

# Mother Goose on the Loose

## Applying Brain Research to Early Childhood Programs in the Public Library

**Betsy Diamant-Cohen**

Mother Goose on the Loose is an award-winning early childhood literacy program for babies and their caregivers offered each week at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland. This article describes the history of the program including the theories behind it, practical implementations for creating optimal learning environments for very young children, descriptions and benefits of the program, and parent reactions to it.

**W**here can babies receive applause for throwing a stuffed animal up in the air, pulling Humpty Dumpty off his wall, or jumping over a candlestick? At Mother Goose on the Loose (MGOL) programs for babies, that's where!

Public librarians have approached the question of how to design programs to introduce very young and pre-literate audiences to library activities in many different ways. This article will present an innovative, time-tested, and successful approach to emergent literacy programming in public libraries that integrates the most recent findings in baby brain research.

Studies in brain research have shown that children learn best through routine and repetition in a nurturing atmosphere.<sup>1</sup> Immersing children in pleasurable language experiences on a regular basis has been shown to result in increased brain capacity that will prepare them for reading and writing at a later stage.<sup>2</sup> Integrating movement with learning activities appears to increase memory retention.<sup>3</sup> Expressing emotions through movement can release tension and aggression harmlessly, helping children to relax, absorb, and learn.<sup>4</sup> Research also indicates that caregivers who enjoy books together with their children help those children develop an attitude toward books and reading that will likely have a positive effect in later life.<sup>5</sup>

MGOL is a thirty-minute structured program held four times each week at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland. It is appropriate for children from birth up to the age of five and their parents, led by a trained librarian. The Pratt pro-

---

*Betsy Diamant-Cohen, Children's Programming Specialist at Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland, was instrumental in creating the Mother Goose on the Loose program; bcohen@epfl.net.*



The Mother Goose on the Loose logo, illustrated by Celia Yitzhak

grams were created with the attention span of babies (birth to age two) in mind and provides activities that complement the recent research in brain development.

### Goals

MGOL has three major goals. The first is to increase use of the public library by families with young children, providing families with the opportunity to foster emergent literacy skills in young children. The attainment of this goal can be demonstrated through increasing use of the public library services by families with very young children, resulting in high demand for new book purchases. Secondly, MGOL aims to provide an educational model to parents, empowering them in their roles as their child's first teacher. Running MGOL programs helps library youth services staff increase their comfort level working as parent educators. The third goal is to create a community of parents, children, and librarians with an open dialogue where parents can make programmatic requests and librarians are encouraged to respond accordingly.

### Format

During the MGOL program, the librarian leads parents to interact with their children through a variety of musical activities, using rhymes, songs, finger plays, musical instruments, puppets, and colored scarves. The program is highly structured, but within the structure there is room for



A mother and child enjoy activities during Mother Goose on the Loose

variation and creativity, and program leaders contribute their own unique talents and personality. Approximately 80 percent of the program's content is repeated from session to session, giving very young children a sense of stability that comes from knowing what to expect. The 20 percent of new activities introduced each week keeps the program fresh and exciting. Following a predictable pattern, the program is based on traditional rhymes and songs that use repetition to help children learn vocabulary, recognize words easily, and feel that certain rhymes have become old friends.

MGOL instills in very young children basic emergent literacy skills that include patterns of music (fast/slow, high/low, loud/soft) as well as phonemic awareness. MGOL encourages a rich vocabulary and use of language by introducing concepts such as syllables through use of songs, rhymes, and musical instruments. MGOL nurtures appropriate responses to verbal cues, for example, by helping children feel a proud sense of achievement by performing actions such as hitting a drum or jumping over a candlestick. Children are encouraged to pay attention to musical sounds and patterns as a precursor to phonemic awareness. The program fosters motor coordination and speech development through interactive rhymes, movement, games, and songs, while simultaneously familiarizing

children (and their parents) with books, book illustration, and a library atmosphere. By providing a social environment where very young children can interact with other children of the same age, MGOL teaches children patience and the need to take turns through participatory activities.

## The Evolution of Mother Goose on the Loose

MGOL evolved from a free-flowing library nursery-rhyme program into a thirty-minute structured program based on the learning theories of educator Barbara Cass-Beggs.

Cass-Beggs, a Canadian opera singer in her eighties, devoted her retirement years to developing and perfecting a system for teaching music to babies and young children called the Listen, Like, Learn method. The main idea behind Listen, Like, Learn is that first the children listen. From listening, they become familiar with the works of music. When the music becomes something they recognize, they start to like it—as if it is an old friend. Once they like it, their minds are open to learn concepts related to the music, such as high and low, fast and slow, tones, notes, and rhythms. In addition, Cass-Beggs felt that security and stability, curiosity, feelings and emotions, imitation, and variety are essential parts of this program. The environment of Listen, Like, Learn programs is one full of optimal learning conditions.

In a music course developed and taught by Cass-Beggs called *Your Baby Needs Music*, participants are always asked to take off their shoes and sit in a

circle on a rug with babies on their laps. The program of musical activities includes physical movements, singing songs, keeping time to classical music by playing on rhythm instruments, and many finger plays. Everything is repeated twice; if the parents have not heard the rhyme before, they are usually able to repeat it aloud during the second time around.

Some babies can sit on their parents' laps bouncing along to the rhymes or ringing their little bells; other children prefer to run around the room, crying or trying to distract another child. In these instances, instead of letting parents become frustrated or embarrassed, both parent and child are made to feel welcome, giving the sense that active behavior in very young children is not unusual or inappropriate. If they are encouraged to keep returning, drastic changes can be observed. Usually, during the fourth class the "inattentive child" suddenly begins participating. The baby sits attentively, reaching up high when the musical instruments are being played "up high" and leaning over in expectation for a leaning rhyme about Mother and Father and Uncle John even before the rhyme has reached the leaning portion. Amazingly, at each session, the children become more attentive and their skills increase remarkably. They all become more socially aware of the other babies and more receptive to the interactive parts, such as putting instruments away or tapping hands together. They love going to classes and their parents enjoy taking them.

In 1988 Cass-Beggs gave a series of workshops in Listen, Like, Learn techniques in Israel. The staff of the Youth Wing Library of the Israel Museum in

### The Core Structure of Mother Goose on the Loose

1. Introduction and starting rituals. Reciting rhymes, reading picture books, and singing songs. Generally includes accompanying flannel board illustrations, puppets, or finger plays.
2. "Body activities" with interactive songs about the parts of the body.
3. "Stand up actions" including songs and dances that teach about syllables and rhythm.
4. Activities about animals, with illustrations, flannel board characters, songs, or puppets.
5. Physical interaction through nursery rhymes (such as "Jack Be Nimble," where children take turns jumping over the candlestick, or "Humpty Dumpty," where children are invited to pull the flannel board character off his wall).
6. Ending rituals including good-bye movements and songs.



Barbara Cass-Beggs with parents and children during a "Your Baby Needs Music" class.

Jerusalem combined the structure, music, and movement elements of the Listen, Like, Learn program with traditional library programming props such as books, puppets, nursery rhymes, and the flannel board. This program was named Mother Goose on the Loose and was presented weekly from 1988 to 1998.

The response to these sessions for babies from birth to age two was tremendous. Each week a group of regulars brought their babies for fun and stimulation. Participants included parents and caregivers, retired and practicing librarians, and day-care providers. In addition, visiting tourists who were intrigued by the idea of an English-language program for babies in Jerusalem often attended. Over the course of the years, children of non-English-speaking parents learned English through regular attendance at MGOL. The warm and nurturing environment provided a place for parents to interact together without tension. Jews, Christians, and Muslims sang nursery rhymes together and watched as their babies smiled when they saw their accomplishments appreciated by the crowd. Play groups were formed and support networks grew. Over time, the program was modified according to trial and error. It was mentioned by Robin Works Davis in her book on library programming for babies, *Toddle on Over*.<sup>6</sup>

The Enoch Pratt Free Library began offering MGOL programs in 1998. Parents from around the city brought their children to this program. They were

amazed that babies could be so attentive for an entire thirty minutes and pleased that, unlike other baby programs, ours was offered for free. The program quickly grew, expanding from one weekly program to four weekly programs for the public. In addition, Early Head Start Daycare Centers began bringing their children to monthly MGOL sessions presented just for them. Librarians in the Pratt library system were trained in the methods, and MGOL was offered at a variety of locations around the city. A training program was offered at a Maryland Library Association Workshop on Baby Programs, and librarians throughout the state of Maryland began coming to observe sessions, ask questions, and receive training packets. In addition, a Terrific Twos program was created for those children who had outgrown the MGOL program but were not quite ready for preschool storytime.

At the same time, the Enoch Pratt Free Library was active in emergent literacy programming and kept up with the recent developments in the field of brain

research in babies. It was instantly clear that the structure and activities in MGOL provided an optimal learning environment for the growth and development of babies' brains. Programs were presented for librarians throughout the state of Maryland that incorporated the most recent findings in brain research with training in how to plan and run MGOL programs. See table 1 for the increases in EPFL programs and participation levels for children under age three.

## Parent-Training Sessions

By January 2003, Pratt librarians noted that parents enjoyed attending MGOL programs but were generally not aware of the theory or value behind it. Since many parents want to do what is best educationally for their child, we decided to provide the opportunity for parents to learn about their child's development in an easy way. We began offering bimonthly parent-training sessions concurrently with the MGOL program. In these sessions, parents have had the opportunity to explore brain anatomy and development, to review specific groups of skills that their child is developing through MGOL, and to learn exercises that support brain development.<sup>7</sup> They have been encouraged to take home and use the activities introduced in the library, and have shared ways in which such activities can be incorporated into home rituals, for example, at bedtime or meal time. Parents have even been inspired to create their own craft activities based on the MGOL programs. (See appendix for an overview of topics covered in the parent-training sessions.)

## Benefits of Mother Goose on the Loose

MGOL programs have created environments where families from different ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds

TABLE 1

<i>Increases in Programs and Participation Levels</i>		
<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of EPFL Programs for Children Under Age 3</i>	<i>No. of Participants in Programs for Children Under Age 3</i>
7/98-6/99	142	2,414
7/99-6/00	279	5,266
7/00-6/01	421	8,217
7/01-6/02	573	11,916

interact in a welcoming community space. The program provides parents with suggestions for interactive activities with their child and answers to parenting questions, such as how to redirect their child's negative behavior in a con-

balls) for 2- to 3-year-olds and Mother Goose on the Loose, which combines songs, movement, and finger plays with rhymes and musical instruments.”<sup>8</sup>

The increasing number of participants in the MGOL program at the

---

## As parents routinely show appreciation for the accomplishments of their babies, the babies push themselves to do more!

---

structive way. Positive reinforcement is central to MGOL interactions with frequent use of the child's name, clapping, and verbal encouragement.

With at-risk parents, this is an important element. Often these parents do not realize that their very young child is doing something special by simply being able to follow instructions. This element of positive reinforcement helps them to appreciate their child while teaching the parents several different ways of offering praise. Over time with the consistent nature of the program, this reinforcement becomes communal. The ritual becomes habit, and as parents routinely show appreciation for the accomplishments of their babies, the babies push themselves to do more!

### Recognition for Mother Goose on the Loose

In November 2002, the Enoch Pratt Free Library received the second annual Godfrey Award for Excellence in Public Library Services for Families and Children. This award recognized the Enoch Pratt Free Library's MGOL as an outstanding program with a comprehensive set of library goals relating to children's services. MGOL was selected for meeting the needs of young children and families; demonstrating ingenuity, imagination, innovation, and creativity; and being responsive to the individuals and groups being served.

In 2003, the Enoch Pratt Free Library was also chosen in a yearly contest run by *Maryland Magazine* as “the best family library.” Among the reasons mentioned were “the thousands of books in its Children's Room and its never-ending children's programming. . . . Terrific Twos, a book-based program (replete with bubbles and bouncing

Enoch Pratt Free Library has shown that parents respond well to a fun, free program for their babies. The excitement and active participation of very young library patrons demonstrates the value of incorporating principles of brain research into library programming. We look forward to continuing to serve these parents and their children as they grow into lifelong library users. ■

### References

1. Gerald N. Tirozzi, “Using Brain Research to Leave No Child Behind.” Paper read at Learning and the Brain Conference VIII, Apr. 26, 2003, Cambridge, Mass.
2. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Sciences of Early Childhood Development, Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds., Board on Children, Youth and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Pr., 2000).
3. Jeb Schenck, “Role of Movement and Decision Making in Creating Memory.” Paper read at Learning and the Brain Conference VIII, Apr. 26, 2003, Cambridge, Mass.
4. Ann Lief Barlin and Paul Barlin, *The Art of Learning Through Movement: A Teachers' Manual of Movement for Students of All Ages* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Pr., 1973), 27.
5. Zero to Three: The National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families, accessed May 22, 2003, [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org); Martha S. Burns, Care and Feeding of the Brain: How to Prepare a Child to Be a Good Reader, accessed July 8, 2003, [www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=col/burns00mar](http://www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=col/burns00mar); Virginia A. Walter, *Children and Libraries: Getting It Right* (Chicago: ALA, 2001).
6. Robin Works Davis, *Toddle On Over: Developing Infant & Toddler Literature Programs* (Fort Atkinson, Wis.: Alleyside Pr., 1998), 18–19.

7. Paul E. Dennison and Gail E. Dennison *Brain Gym: Simple Activities for Whole Brain Learning (Orange)* (Ventura, Calif.: Edu-Kinesthetics, 1992).
8. “Best of Baltimore,” *Maryland Magazine*, August 2003: 152.

### Resources

- Barlin, Anne Lief, and Paul Barlin. 1973. *The Art of Learning Through Movement: A Teachers' Manual of Movement for Students of All Ages*. Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press.
- Barlin, Anne Lief, with Ruthe Gluckson and Mady Taylor. 1979. *Teaching Your Wings to Fly: The Nonspecialist's Guide to Movement Activities for Young Children*. Santa Monica, Calif.: Goodyear.
- Burns, Martha S., Care and Feeding of the Brain: How to Prepare a Child to Be a Good Reader. Accessed July 8, 2003, [www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=col/burns00mar](http://www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=col/burns00mar).
- Cass-Beggs, Barbara. 1978. *Your Baby Needs Music*. Vancouver, B.C.: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Cass-Beggs, Barbara. 1986. *Your Child Needs Music: A Complete Course in Teaching Music to Children*. Canada: Frederick Harris Music Co.
- Davis, Robin Works. 1998. *Toddle On Over: Developing Infant & Toddler Literature Programs*. Fort Atkinson, Wis.: Alleyside Pr.
- Dennison, Paul E., and Gail E. Dennison. 1992. *Brain Gym: Simple Activities for Whole Brain Learning (Orange)*. Ventura, Calif.: Edu-Kinesthetics.
- Hannaford, Carla. 1995. *Smart Moves*. Arlington, Va.: Great Ocean.
- Kirchoefer, Kathy. 2001. *Babies Into Books Handbook*. Hyattsville, Md.: Prince Georges County Memorial Library System. Accessed July 2, 2003, [www.prge.lib.md.us/lib/babiesintobooks.html](http://www.prge.lib.md.us/lib/babiesintobooks.html). Kathy Kirchoefer, a Children's Librarian from Prince Georges County, Maryland, created an excellent Web site about her program, *Babies Into Books*, which is based on the principles of *Mother Goose on the Loose*.
- Lambert, Sylvia Leigh. *Mother Goose Time Pathfinder: Library Programs with Books and Babies*. Accessed July 3, 2003, [www.unc.edu/~sllamber/pathfinder/mothergooseindex.html](http://www.unc.edu/~sllamber/pathfinder/mothergooseindex.html). This site was last updated Dec. 12, 2002.
- National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Sciences of Early Childhood Development. Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Board on Children, Youth and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Pr., 2000).
- Walter, Virginia A. 2001. *Children & Libraries: Getting It Right*. Chicago: ALA.
- Zero to Three: The National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families. Accessed May 22, 2003, [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org).

## Appendix

In one session of *Easy Parenting 101*, parents were given a brief review of specific motor skills, musical skills, social skills, and pre-literacy skills associated with activities in MGOL. This was followed by an analysis that included a game for parents—matching the benefit with the activity. Below are some examples.

### Motor Skills

In this game, the librarian recited certain rhymes from MGOL programs and parents were asked to call out specific motor skills that were related to those particular activities.

- Speech development—*Peter Piper Picked a Peck of Pickled Peppers*
- Develops a sense of rhythm—*Grandfather Clock Goes Tick-Tock*
- Hand-eye coordination—*I Had a Little Turtle*
- Responding physically to verbal cues—*Mother, Father, and Uncle John*
- Feeling comfortable within your own body—*(all tickle rhymes)*
- Movement helps muscles with development and coordination—*Open, shut them*
- A fun way to get some physical exercise—*The Hokey Pokey*
- Promoting use of the voice—*(making animal sounds)*
- Developing locomotion—*Row, Row, Row Your Boat*

- Showing children that any part of the body can develop movement—*We hit the floor together*
- Up and down—*Grand Old Duke of York*

### Social Skills

These MGOL activities encourage development of social skills, including helping the young children to feel comfortable in a group setting.

- Taking turns—*(Throwing pigs up in the air to Hickory Dickory Dare)*
- Waiting patiently—*(Pulling Humpty off the wall)*
- Putting toys away when asked—*Toys Away*
- Learning the rules and sticking to them—*(Invisible circle around flannel board)*
- Interacting with others in a positive way—*(Clapping for all)*
- Receiving positive reinforcement for a job well done—*(Hearing the applause)*
- Giving positive reinforcement to others—*(Using many encouraging words)*
- Feeling friendship, love, and trust through partner rhymes—*Pat-a-cake*
- Developing social responsiveness—*I Can Ring, Ring-Ting-Tingle*
- Gaining self-confidence by recognizing sounds and mimicking them—*When the Cow Gets Up in the Morning*

- Overcoming fears—*This Is the Way the Ladies Ride*
- Bonding with others—*(Rolling beach ball to each other)*
- Experiencing the enjoyment and awareness of everyday activities—*This Is the Way We Wash Our Knees (using colored scarves as a washcloth)*

### Musical Skills

Songs can strengthen musical skills and emotional health.

- Fast and slow (tempo)—*I'm Riding in My Car*
- Loud and soft (timbre)—*Two Little Dickey Birds*
- High and low—*(Using instruments)*
- Recognizing sounds—*I Went to Visit the Farm One Day*
- Connecting sounds with actions—*If You're Happy and You Know It*
- Developing a sense of rhythm—*Polly Put the Kettle On*
- Encouraging accurate listening and singing—*(The leader sings, participants repeat)*
- Listening to sounds and patterns as a precursor to word awareness—*(Hearing a short story being read)*
- Providing an emotional outlet through music—*(Shaking maracas to varying tempos)*
- Relaxing with lullabies—*Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*
- Recognize the underlying beat in various musical works—*Pachelbel's canon*

# Brookhaven Pr. bw 1/3 45