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BRINGING LITERACY HOME: An Evaluation of the Every Child Ready to Read Program

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ABOUT ECRR

Every Child Ready to Read® (ECRR) is a parent education initiative. It stresses that early literacy begins with the primary adults in a child's life. The ECRR program empowers public libraries to assume an essential role in supporting early literacy within a community. Visit everychildreadytoread.org for more information.

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01

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

01—EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report highlights findings from a three-year evaluation of Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR), a parent education initiative developed jointly by the Public Library Association (PLA) and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC). As of this writing, over six thousand libraries have invested in the ECRR Toolkit, which is used to implement ECRR in the library. ECRR is based on two core concepts: reading begins at birth, and parents are a child’s first and best teacher. Librarians encourage parents to interact and help build their children’s vocabulary and early literacy skills using the Five Practices of talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing.

Although seemingly simple, the initiative represents a sharp turn in the way many libraries approach children’s services. Previously, librarians focused their attention primarily on children, not on parent education. Today, librarians see that they can have a greater impact on early literacy by focusing on the primary adults in a child’s life—parents and caregivers. By teaching adults the importance of early literacy and how to nurture pre-reading skills at home, libraries can multiply the effects of their efforts many times over.

In visits to more than sixty libraries nationwide, the research team analyzed library spaces, conducted librarian interviews, and observed library programs. Findings show that focusing on parent engagement has spawned many changes. First, libraries are strategically designing their spaces to promote family engagement. By incorporating décor reflecting local customs and

culture, refurbishing play areas, and providing comfortable furnishings, families feel welcome to hang out, play, and read together. Librarians’ roles are also shifting from focusing on children and reading to focusing on children and their parents. They see themselves as educators, both of children and their parents. In addition, many librarians function almost as community or social workers, drawing in families who might not otherwise visit. Librarian programming is also changing, offering family-friendly options that emphasize play, science, music, and exercise that invite all parents and children to participate. In many libraries, programs are effectively drawing large numbers of families who become weekly regulars.

In areas of need, libraries are playing a vital role as resource brokers, helping to connect parents with services and resources, as well as a space for parents and children to work on literacy skills. Libraries also provide resources for families to interact using digital resources, such as computers, tablets, and e-readers.

As seen in many areas, these changes do not come without challenges. Many libraries, particularly those in areas of need, still struggle to attract parents. In addition, not all libraries are comfortable or capable of addressing parents during library programming. The amount of outreach libraries conduct varies greatly, and libraries with less outreach are more limited in their ability to effectively serve as resource brokers in areas of poverty. Finally, while many libraries offer families a place to use computers and other digital resources together, few libraries ac-

- Focusing on parent engagement via the ECRR model has spawned many changes, including that public libraries are now strategically designing their spaces to promote family engagement.
- Programming has moved beyond story time reading to a more expansive view of how literacy develops, including play and fun, STEM and STEAM, and bilingual story times.
- Library staff behavior is shifting from focusing exclusively on children to also engaging parents and caregivers. This shift better enables family members to continue building literacy at home.
- Librarians are modeling behaviors to show parents how to increase early literacy using the ECRR Five Practices.
- Public librarians see themselves as educators, both of children and their parents. Findings show that children also view librarians as educators.
- Public librarians are embracing new roles as community resource brokers and social justice workers. They strive to reach all families in their communities, particularly those in distress.
- These effective practices need to be more widely implemented, with particular attention paid to outreach and ongoing professional development.

tively promote the use of technology during their programming.

Despite these challenges, libraries are emerging as community centers that promote family engagement, thus serving an important mission of fostering school readiness for children in many communities. ECRR’s flexible framework allows librarians to adapt the initiative to individual community needs and interests, allowing ECRR to reflect the diversity of the many families libraries serve. It looks, sounds, and feels different in various parts of the country. However, the focus of this evaluation is on how libraries are fulfilling one common mission: helping children arrive at school ready to read.

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BRINGING LITERACY HOME

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AN EVALUATION OF THE EVERY CHILD READY TO READ PROGRAM

It's only 9:45 on a sunny San Francisco morning, but the group of fifty-one preschoolers, parents, and caregivers lining up for the local library's 10:15 Spanish-English "Toddler Tales" program know to get here early. In this colorful neighborhood, home to large numbers of Mexican immigrants, children's librarian Laura warmly greets each family as they enter. The children and adults quickly stake a claim on the rug, and Laura leads them in an hour of singing, chanting, dancing, and reading in both languages.

After the program, children and adults stay together, building with blocks or sitting side-by-side playing a computer math game. As the children huddle nearby over puzzles, the adults start to chat, swapping recipes, sharing childcare tips, or spreading lunches out on library tables. The vibe is clear: come, play, talk, read, hang out.

The casual, upbeat scene described above is just one of many that we have witnessed as the research team evaluating the Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) initiative. Although it is only one snapshot, it conveys many of the initiative's core concepts: reading begins at birth. Parents are a child's first and best teacher, and libraries are the perfect place for parents to interact with their children using the Five Practices crucial to literacy development:

talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing.

The ECRR initiative, a joint effort of the Public Library Association (PLA) and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), is a parent-education program operating in about four thousand libraries throughout the country. At the heart of the initiative is a sharp turn in the way many libraries approach children's services. Traditionally, early literacy programs at libraries have focused on children. During story times and other programs, librarians might model strategies that parents can use to develop their children's early literacy skills, but their primary focus was not parent education. For many decades parents were not encouraged to attend story hour. It was thought this would help children develop the independence need to attend school.

After the 1983 report "A Nation at Risk" spurred a push for family literacy, libraries started to move in a different direction.¹ Many came to see that librarians could have a greater impact on early literacy by focusing on the primary adults in a child's life—parents and caregivers. By teaching adults the importance of early literacy as well as how to nurture pre-reading skills at home, libraries can multiply the effects of their efforts many times over.

ECRR emerged from this movement in 2004. Based on research from the National Reading Panel's report, the initiative first focused on the five critical skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.² However,

a 2009 evaluation of the program found that these skills were difficult to communicate to parents, so an updated and expanded edition was introduced in 2010.³

Instead of five critical skills, librarians now focus on encouraging parents to interact with their children using Five Practices critical to early literacy: (1) talking, (2) singing, (3) reading, (4) writing, and (5) playing. The ECRR Second Edition Toolkit contains resources such as PowerPoint slides, brochures, handouts, and tip sheets, offering strategies on ways to promote the importance of the Five Practices. Concepts such as talking, singing, and playing are familiar to many parents and caregivers. A librarian's job, however, is to not only affirm what parents are already doing but also to help them understand how daily interactions relate to a child's early literacy development.

While the focus on the Five Practices seems simple, librarians see ECRR's second version as an invaluable tool for fostering school readiness. First, the program stresses the importance of vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension, skills that children will continue to develop throughout their school careers. To do so, ECRR promotes that libraries provide a stimulating environment for developing literacy skills. Children learn more words when they have an opportunity to talk, use new words, and respond to adult questions. Librarians are encouraged to adapt story time and other programming to include a variety of activities that children and adults can do together, such

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as music, play, and yoga. Having a physical space enriched with objects and activities is also important in providing opportunities for children to hear and practice new words. ECCR also encourages libraries to refurbish children’s areas with toys, puzzles, and other activities that spur adult–child interactions. Finally, the program applies to children from birth to age five—critical years in literacy development—because the Five Practices can be used with children of different ages.

As evaluators of the program, we have travelled extensively throughout the past three years, exploring how libraries are fostering parent engagement. When we started, we had many questions: What does today’s library look like? What changes have emerged in children’s library services? What messages are libraries and librarians sending to families? In our travels, we visited sixty libraries in ten library systems, conducting interviews with more than one hundred librarians. We took extensive field notes, videos, and photos. In our analysis, we offer insights on five key areas:

Library Spaces

Libraries’ focus on families talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing together means that library spaces are taking on a different look and feel. ECCR calls for preschool areas to offer more play areas and opportunities for parents to engage with children, including spaces for blocks, puppet shows, and toys, as well as cozy spots where parents and children can sit and read together. In this evaluation, we examine library spaces extensively to

see what messages they are sending to families.

Librarian Roles

Traditionally, librarians’ main job has been to instill in children a love of reading. Now, librarians’ roles are changing as they are encouraged to increasingly shift from focusing solely on the child to the child *and* parent. In this evaluation, we analyze librarian interviews as well as their activities during programming to glean insights into how they view their role in the library and in the community.

Library Programming

The change in librarians’ roles is accompanied by a movement to revise and expand library programming for children. Libraries are encouraged to replace the traditional image of story times (children sitting in rows while parents go off on their own) with a variety of programs and activities that families can do together. During the evaluation, we examined library programs and schedules to determine the types of programs libraries offer as well as how librarians conduct them.

Libraries’ Role as Resource Brokers

Libraries’ focus on parent engagement puts them in a unique position to serve as resource brokers in neighborhoods of poverty, where many families struggle to support their children’s education. Libraries are encouraged not only to provide space for families to interact, but also to connect with outside

organizations and offer programming that can provide parents the support and assistance they might lack. Through librarian interviews as well as observation of space and programming, we investigated what kinds of connections libraries make with outside organizations and what types of information their spaces convey. In addition, we looked to see what mechanisms libraries use to serve as resource brokers in neighborhoods of poverty.

Technology Access and Use

In many communities, public libraries often serve as the only opportunity for children and parents to access and use digital technology and interactive media. With a focus on parent engagement, public libraries are in a prime position to become leaders in encouraging families to interact using technology in ways that will promote children’s early learning. In our evaluation of library spaces and resources, we investigated what types of technology libraries offer to families. In addition, through librarian interviews and story time observations, we explored how librarians see the role of technology in family engagement and what messages librarians are offering regarding the use of technology in children’s early literacy learning.

The following report highlights the results of our findings from the three-year evaluation. With its flexible framework allowing librarians to adapt the initiative to individual community needs and interests, ECCR reflects the diversity of the

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many families libraries serve. It looks, sounds, and feels different in various parts of the country. However, the focus of this evaluation is on how libraries are fulfilling one common mission: helping children arrive at school ready to read.

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03

OUR APPROACH

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METHODS AND SITES

Our evaluation of ECRR was designed to examine the initiative in different regions throughout the United States. To do so, our evaluation team of four researchers conducted a nationwide sequential mixed-methods analysis. We used multiple methods, including ethnographic observations, interviews, surveys, observation checklists, and photographic and content analyses of library programming. In the first year of our data collection, we sought to better understand how ECRR was being interpreted across ten key sites using qualitative observations and interviews as our primary means of data collection. Later we reviewed both ECRR libraries and those who had not yet adopted the initiative to understand the potential differences in activities and programming. To do so, we revisited year one sites and sought to examine contiguous areas where the initiative had not yet been adopted. In year three we focused on the evolution of the initiative and whether it seemed to support other changes in the library. Together our methods and observations created a robust analysis of this innovative initiative, which has seemed to take hold throughout many libraries in the country. In this section we briefly describe our methods; examples of our surveys and questionnaires are provided in [Appendix B](#).

Research Sites

Since its publication, more than 6,000 public libraries have shown interest in the ECRR initiative and have adopted vari-

ous practices associated with its approach. For this evaluation, however, our research team visited sixty library branches in fifteen states. Our goal was to include a nationwide sample that consisted of urban, suburban, and rural sites. In year one, we visited ten library systems representing different regions who were actively engaged in ECRR activities, as reported by the Public Library Association, and agreed to participate in our research. In this respect, our focus was to examine “full implementers,” those library systems that enthusiastically embraced the initiative. In years two and three, we sought to compare ECRR libraries with nearby non-ECRR libraries, visiting year-one sites (with new research instruments) and non-ECRR libraries for the first time. We include the libraries and locations of the libraries studied in [Appendix A](#).

Within each system, we identified at least three local library branches (to the extent possible given that some rural areas had only one branch) that primarily served low-income neighborhoods. Child poverty rates were often 30 percent and in some cases as high as 60 percent. Libraries varied widely in terms of the race and ethnicity of patrons, ranging from neighborhoods that were predominantly white (94 percent in American Fort, Utah) to those that were predominantly African American (94 percent in Warrensville Heights, Ohio) or Hispanic (89 percent in Weslaco, Texas).

Over three years, we used a variety of strategies to capture how libraries acted as resource brokers for

families in early literacy activities. In the beginning of our observations, two members of the team would visit and observe, and then compare observations following the visit. We then established our focal questions and refined our protocols to ensure comparability of the data collected at multiple sites. After conducting several joint visits, a single researcher would observe each site. Following the visit, the researcher would debrief and share notes with the rest of the team. Occasionally, we would contact libraries to clarify or expand on issues that emerged in our debriefings.

We conducted ethnographic observations and took detailed field notes to better understand the community surrounding the library (for example, we recorded if it was near schools, residential areas, businesses, or community centers). Within the library itself, we observed the physical layout of the library, including how spaces might encourage social interaction and co-participation between parents and their children. For example, we noted whether there were comfortable spaces and seats for parents and children to read or use the computers together. These observations were designed to help us understand some of the ways library spaces might act as passive brokers for early literacy activities.

We also observed more intentional resource brokering in libraries through programming activities and story time hours. We took photos of bulletin boards, brochures, monthly calendars, and handouts to learn more about how libraries

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connected people to local resources related to early literacy activities. We observed story times and noted the types of messages conveyed to parents as they were reading to the children during these hours. In the second year of observations, we systematically recorded these “asides,” informal quick tips to help parents promote practices in the home that were associated with school readiness activities. In some cases, these asides would take the form of brief suggestions, such as “play supports children’s oral language development,” or more active demonstrations or modeling, such as “parents and children, let’s all say this rhyme together.” Following the story time hours, we asked parents to fill out a brief survey to indicate their reasons for attending the library and describe what they found most useful or helpful in their visits that day. These instruments can be found in [Appendix B](#) as well.

Finally, we interviewed children’s librarians to understand how their responsibilities might have shifted in recent years to meet the needs of their communities. We were especially interested in how they might view their role in parent engagement because it seemed to represent a shift in children’s librarians’ roles and responsibilities.

We also collected more than one hundred documents from our field visits, including library program schedules, pamphlets for parents (for example, a pamphlet called “Tips to Help Your Baby Develop Vocabulary”), and library event promotional materials. These materials allowed us to learn about the kinds

of messages libraries gave to parents and to understand the wide variety of resources and services that libraries provide. We compared these documents to identify themes in libraries’ approaches to increasing early literacy and parent engagement.

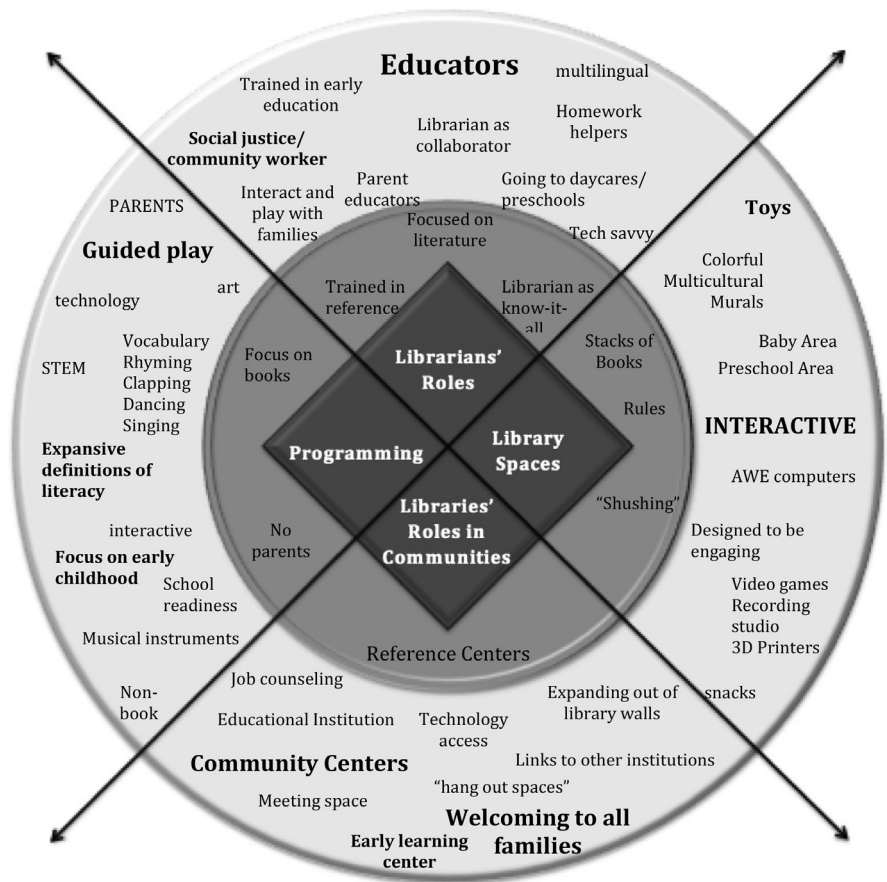
All interviews, observations, and copies of documents were input to the data analysis software Dedoose and then coded and analyzed. We developed and refined a coding scheme representing the breadth of the ECRR initiative. For this evaluation, we focus on the range and

type of resources brokered in these public libraries and the mechanisms through which they were delivered in these resource-poor neighborhoods. In this respect, our efforts were to examine how libraries might help parents better prepare their young children to be successful in early literacy practices and in overall school readiness skills.

The ECRR Initiative

Throughout this report, we highlight central features of the ECRR initiative and the activities that were common across sites. Although

Shifts in Libraries



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each library system was unique, we did see some features that suggest subtle, but distinct, shifts in both libraries' missions and the librarians' role. "Bringing the library to the community" was a common theme, whether through site-visit story times, book distribution programs, or serving the community through relevant programs for families and children. As shown in the figure on the previous page, these subtle shifts seemed to reflect the library's increasing role as an educator to families and children in these communities. Specifically, the figure highlights the following shifts:

- *Shifts in the activities of libraries.* Many of the libraries we visited reminded us of community centers more than traditional libraries. They offered technology access, job training, English classes, video game stations, movie nights, and meeting spaces for all kinds of community

groups. Libraries have always served important roles in their communities, offering "more than just books." However, we noted an ever-expanding set of services and resources that in the past were served by other agencies.

- *Shifts in library spaces.* Many of the libraries we visited offered play areas with toys for children and their families, cafés, fireplaces, music recording studios, video game stations, tablet stations, and areas where people were encouraged to play games, listen to music, and socialize.
- *Shifts in library programming.* Changes in the kinds of programs that libraries offered also reflected their expanding roles in communities. Programs for adults served many functional needs; libraries offer classes on

completing taxes and signing up for the Affordable Care Act, English classes, and technology classes. Additionally, myriad hobby groups met in libraries—from the more traditional knitting clubs to video gaming groups, craft clubs, a taxidermy club, and dozens of others.

The fact that parents are present during story times and encouraged to participate is also a marked shift from past norms. Libraries also offer a much broader array of children's programs, including programs for music, play, yoga, building with blocks, programming robots, playing video games, and dancing. This variety reflects a shift in libraries' foci, but also reflects beliefs about expanding definitions of literacy—that is, librarians' beliefs that many kinds of activities can help to build young children's vocabulary and early literacy skills.

04

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK

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WHAT LIBRARY SPACES TEACH PARENTS AND CHILDREN

It takes only one step into the building to see and feel it: library spaces are changing. While they have traditionally offered a place to sit and read, the libraries we visited are moving far beyond the typical array of tables, chairs, and stacks. Many libraries today provide a space for families to socialize with friends, search on computers, finish homework, read books, play games, and share snacks. While once families with young children might stop on the way home from the grocery store to check out a few books, now libraries encourage them to come and spend time. This type of hangout space is rare in many communities, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, and provides a fertile spot for learning to grow.

While gathering photos, videos, interviews, field notes, and checklists, we noticed that these re-vamped library spaces are providing unspoken messages encouraging parents and children to talk, sing, read, write, and play together. After analyzing different library spaces and the messages they provide to parents and young children, we noticed three different categories emerge. If library walls could talk, they would say (1) Come in and stay awhile! (2) Come play with us! (3) Let's read together!

Message 1: Come In and Stay Awhile!

In many neighborhoods, libraries have long been a warm and welcoming spot where patrons of all ages can come to read, relax, and rest. But in recent years, many libraries have been strategically remodeling and reorganizing their spaces. Rather than being seen just as a place to get a good book, librarians speak of creating buildings that function more as community centers where families can hang out. As one librarian notes,

We've been thinking more about our spaces and our role in the community . . . we're more of a community space, where people gather. We want our children's area to be a place where people hang out and read with their children, do puzzles, and other engaging activities . . . we're that kind of place in the community.

Librarians are quick to list the many advantages libraries have in filling the role of community center. "You can be loud and silly; you can eat and play!" reports a librarian from the Midwest. Another in San Antonio describes her library as a "destination worthy of an outing." The building's striking architecture and the branch's unique programming draws families from all over the city. For families in low-income urban areas, libraries are a welcoming haven away from the daily grind of the crowded city. As a San Francisco librarian says, "Everything is expensive here. The library is one of the few places where families can go for free!"

The changes in library spaces are certainly motivated by librarians' goals to foster parent engagement, but also by efforts to make all families feel at home. For example, libraries welcome families as they step inside the front door by incorporating local culture into their building's design and décor. In the Farmington, New Mexico library, located just outside a Navajo Reservation, design elements reflect local Native American beliefs on the cyclical nature of life. The library departments—children's, teens', nonfiction (representing "work"), and fiction (representing "leisure" in older ages) are arranged in a circle around a central courtyard. The library also boasts an extensive collection of Native American *kachina* dolls.

Many other libraries also include art and decoration reflecting the local community. The New Orleans Public Library displays Mardi Gras costumes, while a mural in San Antonio depicts local historical figures. The children's area in a library in Warrensville Heights, Ohio, is designed to reflect the local African American community (see photo 1).

Many branches offer signage printed in two or more languages, and some libraries include whole sections of books and materials in other languages. In many children's areas, colorful bilingual posters, decorations, and signs let children and parents know that they can find resources in their home languages (see photo 2).

Libraries also use other spatial strategies to make families feel

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Photo 1. Décor designed to reflect local culture (Warrensville Heights Branch, Cuyahoga County, Ohio).

welcome. One noticeable shift is that many libraries now incorporate cafés into their spaces. Coffee machines, vending machines, or, in some cases, full-service cafés lend a “coffee shop” atmosphere where people can meet, collaborate, socialize, and work while enjoying a snack or beverage.

A related shift is that most libraries now allow patrons to eat and drink in the library, either in designated spaces or in any part of the building. Smells of coffee for a morning get-together or popcorn for a teen movie evening would often greet us as we entered. Understandably, some staffers raise concerns about spills on books or crumbs on the children’s computers. Most librarians, however, say that when patrons can eat and drink in the library, they are much more likely to stay awhile. This policy is particularly attractive to parents with small children; we observed many families bringing in snacks or meals for their children to eat at the library.

Similarly, many libraries have



Photo 2. Bilingual rug in the children’s area, Mission Branch (San Francisco Public Library).

revised policies on noise in hopes of making spaces more welcoming to children and families. Many librarians note that the days of shushing patrons are over. Now, children and families are encouraged to talk. Of course, this change frustrates many patrons who expect to read in silence, but libraries are experimenting with solutions to this issue, such as placing the children’s and teens’ areas away from adult reading areas or designating certain “quiet rooms.”

One librarian admitted to receiving complaints about noise from the teen section, but he asserted, “The overall goal is to create lifelong library users, and if teens in the library are continually being shushed, they’re not going to hang around.” The relaxed noise policies also make families with young children feel more comfortable. A member of our research team noted,

Throughout the program and following play time, there is no shushing or “sit down” from either the parents or the librarian.

The fact that the area is far away from the adult area seems to put everyone at ease about the noise. The grown-ups seem happy to be with each other and with their children. The librarian talks to the young parents about when her sons were young and they “never sat still,” reassuring them that “it will come.”

Many librarians reported that some parents do not bring their children to the library because their children cannot sit still and be quiet. By providing play spaces (described further below), and loosening policies on food and noise, librarians hope parents and children will feel welcome—even when they make noise and messes.

Reflecting the revised noise policies are new architectural elements in some libraries designed to encourage families to relax and socialize. Some libraries are spending millions of dollars remodeling spaces, hoping to make families feel at home. For example, some include fireplaces while others are designing teen sections as multi-media driven “cool” places to hang out (see photo 3).

These efforts seem to be working. Across the country, we saw ample evidence that whole families are gathering at the library. After story times, parents and grandparents often hang around and read books with their children, have a snack, use the computers (technology use is examined extensively in [section 8](#)), or play with toys. We frequently saw children, parents, and grandparents spending time together, working on homework, reading,

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Photo 3. Teen Section, Farmington (New Mexico) Public Library.

and playing. As an Ohio librarian noted, “Building a new building brings more people!” She estimated that circulation numbers and numbers of library card holders are up 40 percent since the library was remodeled to include more hangout spaces.

Finally, by providing welcoming spaces, toys, and other objects that encourage interaction, library spaces teach families that they can come to the library to socialize. Our visits showed us that children and parents are often seen talking with one another. Children frequently come together to share and play with toys with other children (see photo 4). As their children play, parents often talk with one another, sharing tips and resources, empathizing about the challenges of parenting, and chatting about local events or weather (see photo 5).

Message 2: Come Play With Us!

One of the most significant shifts we see in libraries today is an increas-



Photo 4. Children playing with wire toy (Algiers Branch, New Orleans Public Library).

ing focus on play. This emphasis is supported by changes in library spaces and increased availability of toys and play structures. Although play is listed as one of the Five Practices, our findings suggest it serves a more dominant role worthy of libraries’ increased attention, since play often incorporates the other four Practices of talking, singing, writing, and reading.

Interviews with librarians reveal their intention to provide a space that supports children and parents playing together. As one librarian explained, a “gold star” library is one that places “a greater emphasis on play, with prominent play centers and visible toys.” Although some librarians balk at focusing on play, many others say the emphasis is justified, citing research prominent in the early education field. One librarian explained,

I would go to the NAEYC [National Association for the Education of Young Children] early learning conferences, and they’re all talking about play. I’m



Photo 5. Caregivers chat as children play (Key Center Branch, Pierce County, Washington).

thinking, “We are not really doing enough play!” Some people resisted, but incorporating play in libraries has legitimacy.

The relaxed noise policies are a central part of the focus on play: children are encouraged to talk, play, and move around. Librarians emphasize that they focus on play to develop literacy, but also because they know it encourages families to come and hang out. As one noted, “We emphasize that the library is a place for families to come and spend some time together. They don’t have to read; they can play a board game or do a puzzle. They don’t have to sign up for a program to come.”

Drawing on the importance of play, libraries are working hard to create spaces that encourage all kinds of play. Some libraries have structures, such as play houses, that immediately draw children and parents in to read or play. In Carroll County, Maryland, the Westminster branch has a train-themed “play and learn” area, which includes a trestle bridge,

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Photo 6. Play castle provides the setting for an impromptu parade (Central Branch, San Antonio Public Library).



Photo 7. Mounted toy with zippers, beads, ties, and rollers (Algiers Branch, New Orleans Public Library).



Photo 8. Puppet theater (South Jordan Branch, Salt Lake City).

a locomotive housing a cozy reading space, and a caboose where families can play with puzzles, puppets, and magnetic letters. Other structures, such as a castle in San Antonio, also inspire play, including the occasional spontaneous parade by children and adults (see photo 6).

Aside from these structures, the main strategy libraries use to promote play is to place toys at the children’s level. The idea of incorporating toys in the library setting, however, has raised its own set of issues. Similar to the complaints about noise, some staff and patrons fear toys will make library spaces messy—and they do. One librarian explained that her boss prefers “a more traditional” neat and orderly library. Another library offers a “play lab” during story times, but chooses not to have toys available at other times. This avoids mess, they reasoned, while increasing the focus on books. Providing toys also means that library staffers have to spend significant time cleaning up as well as cleaning toys to prevent

the spread of germs. Moreover, toys are sometimes lost or stolen. One librarian said her puppet theater was the most popular toy, but four out of the five puppets had disappeared. She was debating whether to put new ones out. Finally, many librarians described difficulty in finding funding for toys.

Despite these concerns, the vast majority of libraries make toys available for families to play with at all times. Some libraries offer toys mounted on wall panels, where very young children can move beads and rollers (see photo 7). Others provide small blocks that parents and children can stack or larger blocks for building big structures. Other simple toys for young children to manipulate and build include wooden puzzles, magnetic sticks and balls, and wire toys on which children move beads along a maze.

Other toys that libraries offer include play houses, barns, train stations, kitchens, dress-up clothes, and other items that inspire chil-

dren to take on roles and act out stories. Several librarians noted that puppet theaters, a very popular toy, are important for promoting interactive play, such as children putting on shows for parents (see photo 8). Another librarian explained that kitchen and train sets also foster “more creative, ‘pretend’ play” that encourage parents to interact with children. She echoed the thoughts of many librarians who say that imagination and interaction help children learn: “We don’t want [parents] drilling their kids on the alphabet. We want them to play and talk with their child.”

Libraries also provide opportunities for children to “play” with writing. Many provide paper, crayons and pencils, and writing space. One librarian described an initiative at her library to encourage writing during play time in the children’s area: “There’s a mailbox, and a writing table with postcards. We have a mascot, Lily the Ladybug. Kids write letters to her, and she replies.”

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Photo 9. Chairs for reading together (Linneman Branch, St. Charles City-County Library, Missouri).

A common way that library spaces generate awareness about parent engagement is through posters, signs, and brochures. Many libraries posted signs showing children and their parents engaged in playing, talking, and singing; other posters gave tips to parents on how to interact with their children. For example, at a library in a suburban area in the Southeast, a sign on a children's table near puzzles and toys explained the value of play:

Playing is good for you! Play is the primary way that children learn. By playing freely, children can begin to understand larger concepts on their own. Take some time to play at the library today!

Another sign outside a room where parents and children attend story time gave the following expectations for parent behavior during the program:

Dear Grownups: Participating helps your child know that what they are doing is important.

Other libraries included information about parent engagement in handouts and materials that parents are expected to take home. Many gave parents monthly calendars which suggested daily activities related to the Five Practices.

Message 3: Let's Read Together!

Newly designed spaces are clearly helping to make the library a central hangout space in many communities. Our investigation also reveals library design strategies that inspire parents and children to read together. Most prominent is comfortable seating for adults and children, where large and small sofas and chairs are arranged amid toys and books (see photo 9).

Another strategic space choice is placing books at levels where even the youngest children can reach them. Libraries help new walkers become familiar with books by allowing them to roam freely around library spaces and pick up books that catch their attention.

Toys are often placed among books so children and parents can access both readily. By intermixing books and toys rather than placing books in a “reading area” and toys in a “play area,” libraries communicate an important message to parents and children: books are fun! They are play objects that children can pick up and put down as they desire. When books are nearby, parents and children are more likely to casually pick up and look through them. Particularly with young children, reading together does not have to be a formal activity where parents



Photo 10. Doll house with books surrounding to encourage reading and pretend play (Deer Run Branch, St. Charles City-County Library, Missouri).

and children sit down and read a book from beginning to end. Babies and toddlers have their own ways of engaging with books, such as those “voracious readers” who put them in their mouths. These “engagements” help even babies become familiar with books. For these reasons, many libraries juxtapose books and toys at child level (see photo 10).

Spaces where books and toys intermingle affect how children and adults use the library. Children often vacillate between reading and playing. They might first work on a craft; next, they might read a book, play with a toy on the rug, read another book, and then play with a different toy. One of our researchers described this play area scene:

On the left-hand side of the children's area are big colorful Lego blocks and then a set of free-standing wooden blocks. With the blocks out and on display, you find children playing with blocks. Then on the bottom row,

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Photo 11. Play and literacy development go hand-in-hand (Deer Run Branch, St. Charles City-County Library, Missouri).



Photo 12. Libraries have something for everyone (Roosevelt Branch, Chicago Public Library).

there are a series of board books. So what I see is this: a child plays with blocks for a minute, grabs a board book, then goes back to play with the blocks, and returns and holds the books. It almost looks like a dance, with the child's attention not held by either of these things very long.

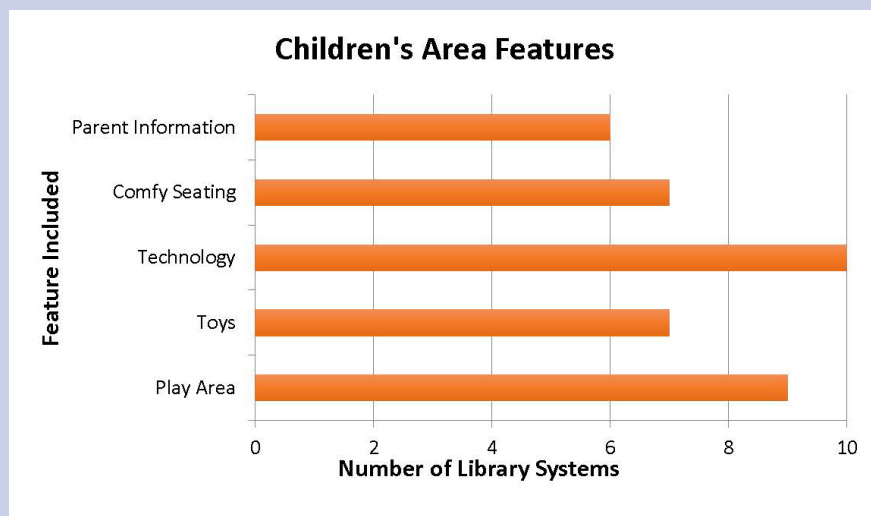
Another member of our research team captured the noisy energy of a similar scene:

There's lots of talking: parents talking to their own children, parents talking to parents, parents talking to other children. The children also notice and approach other children, their parent right behind providing a voice that the child doesn't have yet: "Can I play with your ball?" The children throw the balls and shake the sticks. The parents help them stack the blocks and then knock them over. One eighteen-month-old boy finds a board book. "Do you want to read the book?" his mom asks. He sits in her lap for about two pages and then is off running through the stacks. Soon, the older children are running up and down the stacks, as if it's one of those indoor play spaces (you know: the kind with the ball pits and inflatable slides). The younger, less mobile children sit or stand and watch as they zoom. At one point, a boy picks up a ball and a book and starts to run with both.

In different times, this scene would have been described as inappropriate for a library—children roaming around freely, laughing, and making messes. Yet more and more,

LIBRARY SPACES: DISTINCTIVE

Our in-depth analysis shows that libraries are strategically designed to promote interactions between parents and children. As shown below, all the library systems offer computers and other technology for parents and children to use together (more on technology in [Section 8](#)). Nearly all (90 percent) provide a play area, and the majority also offer comfortable seating areas for reading together and toys for playing together. Half of the libraries provide parent information about early literacy, including signs, brochures, and other written messages.



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this is exactly what librarians aim for: places where young children and their parents can come to read, play, and spend time together.

As we saw during our visits, library spaces today are sending important messages to families. Many have strategically renovated their buildings and are greeting parents and children with culturally relevant décor and comfortable seating. With cafés, fireplaces, and relaxed policies on noise, these homey spaces welcome all families, especially those reticent to visit, to come and hang out.

Other design elements encourage casual family interactions that are critical to developing early literacy. With the increased presence of toys and play structures, libraries affirm that the time families spend playing is valuable. Intermingling books with toys and offering cozy reading places sends another critical message to families: books should be enjoyed together.

By all accounts, these design strategies are working. As our photos show, families are flocking to libraries to socialize, play, and spend time together in many ways. But we can

tell as much by listening as by looking that the library spaces are encouraging parent engagement. Sometimes it's the hushed tones of a father snuggling with his five-year-old son in a comfy chair, reading a book about trucks. Other times, it's the squeals of delight as a child knocks down a block tower she built with her mother. Although library spaces might look and sound different in various parts of the country, libraries are delivering a common message: parents are critical to their children's early literacy development.

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HOW LIBRARIANS VIEW THEIR CHANGING ROLES

By incorporating innovative structural and design changes, libraries are hoping the public will see them as more than a place to get a good book. If libraries had their way, they would be the gathering place in every community. These changes in focus and design, however, have also meant adjustments for a significant player in library services—the librarian.

Today’s librarian is moving well beyond being the “keeper of the books.” If we ask librarians to describe their main job in years past, we typically get an off-hand response, such as “to instill a love of reading” or “manage a collection.” When we ask about their role today, we get a much more enthusiastic answer, such as “early childhood educator,” “parent educator,” “community worker,” and “social worker.” These changing roles reflect libraries’ move to evolve into more than a book repository. To serve successfully as a community center that fosters parent engagement, librarians have had to shift their focus from being primarily on children to also include parents and caregivers. This trend means that many librarians have had to acquire not only a new mindset, but a new skill set.

In our evaluation, we conducted extensive interviews with librarians throughout the country to determine how they view their roles today. Their responses vary, much

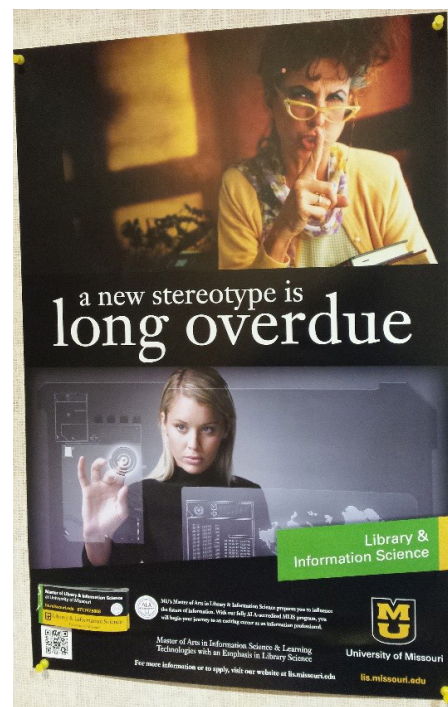
as varied library spaces reflect the many different communities we visited. In the end, three different patterns emerged that tell the story of how librarians’ roles have adapted to fulfill the mission of promoting parent engagement in children’s early literacy development.

Librarians as Early Childhood Educators

While librarians have always supported children’s learning, many librarians unequivocally see themselves as educators. As one librarian notes, the shift started in the mid-1980s. As emerging research emphasized the importance of early reading for children’s success in life, she explained, “The soft role of the librarian became much more serious. We took an educational tack and became more intentional in getting children ready to read.”

Several librarians echoed the value they place on their role as educators. They spoke enthusiastically about how children refer to them as “teachers” and to library programs as “classes.” One commented, “I want families to look at library visits as an educational experience, not just as something fun to do.” The focus on parent engagement, they say, is helping to bring legitimacy to libraries as educational institutions.

As some librarians have come to view themselves as teachers, their duties have expanded. Librarians increasingly design and lead a huge range of programs that may be only tangentially connected to books (see [section 6](#) of this report) but still offer valuable learning opportunities. As programming has expanded to



Poster for University of Missouri Library and Information Science program.

include science, blocks, Legos, yoga, music, and play, librarians have learned to coordinate a larger set of activities. Much like teachers, many librarians even create “lesson plans” with a daily objective and related books, songs, and activities.

Corresponding with this new take on librarians’ roles are changing views on how librarians should be trained, hired, and evaluated. Many children’s librarians have degrees and training in early childhood education; some have worked as teachers. Some systems hire paraprofessionals who have degrees in education and have worked in preschools. As libraries’ focus on

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early childhood education spreads, library directors expect job candidates to have training in early childhood education. As one supervising librarian explains:

The expectation is that [job candidates] will be familiar with family literacy and parent engagement. We specifically ask them, “How would you incorporate phonological awareness in your story time?” If they look at us with confusion, they probably don’t go to the next round of interviews.

But not all librarians have a background in early childhood education or child development. Many librarians report that their training at universities, often a master’s degree in library science or library and information science, did not prepare them adequately for working with children. They describe older systems that taught them “how to do punch cards and know Dewey Decimal.” One noted:

I never had a single class about child development! In the whole two years of library school, it was all about collections development, librarianship, story time preparation, but most of it was about getting familiar with the literature. . . . So you come out, and you understand the history of librarianship, the goals . . . but not child development.

Many are advocating for changes in university programs to prepare librarians to work with children in public libraries. For example, one librarian described her extensive work with a local university to

redesign their curriculum:

We were talking [at the university] about how training needs to be adjusted at the university level. One thing that was missing was the “ages and stages” training. If you’re going to train librarians to work with early learning, maybe they ought to know something about children! For example, what are children like at age four versus age seven?

The curriculum was redesigned but change is slow at many universities. “Across the country,” one librarian explained, “Everyone is saying the same thing: library school graduates are not coming out with the kinds of credentials we need them to have.”

To fill the gap, many systems are providing their own early childhood education training. As more librarians get trained on the job, many gradually feel more comfortable in their roles as educators and literacy experts. One librarian explained she is now more aware of why the things she is doing are important, thus giving her more legitimacy as an educator:

In my first few years at the library I did not feel like an early literacy specialist . . . I started out as an education major and dropped it. But now I feel I’ve got that background. I know the brain research and the child development research. I feel I have the authority to be able to say, this is what’s going on with your kid, and this is what’s going on in her little brain, and this is why it helps. It gave me a lot more confidence.



Librarian helps children put on gloves and coats after story time (Chicago).

Some libraries are beginning to evaluate librarians on how they incorporate parent engagement into their programming. Several systems reported that staff members do both formal and informal evaluations of each other’s story times, discussing how well the Five Practices were incorporated, and offering suggestions to improve.

Librarians as Parent Educators

As librarians position themselves as educators of young children, they are assuming an additional role: parent educator. This current focus on parent engagement sharply contrasts with prior practices in some libraries. As one recalled, “Librar-

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ians wouldn't let parents into the story time room! They were a distraction from the books!" Today's library, though, is being "rebranded" in terms of family engagement. As one librarian described:

The librarian's role has been transformed. I don't just do story times for the kids. I do parent education through the use of story times. I insist that a parent or caregiver attend and be a participant, not just a spectator. If I set up a partnership with the parent or caregiver, the child will ultimately benefit.

Most of librarians' messages to parents take place during formal story time programming (addressed extensively in [Section 6](#)), but librarians also use informal one-on-one interactions to convey information. Some librarians, for example, use informal conversations to tell parents one-on-one about the importance of play in preparing for kindergarten. Other parent "instruction" is simply reassuring parents that they are doing the right things to help their children.

As one librarian explained:

We get a lot of parents of young children who are worried about getting their kids ready to read and so they focus on ABCs and things like that. I say to them, "Actually, just reading with them right now is all you need to be doing. . . . You got your kids a library card! You are on track! Keep coming back!" I try to teach parents that they don't have to read for two hours every night, they can read signs and do it



Librarian reading a book during story time (Chicago).

on the go. . . . Also, parents are embarrassed to come to story time because their children can't sit still but we reassure them that we know there are certain times where developmentally they don't have to know how to sit still.

In addition to these informal reassurances, librarians also subtly model effective practices to parents in the library. They start puppet shows or intervene when parents are frustrated with their children's behavior, sometimes bringing a toy, book, or coloring page. "Here, maybe he might want to play with this," we heard one librarian say as she handed a toy to the mother of a rambunctious toddler. Other librarians help parents and children pick

out books, modeling how to choose appropriate books—but also emphasizing that the type of book does not matter if the child is enjoying it.

Librarians as Community and Social Justice Workers

Librarians' motivation is often tied to their view that libraries are important community institutions serving many goals. One explained that her choice to pursue library work is sourced primarily in a love of helping people in the community; her love of books comes second. Another described how her desire to work in libraries is rooted in social justice. "I can't think of a more democratic institution than the library," she said, further explaining that her parents are Mexican and non-English speakers and she knows the struggles immigrant families face. Working at the library is her way to "give back." One librarian described how about fifteen years ago, some librarians were considered "weird" when they went out into the community to do programming. Now, by contrast, many new librarians see themselves more as community workers than people who are in it because they "love literature."

Librarians often talked about their "passion" for their "mission." For example, a librarian in New Mexico sees the library as a key community player in raising literacy rates in their community. When asked about their high attendance in programming and library usage, she explained:

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Library staff and children play with parachute (Farmington, New Mexico).

We do everything with passion; we do it for the kids. We want to increase the literacy rate in San Juan County. In order for them to come back we have to give them a good story time! If you give it your all, people notice and they come back!

Many librarians also spoke of working with disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. In Salt Lake City, librarians work with pregnant teenagers at a nearby clinic and have also set up library programs in homeless shelters and refugee centers. In many areas, librarians help homeless people who spend time at the library during the day by connecting them to other social services and trying to help them find jobs. Libraries also provide informal daycare services for many low-income families. While many libraries have a formal policy that young children cannot be unaccompanied at the library, librarians often end up caring for children during after-school hours. Since libraries often pick up the slack where

other social services are lacking, librarians frequently become de facto social and community workers.

In these expanded roles as community outreach workers, many librarians we spoke to have an almost evangelical zeal in spreading the word about all the services libraries provide. Many, however, expressed frustration about getting families to attend programs. They are not reaching the parents they need to reach, either because parents had work commitments or do not recognize the importance of coming to library programs.

Trading this frustration for determination, librarians are trying all kinds of strategies to bring in more families. Some have added registration requirements for parents so that parents would be more committed to come but also so that librarians could call to remind them. On the other hand, others have taken away registration requirements in hopes that parents would feel free to stop by. Many librarians partner with other community organizations to promote what the library offers. Still others have tinkered with the times and formats of programs to fit parents' needs. Some offer incentives, such as gift cards or books, to families that attend all programs in a series. Some plaster neighborhoods with flyers to promote programs, while others offer story times and services in multiple languages to attract non-English-speaking families. Many libraries forgive overdue fines for children or whole families so families will continue to come in as well as to check out materials.



Librarian plays with children (Farmington, New Mexico).

As libraries see themselves more as community centers, librarians hope that more families in the community will take advantage of all that libraries offer. In their roles as social justice and community workers, they strive to reach all families in their communities, particularly families who need more educational support. (The library as a resource broker for families in needy areas is examined more extensively in [Section 7](#).)

Challenges of Being a Parent Educator

Across the country, librarians agree that their roles have shifted to become more explicitly focused on early childhood and parent education as well as being community and social justice workers. Many librarians feel comfortable with these shifts; however, some librarians described discomfort with these new roles. Serving as a parent educator has been particularly challenging.

CHILDREN SEE LIBRARIANS (AND PARENTS) AS TEACHERS

The idea that librarians view their roles as educators is evident from librarian interviews. In the field, we also noticed signs that the public is acknowledging the educational role of librarians. As we see in this excerpt from a story time at a Missouri library, parents, as well as librarians themselves, label librarians as “teachers” and library programs as “classes.” In their own way, librarians plan “lessons,” assemble “materials,” and “instruct” parents and children. Parents instruct their children to follow directions from the librarian, much as a child would be expected to listen to directives from a teacher. The result: children realize they can learn from both their parents as well as from the librarian.

At exactly 10:00 a.m., Julie, the children’s librarian, arrives and announces to the caregivers in the children’s section, “We’re about ready to begin, come in when you’re ready!”

“Ready to go to your class and learn?” one mother says to her young daughter. Everyone takes a seat on the circular rug. Julie, also seated on the rug, announces, “My name is Miss Julie and I will be filling in today. Your regular teacher is about ready to become a mommy herself.”

The caregivers smile and nod at her. Julie instructs them: “Now, moms, grandmas, caregivers, remember, don’t feel bad if your child is running around. They are young; it’s their job. You can read and encourage literacy even when your child is up and walking around!”

“Are you ready to begin?” She claps her hands, and the children mimic her. “Okay, now we’re going to sing ‘Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.’” She asks questions like, “Where is our head? Our shoulders? Our knees? Our toes?” The parents help direct the children to their various body parts. The adults are engaged, some making the motions for their children, others moving their children’s hands. Everyone claps at the end of the song.

Julie has planned extensively for this program. For each song or chant, she has papers that she sticks on the felt board. The first song is followed by a chant (“Open, shut them; open, shut them”) and then the first book, titled *If You See a Kitten*. Julie holds the book up, showing the cover to the children. Throughout the story, she encourages child and parent interaction. For example, “If you see a kitten, say awwwww,” she says to both parents and children; the parents then mimic her “aww” noise. And, “if you see a puggy pig, say pee-you!” Most children are listening to Julie but don’t participate; they seem really fascinated, however, when their caregiver follows her lead and makes these noises. Julie gets up and shows the book around the room, letting children touch and look at the pages.

The children get a bit loud and fidgety, so Julie then announces, “It’s time for a bounce! Find your grown-up!” With this directive, all the caregivers grab their children and put them on their lap. “Bong bong squeak” (repeated once), then “Rollie Pollie out out . . . in in in.”

Julie announces the second book, *Animal Sounds*, but instead of reading to the group, she passes out a copy of each book to the children.

The children run to their caregivers, who immediately begin to read aloud. Soon, random animal noises are heard throughout the room. Some of the children are extremely focused on the book, turning the pages along with their caregiver; others sit for a minute or two and are up running again. Soon, Julie asks the children to give her back the books. “Give it back to your teacher,” one caregiver says to the child who hands the book to Julie. Another parent leads a child to Julie to return the book; the child smiles and thanks Julie.

After another chant, Julie wheels out a plastic container of books. “I have a big box of books,” Julie announces, “find a book to read with your grown-up!” The children group around Julie and pull out various books, all revolving around animals. They settle back down with their caregivers, who read for about two to three minutes with their child.

Around 10:29, Julie asks everyone to return the books, and the majority of children follow her directions. They complete the story time portion with a good-bye rhyme (“Bye bye book, wiggle fingers to the sky, wave them all goodbye!”). A short play session with blocks and other toys follows before the families pack up and leave.

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In interviews, some librarians who were responsible for expanding parent engagement and training other librarians explained that there is some “hesitancy” or even “resistance.” One supervising librarian described stiff pushback from many branch librarians:

Many librarians want to maintain their traditional roles of collection maintenance and working with current readers . . . but since they report to me, I force them to do it! There is a lot of kicking and screaming.

Some described how other librarians and branch administrators are hesitant because of the noise and mess associated with children and parents playing together. Others explained that some librarians are more comfortable working with older children who are already reading. During initial workshops, some organizers felt concerned that librarians would dismiss these new roles because they are “too much like teaching.” In several locations, supervising librarians spoke of how it was crucial to get the administration and trustees to fully back these new roles so that librarians would understand that this was a new direction for the library that everyone needed to adopt.

Several librarians discussed how at first they were uncomfortable telling parents what to do. One worried that parents “have their own method of doing things, and they would not want to take my advice.” Another described how she felt hesitant talking to parents because “[we’re] trying not to be judgmental, they’re

not coming to story time to hear a lecture.” Several explained that some librarians are more accustomed to working with children and do not feel comfortable educating parents.

Even though many librarians see the value of promoting that parents play, talk, read, write, and sing with their children, some struggle to convince parents of its importance. As one librarian explained, “I go out of my way to specifically say, ‘You need to play with your child; it’s important to help him get ready for kindergarten.’” Another librarian felt frustrated over parents’ singular focus on building academic skills at the expense of play. “They want their child to read by age four! I spend a lot of effort saying that it’s all right if a child is not reading early. I try and stress more gross motor things, more talking to each other, more intentional play.” Another librarian was challenged by parents’ hesitance to play with their children because they “have a resistance to silliness.” Many young parents, she said, place a high premium on acting older and do not want to be silly with their babies. She tried to promote the “lost art of playing” while at the library, but she worried that parents are not doing the same at home.

As our research shows, there have been significant shifts in how some librarians perceive their roles. Many are dedicated to their jobs as early childhood and parent educators as they proudly promote parent engagement and champion the Five Practices. Others zealously market the library to position it as an



Librarian chats with parent in play area (New Orleans).



Librarian shares a book during story time (San Antonio).

integral community institution that serves many needs.

These shifts are not without challenges. While many librarians have embraced new roles and are successfully performing additional tasks and duties, some remain resistant. Many left library school with little training in child development or early education. As a result, they do not see themselves as qualified to serve as early child-

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hood and parent educators. Others are still struggling to find the most effective way to address parents. Finally, parental attitudes about how to prepare their children for school can derail a librarian's best efforts. Librarians reported that many parents would rather drill children on alphabet or numbers rather than focus on building vocabulary

through talking, playing, or reading together.

Despite these challenges, librarians are helping local communities see libraries in a new light. As the movement continues to take hold, librarians are embracing new roles as early childhood educators, parent educators, and community workers.

Although librarians' emergence as leaders in school readiness is a relatively new trend, we believe it is one that will substantially benefit the children, families, and communities they serve. As libraries emerge as the heart of the community, it is the librarian who will be at the heart of the library.

06

MORE THAN A GOOD STORY

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CHANGES IN LIBRARY PROGRAMMING

Sara, a librarian at a Texas library, closes “Seals on the Bus,” a book she has just read with a group of two- and three-year-olds. Seated on the floor around her, the children each wear a name tag cut in the shape of a car. With their parents and caregivers nearby, the children sit calmly, listening to books about transportation and occasionally answering questions or making comments. Between books, Sara leads them in rhymes and songs about cars and buses.

This scene, peaceful and relaxed, does not last long. As Sara pulls out rolls of masking tape, bowls of tiny plastic road signs, and bins of toy cars, the parents and children dive into action. At Sara’s suggestion, the adults construct “roads” on the carpet with the masking tape; the children put up the signs and “drive” their cars. Within minutes, a tangle of roads crisscrosses the floor. “Do you know what this means?” asks one mother, pointing to a yield sign. “It says ‘yield,’ which means you let the other car go first.” She has her child wait while another child “drives” his car through. “Can you put the ‘stop’ sign at the intersection?” another mom asks. Her child looks back at her. “It’s the place where the two roads meet,” she explains.

Other words pop up as the adults and children play: “road,” “wheels,” “grocery store,” “traffic jam,” “crash,” “direction,” “stacked-up.” The parents and caregivers

start their own conversations about intersections with traffic jams, the parking lot at the grocery store, monster trucks, remote-controlled cars, drained car batteries, directions to various places. Their children echo these conversations as they play: “Here comes a monster truck!” “Get out of the way, you’re about to crash!”

While it seems spontaneous and carefree, the din erupting in this library community room is actually Sara’s carefully planned strategy to use this toddler story time to foster parent engagement. She incorporates a fun play segment that provides opportunities for parents and children to build vocabulary. In addition, the activity reinforces and builds on the themes from the stories the children have just heard. As the children happily build roads and drive their cars, what looks like play is actually serious business.

Although our research reveals the many new steps libraries are taking throughout the country, perhaps the most substantial changes are emerging in story time programming. The transformation is almost seismic in proportion. Before the push for parent engagement, parents would typically drop off children at story times, leaving them in the care of the librarian. If parents did stay, they sat quietly in the back while the librarian read a few books to children and perhaps sang a song or finished with a simple craft.

Today’s story time looks markedly different. Programs are moving beyond an emphasis on story reading

to include a more expansive view of how literacy develops. At the same time, librarians’ behavior during programming is evolving, shifting from focusing exclusively on the children to focusing on children and their parents. As we travel throughout the country, we noticed that program content and librarians’ activities vary widely. Despite the many variations, we saw that the focus on parent engagement during programming is a key ingredient in enticing families to gather at the library.

Story Time Program Content: Drawing and Serving Families

While promoting book reading is always the goal, story times now go far beyond the traditional storybook reading. Today’s retooled story time draws families to the library by promoting a more expansive view of literacy development. For example, many programs focus on the importance of play, including music, movement, and other types of “fun.” In addition, programs cover an amazing array of topics, such as yoga, building, music, and gardening, all designed to expose children to novel information and new vocabulary. Finally, to reach children who are English-language learners (ELLs), many programs are conducted for bilingual families in their home languages.

Play and Fun

Libraries are changing traditional “Story Time” or “Preschool Story Time” programs to reflect the importance of play. In our evaluation, we observed programs such as

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“Parachute Play for Toddlers,” “Play Baby Play!” and “Music and Movement” drawing scores of families, many originally reluctant to bring squirmy toddlers to a quiet story time program. Other titles alluded to fun (“Fun for Ones”) or include the idea of toys or a party (“Books, Blocks, and Tots” or “Pajama Party Story Time”). The notion of play at the library helps families connect with how early literacy develops, with a focus on developmentally appropriate activities for children of different ages.

The incorporation of play occurs in various formats. In some programs, librarians bring out toys, balls, and games after the story portion of the program, encouraging families to stay and play together. At other times, the play portion is more elaborately designed to coordinate with the program’s theme, such as in this scene at a rural New Mexico library offering the story time “One World; Many Stories” for preschoolers:

First, the librarian reads a storybook and then leads parents and children in a song, all related to the theme. The librarian then explains the various play stations, each representing a different country: In “China,” the parents help children use tweezers (simulating chopsticks) to move colorful plastic elephants from one bowl to another. In “Rome,” they play hop scotch in the middle of the floor, emulating what Romans used to do with stones. In “Denmark,” parents and children build with Legos or blocks on a multicolored mat. Other play opportunities include multiple



Librarian leads children in a song with motions (St. Charles County, Missouri).

puzzles, a child-size bowling set, magnets on the white board, and an activity center where families pour rice into empty plastic water bottles to create shakers.

Enrichment through STEM/STEAM

In addition to the focus on play, many library programs we saw incorporated STEM/STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math), such as “Family Lego Night,” “Preschool STEAM,” and “Playdough Lab.” These enrichment activities offered children the opportunity to hear novel words and concepts while still in a play context, thus adding to children’s vocabulary development. For example, a Texas library offered story time programs such as “Color Science,” “Space Day,” and “Water Science.” In these programs, the librarian typically read several books related to the theme before having

children and parents complete an “experiment.” The “Water Science” program, for instance, featured several tables with large tubs of water where children predict whether objects will sink or float.

Embracing Bilingual Families

Many libraries are also offering bilingual story times, with program titles such as “Amigos y Libros” and “Toddler Tales and Playtime: Spanish,” among others. Bilingual story times especially benefit ELLs, who often start school lagging behind their class mates. At the bilingual story time at the urban library in California, for example, the librarian lead parents and children in songs and rhymes, first in English and then in Spanish, reminding parents of the benefits of speaking to their children in their home language.

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Librarian Behavior during Story Times: Sending Messages to Parents

Another dramatic change is that librarians' target audience is no longer simply young children but also their parents and caregivers. Instead of only talking to children, the librarian often models behaviors to show parents how they can increase early literacy using the Five Practices. Even more striking is the movement for librarians to directly address parents and caregivers during story time while children are present, explicitly offering small tips and suggestions on ways to expand their children's vocabulary and early literacy skills. Finally, some librarians are sending even more direct messages by holding parent-only workshops designed to supply adults with information and suggested activities to help them best prepare their young children for the school years ahead.

Modeling

During story time programs, we saw that librarians often model ways for parents to interact with their children. In one story time, for example, we saw two library staff members rotate positions, with one reading a book or leading a song while the other sat among parents and children, pointing at the book, asking questions to the child next to them ("Have you seen a lion in the zoo before?"), and doing motions along with books and songs. The behaviors of the librarian sitting among the parents clearly modeled how parents could be engaged in the story time.

We also observed librarians modeling behavior to parents during different types of programs, as the following scene from a "Lego Play" program demonstrates:

This program is totally centered on play, creativity, and conversation rather than any formal book reading. A library assistant, Jen, is here but she is not even bringing books around at all. Instead, she circulates among families, asking questions and modeling play. If a child is building something, she encourages with a "Hey, that's cool," or "Tell me about it" conversation. If a child tires of one activity, she steers him to a new one. "Look at these straws. You can make a million things out of these!" "Do you want me to help you build a tower?" she says as she sits down with a young boy to build a tower.

This kind of informal play continues for an hour. It's very relaxed and comfortable, very much paced by the child's interest. The fact that it's a beautiful space with bountiful supplies and dedicated staff makes it a very inviting activity for families to come and enjoy. Again, the notion of a playground, with fixed activities, unstructured play, and emphasis on enjoyment, comes to mind (minus the mud).

In this scene, the library staff member is modeling to parents how to build vocabulary by having their children describe what they are doing. She is also modeling constructive behavioral approaches to parents by following young children's (often short) attention spans

and continually redirecting their attention to new activities.

Asides

In addition to modeling behaviors that encourage parent engagement, many librarians are using a more direct approach in sending messages to parents. During programming, we noticed many librarians include tips or "asides," that is, directly addressing parents about ways to foster early literacy, the importance of play, and appropriate behavioral expectations for children at different ages. In doing so, the parent becomes a participant in the story time program, not merely a bystander.

An intensive look at this story time in a Midwestern library provides examples of the types of messages librarians can send to parents during programming:

On a crisp October morning, fourteen children and thirteen adults are seated on the floor in a large circle around a colorful rug waiting for the program to begin. The children range in age from nine months to three years old. A few adults are nannies or grandparents, but most are the children's mothers. Soon, Jenna, the children's librarian, takes her place on the rug as well.

Jenna begins, saying, "Remember, grown-ups, it's normal for kids to wander around while they're listening." She then explains to the adults that all the songs and chants they do today will be repeated twice "because repetition is the key to building

PLAY AND LEARN—WITH THE EMPHASIS ON PLAY

The emphasis on play during story time programming was clearly evident at many libraries. As we saw at this Texas library, the program was titled “Play and Learn,” a clear indication to parents and children that play is related to learning. In addition, incorporating play is an effective way to draw parents, who sometimes hesitate to bring their young, rambunctious children to the library. At this library, three staff members were needed to accommodate the more than thirty adults and children who attended regularly. Focusing on play also allows families to bring siblings of varying ages. This program, intended for children under age five, drew children from ages one to four. Finally, since “play” often means “loud,” this library held their program in a separate room adjacent to the children’s area, allowing librarians, adults, and children to interact freely without worrying about creating a disturbance:

At 9:20 on a February morning, three librarians—Shannon, Robin, and Julia—are preparing for the “Play and Learn” program starting at 10 a.m. The program draws many regulars. It is particularly appealing, they say, to children who need to move and can’t sit still. “It’s more active than a traditional approach to story time,” one explains. The three of them switch off each week, with one leading the program and the other two serving as assistants. The program is difficult to do alone given the large number of children who come every week.

As adults and children arrive, they check in to get a nametag and then sit at the coloring area or read a book together. The doors are still shut to the story time room; everyone seems to understand this and takes a place somewhere else near the doors. Within the next few minutes, it’s almost standing room only, as thirteen children and eighteen adults wait for the program to begin.

At exactly 10:00, Julia rings a bell as Robin and Shannon fling open the doors to the story time room, reminding us of a game show with families viewing their prize for the first time. The adults and children seem to

know the routine and quickly take their seats on the floor. The room, a huge space with paper snowflakes the size of car tires hanging on the walls, boasts a colorful rug and a puppet theater. Books about shapes and colors, the weekly theme, are open on various tables. Around the room, five stations are also set up, but they are covered with tarps, adding to the feeling of anticipation and surprise.

As the children settle down on the rug, the adults sit behind them. Julia perches on a child-size chair and leads a song as they wait for any stragglers, pointing to a flannel board holding “pants” in various colors. “Little ants, little ants, are you in the . . . what color pants should I say?” All the children join in and shout out colors. This seems to be the regular “get settled” song, with all the children knowing the words and parents joining in with questions, “Oh, is it that? No? What other colors can we chose?”

At 10:10, Julia proclaims, “It’s time for the story!” Taking *Dog’s Colorful Day*, she explains that today’s theme is colors and shapes! As she reads the story, the adults and children count with Julia, some using their fingers

“1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 spots!”

Throughout the book, Julia asks questions like, “What color is this?” and “Silly dog, why would he do that?” She waits for the kids to shout out; some adults whisper to their children, helping them with some answers. She reads the story with great animation, making hand motions when saying “Splat!” and “Squash!”

Julia finishes the story and announces, “Let’s play!” At that moment, Shannon and Robin toss off the tarps one by one, revealing what lies below:

- two tables holding sticky paper cut in various shapes;
- a large yellow tub of soft colorful blocks, play food, shakers, and a cushion-filled Rock-a-Stack;
- a large blue box holding colorful building blocks, as well as containers holding streamers and dinosaur-shaped puppets;
- an eight-foot long tube with soft edges, big enough for a child to climb through; and
- an eight-foot square blue tarp on the ground, with a red tube filled with colorful beads, small cups, and scoops.

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PLAY AND LEARN (CONTINUED)

The room explodes in mayhem. While the story time was quiet aside from the prompted shouting, the play portion of the program is definitely free form. Adults and children move to the various stations. Julia, Robin, and Shannon purposefully circulate, never together, and all actively play with the children. At one point, all three of them don capes and have a streamer competition with one young boy, swinging it around in circles and squares. Shannon asks the young boy if he can write his name with the streamer in the air.

Adults continuously prompt the children: “What shape is this? (child: square) How do you know? (child: pointing to the four sides) Right! Because it has four sides! Great job!” All the adults understand their “required” involvement. A few of the adults chat about work, groceries, and other daily routines as they play with their children. A man and woman discuss different activities their children are in while playing with the beads. A grandmother tells how the program is great for helping her granddaughter with socialization.

Playtime continues until Julia calls everyone back to say goodbye at about 10:45. It takes a few moments for the adults to settle the children back on the rug then they all sing, “Good-bye, See You Soon.” Everyone knows the hand gestures; the adults help the children wave their hands. Afterwards, the adults and children move on to read books with their children or play on the preschool computer together in the general children’s area. Shannon chats with some of the parents while Robin and Julia begin to clean up.

early literacy with our little ones.” She launches into a series of chants and songs with motions, giving the caregivers instructions as she goes: “Now remember grown-ups, if you’ve got someone you can pick up, fly that someone through the air; otherwise just encourage your children to raise their arms up above their head.” She next leads a song about the five ECRR practices: “Talk, sing, read, write, play” (repeats three times), “Raise a reader every day!” This song, she tells the adults, is “a good song to sing before a learning activity to alert children about the ways to learn.”

After five more songs, Jenna says “Guess what time it is? It’s my favorite time!” Parents and children join in as she sings, “It’s time to read, read a book” (clap, clap, repeat two times). She reads *The Seals on the Bus*, pointing at pictures and com-

menting as she reads: “Look at all the animals waiting for the bus. Who’s that? It’s a lion? What does the lion say? Roar! The lion on the bus goes roar, roar, roar.” Next, she comments “Oh my goodness, a pink flamingo! Grown-ups, let’s help our little ones flap their wings!” At the end of the book, Jenna walks around to show everyone the picture of all the animals swimming in the lake. “Does anyone here like to swim? Who goes to swimming lessons?” she asks.

Jenna leads more songs and chants before reading the next book. One of the chants involves moving around in a circle, first slowly, then quickly and in other different ways. “We march, and we march, and we stop!” she says. Jenna instructs caregivers to give children specific feedback: “When I say ‘stop’ on the drum, we’re going to encourage

our little ones to stop. And when they do, we’re going to say ‘You did it! You stopped!’ because that kind of validation is more affirming than ‘Great job!’ So remember, when our little ones stop, we’re going to say, ‘You did it! You stopped!’”

After reading a second book, Jenna leads a flannel board activity in which children make a Humpty Dumpty figure “fall down.” Some children approach the board hesitantly; others run up and confidently make Humpty crash to the ground. Jenna emphasizes to caregivers that this activity “helps children learn to take turns.” After a few final songs, caregivers help their children get ready to go. A few families stay to play with large Lego blocks on the floor, but most leave, saying thank you to Jenna as they go.

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Unlike the modeling behaviors we observed, Jenna made many parent-directed comments that *explicitly* tell parents what to do. At the same time, she explained *why* such activities will help their children develop early literacy skills. These “asides” offered parents several key messages that we break down into four categories:

- 1. Ages and Stages:** In our visits to libraries throughout the country, librarians expressed concern that parents sometimes have unrealistic behavior expectations for their children. With asides such as “remember, grown-ups, it’s normal for kids to wander around while they’re listening,” Jenna communicated messages about what behaviors parents can expect from their children at all ages. Jenna also helped parents adapt activities for their children based on their ages.
- 2. Early Literacy:** Jenna also included short messages to parents that specifically address building early literacy. For example, when she reminded parents that they will “repeat stories and chants two times,” she emphasized that importance of repetition. This aside not only affirmed parents’ frequent need to repeat certain words to their children, but also helped them understand why this repetition will help early literacy.
- 3. Behavior:** Jenna also offered other messages to parents about how to teach their children different behaviors. For example, when she asked parents to say, “You did it! You stopped!” instead of “Good job,” she taught

parents about helping children to match an action with a vocabulary word (“stop”). More importantly, she guided parents to give their children specific, affirming feedback than can help to develop positive behavior patterns.

- 4. School Routines/Readiness:** Finally, some of Jenna’s messages helped parents make their children more familiar with common school routines. When Jenna transitioned into a new activity, such as reading a book, she used a specific song designed to signal what is coming next—a common strategy in many classrooms. She also helped children practice taking turns through the Humpty Dumpty activity. These activities can implicitly teach children common school routines and behaviors, but Jenna also called specific attention to these behaviors to alert parents that the activities teach children how to transition and take turns.

Jenna seemed very natural in addressing “asides” to parents, sounding neither preachy nor patronizing. Judging by the large group of parents and children who attended, the story time is very popular, indicating that parents and



Librarian reading a book during story time (Farmington, New Mexico).

children alike are very comfortable with this type of programming. Still, the concept does not come naturally to all librarians. This is true even in libraries that were strong ECRR adopters. In the forty story times we observed, we counted sixty-seven asides. In some programs, we counted more than fifteen such comments. However, in many cases, we observed zero or one parent-directed comments. This suggests that even if librarians knew they

Table 1. Messages (“Asides”) to Parents during Jenna’s Story Time

Type of Aside	Frequency
Ages and stages	4
Early literacy	5
Behavior	1
School routines/readiness	2

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Bilingual librarian leads a flannel board activity at a story time crowded with parents and children (San Francisco).

should address parents, they sometimes felt uncomfortable doing so.

Parent-Only Programs

While many programs are conducted with both parents and children, libraries are also increasingly offering programming solely for parents. In these sessions, librarians use the concentrated time to offer advice and suggestions on how parents can play with their children during their daily routine in ways that promote vocabulary development. At a suburban library in Maryland, for example, a librarian offered the following suggestions during a parent-only session: “Talk every day to your child . . . it could be at breakfast, or in the car. Let him respond.” “Pretend play is important. When you are playing, pretend you are the

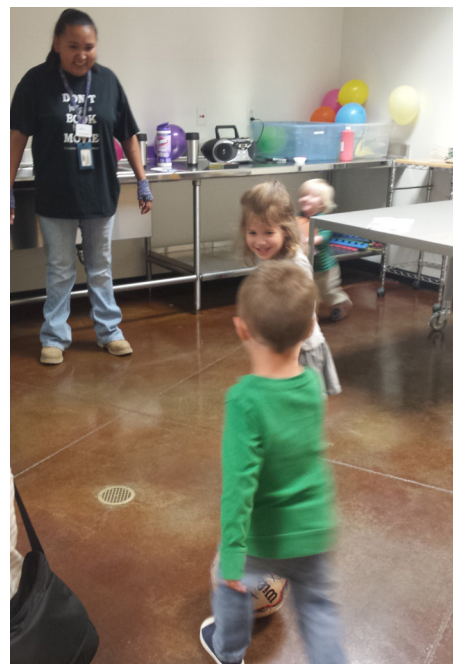


Librarian leading a chant during story time (Pierce County, Washington).

character in the book. Ask ‘what are they doing?’” “When you hear music at home, sing along with your child.” In these programs, parents often received takeaway materials and suggested activities they could use to engage with their children at home.

While parent-only sessions do not provide opportunities to see librarians model behaviors with children, they do provide a setting where the adults might be able to listen more intently to the librarian without being distracted by their children. Staff members take children to a separate room to listen to stories and play while other librarians conduct parent engagement workshops. For example, in a “Kindergarten Club” program in an Ohio library, staff members helped children conduct experiments in one room. In a separate room, librarians and parents discussed how young children can learn vocabulary and basic science concepts by playing in the bathtub.

Our investigation shows that public libraries are intentionally rework-



Librarian plays soccer with a child during “play lab” (Farmington, New Mexico).

ing story time programs and other activities to foster parent engagement. Together with redesigned spaces and librarians’ new roles, library programs add another layer to libraries’ strategy to promote critical parent–child interactions through the everyday practices of talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing together.

The trends we observed were a departure from what the public sees as typical library programs. The emphasis on parents as well as on children represents a substantial shift in how libraries have traditionally conducted business. The focus on playing, talking, and singing as well as reading during programming also signals that libraries are promoting a more expansive view

BABY STORY TIME—MODELING AGE-APPROPRIATE LITERACY ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS WITH BABIES

One major programming trend we saw is a move to offer programming for very young children. As we observed in this library in the Northwest, librarians used the story time programming to model age appropriate literacy activities for parents to do with their babies. Holding the attention of such young children requires a certain mix of activities and materials, but the librarian here successfully provided a program that keeps adults and children happily engaged for a solid hour:

At 10:00 a.m., five adults (four mothers and one caregiver) and six children, ages nine to twenty-four months, have arrived for “Baby Story Time.” A couple of the mothers seem to know each other, and Carol, the children’s librarian, greets all the babies by name. Without prompting, the adults put sticker nametags on their babies’ backs and sit down on the colorful alphabet rug where Carol has set out plastic cups, rubber balls, wooden puzzles, and cloth dolls. Carol and the grownups interact together and with the babies amid a chorus of positive reinforcement and engagement:

- Carol: “Look at you, at eleven months!” (the baby is beginning to walk)
- Mom (with plastic cups): You got three, good job, can you put four cups there?
- Mom: Meow, yes, that’s right, it’s a cat!
- Carol: What’s that, is that a pig? That’s right. And there’s a banana. I had a banana for breakfast!
- Mom: I like that you’re sharing your balls! Thank you!
- Mom, to other mom: She just started drooling again, she must be teething!

Around 10:07, Carol brings out two large bins that the caregivers and kids fill with the toys. Carol tells the chil-

dren to “find your grown-up!” What follows next resembles an exquisitely choreographed dance, with chants, play, and books seamlessly interwoven to keep the attention of the six young children for the remainder of the program:

- Chants: Carol leads the adults in chanting “This is the Way the Jockey Rides” and “This Little Baby Loves Dancing, Dancing.”
- Book: Carol hands everyone a copy of a board book with eye holes; the adults and babies hold the book up to their eyes to make a mask as a frog, monkey, pig, etc. They play with the books for a little bit, making the faces and the noises that the animals make.
- Play: “When you’re done with the book, you can trade me for a shaker!” Carol says. She passes out “shaker eggs” and puts a song on the CD player: “I know a chicken, and she laid an egg, oh my goodness, it’s a shaky egg! Shake it slow” (next verse: shake it fast, high, low, in circles, etc.). The song is call-and-response, and parents sing the responses.
- Chants: “Acka Backa Soda Crack-ah,” “Bumpin’ Downtown in My Little Red Car.”
- Play: Carol brings out a cloth parachute; she and the grown-ups

sing “If You’re Happy and You Know It,” “Toss the Chute,” then “Ride the Chute, Turn the Chute.” Babies sit on the parachute while the adults turn it around; some babies are a little scared but also excited. Afterwards, Carol says, “Find your way back to your grown-up.”

- Chants: Carol says, “A lot of our rhymes are in our wonderful booklet, ‘Wiggles, Tickles, and Rhymes.’ Please take one.” She hands out the booklets, and she and the parents chant “Two Little Bluebirds” and “Tick Tock, I’m a Little Cuckoo Clock.” They next do peekaboo, and Carol explains, “There’s all kinds of ways to do peekaboo because kids love the surprise, and they love spending time with you!”
- Play: They play with bubbles from a bubble “gun.”
- Book: Carol hands out copies of the board book *Are You My Baby?* to each caregiver. As Carol reads, she interacts with the babies: “What do you think, is this my baby? No, that’s not her baby!” Parents make the animal sounds for the different animals in the book.
- Play: “Are you ready for some scarves?” Carol asks. She distributes colorful cloth scarves, and

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BABY STORY TIME (CONTINUED)

the babies wave them around, up, down, fast, slow. Carol puts on a CD and they listen to a song about dancing with scarves, freezing at times when the song says. With the younger babies, the moms are waving around the scarves. Carol says to one of the boys, “I like how

you’re moving in a different way, Dylan!”

- Play: Carol brings the toy bins back out, as well as a bin of large Legos. All the grown-ups and babies stay for a while and play. The adults chat about programs at a nearby children’s museum,

their babies’ nap schedules, new crockpot recipes, etc. Carol stays and plays with the babies as they put balls through plastic tubes and stack little bean bags.

At 11:00, the caregivers with babies gradually pack up and leave as more families arrive for the next program.

of how literacy develops than they have in the past.

As we have seen before, changes also come with challenges. Some librarians are better prepared than others to incorporate activities such as playing and singing into their programming. While most librarians are comfortable modeling the Five Practices for parents during story times, the direct “asides” are much less evident. As discussed in [section 5](#), many librarians feel awkward addressing parents at the same time they are leading activities with children. The parent-only programs work around this issue by allowing librarians to focus solely on parents without the distractions of children nearby. This type of programming is not offered frequently,

usually because of staff or funding constraints. Finally, even with re-vamped programming many librarians still struggle to attract parents, particularly in low-income areas.

Despite these conflicts, we are convinced that these programming shifts are not merely fleeting trends but emerging hallmarks of library services. In many areas, library programs are drawing scores of parents who previously could not envision their rambunctious toddler sitting through a traditional story time. Enticing families with a casual, playful atmosphere and librarians dedicated to educating both children and parents, libraries are branding programming as family friendly. By offering increased opportunities for families to play,



Librarian leads a song with children (Cuyahoga County, Ohio).

talk, and read together—and explaining why it is important—these programs further support families helping their children arrive at school ready to read.

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FOCUSING ON ELLs

Libraries are also stepping up to ensure that dual-language learners arrive at kindergarten on the same footing as their peers. As we see in this excerpt from our notes at a Texas library, libraries are welcoming bilingual families with décor that reflects the local culture, with comfy seating that encourages children, teens, and parents to hang out, and with programming geared toward supporting ELL parents in fostering their children’s literacy development:

On a misty November evening at a Texas library, scores of families gather in this gleaming new building, decorated with artwork and pottery highlighting the local Hispanic culture. A mixture of English and Spanish is heard as children collaborate noisily on homework and teens mingle around high-tech video screens. A father snuggles with his five-year-old son in a comfy chair, reading a book about trucks.

In a separate meeting room, literacy specialist Cassandra conducts a parent workshop titled “We’re Going Places.” A dozen parents, both native English speakers and native Spanish speakers, sit around a table in the branch’s meeting room. Nearby, their preschoolers are playing with a library aide. “What can you do to get your children ready to read

while you are out on the road?” Cassandra asks. After some discussion on the role of parents as teachers, she offers suggestions on how the adults can engage their children while they are traveling. This includes talking, (“use words such as ‘destination’ when talking to your children; it increases their vocabulary”) and singing (“slow down the words as you sing, so your child will understand”). She hands out takeaway items such as a stack of “Silly Questions to Ask on Car Trips” and models hand movements parents can do as they sing “Wheels on the Bus” with their children. With each suggestion, Cassandra speaks first in English and then in Spanish. In either language, her message is the same: “Conversation is the key; it’s all about interaction with your child.”

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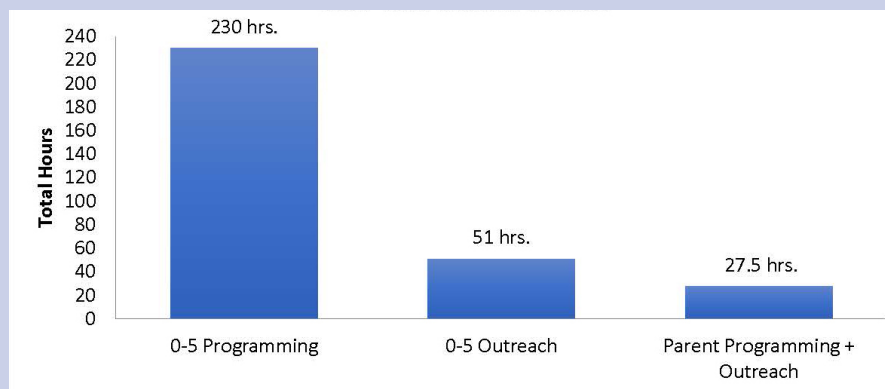
LIBRARY PROGRAMMING: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

Our analysis of programming hours in ten libraries shows that libraries are devoting a significant amount of time to programming for children ages zero to five both in-library and off-site (outreach) in community centers, schools, and parks, thus providing many opportunities for parents and children to interact and play together. Less common are parent-only workshops, in which librarians conduct separate programs for parents and children.

While libraries are scheduling more programs for young children, they are also changing traditional titles such as “Story Time” to include words such as “Play,” “Fun,” or “Party.” Other shifts include combining play with STEM/STEAM content as well as offering opportunities for bilingual families to interact and play.

Finally, our story time observations also show that librarians offer many opportunities for parents and children to interact with toys, games, and other activities during a free-play segment. These libraries are also likely to include music as well as large-motor and small-motor movement, all of which contribute to the fun, playful, party atmosphere that encourages parents and children to play together.

Total Programming and Outreach Hours (One-Month Period)



Story Time Program Titles (One-Month Period)

No. of story times	40
No. of program titles that reference “play” or “fun” (e.g., “Pajamas Party Story Time”)	22
No. of programs focused on STEM/STEAM	10
No. of sites offering bilingual programming	4
School routines/readiness	2

Story Time Components (One-Month Period)

No. of story times	40
No. of programs with play	20
No. of programs with music	39
No. of programs with large motor movements	31
No. of programs with small motor movements	25

07

SUPPORTING FAMILIES

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THE LIBRARY AS RESOURCE BROKER OF EARLY LITERACY LEARNING

While hanging around libraries for three years, we heard a core message time and again: parents play a key role in early literacy. Through everyday activities such as reading, talking, and playing, parents can help enhance a young child's vocabulary. In turn, these interactions help set the stage for their child's entry into school and early reading success.

In our time spent hanging around, we've come to another realization: many parents, particularly those living in low-income communities, face certain challenges in filling this roll. Although family relationships are critical to children's later school success, the environments children grow up in can also profoundly affect their development. Families living in affluent or middle-class neighborhoods, for example, will have access to many supports, such as educational opportunities, medical care, and community programs. On the other hand, families living in neighborhoods of poverty see little of these services. Isolated from the mainstream, parents who live in resource-poor areas face extreme difficulties in raising their children.

In our visits to communities, we noticed that certain neighborhood institutions take on the role of resource brokers, connecting families to government agencies, nonprofits and other organizations

that can provide information and social services. For example, child care centers often supply families with direct services and information about health care, dental care, and government assistance. Urban churches also often serve as brokers, providing congregants with information on jobs, educational opportunities, and naturalization services, among other resources.

Libraries, we are discovering, are also serving a role in poor communities: resource brokers for children's early literacy development. We see this role evolving in two ways: First, libraries serve as passive brokers, providing community spaces where families can exchange information and resources. Second, they are active resource brokers, reaching parents through story time programming and by making direct connections with social services and early childhood programs, such as Head Start.

As we see it, the library has several advantages as a resource broker in neighborhoods of poverty. Unlike many other neighborhood institutions, such as recreation centers, they offer services free of charge. People can come and go as they wish. Their participation is voluntary; it's based on their individual interests, needs, and curiosities. All of this puts the public library in a unique position to support families in the community, both formally and informally, by mobilizing information, outside services, and resources.

In our evaluation, we examined how libraries serve as resource brokers

in neighborhoods of poverty to support parent engagement. We looked at it from a variety of angles: What kinds of connections do libraries make for families living in poverty? What types of information do their spaces convey? What mechanisms do they use to broker resources?

To answer these questions, we made a point when conducting site visits to look for signs of libraries' strengths as resource brokers. We scoured the community surrounding each library, noting whether it is near schools, residential areas, businesses, or community centers. Within the library itself, we examined how the library might act as a passive broker for early literacy, such as by providing comfortable spaces and seating for parents and children to read or use the computers together. Our photos of bulletin boards, brochures, monthly calendars, and hand-outs also helped us learn more about how libraries connect people to local resources related to early literacy activities in particular. In story time observations, we noted the types of messages conveyed to parents as they read to the children during the program. As we systematically recorded "asides," we heard what informal quick tips parents received that promote school readiness activities while at home. Finally, our interviews with children's librarians helped us understand how their responsibilities might have shifted in recent years to meet the needs of their community and how they view their role in parent engagement. What we found is that, as resource brokers, libraries are playing a vital role in helping families in poor

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communities prepare their children for school.

Resource Brokering to other Organizations

Although some libraries have more extensive networks than others, virtually all libraries transfer services to other organizations or connect patrons with vital services. The most common way libraries connect with outside organizations is by conducting outreach sessions for young children in preschools, daycares, and Head Start programs. During these visits, children’s librarians bring books, library card applications, and information about upcoming events to these sessions, hoping to model read-aloud practices to staff and to encourage ongoing visits to the library.

In addition, several libraries offer early literacy training on the Five Practices for childcare staff. They also provide services to local hospitals, bringing baby books and child development tips to new mothers. In some areas, librarians supply book cases and books free for the taking in local Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) centers, housing offices, and wellness centers. Most libraries deliver resources and training to families who choose to homeschool their children, working closely with the local public schools to ensure alignment with standards and curriculum. And in some areas, librarians provide services to local museums, modeling reading and playing with children to encourage learning throughout the city. In each case, outreach to the community is a central feature of their role,

delivering materials, services, and training to organizations that would otherwise not have early literacy opportunities for their children.

Libraries also connect families to other organizations that could provide essential services. For example, the Warrensville Heights, Ohio, branch offers families a free lunch program at the library as well as helping them connect to the local food bank. In areas with a large immigrant population, librarians link families to local institutions that could provide resources and services for refugees, such as United Hands or Sunnyvale Services. Throughout libraries, brochures, flyers, and handouts suggest numbers to call for various family services. As shown in photo 1, for example, the display at Carroll County, Maryland, provided connections to local doctors and dental services, saying, “For some parents with a sick child, the hardest part isn’t getting a doctor’s appointment—it’s paying for one.”

Many library systems are also joining state organizations dedicated to promoting early literacy learning. In Pierce County, Washington, for example, a staff member locally known as the “early learning” librarian is part of a coalition of forty other organizations working with legislators to advocate for funding and greater attention to the needs of young children and their families. As part of the coalition, they participate in the development of the Quality Rating Improvement System initiated by Race to the Top dollars. As one librarian indicated, “Being at these tables has been

huge for us, changing the landscape completely. We’ve always been there, offering things, but now these organizations see us as a vital player in early education.”

Viewing libraries as resource brokers highlights the many different roles that library branches play in promoting early literacy development in resource-poor neighborhoods. They communicate with families by providing direct services and by connecting them to other organizations, recognizing that children’s school success is related to the health, education, and well-being of the family.

Types of Information Conveyed through Resources

Perhaps the most crucial information that libraries provide to families is messages about early literacy. This information, threaded throughout the resources libraries broker to families, is particularly vital for families living in resource-poor areas. Although different libraries take various approaches, families hear relatively consistent messages within and outside the library from the services libraries provide, including the following key messages:

Message #1: Encouragement (or even expectation) of parent engagement in children’s early literacy learning. Whether through story times, handouts, or modeling activities, librarians send a strong message that “parents are children’s first early literacy teachers.” Throughout many of the activities we observed, parents were encouraged to actively

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Table 1. Examples of Librarians Bringing Services to Community Organizations

Community Organizations	Description of Organization and Connection to the Library
Our Lady’s Inn (St. Charles County, Missouri)	Libraries partner with this nonprofit organization that provides food and shelter for pregnant women. Librarians teach free classes about the importance of the Five Practices for early literacy. Mothers receive bags with books and information.
Sunnyvale Neighborhood Center (Salt Lake County, Utah)	Librarians take crafts, toys, and books to this community center which serves immigrants and refugees. The library conducts programs focused on teaching interactive play and reading. Librarians also teach parents about the purposes of the library and the resources available.
Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Offices (St. Charles County, Missouri)	WIC is a federal assistance program dedicated to providing healthcare and nutrition services and information to low-income families. The library visits WIC offices to supply bookcases, stock and update free books, and conduct story times onsite.
Head Start/Preschools (Pierce County, Washington; Salt Lake County, Utah; New Orleans)	Librarians visit Head Start centers and preschools to conduct story times and provide parents with information about library resources.
Senior Centers (St. Charles County, Missouri)	The library brings books to local senior centers for those who are unable to visit the library.

participate in programs and to have fun and play with their child. Rather than sending didactic messages, librarians use an “assets-based approach,” celebrating caregivers’ strengths and abilities and reassuring parents that “the things you are already doing, such as singing and talking to children, are proven by research to have positive effects on early literacy.”

In their story time programs, librarians make plain to parents the rationale for engaging in various activities. For example, after singing a song with children, one librarian told parents about the benefits of singing rhymes or the importance of repeated readings of stories during story time sessions. As one librarian said, “We tell kids what we are doing, and then mention to the adults why we



Photo 1. Flyers and brochures with information for parents. Topics include reading, media tips, testing in local schools, dentists, and services to help with medical costs (Westminster Branch, Carroll County, Maryland).

are doing it.” In each case, the focus is on getting parents actively involved in their children’s education at all ages but especially in the early years prior to formal schooling.

Message #2: A more expansive view of early literacy learning. As mentioned previously, librarians’ adoption of a more expansive definition of early literacy learning is a significant shift in practice. Although books and story times are still essential features of early literacy, other activities in the early years also contribute to children’s school readiness. Recognizing that children use symbols to create and

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communicate meaning, the practices of talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing are a common mantra in libraries. Librarians often describe how drawing, talking, pretend play, and pretend reading are alternate forms that young children use to create and express meaning. For example, one librarian noted, “I’ve starting drawing attention to early writing, helping parents to see that their children’s doodles and marks are really significant.” As little ones experiment with various ways of using symbols, they gradually learn to differentiate them as they ascertain their unique purposes. Librarians are also finding that these practices are an easy way to convey the skills essential in early literacy, such as phonological awareness and print concepts. “Parents appreciate the lack of jargon,” said one librarian. “When I share how these activities can influence early literacy, they become more intentional about it.”

Message #3: The importance of play. Related to the more expansive view of literacy development is a focus on the integration of play in all activities and its importance in young children’s development. In some cases, librarians seem to use play as a strategy to keep children actively engaged in the storybook hour, integrating play within and between stories. But in other cases, they make more intentional attempts to link play and reading together through reenactments of stories, dressing up in various costumes, or playing a gross-motor activity. In each case, parents are encouraged to join in and play along with their children, using scarves, toys, or markers and crayons. With

Table 2. Examples of Libraries Collaborating with Community Organizations

Community Organizations	Description of Organization and Connection to the Library
Judy Center Partnership (Westminster, Maryland)	A coalition of nonprofits, the local library, and public agencies, the goal of which is to enhance school readiness for all children.
United Hands (Westminster, Maryland)	A nonprofit organization established to assist new immigrants in the community. The library and nonprofit work together to link immigrant families to resources.
Engaging Latino Communities for Education (Farmington, New Mexico)	Aims to increase education opportunities for students who have been traditionally underrepresented in institutions of higher learning. The organization coordinates with the local library to provide access to resources.
Hospitals (St. Charles County, Missouri)	The library works with a local hospital to provide new parents a bag containing a library card, baby books, and information about the library and story time programming.
County Consortium on Early Education (Westminster, Maryland)	A group of education, health, and other service providers in the county, all dedicated to ensuring school readiness. Librarians serve as liaisons to effectively provide families with information and resources.
Community Garden (Cuyahoga County, Ohio)	The local community garden teams with the library to better educate children on how healthy food is grown.

play, the focus is on exploring rather than accomplishing predetermined ends or goals. Children are encouraged to explore or invent new possibilities—new ways of doing things and thinking about ideas that might lead them to ask questions and interact with adults and their peers. Helping parents see “early literacy as a type of play

seems to help take the pressure off of learning the ABCs” states one librarian, which might create opportunities for young children to find reading and writing a source of exploration and fun rather than work.

Message #4: Age-appropriate practice. Helping parents become

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more aware of child development and age-appropriate practice is a central feature of many activities and programs in and outside the library. Recognizing the unique way children learn, some of the libraries are offering specially designed programs for babies or toddlers that target their energies and needs as opposed to preschoolers, who are better able to sit and listen to a story. At the same time, librarians also attempt to reassure parents that children’s development varies substantially. As one librarian put it, “Some can sit for story time, others are better reached through music. Children can learn about reading through music. Each beat is a syllable. So, every time you bounce your baby on your knee, it’s a syllable.”

In addition, many of the messages about child development are conveyed through modeling activities. For example, in one library we found children and their parents on yoga mats, with the librarian showing them how the poses and physical movements of yoga contribute to literacy and why movement is important for children’s development. Some of the movements we observed were physical, like down-dog; others were meant to be soothing, like the “child’s pose.” At one point, she showed the adult a movement, and said, “This move will encourage your child to crawl, which is important for his development.” In these and other activities, librarians attempt to convey knowledge about children’s development and its connections to early literacy.

Together, these messages highlight the central features of parent

engagement. As one librarian put it, she designs her programs to provide families with “succinct and easily digestible information that they might need.”

Brokering Resources in the Library

Libraries broker resources about early literacy to families both formally and informally. With its physical location in the neighborhood, library branches serve as passive brokers—spaces where children and families can exchange information and engage in literacy-related activities. In other words, the physical setting itself creates opportunities for parent and child engagement in early literacy. Libraries also serve as active brokers through their programming activities, involving families in ways that support the essential messages of the Five Practices.

Passive Brokering

Environments can greatly influence behavior. As a passive broker, libraries can create new opportunities for parent engagement by making subtle changes in library spaces. As discussed previously in [Section 4](#), libraries are reconfiguring their environments to promote parents spending more time on early literacy activities. As we heard librarians describe it, “We want to be a community space where people gather. We want our children’s area to be a place where people hang out, and read with their children, and do puzzles, and engaging activities.”

The need for a gathering space is particularly important in areas of poverty, where families often live



Photo 2. Map showing the circular design of the Farmington (New Mexico) Public Library, which was designed to reflect Navajo beliefs about the life cycle.



Photo 3. Large and small seating in the children’s area (Warrensville Branch, Cuyahoga County, Ohio).

in crowded conditions and with few resources in the home. In addition, resource-poor areas are often devoid of parks, recreation centers, or other community areas where families might gather and hang out.

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Table 3. Types of Messages Provided to Caregivers by Librarians

Type of Message	Definition	Example
Parent engagement	Librarians encourage parent engagement in children’s early literacy learning through story times, handouts, or modeling activities.	“So remember, your child needs to be with you at all times during the program. Your child will need your help to participate in the story time, so you will be modeling how to participate with them during the program by singing and doing activities with them” (San Francisco).
Early literacy	Librarians promote a more expansive definition of early literacy, which includes the practices of talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing.	“All of the chants and songs we do today, we’ll do two times, so that we can repeat all of the fun with our kids. Remember that repetition is the key to building early literacy with our little ones, and so we celebrate that. And you can say all of the rhymes, and do all of the movements along with your child” (Chicago).
Importance of play	Librarians focus on the integration of play in young children’s development and on linking play and reading.	“Playing helps kids express themselves and it also helps turning thoughts into words. . . . Next time you guys are playing, what I want you to do is narrate what you’re playing. So if you are playing with a car, you’re going to say, ‘the car is driving fast,’ or if you’re playing with your doll house, you are going to say, ‘the dolls are going to take a bath.’” (Farmington, New Mexico).
Age-appropriate practices	Librarians help parents become more aware of child development and age-appropriate practices.	[Baby chewing on books] “Oh, that’s what they do! That’s what babies at this age do. They’re exploring everything so much, and they use their mouth to explore things, so that’s good that she’s exploring things with her mouth” (Pierce County, Washington).

The library becomes a haven for many families, cool in the summer and warm in the winter, filled with toys, books, and areas for parents and children to relax.

Our observations and photographs show evidence of certain design features in these spaces that support parent engagement. For example, in addition to incorporating aspects of the local culture into their design and décor, libraries display bilingual signage to make patrons feel welcome and integral members of the community, something that is often

missing in many neighborhoods of poverty. This strategy sends parents implicit messages that bilingualism, or in some cases, multilingualism, is a strength for children’s early literacy development.

As reviewed in [Section 1](#), spaces are created to inspire parents and children to read and play together. In addition to comfortable seating for adults and children, where large and small sofas and chairs might be arranged amid other toys and books, the computer area is often reconfigured so that parents

and children can sit side-by-side. Libraries’ strategic decision to include toys along with books in the preschool area (and beyond) reinforces the playfulness of early literacy development. In some libraries, spaces are designed with semi-fixed structures to encourage children to grapple with a problem or question related to content reading, similar to those one might see in a children’s museum. Questions like “how many times does a snake shed its skin?” are designed to encourage parent–child interaction and conversations. We often saw

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young children manipulating items on these structures, playing with others, and occasionally asking other peers to read to them. Walking through the libraries, it was easy to spot small blocks that parents and children could stack, large blocks for building big structures, and wooden puzzles, magnetic sticks, and balls with tables close by to sit and play.

As many librarians told us, space decisions are designed to send an important message about early literacy: imaginative play and parent–child interaction help children learn. As one librarian said, “We don’t want parents drilling their kids in the alphabet. We want to teach them to play and talk with their child.”

Finally, in addition to computer spaces, some libraries feature interactive video game areas where parents and children could do movement together, including yoga and dance. In Warrensville, Ohio, for example, we watched (and joined in) with children and families all learning complex moves to a new dance. These carved-out stations throughout the library seemed to take away from the more traditional, solitary quiet reading areas. With their large screens and small dance floors, they combined the need to socialize and play, sometimes seeming to stretch the very definition of a library and its mission.

Together, these spatial characteristics encourage families in neighborhoods of poverty to come with their children and stay awhile. By



Photo 5. Children and parents play, read together, and look for books (Deer Run Branch, St. Charles County, Missouri).



Photo 4. Mother and toddler build together with blocks (Central Branch, San Antonio).

providing welcoming spaces to play, read, watch, and do, these libraries become community centers with books and technology integrated throughout the environment, helping families counter the social isolation that may hinder their ability to raise young readers.

Active Brokering

In addition to their weekly story hours, librarians create special programs, workshops, learning series, and information sessions

for parents and children. Working with nonprofit organizations, school districts, and government agencies, libraries host representatives from Head Start, school district offices, juvenile justice, immigration services who might assist with translational support, WIC, and local food banks, among others. Information sessions are largely given by the representatives of these organizations and focus on describing the resources available to families related to health, food, and early education.

The bulk of the programming in libraries, however, is conducted by the library staff. In their effort to attract new and returning patrons, librarians often try to anticipate what families in the community want to learn or experience. Rarely requiring any sign-ups, and always free and open to the public, the attendance might vary from one week to the next. However, some libraries like the Roosevelt Branch in Chicago, have clearly built a following. As the librarian there described, “On the days we open our doors for our ‘Mother Goose on the Loose’ and ‘Book Party for Preschoolers’ programs, people line up outside the building, and our phones are ringing off the hooks! Everyone wants to be part of the fun. So programs fill quickly and are attended regularly.” Other libraries find that they need to adapt their programming before attracting an audience. For example, in Ohio, librarians offer a Readiness club for the many families that choose not to or cannot afford to send their children to preschool.

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Table 4. Space Characteristics that Encourage Parent Engagement and Early Literacy

Space Characteristic	Purpose	Example
Community-inspired décor and bilingual signage.	To help all families feel welcome and included.	Library architecture is designed to reflect Navajo beliefs, and books of rhymes and songs for parents to use with their children are available in English, Spanish, and Navajo (Farmington, New Mexico; see photo 2).
Spaces with comfortable seating, computers, and books for adults and children together.	To encourage parents to interact with their children and read and play together.	The children’s area contains comfortable seating for adults and children next to each other near a puppet theater where children can put on shows (Cuyahoga County, Ohio; see photo 3).
Toys and play objects available at all times for parents and children to use.	To help parents understand how playing with their children can foster early literacy development.	A boy and his mother build with blocks on the library floor. She asks him what he is building and what blocks they will need to finish it (San Antonio; see photo 4).
Multiuse spaces with opportunities to read, dance, play, eat, and use technology.	To create spaces where families can hang out and alternate between different activities; to foster socializing within and between families.	In the children’s area, a few toddlers play with a train set. One mother reads to her baby while another mother helps her daughter to pick out books. Children frequently change activities (St. Charles County, Missouri; see photo 5).

Although their focus and audience varies, most of the programs adhere to several central messages: sensitivity to child development and age-related activities; a focus on play; the integration of symbol systems of music, writing, drawing, reading and rhyme; and the expectations that family involvement is critical for early literacy development in ways that are supportive and fun.

As our evaluation shows, libraries play an important role in many neighborhoods as community cen-

ters. In neighborhoods with limited resources, however, the significance of their role is magnified many times over. Here libraries serve as resource brokers, providing not only a passive space where families can gather to exchange information, but also serving as an active force, delivering enabling early literacy messages and connecting families with needed local services. They are almost unsung heroes in many areas, not only filling a gap in social services but also bolstering communities in need.

The role as resource brokers varies by community. Some libraries have large outreach staffs conducting dozens of programs each month, while other librarians, because of staffing shortages, barely have time to leave their building even once over many weeks. In many areas, particularly those with high populations of immigrants, libraries still struggle to entice families, wary as they are of government entities.

Still, we think libraries’ role as resource brokers is a growing move-

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Table 5. Examples of Library Programs and Primary Messages to Parents

Program	Description	Primary Focus			
		Parent Engagement	Early Childhood Literacy	Importance of Play	Ages and Stages
Books, Blocks and Tots	Focuses on early literacy skills (introduction of alphabet, book reading), and time dedicated to play (blocks, little cars, building materials) that encourages parent involvement. Sign by entrance to story time states, “Dear Grownups: Participating helps your child know that what they are doing is important” (Salt Lake City).	X	X	X	
Time for Twos	Includes reading fiction and nonfiction storybooks, singing songs, and dancing. Toward the end is craft time, during which children develop listening and developmentally appropriate fine motor skills, such as using scissors (St. Charles County, Missouri).		X	X	X
Play, Learn & Grow	A series of programs that offers opportunities for children to play with developmentally appropriate toys in a play-group atmosphere. Parents can meet and ask community experts questions about child development, speech and language, nutrition, play, movement, and music (Cuyahoga County, Ohio).	X		X	X

ment, one bolstered by the emphasis on parent engagement. Although this shift is evident to us, it might be more clearly captured by looking at a visit we made to a library in Carroll County, Maryland. Here,

on a lovely June afternoon, we met Rasolva, a Spanish-speaking mother of two children, now nine and five. She was more than happy to tell us about how important the library is to her family. Through a connection

the library made with United Hands, an organization serving the needs of Hispanic immigrant families, she and her children had become regulars at library programming since the youngsters were toddlers.

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Speaking through an interpreter, Rasolva said her library experiences had taught her that “books are very

helpful for my children to do better in school.” But more important, she said, “books are a way for me to get

to know my children better. We sit with books and I learn more about my children. And we get closer.”

08

**“WHERE THERE’S
A LAP, THERE’S
AN APP”**

08—“WHERE THERE’S A LAP, THERE’S AN APP”

TECHNOLOGY IN LIBRARIES

One day in a Southwestern library, we came upon a four-year-old boy sitting at a computer in the preschool section. He was flanked by his mother on one side and his grandmom on the other, and they directed him, point by point, as he played an early literacy game. “Click on the legs of the hippo,” his grandmother said. “Yes, we saw hippos the other day at the zoo, didn’t we?” reminded his mother. “They usually like to be in the water. They are so big!”

This scene, where parents and children—and sometimes three generations at once—interact while using digital technology is becoming increasingly common in public libraries today. Many librarians reported that parents frequently request technology, driving libraries to add more digital devices. “We had one lab with twelve iPads and they were so popular that we are ordering more,” one librarian told us. This is particularly true in low-income areas, where parents are asking for more technology because their children do not otherwise have access, but they need to learn how to use it. “The parents definitely think technology is important,” reported a librarian who works in an urban area. At the same time, more parents are asking for recommendations for apps and other educational digital resources.

The rising demand for technology is another challenge for libraries looking to foster parent engagement. Libraries are certainly providing

families with access to technology and interactive media to use either in-library or externally via resources on the library website. But getting parents to interact with their children as they use technology is another story. Some librarians are modeling ways for parents to effectively use technology with their children by incorporating technology into family story times. Taking it a step further, some librarians are directly addressing parents with tips and suggestions on how families can interact using technology in ways that will promote children’s early learning. Although librarians are responding in various ways to these new demands, many will agree: where parents and children are found, technology is often in the mix.

Technology in Library Spaces

Our observations of library spaces reflect how important technology has become in children’s library areas. Computers are often the most popular spot in children’s sections, where children can play games, work on homework, or do research for school (see photo 1). Computers also provide opportunities for parents and children to interact. We often saw young children playing computer games together with their parents, grandparents, or both (see photo 2).

Technology is plentiful in library children’s areas. All the libraries we visited have desktop computers loaded with software of some sort designed for children, such as AWE computers. Other types of technology available for families to use



Photo 1. Children working at computer station (Warrensville Heights Branch, Cuyahoga County Public Library, Ohio).

together include tablets, e-readers, and laptops. Some children’s areas contain large screens on which families can listen to stories being read.

Libraries are increasingly embracing video game technology as well. One library has a video game station where children can play video games with parents or other children (see photo 5). The inclusion of this technology has been met with some resistance from staff and patrons who oppose offering video games and music stations in the library because they believe kids would be better served by reading. “They probably have a point in some aspects,” one librarian conceded, “but the overall goal is to create lifelong library users . . . and video games and 3D printers draw kids into the library.”

Some libraries also place computers strategically to allow parents and children to be near each other.

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Photo 2. Grandparents and children playing on computers (Deer Run Branch, St. Charles City-County Library, Missouri).

Particularly in low-income neighborhoods, parents often need to use library computers to pay bills online, apply for jobs, and keep in touch with family. Some librarians expressed concerns that parents are dropping off their children in the children’s area and going to another section of the library to use the computers. To address this, a few libraries are putting adult computers in or near the children’s section so parents can complete their own tasks while keeping an eye on their children. One librarian explained,

We intentionally added computers with Internet near the children’s section, so if parents do need to be on a computer, they can be near their children. . . . Our other computers are way over on the other side, so unless you want the children to be over by the adults, then you have to put computers near the children’s area.

As this quote illustrates, libraries are making purposeful space decisions to keep parents and children together, a strategy showing how space can foster certain behaviors. A Missouri library uses a similar approach: a sign on a computer reads, “Preferred adult and child station: Thank you for keeping this station free so that parents and children can sit together” (see photo 6). This space solution fosters more parent–child interaction when parents need to use the computer.

As much as libraries are embracing technology in the children’s area, they also offer a place where technology, play, and literacy can collaborate. For example, many libraries position technology near children’s play areas, thus offering opportunities for families to connect using technology. At the same time, they encourage “unplugged” interactions using books and toys.



Photo 3. Child playing on tablet (Kisker Road Branch, St. Charles City-County Library, Missouri).



Photo 4. Child playing on tablet (South Jordan Branch, Salt Lake City).

E-Resources

Because the digital world transcends physical space, libraries are using their websites to promote apps, e-books, music, and other resources for families to download and use together outside the library. Families looking for digital resources such as e-books, audiobooks, and e-magazines along with streaming music and videos can find them on all library websites. Hoopla (www.hoopladigital.com), a service that allows patrons to download movies, music, books, and more, is available on many library websites via links to the Hoopla website.

All websites mention specific sites

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Photo 5. Videogame station (Warrensville Heights Branch, Cuyahoga County Public Library, Ohio).

for children’s digital resources, including TumbleBookCloud Junior (www.tbclr.com), ABCmouse.com (www.abcmouse.com), and Bookflix (www.scholastic.com/digital/bookflix.htm). Still others provide a list of online games or apps that parents can purchase and download on their phones. ECRR’s influence is starting to emerge in these digital areas, showing that the initiative can encourage parent engagement using digital resources. One library website, for example, lists a page of app recommendations along with tips for parents on how to engage with their children when using devices. A label on an app might read “this app promotes reading and playing with your child” or “this app promotes writing with your child.”

Digital resources are also reaching families who cannot attend library programming. Librarians told us they upload books they have read

during story time or post finger plays and songs on a YouTube channel. These options expand family engagement, explained one librarian, “because families can pull up our things on YouTube or Pinterest, and they can bring literacy into their home.”

Technology Use in Programming

In our observations, we noted some librarians also incorporating technology use into story time programming, sending a message to parents that technology and interactive media are appropriate tools for early learning. Story time programming offers librarians the opportunity to promote parent–child interaction using digital resources. For example, a librarian might distribute tablets and then encourage families to read e-book stories or use educational apps together. In other story times, we see librarians

using interactive displays; families first view videos related to stories, and then draw, scribble, and write together. We also see parents and children watching videos shown on computers.

While including technology certainly sends messages to parents and children that technology and media have educational value, some technology use seems more likely than others to encourage parent engagement. For example, parents and children seem to engage more while using a tablet app or reading e-books together. Showing videos on computers or interactive displays, however, does not generate much conversation between librarians and children or between parents and children.

While librarians are still experimenting with the best ways to implement technology use in story time, some librarians are firm in their belief that parents need to hear more about how their participation in their child’s technology use is crucial to foster early learning. Many librarians stressed that “it doesn’t matter if it’s a physical book or a virtual book or e-book, as long as you are sitting with your child and looking at what’s on the screen, you are promoting early literacy.” Many librarians echo the sentiment that the conversation between parent and child is the most important element in preparing children for school success. “We think technology should be used to enhance what we are doing,” says another, “but the interaction between the children and parents is most important.”

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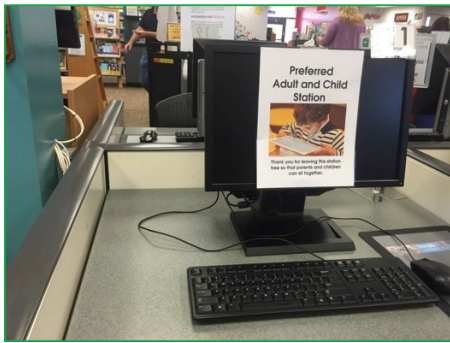


Photo 6. Adult and child computer station (Deer Run Branch, St. Charles City-County Library, Missouri).

Signs are emerging that some librarians are embracing the role of the librarian as a “media mentor,” one who can guide parents and caregivers as they navigate the digital world in ways that support children’s literacy. In a few cases, we observed during programming librarians giving tips to parents on how they could use technology with their children to promote early learning. Although not widespread, these examples do show that parent engagement can foster meaningful use of technology in ways that benefit children.

Parent-only programs seem to be a successful way to encourage parents to interact with their children using technology. In one Southwestern library, for example, a librarian urged parents to take advantage of library website resources to promote conversation with their children:

Download up to three songs per week from the library so you have them in your toolkit when you go places. When you sing with your child, slow down the words as you sing. There are

many words in songs we don’t use every day. What did the itsy spider go up? A water spout! How many times do we use the word “water spout?”

At a later point in the program, she said,

Download audiobooks from our website and listen to them when you are driving around with the children in the car. But remember, it’s really about the interaction. Be aware and engage with your child when using digital media.

These tips were incorporated into a program that included tips on how to incorporate the Five Practices in many routine family activities, not just technology use. Another program we observed, however, focused solely on educational ways to incorporate technology into everyday activities. The program, held at a local elementary school, was attended by more than thirty parents who listened to librarians offer advice and suggestions on ways to interact with their children using digital technology. A few examples show the types of messages librarians offer to parents:

- Technology and school readiness:
 - » “If you select the right apps and experience co-viewing, you will be helping your child get ready for school.”
 - » “When a child is learning about writing, she learns that the symbols she makes on paper or on a screen have a connection to the words that are in the story.

- Technology and suggestions for home:
 - » “If your child is using a tablet or smartphone, do it with them.”
 - » “We want to use apps that are open-ended, that allow them to use their creativity and learn something.”
- Technology and app choice:
 - » “There are a few simple apps that promote talking, such as Touch the Sound.”
 - » “Play 1-2-3 . . . helps children explore shapes, colors and numbers.”
 - » “One of the best book series for children when they are learning to read is Bob Books. The app will help children to become pre-readers.”

As our evaluation indicates, technology use by children and parents is mushrooming in libraries throughout the country. At nearly every library, computers, tablets, videogames, e-books, and other interactive media are drawing families to come and play. Once they are home, parents can continue to interact with their children using the many resources available on library websites. Story times and parent-only programs also offer opportunities for librarians to drive home an important message: technology and interactive media can be effective tools to support young children’s early learning.

Although libraries provide technology, and families certainly use it, library programming mostly seems

08—“WHERE THERE’S A LAP, THERE’S AN APP”

to shy away from families’ growing technology use. Librarians mentioning or incorporating technology use during story times was a relatively rare occurrence. In addition, we only saw a few instances of librarians willing to speak directly to parents about how to interact with their children using technology.

Technology is ubiquitous. In every library we visited, we saw parents and children using smartphones, computers, and tablets, either on their own or together as a family. Although librarians are only slowly adapting story time and other programming to promote family engagement using technology,

we think this represents a great potential for libraries to emerge as leaders in this trend. We think the words of one librarian best describes it: “Where’s there a lap, there’s an app. . . . If they are sitting in a lap, if the parent is talking and using technology with them, young children will learn even more.”

09

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

09—SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our three-year evaluation was designed to examine how the Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) initiative influences parent engagement practices in public libraries. Our analysis indicated a wide dissemination of practices associated with the initiative. Librarians seemed to embrace a more expansive view of early literacy, focusing on the Five Practices (talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing) in workshops, activities, and programs. Story time activities engaged parents more deliberately in the activities with their child, with nondidactic “asides” or tips for parents interspersed throughout the programs. Spaces in libraries were often reconfigured to encourage parent–child engagement with technology, play, and book reading, using the public place of the library to gather with friends and acquaintances. These common foundational features seemed to thread throughout the ECRR initiative, with each library system conveying information to parents in ways that best met their constituent communities.

After three years, we have come to realize that the setting might change in libraries, but the picture looks remarkably similar. In neighborhoods throughout the country, families of all types—immigrants in San Francisco, Native Americans in New Mexico, urbanites in Chicago, refugees in Salt Lake City, suburbanites in Missouri—are drawn to their community library. Once there, parents and children connect through informal play sessions or through scheduled story times, music, or exercise classes. Concerts, parties,

and other community events celebrate the cultures of local families. Although the Five Practices might appear differently in different places, there is no mistaking that they are well known to many families.

As we concluded our three years of visits, observations, and field notes, we reflected on the many changes that the push for parent engagement has spawned in libraries. In particular, we noted the following:

- Libraries are strategically re-designing décor and layout to promote family engagement. By incorporating décor reflecting local customs and culture, refurbishing play areas, and providing comfortable furnishings, families feel welcome to hang out, play, and read together.
- Librarians’ roles are shifting from a focus on children and reading to a focus on children and their parents. They see themselves as educators, both of children and their parents. In addition, many librarians function almost as community or social workers, drawing in families who might not otherwise visit.
- Librarian programming is changing, offering family-friendly options that invite all parents and children to participate. An emphasis on play, as well as programming rich in STEM/STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math) content, offers families opportunities to interact, thus helping to build children’s vocabulary skills. In many libraries, programs are effectively drawing large numbers of

families, many of them regulars who attend each week.

- In areas of need, libraries are playing a particularly vital role as resource brokers, helping to connect parents with services and resources and providing them the support they need to effectively raise their children. By offering information about medical, government, and other services as well as a space for parents and children to work on literacy skills, libraries are helping to alleviate some of the direct effects that poverty brings to so many families.
- Libraries provide the space and resources for families to interact using digital resources, such as computers, tablets, e-readers, and video games. To a lesser extent, librarians model or offer tips and suggestions to parents on how to use digital resources in ways that support children’s literacy development.
- Because of these many changes, libraries are emerging as community centers that promote family engagement, thus serving an important mission of fostering school readiness for children in many communities.

The changes do not come without challenges. Not all facets of parent engagement are evident in all libraries:

- Even with redesigned spaces and inviting atmospheres, libraries in low-income areas still struggle to attract parents to programming and other events, largely because of work schedules and transportation issues.

09—SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Other families are not familiar with library services or do not see the need to bring children who cannot read to the library. In these cases, the library is missing out on attracting the very families who could benefit the most from their services.

- Not all librarians are comfortable with—or perhaps willing to—address parents during programming. While modeling the Five Practices is relatively common, few librarians have mastered how to incorporate “asides” into family programming. Those who do incorporate “asides” seem to draw large numbers of families to their programs, indicating that parents are responsive to the messages and realize their importance.
- The reluctance to address parents, as well as children, is often rooted in librarians’ lack of training in early childhood education or child development. Without this training, librarians lack confidence in their role as educators and thus are less effective in promoting parent engagement.
- The amount of outreach libraries conduct varies greatly, and libraries with less outreach limit their effectiveness as resource brokers in their communities. Libraries with large outreach staffs conduct many hours of programming and provide plentiful resources to community centers, programs for teen parents, and Head Start facilities. Most libraries, however, only have limited resources devoted to outreach.

- Libraries are “digital havens” for many families, providing computers, tablets, videogames, and other interactive media for children and parents to use together. Although some librarians model technology use during story times, and a few librarians have directly addressed parents about meaningful ways to use technology with their children, most libraries do not incorporate technology in their parent engagement programming. Certainly, libraries promote that families interact in “unplugged” ways through toys and books, but digital resources offer a vast amount of knowledge, and both parents and their young children use technology frequently. Many libraries are missing the opportunity to promote technology use in ways that would help children learn early literacy skills.

As with any initiative, ECRR will continue to evolve. Libraries are responsive organizations, often among the first in their communities to identify the critical needs and interests of their patrons. Given the importance of parent engagement in children’s development of early literacy, we make the following recommendations to further strengthen and develop the ECRR program.

Recommendations

Go Deeper

ECRR-2 (the revision of ECRR) attempted to create a more parent-friendly version of early literacy development by focusing on the Five Practices: talking, singing,

reading, writing, and playing. As our evaluation indicated, the Practices have been widely disseminated across libraries through singing (about the Five Practices), brochures, and signs. At the same time, they are intended to represent more complex skills, such as phonological awareness, decoding, comprehension, and vocabulary development, that are essential for early literacy development and success. Although we recognize that messages to parents should remain easy for parents to grasp, delving deeper into these skills is still possible. For example, helping parents to become more responsive to children’s queries and comments is strongly associated with increases in children’s vocabulary. Librarians and staff should therefore consider ways to add greater content and practice opportunities to enhance parents’ efforts to promote quality literacy practices.

More Training

Librarians’ practices vary greatly. Many librarians remain uncomfortable with engaging families in literacy practices, preferring the more traditional role of the children’s librarian. In some cases, parents remain on the periphery during story time activities with little to do other than mimic the children’s librarian. Although involving parents more deliberately is surely a positive step in engaging them in literacy activities, whether they are merely participating or actually learning new skills that they can convey at home remains in doubt. Librarians would benefit from additional training in early literacy development, including the recommendation of some

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simple, effective routines parents can use at home.

In addition, although we found that “asides”—the parenting tips that librarians conveyed during storybook reading—were useful, this approach to parental involvement has natural limitations. On the positive side, they are nondidactic (suggestions and helpful tips) that parents can do in the course of other activities. On the other hand, “asides” often act like “teachable moments,” which have been shown to have limited impact on practices. Because they are given during other activities, “teachable moments” and “asides” may easily be forgotten. They do not provide sufficient information, practice, or review, which is required for attaining a new skill.

Instead, the ECRR initiative should consider developing parent-friendly workshops that provide topic-centric information to parents. These workshops need not be devoted specifically to skill development, but rather to some of the foundational skills in rich content areas like science or learning about one’s environment. Literacy skills can be integrated in other content areas that might attract family engagement and indirectly promote early literacy learning.

Greater Coherence

Although the Common Core Standards are on the wane, they provided some important innovations in early literacy that could enhance the ECRR framework. First, the Standards highlighted the importance of attaining knowledge through text, often through narrative nonfiction

and informational books. Second, the Standards focused on close reading and deeper comprehension of stories. And third, they emphasized intertextuality—developing knowledge of text genre by comparing story types. While Common Core has been targeted to grade-level students, it may provide some important sources of guidance to enhancement of the ECRR initiative.

For example, librarians might consider a greater coherence in their story hours. This might mean focusing on a topic (e.g., nature) and integrating both narrative and information books within the session. Librarians might engage children in dialogic questioning, providing models to parents on how to actively engage their young learners in read-alouds. Such activities could provide a more intentional focus on helping children learn through text without taking away the fun and pure joy of reading aloud.

Greater Attention to Writing

In our observations, we found that story times were filled with singing, reading, and playing, with many opportunities for parents and children to engage in these activities together. However, we rarely, if ever, found any attention to writing, even though this represents an important early literacy skill. In most cases, we found that after a storybook reading session, children and parents would spend time on arts and crafts, cutting and pasting and making things that they might take home.

Writing activities have the potential to more thoroughly engage parents

and children in joint activity. Developmental writing often involves more conversation than when children are engaged in art activities, where the physical activity takes over as children (and their parents) work with the materials. Nevertheless, more simple activities such as asking children to “drite” (draw and write) their favorite part of the story might be a greater source of learning about writing as a communicative act than some of these arts and crafts-related tasks. In addition, showing parents how writing emerges from drawing and writing symbols is an important developmental activity. Furthermore, writing can promote comprehension and retention of story elements.

The Goldilocks Principle

Parents can always benefit from information about child development and school readiness. But in many cases, the parents who regularly participated in many of the events we witnessed were already highly familiar with the developmental information and the strategies to promote children’s early literacy development. In fact, in many cases, librarians “preached to the choir,” engaging parents who were already knowledgeable while those who were less comfortable in promoting these skills stayed away. For those parents who attended, the information may have been too elementary; for those who were reluctant to attend, it might have been too much. Thus a future extension of the ECRR initiative might want to account for differences in parents’ background knowledge and the information that might be most interesting and relevant to them.

09—SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For example, in one of our libraries, sending text messages to families was very effective when the messages focused on community-based activities that one could attend with their children. It was less effective when the messages focused on skill-based learning activities that one could do in the home. Most likely, no single strategy will work across all libraries. Rather, each library system will have to experiment with several ideas to determine what is “just right” for their community.

Continuing Effort to Reach Families in Need

The ECRR initiative was designed to promote parent engagement in early literacy activities, especially among families who need more support for their children. Studies suggest that children who start behind in school often stay behind, despite the valiant efforts of their teachers.¹

Knowing that parents are children’s first literacy teachers, librarians must continue to draw these families into the library community. Given the status of the library in the community, and the trust that librarians have established among their patrons, it is imperative to reach out to the nontraditional library users to further engage them in early literacy activities. Many families in highly distressed communities want to help their children succeed in school. However, although we can speculate that it may be due to cultural differences of immigrant distrust of government or lack of leisure time, nontraditional library users are often the least likely to attend story time activities and other special programs. We must continue to address this paradox if we are to be successful in engaging families and closing the considerable achievement gap early on.

The ECRR initiative has successfully promoted early literacy activities in the public library for families and children. It is a bold initiative designed to build on relationships with families to improve children’s school success through highly motivating activities that include a more expansive view of literacy development for young children. We are confident that ECRR will continue to evolve and expand on these initial successes, enhancing children’s opportunities in early literacy at home, school, and throughout the community.

CITATION

1. Cunningham, A.E., & Stanovich, K. (1997). Early reading acquisition and its relation to reading experience and ability 10 years later. *Developmental Psychology*, 33, 934-945.

10

**APPENDIX A:
SAMPLE OF
LIBRARIES VISITED**

10—APPENDIX A: SAMPLE OF LIBRARIES VISITED

ECRR AND CORRELATED NON-ECRR RESEARCH SITES

ECRR Libraries	Non-ECRR Libraries
Salt Lake City Public Library System	American Fork (UT) Public Library System
St. Charles County (MO) Public Library System	Barton County Public Library System, Lamar, Missouri
Farmington (NM) Public Library System	Aztec (NM) Public Library System
San Antonio Public Library System	Weslaco (TX) Public Library
Carroll County Public Library System, Westminster, Maryland	Buchanan County Public Library System, Grundy, Virginia
Chicago Public Library System	Cicero (IL) Public Library System
Pierce County (WA) Public Library System	Seattle Public Library System
New Orleans Public Library System	Rapides Parish Public Library System, Alexandria, Louisiana
San Francisco Public Library System	Tehama County Public Library System, Red Bluff, California
Cuyahoga County (OH) Public Library System	Wagnalls Memorial Library, Lithopolis, Ohio

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESEARCH SITES

Note: Demographic data was obtained from the American FactFinder website (factfinder.census.gov), which contains data from the 2010 U.S. Census and the 2014 American Community Survey. For each library branch, we collected demographic data for the zip code in which the branch was located.

Non-ECRR Libraries				
Library Visited	Site Type	Population	Race/Ethnicity	Poverty
American Fork (UT) PL System	Suburban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 44,669 • 43% under 19 • 9% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0% African American • 94% White • 5% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 1% Asian • 1% American Indian • 5% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10% below poverty • 11% children below poverty
Mary K. Finley Branch, Barton County PL System, Lamar, Missouri	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8,574 • 28% under 19 • 7% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0% African American • 94% White • 2% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 2% Asian • 0% American Indian • 3% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24% below poverty • 38% children below poverty
Aztec (NM) PL System	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17,480 • 26% under 19 • 6% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0% African American • 84% White • 18% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 0% Asian • 7% American Indian • 9% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14% below poverty • 19% children below poverty

10—APPENDIX A: SAMPLE OF LIBRARIES VISITED

Library Visited	Site Type	Population	Race/Ethnicity	Poverty
Mayor Joe V. Sanchez PL, Weslaco, Texas	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 65,875 • 35% under 19 • 9% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0% African American • 90% White • 89% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 1% Asian • 0% American Indian • 9% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 33% below poverty • 43% children below poverty
Buchanan County PL System, Grundy, Virginia	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7,621 • 20% under 19. • 3% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2% African American • 96% White • 1% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 1% Asian • 0% American Indian • 0%Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19% below poverty • 33% children below poverty
Cicero (IL) PL System	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 84,481 • 36% under 19 • 10% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4% African American • 43% White • 87% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 0% Asian • 1% American Indian • 50% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 22% below poverty • 30% children below poverty
Central Branch, Seattle PL System	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13,177 • 9% under 19 • 3% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16% African American • 48% White • 7% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 26% Asian • 2% American Indian • 9% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 33% below poverty • 63% children below poverty
Westside Regional Branch, Rapides Parish PL System, Alexandria, Louisiana	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21,258 • 26% under 19 • 8% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 31% African American • 63% White • 2% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 3% Asian • 0% American Indian • 3% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17% below poverty • 31% children below poverty
Red Bluff Branch, Tehama County PL System, Red Bluff, California	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27,650 • 26% under 19 • 7% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0% African American • 88% White • 18% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 2% Asian • 2% American Indian • 8% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19% below poverty • 26% children below poverty
Wagnalls Memorial Library, Lithopolis, Ohio	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 39,818 • 31% under 19 • 7% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21% African American • 72% White • 2% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 2% Asian • 0% American Indian • 2%Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10% below poverty • 17% children below poverty

10—APPENDIX A: SAMPLE OF LIBRARIES VISITED

ECRR Libraries				
Library Visited	Site Type	Population	Race/Ethnicity	Poverty
Hunter Branch, Salt Lake City PL System, West Valley City, Utah	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 49,282 • 34% under 19 • 9% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1% African American • 75% White • 36% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 5% Asian • 1% American Indian • 18% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19% below poverty • 29% children below poverty
Deer Run Branch, St. Charles County PL System, O’Fallon, Missouri	Suburban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 31,791 • 30% under 19 • 7% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14% African American • 79% White • 3% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 3% Asian • 0% American Indian • 5% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7% below poverty • 9% children below poverty
Farmington (NM) PL System	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 46,249 • 32% under 19 • 8% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1% African American • 60% White • 25% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 0% Asian • 27% American Indian • 12% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21% below poverty • 29% children below poverty
Central Branch, San Antonio PL System	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15,398 • 30% under 19 • 7% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 22% African American • 54% White • 66% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 0% Asian • 0% American Indian • 23% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 42% below poverty • 60% children below poverty
Westminster Branch, Carroll County PL System, Westminster, Maryland	Suburban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 37,094 • 25% under 19 • 5% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4% African American • 92% White • 4% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 2% Asian • 0% American Indian • 2% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9% below poverty • 13% children below poverty
Roosevelt Branch, Chicago PL System	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25,927 • 18% under 19 • 6% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15% African American • 61% White • 9% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 19% Asian • 0% American Indian • 5% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23% below poverty • 27% children below poverty
Key Center Branch, Pierce County PL System, Lakebay, Washington	Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4,415 • 28% under 19 • 8% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1% African American • 94% White • 1% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 0% Asian • 1% American Indian • 3% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12% below poverty • 4% children below poverty

10—APPENDIX A: SAMPLE OF LIBRARIES VISITED

Library Visited	Site Type	Population	Race/Ethnicity	Poverty
Algiers Regional Branch, New Orleans PL System	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 29,662 • 25% under 19 • 6% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60% African American • 33% White • 5% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 4% Asian • 0% American Indian • 3% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14% below poverty • 20% children below poverty
Mission Branch, San Francisco PL System	Urban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 71,422 • 15% under 19 • 5% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4% African American • 61% White • 37% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 13% Asian • 1% American Indian • 21% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14% below poverty • 14% children below poverty
Warrensville Heights Branch, Cuyahoga County (OH) PL System	Suburban	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 29,269 • 26% under 19 • 5% under 5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 94% African American • 4% White • 1% Hispanic/Latino(a) • 0% Asian • 0% American Indian • 2% Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24% below poverty • 38% children below poverty

**APPENDIX B:
EVALUATION
INSTRUMENTS**

11—APPENDIX B: EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

IMLS General Library Observation Checklist

Library System: _____

Branch name: _____

Date and Time: _____

Location: _____

Researcher: _____

General Library Stats

On average, how many people:

- Visit the library each day? _____
- Come to each children's program? _____
- Check out materials (per month)? _____
- Check out children's materials (per month)? _____

Community this Library Serves (Stats by Catchment Area)

Population

Total: _____

Under 18: _____

Under 5: _____

Race/Ethnicity

_____ % African American

_____ % White

_____ % Hispanic/Latino

_____ % Asian

_____ % Native American

_____ % Other

SES

_____ % living below poverty line

_____ % children living below poverty line

Comments: _____

General Library Observations

1. Does the library have a play area for babies and toddlers? What does it look like?

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

2. Are toys and play objects (blocks, games, puzzles, etc.) available (at eye level) for children to play with at any time?

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

11—APPENDIX B: EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

3. Are there computers available for children to use? (Note # of preschool-level computers vs. child computers)

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

4. Are there semi-fixed structures with educational manipulatives (e.g. phonics or storybuilding activities mounted on a wall)?

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

5. Are there signs/posters that refer to ECRR or something similar? (Can be ECRR 1 or 2)

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

6. Is there comfortable seating for parents and children to read together?

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

7. Are there kiosks, signs, book racks, or activity stations to inform parents about what to do with their children to build early literacy?

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

8. Does the décor/architecture of the library reflect the community's diversity? How so? Provide examples.

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

11—APPENDIX B: EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

9. Are there book sections and/or visible signage in non-English languages?

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

10. Do different types of people seem to be interacting at the library? (ages, races, languages, SES, parents/caregivers etc.)

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

Personnel Observations

11. Does the library staff seem to reflect the community's diversity (in terms of race, language, SES, etc.)?

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

12. Are any librarians bilingual? Do they interact with patrons in other languages?

No Somewhat Yes

Comments: _____

11—APPENDIX B: EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

IMLS Story Time Checklist

Program Theme (if any): _____ Presenter: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____ Location: _____ Researcher: _____

Targeted age(s): _____ Attendance (children): _____ Attendance (adults): _____

Approx. # all attending by Race/Ethnicity, Age, Gender:

No	Somewhat	Yes	A. Adult Participation (check all that apply)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter encourages participation of parents and caregivers.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter encourages interactions between parent or caregiver and children.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter acknowledges the important role parents and caregivers play in early literacy development.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter calls attention to handouts and/or displays for parents/caregivers.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter encourages communication between him/herself and parents and caregivers before and after the program.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter found ways to communicate early literacy information to parents and caregivers not in attendance.

No	Somewhat	Yes	B. Print Motivation (check all that apply)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter conveys the idea that reading is enjoyable.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter seems to have fun.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter reads books in an engaging manner.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Children are engaged; enjoy the story time.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adults in attendance seem engaged; enjoy the story time.

Comments: _____

C. Early Literacy Asides and/or Tips: Write down any asides—Take notes on *any* parent directed comments.

11—APPENDIX B: EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

No	Somewhat	Yes	D. ECRR Practices during Story Time (check all that apply)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter has a coherent, content-related theme.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter invites children/adults to chime in saying rhymes/fingerplays/poems.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter uses music/songs/songbooks.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter offers opportunities for small motor development, such as fingerplays (precursor to writing).
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter offers opportunities for large motor development to develop spatial relationships (precursor to writing).
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter demonstrates writing and/or encourages children/families to write.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter talks about the books and engages in conversations around books.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter provides activities to support learning through play.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter makes connections to concepts and vocabulary when reading.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter specifically explains word(s) or word nuances that children may not be familiar with.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter models talking with children, leaving time for child to respond.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter talks about the events of the story/theme: encourages children's comments.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter allows children to participate in retelling of story; may use puppets, props, creative dramatics, and/or flannel board.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter uses at least one informational book but may not read the whole book (ages 2 and up).
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter offers opportunity for booksharing between parent/caregiver and child.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter offers suggestions for ways adults can support children's play to develop early literacy.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Presenter uses visual technology (Smart Board, TV, DVD, etc.) to engage parents and children in story time.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Parents and children have the opportunity to use technology together (tablets, Smart Board, etc.) during story time.

11—APPENDIX B: EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Caregiver Survey

Library Branch Name: _____

- Why do you come to the library? (check all that apply)
 - For children's programs
 - For adult programs
 - To use the computers/Internet
 - To check out books
 - To browse/read books in the building
 - To socialize or have my child(ren) socialize
 - To check out DVDs or music
 - To get information from librarians
 - Other: _____
- How often do you bring your child(ren) to the library (check one)?
 - This is our first time
 - 1–2 times a year
 - 1–2 times a month
 - Every week
- What do you think your child gets out of story time (check all that apply)?
 - Gets ready for school
 - Has fun
 - Socializes with other children
 - Other: _____
- How long does it take you to get to this library?
 - 10 minutes or less
 - 11–30 minutes
 - 31–60 minutes
 - Over an hour
- How many CHILDREN'S books do you have at home (that you own)?
 - Fewer than 5
 - 6–20
 - 21–40
 - 40+
- What kinds of books do you MOST OFTEN read to your child? (check one)
 - Books s/he is required to read for school
 - Books that we read for fun
 - Books I think s/he should read, to learn more
 - I don't read books to my child
- What are the main barriers to reading with your child (check all that apply)?
 - We are too busy with other activities
 - I don't feel comfortable reading to my child
 - My child doesn't like reading
 - We don't have easy access to books
 - Other: _____

How much do you AGREE with each of the following statements? (For each statement, please put an "X" by one answer.)

11—APPENDIX B: EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. Library programs help my child get more ready for school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. During library programs, I learn new things to do with my child.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Library programs help my child develop socially.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. My child enjoys library programs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Since attending library programs, I spend more time reading with my child at home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. I enjoy reading stories to my child.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. My child likes reading and having stories read to him/her.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Since attending library programs, I spend more time singing with my child at home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Reading to my child helps him/her use his/her imagination.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Since attending library programs, I spend more time talking with my child at home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Reading to my child helps us to connect emotionally.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Reading to my child helps him/her to do well in school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Reading to my child is entertaining to him/her.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Since attending library programs, I spend more time playing with my child at home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Library programs help my child get ready to read.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Since attending library programs, I spend more time writing with my child at home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

LAST WEEK, HOW MANY TIMES did you do each of the following activities with your child? It is OK if you did not do these things at all last week. Each week is different. Please answer as accurately as you can. (For each activity, please put an “X” by one answer.)

	Not at all	1–2 times	3–4 times	4 + times
24. Told your child a story	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. Sang a song with your child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. Read to your child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27. Looked at pictures in a book with your child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. Gave a book to your child to look at by himself/herself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29. Showed or helped your child write his/her name or other words	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
30. Showed your child the different parts of a book (e.g., cover, title, author, and pages)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
31. Pointed out letters or words on signs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

11—APPENDIX B: EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Not at all	1–2 times	3–4 times	4 + times
32. Said & explained a new word to your child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
33. Said a nursery rhyme to your child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
34. Took your child to the library	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
35. Checked out children’s books at the library	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
36. Played games or did puzzles with your child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
37. Attended a children’s library program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
38. Attended an adult library program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Background Information

39. What is your gender?

- Male Female

40. What is your age?

- 18–30 31–45 46–60 61+

41. What is your race/ethnicity? (check all that apply)

- Caucasian/White Native American
 African American/Black Other _____
 Hispanic/Latino Prefer not to answer
 Asian/Pacific Islander

42. What is the highest level of school you have completed?

- Some high school Bachelor’s degree
 High school diploma/GED Graduate degree
 Associates degree/technical or vocational training

43. What is the primary language spoken in your home? _____

44. How many children (under 18) do you have? _____