



Center for Urban Child Policy

Advancing Public Policy to Improve the Well-Being of Children

CHILDREN AND FAMILY LITERACY IN SHELBY COUNTY

In our community, parents in poverty are less likely to read to their children than parents in poverty nationwide. Fortunately, there are simple ways even for parents who struggle with reading to help their children become strong readers and learners.

March 2009



- » This issue brief reports on the findings from an important survey conducted by the Memphis Literacy Council (MLC). The MLC survey investigates the early literacy experiences of children living below the poverty line in Shelby County. These insights offer an important key to understanding the literacy problems facing families in poverty in Shelby County and help to identify ways to prepare low-income children to reach school ready to learn.
- » Across the country, middle-income parents are more likely to spend time reading with their children than are parents in poverty. Rates of reading to children vary with family income, and also vary with parents' comfort level with reading (Lee & Burkham, 2002).

ONE IN FOUR CHILDREN IN SHELBY COUNTY LIVES IN POVERTY. THESE CHILDREN ARE LESS LIKELY THAN CHILDREN IN POVERTY NATIONWIDE TO READ WITH THEIR PARENTS.

In the city of Memphis, 2 in 5 children live in poverty. These rates are substantially higher than across the U.S. where 1 in 5 children lives in poverty.

Children whose parents read to them, talk to them, sing songs and tell stories are more likely to do better in school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Children in more affluent families hear more words and consequently develop substantially larger vocabularies even by age three than children in families below poverty (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Across Memphis and Shelby County, parents living in poverty are less likely to read to their children than are parents in poverty nationwide. Fortunately, there are simple solutions for parents who struggle with reading to help their children become stronger readers and learners.

One of the most powerful ways parents can prepare children to succeed in school and in life is to introduce them to reading. Even parents who have a difficult time reading can tell their children stories and talk them through picture books. Researchers call this "dialogic reading." Children who are read to frequently are much more likely to become early readers and to have an easier time in school. This matters in Memphis, where 1 in 3 parents has a difficult time reading (MLC, 2007).

Did you know...

- » A child in a family living in poverty is likely to hear—and to learn—half as many words at home as a child in a middle-income family.
- » A 3-year-old child raised by professional parents has a larger working vocabulary

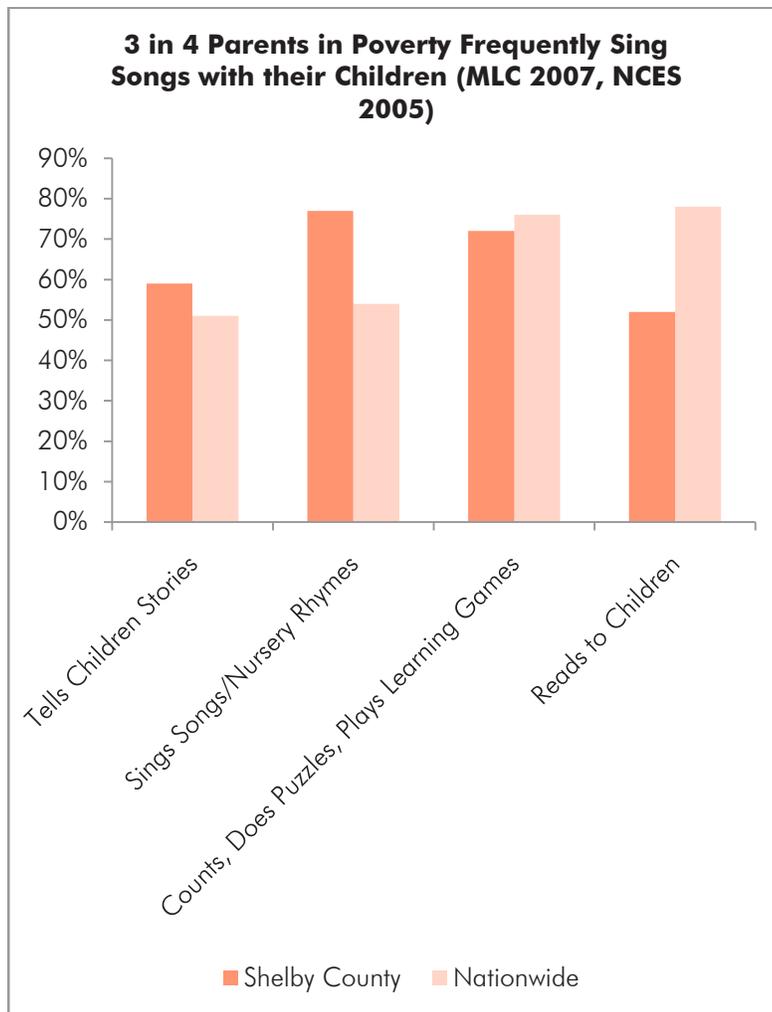


than a parent in a family below poverty (Hart & Risley, 1995).

- » Reading to children at an early age can prevent problems often associated with being raised in poverty, like difficulty in school, an increased risk for dropping out, and parents at earlier ages.

Poor parents do many things right when it comes to helping their children learn about language and reading.

Many parents in poverty in Shelby County work hard to strengthen their children's start in life.



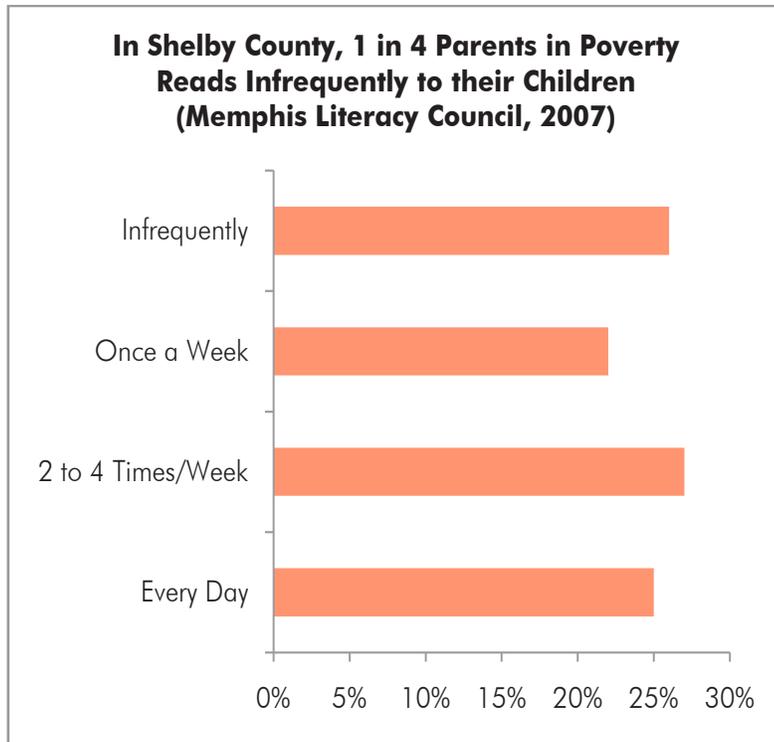
In fact, parents in poverty in Shelby County are more likely than parents in poverty



nationwide to tell their children stories, sing songs or nursery rhymes, and play learning games with their children.

However, poor parents in Shelby County lag far behind poor parents nationwide when it comes to reading to their children.

As the following figure indicates, a quarter of parents in poverty in Shelby County seldom if ever read to their children. Children in these families are especially at risk for social and educational problems in their future.



Nationwide, 3 in 4 parents in poverty read to their children several times a week. Half of parents in poverty in our community read to their children several times a week.

Five simple ways to increase literacy among children and families in poverty:

- » Read to your children—it makes a world of difference, parents are a child's first teachers and education begins long before children reach school.



- » Use longer sentences (“try for five” words) when speaking with children.
- » Support efforts to raise literacy levels in Shelby County. When parents enjoy reading, their children are more likely to enjoy it too.
- » Encourage early childhood care and development providers to stress the importance of reading. Well-informed parents are better able to help their children from the earliest years.
- » Sign children up for Books from Birth, the Shelby County free book program partnered with the Imagination Library. Children enrolled in the Imagination Library are stronger readers when they reach school. This is a great—and free—way to share the excitement of reading.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT LITERACY CONTACT THE
MEMPHIS LITERACY COUNCIL AT (901) 327-6000 X1007.**



References

Hart, B. & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore: Brooks Publishing.

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MEMPHIS

Lee, V. & Burkam, D. (2002). *Inequality at the starting gate: Social background differences in achievement as children begin school*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

"Other family activities such as telling stories and singing songs also encourage children's acquisition of literacy skills" Moss, B., and Fawcett, G. (1995). Bringing the Curriculum of the World of the Home to the School. *Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties*, 11: 247-256.

Snow, C., Burns, M., Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. National Academies Press.

Data included in this policy brief are the independent estimates created by the author for the Center for Urban Child Policy utilizing 2007 data from the Memphis Literacy Council unless otherwise specified. Information on the Memphis Literacy Council can be found at www.memphis-literacycouncil.org,

