom is in the kitchen making dinner.	**What does the activity look like?** Kim turns on cartoons for Serena and gets out her favorite toys. Serena sits on the carpet playing and watching television.
What goes well? Serena plays independently and Kim is able to get dinner ready for the family.	**What is challenging about this routine?** Kim reported that she would rather be interacting with Serena than having her watch television during this time.

ROUTINE: Grocery shopping	
Who participates? Kim & Serena	**What does the activity look like?** Serena rides in the cart and often pulls items down from the shelf. When Kim tries to put them back Serena screams and cries and begins throwing other items out of the cart.
What goes well? Sometimes Serena helps put items in to the cart and she seems to enjoy it.	**What is challenging about this routine?** Kim reports that Serena does not follow her directions. Kim feels uncomfortable and embarrassed when Serena tantrums in the store.

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Figure 4. Identifying Language and Literacy Opportunities Form

Identifying Language and Literacy Opportunities

Name: Serena **Age:** 3.5 **Date:** September 10, 2008

Respondent(s): Kim & Dave (parents) Maria (grandmother)

	Provide Opportunities	Model Lang/Lit	Interact with Child	Recognize Achievements
Depart for center & drop off	• Speak to Serena in the car; ask about school or other familiar things • Sing songs • Point out letters and symbols in the car • Encourage Serena to greet peers & teachers • Assist Serena in writing her own name and finding her cubby • Help Serena find a peer to join in play	• Read street signs aloud • Talk about what you are doing when you look at a map • Greet children and adults at the center • Read classroom message board aloud while pointing to the words • Read labels on items in the classroom	• Speak to Serena, sing songs, respond to her initiations • Listen to Serena and respond • Ask Serena what she is going to do at school and who she will play with	• Show excitement and enthusiasm when Serena engages in language or song • Acknowledge Serena for signing in and finding her cubby • Encourage and praise Serena for greeting peers and teachers
Serena plays alone	• Give directions to be followed • Place name cards at people's spots at the dinner table • Make and set menus on the table • Set up magnet letters on the refrigerator • Have Serena help measure and mix ingredients	• Describe what you or Serena are doing • Read place cards, menus, or recipes • Describe smells and colors of ingredients • Talk about the letters each item starts with and find rhyming words	• Describe what you or Serena are doing • Ask Serena questions • Have Serena be your assistant (help you cook or set the table) • Be Serena's assistant and have her tell you what comes next	• Praise Serena for following directions, interacting & recognizing names

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	Provide Opportunities	Model Lang/Lit	Interact with Child	Recognize Achievements
Grocery shopping	• Have Serena choose between two items • Encourage Serena to help you make a grocery list • Make a special list for Serena that includes pictures of common items • Have Serena identify items on the shelf that match the pictures on her list • Have Serena cross items off the list • Have Serena load groceries on to the belt	• Read labels and grocery list aloud • Read aisle labels • Greet the checker	• Give Serena choices • Talk about what you are doing • Describe smells, colors, tastes • Ask Serena to put items in the cart	• Praise & show excitement for following directions, helping make the list and checking items off, greeting checkers and loading the groceries on to the belt