
***Library preschool storytimes:
Developing early literacy skills in
children***

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Public libraries have traditionally offered early literacy programming to preschool children in the form of storytimes. Through the use of a wide range of high-quality picture books, songs, poetry, fingerplays, puppets and crafts, public libraries have been making literacy fun! They have created inviting spaces for children to enjoy literacy-rich, hands-on experiences in an interactive and caring environment. Many public libraries have also provided tips for parents and caregivers on how to select and use age appropriate materials for their children.

By capturing a child's interest and imagination early, librarians intuitively believe that they help children discover that libraries and literacy can be an enjoyable and valued part of their lives. Librarians believe that young children who become regular library users will benefit from the meaningful early literacy experiences available through storytimes. They also believe that this will allow children to develop the early literacy, communication and social skills needed to be ready to learn by the time they enter school.

Do public library storytimes prepare children to be ready to learn when they enter school? Is there scientific research to support these intuitive beliefs or are librarians simply providing a frazzled mother a coffee and a much needed break on a Tuesday morning when they entertain her child? Are public libraries really setting the stage for future successes in learning?

DEFINITIONS

To better understand the role of public libraries in the literacy development of a child, it is necessary to define the terms early literacy, emergent literacy and school readiness.

Early literacy refers to what children know about reading and writing before they actually learn to read and write. It is not the teaching of reading but instead involves the building of a foundation for reading so when children are taught to read, they will be ready (Ghoting, 2006).

Emergent literacy refers to the early literacy concepts, skills, and positive attitudes that form the foundation for subsequent reading and writing achievement" (Henry, 2004). It is the understanding that print letters have sounds that can create words, and that these words can be read from left to right to tell a story. It involves children playing and being creative by telling, writing or acting out their own stories. These, and other early literacy skills, help to build a solid foundation for literacy learning.

School readiness refers to a combination of the different skills that lead to school success. These include positive early literacy experiences, physical and mental health, social skills, playing well with others, as well as basic cognitive skills, curiosity and enthusiasm about learning (Daimant-Cohen, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although educators often vary on their expectations of children entering school, there was general agreement in the literature of six pre-reading skills that children must have before they can learn to read. These act as the building blocks for future success in reading (Utah, [n.d.], Shirley-Kirkland, 2002, Arnold, 2003, Ghoting, 2006). These skills include:

- Print motivation – thinking that books and reading are fun
- Vocabulary – knowing the names of things
- Print awareness – recognizing print and understanding how books work
- Letter knowledge – understanding that each letter has its own name and sounds
- Narrative skills – being able to tell stories and describe things
- Phonological awareness – being able to recognize and play with the smaller sounds that make up words.

A review of the literature shows that there is evidence to support that meaningful literacy activities, such as reading, singing and playing with children, can impact a child’s brain development and subsequently help provide them with the pre-reading skills they need to start school. These literacy activities are found in public library storytimes and provide evidence to support the intuitive beliefs held by librarians that preschool storytimes can and do make a difference!

Meaningful literacy activities can impact a child’s brain development.

Children begin to learn early literacy skills at birth through everyday interactions such as sharing books, telling stories, singing songs, talking to one another, or pointing out and naming objects (Bohrer, 2005, Ghoting, 2006, Daimant-Cohen, 2007). These activities help expand their vocabularies, broaden and enrich their experiences and stimulate brain development.

Engaging children in what is being read further promotes their critical and imaginative thinking. It also improves their intellectual and emotional development, and helps them acquire the pre-reading skills needed for reading success in school (Fiore, 2001, McGill, 2003).

In her 2003 American Libraries article *Public libraries and early literacy: raising a reader*, Renea Arnold, program manager for Early Childhood Resources at the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon states that

“The most significant research to impact library programming is the clear evidence that phonological sensitivity and letter knowledge skills are highly predictive of later reading success. Although children need direct instruction to gain these skills, the skills are not reached through drills, but by engaging them in fun, interactive, age-appropriate activities.

Literacy development can be greatly enhanced by simple interactions. Repeated reading of rhymes, poems, or stories with rhyming words help children notice sound patterns. Clapping out syllables in their names or characters in a book helps children begin to separate sounds in words. Other fun games include searching for things on a page that begin with the “n” sound or singing songs like “Willoughby Wolloughby Woo” to heighten awareness of speech sounds...Libraries are well suited to provide this amount of instruction as part of existing programming” (Arnold, 2003).

Parents and caregivers have the most influence on a child's educational development.

The literature also emphasized that parents and caregivers, are a child's first teachers, and are, therefore, the most influential factors in a child's educational development. A child's home environment and in particular the extent to which they acquire literacy skills and habits from the adults raising them, are the key to early childhood literacy (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, Ghoting, 2006).

However not all children grow up in a literacy rich environment or have parents who read to them. Some parents or caregivers do not have the literacy skills themselves or the financial resources to purchase books or provide children with literacy based activities. Due to cultural traditions, some parents place different values on education and on the importance of their role as their child's first teacher. As a result, some parents and caregivers are unable to provide their children with the literacy rich environments and experiences at home to support their child's emerging literacy skills (Bohrer, 2005).

Approximately one-third of North American children who enter kindergarten are not school-ready, and lack some of the skills needed for a successful learning experience. (Russ et al. 2007, Doherty, 2007). Ethnic children, and those from poorer families, are most at risk of entering school with less prior knowledge in literacy prerequisites. They are the children who are less likely to have children's books in their homes and are less likely to be read to frequently. Research has also shown that there is a 90% probability that a child will remain a poor reader at the end of the fourth grade if the child is a poor reader at the end of the first grade. Therefore, children who start school behind typically stay behind (Celano, 2001, Meyers, 2002, Rosenthal, 2004).

Public libraries are well suited to address the literacy needs of the entire family, from birth to grave. Public libraries can also act as economic equalizers in the community, offering free books and services to all ages, and providing literacy-rich opportunities to children who might otherwise miss out (Teale, 1999, Fiore, 2001, McGill, 2003, Bohrer, 2005, Martinez, 2007).

Public libraries have the greatest impact on literacy behaviours when they promote early literacy and model behaviours for parents and caregivers.

Research shows that public libraries have a unique opportunity to promote school readiness through parental involvement by training the trainer. Libraries can help parents learn how to help their children develop literacy skills by providing training, information and support.

Elaine Meyer, Head, Children's and Teen Services, Phoenix Public Library, argued in her review of the Public Library Association's early literacy initiative, that librarians need to work with parents and caregivers to instil behaviours and practices that will allow them to enhance learning and literacy at home on a daily basis (Meyer, 2002).

Saroj Ghoting, program consultant with Every Child Ready to Read @ your library, reiterated this belief. She stated that library programs for young children have neither the duration nor consistency of contact to have a permanent influence on their early literacy development. She argued that the library's important role is to promote early literacy, to explain it and to model behaviours for the parents and caregivers who are with the children every day (Ghoting, 2006).

There are best practices for conducting early literacy programming.

Best practices for early literacy programming in libraries have been established based on current education and library research. Research has shown that when best practices are followed, literacy behaviours are increased.

In 2000, the American Library Association and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) of the National Institutes of Health, developed a partnership which led to the creation of the public library program Every Child Ready to Read @ your library.

The program consists of several workshops to inform parents of the research behind early literacy, and to teach parents how to help their children become readers. Children's librarians attend workshops to learn more about early literacy research, and how to conduct three age-specific classes for parents and caregivers of babies, toddlers, and preschoolers. They then provide parents and caregivers with enhanced, value added storytimes which include the latest research on reading development in easy-to-understand terms and incorporated practical, hands-on activities, using standardized scripts. Instead of just reading a story, or singing a song, the library staff explains to the parent the importance of reading and singing to children – how it allows them to learn new words, hear rhymes, clap syllables – all important for later reading success.

Results from a 2003 evaluation of the program by Sara Laughlin Associates, show that parents – of every age, educational background, income level, and ethnicity – who participated in the public library early literacy programs significantly increased their literacy behaviours. Increased literacy behaviours included sharing books, visiting the library, talking to their children and other literacy based activities such as introducing letters and word games to build vocabulary. Teen parents, low-education and low-income parents showed the most significant improvement in literacy behaviours following the program.

This is just one example of a successful family literacy initiative found in public libraries in Canada and the United States. Mother Goose on the Loose is another example of a best practices model based on current early literacy research.

Training staff to provide meaningful literacy experiences based on current research can enhance library programming and increase literacy behaviours.

Public library storytimes tend to include a combination of books and book related activities such as songs, crafts, and puppets. However, a library staff's enthusiasm, educational background and materials available to them all influence the outcome of the program.

There is evidence in the literature that training library staff has a positive impact on literacy behaviours and library programming. In Martinez's 2007 study, *Partnering for reading readiness: a case study of Maryland public librarians*, she found that following the training, librarians were better able to select books and develop storytime programs that would promote the early literacy skills children needed to start school.

As one librarian stated:

"Since the training, I have put more emphasis on stopping and asking questions, having children predict, mentioning the author and illustrator, and just going into more depth than just reading the books"

Outreach is important for libraries to serve the increasing number of children unable to get to the public library.

To reach the growing number of children unable to regularly attend and benefit from library programming, the literature stated that it is necessary for libraries to take their programming into the communities to where the children are. This may include daycares, schools, community organizations or parks.

In Laughlin's 2003 study, *Evaluation: Every Child Ready to Read @ your library*, she found that outreach was crucial to the success of the program. She stated that "both library staff and community partners reported that the training worked best when it was delivered at schools, Head Start centers, teen parent program sites, prisons, hospitals, and other community locations.

Given the low use of the library reported in the intake interviews, it is likely that the libraries would not have reached the target audience any other way” (Laughlin, 2003).

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Research has shown that library storytimes can make a difference! Public libraries do have an important role to play in helping parents prepare their children be ready learn when they enter school. However, in order to provide the best service possible for the preschoolers, it is necessary to consider the recent education and library literature and develop best practices based on these findings.

We know that children begin to acquire pre-reading skills from birth. We know that reading to children, talking to them and introducing them to the wonder of the world around them will help in their literacy development. We also know that storytimes provide opportunities for children to interact with one another, engage in dramatic play, learn new words and concepts, and help to gradually increase their attention spans. These are all important for later school success.

What public librarians need to do is grasp the opportunity to become literacy leaders in their communities by not only creating the best children’s programming that they can based on current literature findings, but also by promoting their services and telling parents that public libraries can help them prepare their child for school!

To create the best programming possible, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. Develop best practices for children’s programming based on early literacy research.
2. Develop partnerships with schools, daycares and other organizations interested in literacy to promote library services.
3. Encourage staff to pursue training in early childhood development and literacy by providing opportunities such as the American Library Association’s Every Child Ready to Read @ your library workshops, or by providing other learning opportunities or funding to staff.
4. Explain to staff the importance of their teaching role, and encourage them to provide storytimes based on current research on brain development.

5. Encourage staff to provide workshops for parents to share ideas about current research on brain development and provide examples of how to help parents develop the literacy skills of their child.
6. Encourage staff to model reading behaviours for parents – how to sit, share books and interact with a child – how to ask questions, how to select books, how to make visits to the library fun for the whole family.
7. Provide plenty of opportunities for families to experience literacy together – family literacy events, family literacy programming, word games, puzzles, age appropriate booklists, tips for literacy at home, song sheets, tutoring programs, summer reading programs (for kids and adults), contests, websites, etc.
8. Go into the community. If public libraries only serve those who come into the library, they are “preaching to the choir”. These families already know the importance of literacy. To really have an impact, public libraries must go into the community to reach the families who do not go to the library.

CONCLUSION

Librarians are in their own way teachers – perhaps not so much in teaching children the mechanics of how to read, but in teaching children how to love to read. By making literacy fun, they set the early literacy foundations needed for reading success. Public libraries have a very important role to play in helping children develop the pre-reading literacy skills they need to be ready for school. By training library staff in best practices for planning and delivering preschool storytimes, public libraries can and will make a difference.

Betsy Diamant-Cohen, Children’s Programming Specialist at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland, states that public libraries “offer positive environments and nurturing settings that prepare preschool children for more structured learning situations” (Diamant-Cohen, 2007). By attending library programs on a regular basis, the child can develop the skills of listening, asking questions, taking turns, following instructions, and other important social skills required by the time they enter school.

Public library storytimes are so much more than just the reading of books. They are the planting of seeds for lifelong learning, the awakening of imagination, and the widening of mind and spirit.

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How libraries can promote the 6 pre-reading skills through preschool storytimes

- ***Print motivation*** – thinking that books and reading are fun
 - make storytimes fun by being creative and enthusiastic
 - vary programs using a variety of activities and story formats
 - invite guests with special interests or skills
 - create interactive storytimes where children can take part

- ***Vocabulary*** – knowing the names of things
 - talk, talk, talk and listen twice as much
 - help children know that they and their opinions are valued
 - ask questions, encourage discussions
 - introduce new words and concepts and encourage children to use them
 - use descriptive language
 - challenge children with both fiction and non-fiction
 - read, read, read

- ***Print awareness*** – recognizing print and understanding how books work
 - use big books and point to words as the story is read to show left to right directionality as well as connections between words and sounds
 - explain the format of a book – cover, title, author, illustrator, dedication page
 - show children and parents how to hold and share a book together
 - provide parents with handouts for rhymes, fingerplays and songs so they can practice at home
 - label everything and then point out words in the library
 - have children write their own stories by dictating sentences while you write them on a white board

- ***Letter knowledge*** – understanding that each letter has its own name and sounds
 - Supply magnetic alphabet letters or games
 - Sing alphabet songs

- Have posters and writing tools so children can visualize letters and begin to make them
- Use alphabet books
- Encourage children to print their own names on nametags

- ***Narrative skills*** – being able to tell stories and describe things
 - Provide puppets, costumes, toys or flannel boards so children can create their own stories or act out stories shared during storytime
 - Encourage children to tell you what they think the story will be about or, ask for a review of what happened in the story.

- ***Phonological awareness*** – being able to recognize and play with the smaller sounds that make up words.
 - Play with words, rhymes, songs, poetry
 - Read books that have rhythm and rhyming words
 - Leave out rhyming words in a story and have children fill in the blanks
 - Clap syllables in words and songs
 - Emphasize particular letters or sounds in stories or activities

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