

**THE EFFECTS OF FAST START READING:  
A FLUENCY-BASED HOME INVOLVEMENT READING  
PROGRAM, ON THE READING ACHIEVEMENT  
OF BEGINNING READERS**

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*This study tested the effects of a fluency-based home reading program called Fast Start. Thirty beginning first-grade students, representing a wide range of early reading abilities, were randomly assigned to experimental or control conditions for a period of 11 weeks.*

*Parents and students in the experimental group received Fast Start training, weekly materials packets, and weekly telephone support. Control group parents and students received the parent involvement opportunities typical for their family and classroom. Significant effects for those students most at-risk in reading (as measured by pretest) were found on measures of Letter/Word recognition and reading fluency. Verbal and written survey information collected from the experimental group indicated generally positive perceptions of the program by parents.*

There is currently a call for more parent involvement children's education. This is exemplified at the national level by the addition of an eighth goal to the National Education Goals statement; a goal that calls on schools to adopt policies and practices that actively engage parents and families in partnerships to support the academic work of children at home, and shared educational decision-making at school (National Education Goals Panel, 1995).

Additionally, reading has been identified as a critical curriculum area for student success across grade levels and curricular areas (National Reading Panel, 2000). Moreover, the same National Reading Panel (2000) identified word decoding (phonics) and reading fluency as two key components of successful early reading instructional programs.

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The present study reports the effects of a home-based reading program that incorporates elements of word decoding and especially reading fluency on the reading achievement of beginning first-grade students.

Across a wide range of studies and reports, it has been concluded that parental involvement in early childhood through adolescent education generally benefits children's learning and school success, particularly in literacy (Chavkin, 1993; Durkin, 1966; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1989, 1991, 1994; Postlethwaite & Ross, 1992; Pressley, 2002; Rasinski, 1989, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Empirically based outcome studies of diverse parent-involvement programs have been very positive. Henderson and Berla (1994) conducted an ERIC search of 66 studies, reviews, analyses, reports, and books, and concluded that efforts to improve children's outcomes are more effective if children's families are involved.

Crimm's (1992) meta-analysis of 57 studies in parent involvement interventions of many types (e.g., tutoring, communication, home visits, home interactions, parent training, and general relationships) on students from kindergarten through high school, in a variety of curriculum areas found a mean effect size of .393 for parental involvement. Reading was the domain that appeared to obtain the most benefit from parent involvement. Crimm also analyzed an additional 29 studies that had quantitative data but were not suitable for meta-analysis. Of these, 17 reported significant positive results. Parent tutoring studies produced an effect size of .613. It appeared to Crimm that parent involvement could rectify an educational deficit within a short period of time, depending upon the age level of the student. Moreover, parent involvement, if utilized effectively, could lessen the need for remedial education in schools.

Christenson (1995) found that when teachers involve parents in their children's education, teachers are recognized by parents for better interpersonal and teaching skills, evaluated higher on teaching performance by principals, and manifest greater satisfaction with their job. Topping's (1996) review of parent tutoring research concluded that there were generally positive results on objective measures of tutoring, and subjective parent feedback about the parent tutoring was "ubiquitously positive." Topping (1996) posited the following potential advantages of home-involvement

programs in reading:

1. extra practice at home with an encouraging adult may increase reading skill;
2. the child may experience a sense of security and benefit psychologically from the feeling that both his or her teacher and parents are working together;
3. a home reading program may help create a similar and consistent set of attitudes and expectation from both home and school;
4. instituting a parental-involvement program allows teachers to learn about family literacy practices and to incorporate this understanding into the school curriculum.

Neidermeyer (1970), a researcher who reported unequivocally positive results from parental involvement, offered speculations regarding the necessary components of a good parent-tutoring program. He reported that clear specification of objectives and clear communication of those to the parents are essential. Structured teaching materials must be provided to the parents. Inclusion of role-playing of teaching procedures in the training session with immediate feedback is also important to the success of the program. Instruction of the parents in the use of positive reinforcement should be a part of any program, and there must also be provision of record cards to help parents monitor a child's performance.

The primary problem addressed by the present research involves the implementation of a parent-tutoring program in reading that can generate clear documentation of the program's ability to assist the development of children's early reading skills. Fast Start (FS; Rasinski, 1995), an adaptation of the Fluency Development Lesson (Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant, 1994), is a school-coordinated parental involvement in reading program for primary-grade students, designed to get children off to a successful start through intensive and systematic parental involvement in word decoding and fluency instruction. It attempts to incorporate elements of effective parental involvement programs identified by previous scholars.

In a five-week pilot implementation of Fast Start, Rasinski (1995) reported strong correlations (ranging from .60 to .79) between parent participation in FS and various measures of

reading achievement. Similarly, Padak and Rasinski (in press) found significant reading achievement gains among public school kindergarten and first-grade students who participated in FS across a number of achievement variables over students whose parents chose to be less involved in the program.

The present study compared implementation of FS with a group of students who received similar classroom instruction but received a more traditional form of academic assistance from their parents.

### Method

The lessons of previous research strongly suggest that an effective parent-tutoring program in reading must be sensible to the parents, developmentally appropriate for children, directly relevant to the curriculum, easy to learn and implement by parents, not require extensive time on the part of the parents, and focus on the instructional reading needs of students. The program should be structured, but have room for individualization based on child and family needs. Ongoing consultation and family support is necessary, also. Parent training should provide parents with opportunities to learn a tutoring procedure and have opportunities for practice and feedback. Parents should also receive information about basic reinforcement strategies for use in the teaching and learning process at home. The programming should begin near the start of the school year and continue for more than ten weeks. The measurement of outcomes should be relevant to the materials used in tutoring and at school.

Fast Start (Rasinski, 1995) is an appropriate parent-tutoring reading program to use with a first-grade population. The program comprises a 10- to 15-minute daily lesson that involves parents in reading a brief text to and with their children repeatedly (Dowhower, 1994), proactively listening to their child read the text to them, and engaging in a brief word-study activity with their child. Specifically, FS procedures include the following:

1. Parent and child are to sit together. The parent draws the child's attention to the text by pointing to the appropriate lines and words.
2. Parent reads the text to the child several times until the child is familiar with the passage. Parent and child discuss the content of the passage.

3. Parent and child simultaneously read the passage together. The passage is read several times until the child feels comfortable with reading the passage alone.
4. The child reads the text alone with the parent providing backup or shadow reading support. The text is again read several times.
5. The parent engages in the word study activities requiring the parent and child to choose words from the text that are of interest; or choose words from the word lists in their packets. The words are printed on cards and added to word cards from previous days. This word bank is used for word practice, sentence building, word sorts, and other informal word games and activities.

### Design

The study used a pretest/posttest with control group design. Student/parent dyads were randomly assigned (randomized block procedure) to groups so as to provide equal number of subjects in each group. That is, based on pretest data, equal numbers of students were placed into one of three reading-development categories: High, Middle, and Low. Accordingly, students in each of these three reading categories were randomly distributed between the Experimental and Control conditions.

The parents of the students in the Experimental group were trained in the Fast Start parent-tutoring program and received eleven weekly packets of materials and weekly follow-up phone calls. The Control group received the normal school program including the form of parent involvement that was typical for the children's classrooms and parents. Parents in the Control group did not receive the Fast Start training, materials or follow-up. This design allowed for an analysis of main effect of parent tutoring and the relationship between the parent-tutoring program efficacy and the pretest reading categories (High, Middle, and Low).

### Participants

The host school district is situated in a suburban central Ohio community with an estimated population of 55,000 people. District enrollment at the time of this study was approximately 10,330. Approximately 6.4 percent of the district's students are Asian,

5.5 percent are African American, 1.4 percent are Hispanic; and .2 percent American Indian. The majority of students are Caucasian.

The population for this study consisted of all first-grade students at a K-6 elementary school within the above-described district who were enrolled at the beginning of the school year. This school's demographics are representative of the district in which it is located.

Just before the school year began, all parents of soon-to-be first-grade students in the school were mailed a letter with information about the study and a request for consent to participate. Thirty first-grade student/parent dyads (16 girls and 14 boys) from two first-grade classrooms agreed to participate in the study. The range of skills represented by this population was extensive. The students with the weakest reading skills knew about half of the letters of the alphabet and no words. The most skilled students were able to read many words and read grade-level material fluently.

#### *Instrumentation*

Pretest and posttest data was gathered using a criterion-referenced Letter/Word Identification test that included an upper- and lower-case alphabet assessment and a word-list assessment which combines the Fry Word List for Early Literacy Assessment (Fry, 1980) and Clay's twenty-one core words, based on Reading Recovery research of early emergent readers (Clay, 1993). Both assessments were developed by the second author. These words in the Letter/Word Identification Test comprise the important and high-frequency words for reading and writing in the English language. The raw score of total items correct was used as the numerical indicator of progress on the criterion referenced Letter/Word Identification test that consisted of all upper and low case letters (52 letters) and 12 word lists with 25 words per level (300 words). The Letter/Word Identification test was administered using a five second time limit per letter or word.

A curriculum-based measurement (CBM) was also used to assess connected reading fluency. Materials used for this assessment were taken from curricular material being used with these first-grade students. In consultation with the first-grade teachers, three probes (selections) were taken from the reading series and used as the reading material for the assessment of reading fluency.

Curriculum-Based Measurement (Deno, 1985; Deno, Mirkin, & Chiang, 1982; Marston, 1989; Shinn, 1989) was developed for the purpose of assessing reading fluency. It involves counting the number of words read correctly from a grade-level text in one minute; scores are reported in "correct words read per minute." Initial CBM validity studies were conducted by Deno et al. (1982) who found that listening to children read from their basal reader for one minute was a valid measure of reading skill. Correlation coefficients between CBM measures and various standardized reading achievement tests ranged from .73 to .91, with most coefficients above .8. The median correlation of CBM reading measures with elementary teachers' global ratings of student reading proficiency was .86. Construct and discriminate validity studies have also been indicative of good validity. Test-retest reliability estimates (using 1 to 10 week intervals) showed coefficients ranging from .82 to .97, with most estimates above .9. Interrater agreement coefficients were examined and found to be outstanding at .99. Standardized administration and scoring procedures for CBM were followed in this research study.

#### *Treatment*

All 30 consenting students were pretested and then randomly assigned to Treatment and Control groups by reading skill level blocks (High, Average, and Low). Parents of the treatment group students were contacted by mail and telephone, given more detailed information about the nature of the study, and invited to attend a sixty-minute training session at school. All parents attended and brought their first-grade children who participated in the respective training program.

As the parents entered the training session, they were asked to complete a brief survey of demographic information. They were also given a *Fast Start Parent Manual* which included the agenda, a newsletter written by Timothy Rasinski which outlined the Fast Start Program, a high-frequency word list, word games, and sample poems and rhyming activities used in FS. Additionally, the packet contained reading log sheets for parents to use in record keeping.

After the training, parents were given the first of 11 weekly packets of materials. The packets contained inspirational and practical ideas about how parents can help establish good literacy habits



in their children. The packets also contained several poems (Ardis, 1996; Rasinski & Zimmerman, 2001) to be used as the instructional texts in the FS program. The Fast Start approach to tutoring was modeled for the parents and followed by parents practicing a FS lesson with their own children.

It was emphasized to the parents that the Fast Start program asks parents to work with their children for 10–15 minutes at regular, specified, and convenient times each day.

#### *Data Collection*

Pretest data were collected on all 30 of the first graders participating in the study before the students were assigned to groups and levels. Posttesting with the same materials was conducted at the end of the 11-week treatment program by a test administrator independent of the study and blind to the composition of groups. The Letter/Word Identification test and three Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) probes were administered as the pretest and posttest. The median score of the three CBM probes was the score given to the child for the CBM portion of the assessment. The raw score of total items correct was used as the numerical indicator or progress on the Letter/Word Identification test.

The second author contacted by telephone the 15 student/parent dyads in the Experimental group weekly and information was gathered regarding the amount of time spent in Fast Start activities. This information was recorded and later used in the data analysis.

All Experimental group parents were asked to provide in-depth information regarding their experiences with the program in order to help understand the parent perspective of the program and factors that may have helped or hindered the program implementation. This was done through a written survey mailed to their homes.

Finally, all parents in the Control group were sent a survey to assess the home-based reading activities they used with their children. This information was collected to determine the reading activities engaged in by the Control group parents and children. These activities and efforts were then compared with the Experimental group activities made available in Fast Start. Eight

of 15 Control group and nine of 15 Experimental group parents returned the survey.

#### *Data Analysis*

The Letter/Word Identification test raw scores were recorded as total items correct for each student. The maximum score on this instrument was 352. A t-test was conducted to determine differences between Control and Experimental groups on the Letter/Word Identification and CBM pretests. No significant differences were detected.

Student scores were then subjected to an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to determine differences between the Fast Start intervention and the Control group. The ANCOVA was applied to highest half of the student population (based on combined pretest scores) and the lowest half of the student population. Pretest scores were used as the covariate in the analysis.

#### **Results**

The primary purpose of this study was to assess the efficacy of the Fast Start program in an actual school setting. As designed, this study allowed for a comparison of gender and skill differences among the groups and levels of students. Further assessment was done of the association between tutoring time and reading improvement among the FS students. This study also examined the reactions of families in FS to FS itself and to components of the FS program.

Since the two measures, Letter/Word Identification and CBM reading fluency, were highly correlated ( $r = .97$ ), the two reading scores for each student (letter/word identification and CBM reading fluency) were transformed into z-scores ( $M = 0$ ;  $SD = 1$ ) and combined into a unitary reading measure for each student that represented performance in the mastering the surface level of the text—fluent text decoding—the skill most associated with beginning reading instruction. Thus, for the analyses reported below, each student's data consisted of a single pretest measure and a single posttest measure.

The average amount of time spent per day (7-day week) for the 15 Experimental group participants was 11.3 minutes. The amount of time ranged from an average of about six minutes per

day to about 25 minutes per day. The majority of parents tutored approximately 10 minutes per day. It was also observed that the amount of time spent in tutoring during the first five weeks and the second five weeks was essentially the same.

Treatment effects (two types)  $\times$  reading skill (two levels: High achievers; Low achievers)  $\times$  gender (two levels), was determined. A significant treatment by skills interaction was observed in the ANCOVA,  $F = 6.0$ ;  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .02$ . The follow-up ANCOVA showed a significant difference between the lower half of the Control group and the lower half of the experimental group,  $F = 19.41$ ;  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .0009$ .

The higher half of the Control group and Experimental group were compared and produced an  $F$  value of .22 ( $df = 1$ ,  $p = .65$ ), which did not achieve statistical significance. No other significant main effect or interaction was observed.

Thus, the Fast Start program had a positive impact on those students with the lowest levels of reading at the time the program began. The low half (Low achievers) of the sample was largely comprised of students with minimal sight word skills and no real reading fluency skill (three or fewer correct words per minute).

Within the whole experimental group, pretest scores ranged from 27 correct items to 318 correct items on the Letter/Word Identification test. On the reading fluency measure (CBM), the pre-test scores ranged from 0 to 122. In the control group, pre-test scores ranged from 24 correct items to 350 correct items on the Letter/Word Identification test. On the CBM (reading fluency), the pretest scores ranged from 0 to 133.

The whole control and experimental groups had similarly distributed scores with similar means and standard deviations at the time of pretest and at the time of post-test (see Tables 1 and 2).

**TABLE 1** Pre-Test Raw Scores and Standard Deviations for Experimental and Control Groups

Groups	Mean L/W* (SD)	Mean CW/M** (SD)
Experimental Group ( $N = 15$ )	90.06 (83.42)	15.33(31.71)
Control Group ( $N = 15$ )	98.13 (98.36)	22.33 (40.34)

\*Correct items on Letter/Word Identification Test.

\*\*Correct Words Read/Minute on Reading Fluency Test (CBM).

**TABLE 2** Post-Test Raw Scores and Standard Deviations for Experimental and Control Groups

Groups	Mean L/W* (SD)	Mean CW/M** (SD)
Experimental Group ( $N = 15$ )	149.73 (80.23)	51.67 (46.54)
Control Group ( $N = 15$ )	138.87 (106.27)	50.53 (51.12)

\*Correct items on Letter/Word Identification Test.

\*\*Correct Words Read/Minute on Reading Fluency Test (CBM).

Table 3 shows pretest score comparisons between the lower achieving half of the Experimental and Control groups.

Table 4 shows a large difference between the Experimental and a Control groups in the lower achievement half of the sample. The Experimental group clearly outperformed the Control group.

Nine of 15 parents among the FS students returned the survey. Four of the survey respondents had children from the lower half of the pretest distribution (from a total of 8 students). Of the nine parents responding, six felt more confident assisting their child as a result of the program. Six parents reported good child interest in the poems that were part of the FS program. One noted that the interest in the poems waned after the first few weeks. One parent did not see interest in the child regarding poems.

All nine responding parents reported that use of word lists were helpful. Parents reported the following comments regarding the word lists: "enjoyed"; "excited"; "used with spelling lists"; "used more often after the first few weeks." One parent said the most benefit was derived from use of the word lists.

Seven parents felt that the weekly handouts and ideas were helpful; one parent said some were helpful. Comments regarding

**TABLE 3** Pre-Test Raw Scores for Lower Achievers in the Experimental and Control Groups

Group and levels	Mean L/W* (SD)	Mean CW/M** (SD)
Low Half Experimental Group ( $N = 8$ )	50.88 (10.39)	1.38 (1.11)
Low Half Control Group ( $N = 7$ )	46.9 (10.25)	1.43 (.90)

\*Correct items on Letter/Word Identification Test.

\*\*Correct Words Read/Minute on Reading Fluency Test (CBM).

**TABLE 4** Post-Test Raw Scores for Lower Halves of the Treatment Groups

Group and levels	Mean L/W* (SD)	Mean CW/M** (SD)
Low Half Experimental Group (N = 8)	116.38 (29.15)	35.38 (11.02)
Low Half Control Group (N = 7)	79.71 7.32	14.43 6.25

\*Correct items on Letter/Word Identification Test.

\*\*Correct Words Read/Minute on Reading Fluency Test (CBM).

the handouts were as follows: “good ideas” and “enjoyed reading and applying.”

All nine of the participants who returned the survey stated that the *Fast Start Parent Manual* was helpful. Six reported that the sequential procedure was helpful. The other three respondents reported that the sequential procedure was inconsistently helpful. Eight of nine respondents reported using the sequential procedure on other reading materials than the ones sent home (e.g., books at home, library books, church books). The sequential procedure was not helpful for one child who could read independently and did not want the parent to read to him. One parent commented that Fast Start was appreciated because it is an “exact way” to help.

When parents were asked if the Fast Start Program helped their child get a good start in reading, six strongly agreed, two agreed, and one neither agreed nor disagreed.

The parent survey also asked parents to comment on specific aspects of the program. All nine respondents said the word-family activities were helpful and one parent said it took a while for the child to get the idea of how to do it. Eight parents thought that was helpful.

When asked if they would recommend Fast Start to other first-grade parents, five parents strongly agreed and four agreed. One parent described the overall program as “excellent” and said the program was enjoyed by the family. One parent stated she “loved the program” because her child could now read. One parent termed the program a “great concept,” while another described it as a “great program.” One reported that the program was enjoyable to both parent and child. All nine parents reported that their children were more independent in reading activities since the program began.

All 15 parents from the control group were asked to anonymously respond to a survey regarding the types of literacy activities they do with their children. Eight of the 15 parents responded to this survey. Parent responses showed that their children engaged in a wide variety of home-based literacy activities: playing traditional board games and educational computer games; watching educational TV programs; reading environmental print and Sunday school materials; writing activities such as e-mail communications and writing “letters” to family members and writing simple sentences; practicing assigned spelling words; use of flash card lists for vocabulary words provided by the teacher; parent-to-child reading, child-to-parent reading, silent independent reading by child; and silent reading by child as the parent read aloud.

None of the parents reported previously using a sequential process program like Fast Start. None mentioned the use of poetry or finding word families after reading a text. Fast Start appears to be a unique reading intervention when compared with typical home and homework-type literacy activities for beginning readers.

### Discussion

Fast Start (Rasinski, 1995; Padak & Rasinski, in press) is a parent-child reading tutorial system that is different from typical parent-child reading activities, effective among at-risk students, yet easy enough to teach parents in about an hour. The Fast Start program is responsive to the current call for parent involvement in education (National Education Goals Panel, 1995), in a very practical way. Previous research in this area has been mixed (Topping, 1996) and questions have been raised regarding the need to tease out aptitude by treatment interactions (Topping, 1996).

Although a main effect for treatment was not verified for the whole groups, it was found that those student/parent dyads in the lower-achieving half of the sample that received Fast Start training, materials appropriate for first-grade students, and on-going support through the 11-week process, showed significantly greater reading skill at posttest than those in the Control group.

The students who tended to respond well to this intervention were beginning first graders with minimal sight-word skills and no real reading-fluency skill (3 or fewer correct words per minute)—students considered most at-risk for reading failure. Moreover, an

average of 10 to 12 minutes of daily FS tutoring seemed to make the difference for most students at the beginning stages of reading.

Comments from all 15 parents during the weekly telephone conferences indicated very little negative feeling toward the program. Most comments were quite positive or reflected minor concerns that were easily rectified. Therefore, based on this limited population, it appears that Fast Start is an effective home tutoring option for parents and students at the beginning of the first-grade year.

Overall, then, it appears that FS holds great promise for both parental involvement in reading and significant improvements in reading achievement for beginning readers. For educators wishing to use Fast Start, we suggest that they focus their efforts on those students who have minimal sight-word skills and minimal reading-fluency skills (three or fewer correct words per minute).

Starting this program at the beginning of the first-grade year worked well in this study because it seemed to capture the enthusiasm and hopefulness of the parents and their children who were trying to learn to read. For this reason, we suggest that programs like this be implemented at the beginning of the first-grade year. It may also be appropriate to initiate this program during the kindergarten year for those students who show indications of knowing most letters/sounds and can read a few sight words.

We suggest that a training program be implemented with a focus on building parent efficacy in tutoring and instruction in ways to use positive reinforcement in the tutoring process. Also, parents and students enjoyed the practice tutoring during the training. Parents said they valued the opportunity to see the procedure modeled for them before they began it on their own. Thus, we suggest that students be included as part of the training program.

The results of this study suggest that parents needed the weekly contact in order to develop a sense of trust with the contact educator, to be made accountable, to be encouraged, and to have questions and concerns dealt with in an expeditious manner. The weekly telephone conference strategy appeared to be successful in helping parents continue using Fast Start because the amount of tutoring time reported by parents did not decrease during the last half of the study but, in fact, increased slightly. Most parents needed a five-minute call or less each week. Some

needed more time, but this was rare. If a teacher had five students who needed this type of support, it might mean an additional 30 minutes of work per week. Clearly, this study highlights the importance of an enthusiastic teacher who supports FS with parents and tries to make connections between FS and the school reading curriculum.

Since this intervention seems quite effective for those students most at risk for reading failure, its use in kindergarten or first grade may alleviate more serious and more costly reading failure at higher grades. It may also help school districts comply with parent involvement and reading achievement mandates.

We suggest that future research into FS continue with first-grade students and be expanded to kindergarten students and second-grade students struggling in reading. There are students in kindergarten and grade two performing at reading levels found appropriate for FS. If FS is found efficacious for kindergarten and second-grade students, regular parent training programs could be offered to kindergarten through second-grade parents who have children in the skill range associated with the positive outcomes of this study.

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