

# Libraries emerging as leaders in parent engagement

Parents are discovering that libraries offer opportunities to play with their children and learn how to improve their reading.

**By Donna C. Celano and Susan B. Neuman**

The 13 parents and toddlers practicing their cobra positions at the Westminster, Md., library may have signed up for the Yoga and Kiddies program, but Ms. Jen, the instructor, has some news for them: There's more serious business at hand. The bending, stretching, and chanting help with vocabulary development, fine motor skills, and brain development, Ms. Jen tells the group. She should know: Ms. Jen is a trained early literacy specialist. What looks like yoga is actually part of a national initiative helping these parents prepare their children for later success in school.

The role parents play in preparing their young children for school is generating a lot of attention these days. The American Academy of Pediatrics re-

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cently issued a statement recommending that parents read aloud to their infants from birth (Rich, 2014). Legislators at the national and state level are also championing the message of more parent engagement. This confirms what many educators have been saying for years: Parents play a pivotal part in a child's school readiness. Unfortunately, not all parents are prepared to do this. Many parents, particularly those living in low-income communities, face challenges in filling this role. Our research shows that families living in low-income neighborhoods have access to fewer books and computers; low-income children also spend less time reading with a parent or other adult. The result is that low-income preschoolers hear fewer words and gain less knowledge, thus falling behind their affluent peers before they even set foot in kindergarten (Neuman & Celano, 2012).

The good news, applauded by families and educators too, is that help often is around the corner — at the local library. Located in most communities throughout the nation, libraries are an often-overlooked, yet vital local source of expertise and resources dedicated to fostering parent engagement. Through a strong parent education initiative called Every Child Ready to Read, libraries are in the midst of reaching thousands of parents each month, particularly those in high-need families, in the hopes of changing many children's lives. Some 4,000 public libraries nationwide are involved.

### A child's first teacher

The basic principles of Every Child Ready to Read are straightforward: Reading is an important life skill, learning to read starts at birth, and parents play an instrumental role as a child's first and

best teacher. To do this, Every Child Ready to Read encourages parents to interact with their children using the five practices of early literacy: singing, talking, reading, writing, and playing. While seemingly simple, the five practices are rooted in extensive research (Neuman & Roskos, 2007), which strongly indicates that these parent-child interactions greatly enhance a child's preliteracy skills.

In libraries throughout the country, the message of Every Child Ready to Read filters down in a variety of ways, but it usually involves librarians modeling the five practices for parents. The librarian then offers suggestions on how the parent can duplicate the activities at home, such as by singing a song or playing in a new way. Much of the modeling and instructing takes place during story times or other programming attended by parent and child in local branches or in informal interactions between librarian, parent, and child. But it also could take place outside the library in parent-only workshops at Head Start or teen-parent programs, or with entire families at large community events such as concerts.

### The changing library

The Every Child Ready to Read initiative, first developed in 2004 and revised in 2010, represents a sharp turn in the way many libraries approach children's services. The traditional image of story times with children sitting quietly in rows while parents go off on their own has been increasingly replaced by a variety of programs and activities, including music, exercise, and play programs that parents and children attend together. Although book reading — the ultimate goal — is still modeled and encouraged, librarians also stress the importance of playing, singing,

and rhyming in fostering vocabulary development and school readiness. This shift in libraries' focus has evolved over time. While traditionally librarians used story time to foster children's reading readiness using rhyme and repetition, their attention was primarily on teaching the child exclusively. For many decades, parents were not encouraged to attend story hour, as a way for children to develop the independence needed to attend school. Parent engagement programs such as Every Child Ready to Read, however, take a different tack: Librarians can be more influential in a child's life by teaching the parent how to engage with the child in ways that will foster early literacy (Albright, Delicki, & Hinkle, 2009).

The result is that libraries are now often livelier, noisier places, featuring play zones and interactive stations designed to encourage parents to engage with their young children. Children's areas in libraries are filled with activities, toys, and games as well as books. Parents and children can connect through informal block play, a scheduled story time, or a less traditional activity, such as music or exercise class. Programming is often scheduled during evening or weekend hours to accommodate working families. What's more, since many programs include the entire family, parents can attend with children of varying ages. While a large-scale evaluation is pending, librarians initially report that the Every Child Ready to Read initiative is filling a vital need in many communities. In particular, the program is reaching a core group that benefit most: children in high-need communities who are likely to enter school less prepared than their wealthier peers.

We offer these findings based on our recent research to gauge how libraries are supporting parent engagement. Our initial visit to the Westminster, Md., library branch led to a series of phone interviews with librarians in 20 locations throughout the country. In our research, we found Every Child Ready to Read is bringing parents and children together in a wide range of communities serving low-income families, including immigrant families in Chicago and San Francisco, a Navajo reservation in New Mexico, teen-parent programs in San Antonio, and health clinics, homeless shelters, and refugee centers in Salt Lake City. And although the program is not without challenges, for many families, it is a step in the right direction.

### Simple and reaffirming

One reason the program is working, librarians say, is that focusing on the five practices — singing, talking, reading, writing, and playing — is very parent friendly. Instead of learning new concepts, this approach reaffirms that many parents' current inter-

actions with their children are helping the young ones learn. Naomi Smith, a librarian in the Parkland/ Spanaway Library in Tacoma, Wash., says many parents find it reinforcing. "They learn they can still do what they are doing — playing, singing," Smith said, "and they don't have to do something completely different."

This is welcome news for many parents who struggle to keep squirming toddlers interested and who worry that book reading is the only way to help children develop literacy skills. "Much of what parents think about how to get their child ready to read is counterproductive. I do a lot of permission giving," said Jenna Nemece-Loise, of the Roosevelt Branch Library in Chicago. "I let parents know it's OK to sing instead of read or to play instead of sit with a book." Nemece-Loise, who works closely with Mandarin Chinese families, finds that many parents, particularly non-native speakers, lack confidence in preparing their child for school. They want the children to learn English, but the parents themselves struggle with the language. "This limits their interactions with the child," said Nemece-Loise. "I tell them it's OK to speak in your native language."

Amy Koester of the Skokie (Ill.) Public Library, likens the five practices approach to a teacher dealing with children who have different learning styles. She encourages parents to try different ways to engage their children. "I want families to see the connection: It's OK if your child is fidgety and can't sit while you read to him. Reading is only part of it," she said.

### Reading is only part of it

Librarians' most urgent wish is that parents make the connection between activities such as playing and singing and early literacy. "What's most surprising to the parents is the connection between music and reading," said Lisa Woodruff of the North Royalton branch in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. "I tell them rhyme is reading. Some children can sit for story time, but some children are best reached through music. Each time you bounce your baby on your knee, it's a syllable."

Many parents fail to realize the importance of play, the librarians said. Maria Trivisonno of the Warrensville Heights branch in Cuyahoga County, said the real value of Every Child Ready to Read is its emphasis on imaginative play. "This is vital to this community," she said of the library's many low-income families. "Parents here need to see us modeling playing and talking with the child, not at the child."

Like Trivisonno, many librarians struggle to attract low-income and immigrant families to the library for a variety of reasons. Many parents don't

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see the value of bringing a child who can't read to the library. In addition, low-income families are wary of paying fines for overdue materials. Others, particularly illegal immigrants, see the library as a governmental body and fear registering for a library card. In meeting these challenges, many librarians are turning to "stay and play" events or "block parties," which focus on encouraging parents to play with their child, instead of reading books. "I'm noticing the event can't be called a 'story time,' because the parents won't bring children who can't read yet. But if I bill it as 'play time,' they are more likely to come," Trivisonno said. She said the play center, stocked with toys, train set, kitchen set, and blocks is very attractive to parents with young children. "We want to encourage imaginative play because it is a lost art," she said. "We don't want them drilling their kids in the alphabet; we want to teach them to play and talk with their child."

Initially, many parents are hesitant to interact with their children during these sessions. Weatherly of the Parkland/Spanaway Library holds a bilingual "block party" for Spanish-speaking families on Saturday mornings. In initial sessions, she had to remove chairs in the room to encourage parents to sit on the ground and play with their children. She typically models conversation for the parents and then encourages the parents to do the same. "I'll say to a child, 'what are you building?'" Then, "I'll ask 'how can you make your tower stronger?'" "I'll then leave the parent to continue the conversation." After a few mornings of interacting through play, Weatherly hopes to shift the focus. Eventually she'll add in some story reading at the end of the session, where she will model some effective techniques that parents can use when reading to their children.

### Bringing literacy home

Librarians model and encourage parent-child interactions during library visits, but the big goal is for parents to continue the five practices at home. "For kids to read, the environment must be supportive," Nemec-Loise said. "We have to make sure that what teachers and librarians do during the day gets reinforced at home."

An important part of Every Child Ready to Read is giving parents tools to take with them. Lisa Woodruff emphasizes how parents can use daily tasks and routines as important learning times. "Preparing children for success in school does not have to be a struggle," she said. "Parents can make it part of their day, whether it's going to the grocery store or putting a child in the car seat. I tell them, 'Talk to your children about all the things they see. Think

of all the vocabulary your child can learn when you talk to them.”

The benefit of parents engaging at home is not limited to ensuring a child’s school readiness. In Westminster, Md., we met Rasolva, a Spanish-speaking mother of two children, ages 9 and 5. United Hands, an organization serving the needs of Hispanic immigrant families, had encouraged her to attend the library program. 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 were a way for me to get to know my children better. We sat with books, and I would learn more about my children. We would get closer.”

## Libraries lead the way

Rasolva’s story shows how important community libraries are in the lives of many families. Because they are located in nearly every community, libraries hold a unique advantage in fostering parent education. Many libraries, though, realize they need more than just a physical space to attract the neediest families. They also need partners in the way that United Hands helped Rasolva. For example, a partnership with a Bureau of Indian Affairs education program, the Farmington, N.M., library system, which serves a Navajo reservation, has resulted in more than 700 parents attending library programs with their toddlers. The Corporate Parkway Branch in St. Charles, Mo., partners with a school district-sponsored organization, Parents as Teachers, to provide screening, home visits, and enrichment services for high-risk children. In Carroll County, Md., where Rasolva lives, the library is a major player in a countywide initiative called The Judy Center, a collaboration of nonprofit and public agencies aiming to enhance school readiness.

A library’s biggest advantage in a low-income community, however, often comes down to something more fundamental. “Our programming is free,” said Laura Tarango of the Mission Branch in San Francisco. Local families gather often at the branch, particularly on the weekends, when more than 100 families might come to participate in Tarango’s Spanish-only story hour or to interact in the branch’s spacious play area.

Reports from individual library systems around the country indicate that the initiative is making great strides. In San Antonio, for example, more than 2,500 parents attend programs each year in preschools, Head Starts, immigration centers, and high schools or at play-and-learn sessions held in community centers and parks. In a survey of San Francisco parents who attend Every Child Ready

to Read programs, 88% said they read more often with their child, 89% sing and share rhymes more often with their child, and 99% view the library programs as an important school readiness activity. In Carroll County, Md., where the library partners with a strong network of community organizations, the number of preschoolers who scored proficient on school readiness assessments has increased from 60% to 93% in the past eight years.

Still, many barriers remain in libraries’ quest to become a national leader in parent engagement. Librarians find it difficult to balance keeping young children engaged while trying to address adults at the same time. Funding is an ongoing struggle. Many branches lack the resources to renovate and incorporate play areas. Staffing cuts prevent community outreach efforts to many needy parents who might not otherwise visit the library.

Libraries’ greatest challenge, though, is much more complex. Many low-income parents, particularly immigrant parents, do not prioritize school readiness. Having been raised in an immigrant, Spanish-speaking family, San Francisco’s Tarango understands this firsthand. “These parents are coming from a totally different environment,” she said. “They don’t know children have to go to preschool in order to get ready for school.” In addition, low-income families face tremendous pressures. “How do you fit these things in — engaging with children — when both parents are working to make ends meet? These families are really struggling,” she said.

Still, many librarians believe the public’s perception of libraries will change. Libraries, they said, are more than just a place to get a good book. Their goal is for families, educators, and communities alike to see them in a new way. “We want people to see librarians as ‘educational experts,’” Nemeć-Loise said. “We want them to see libraries as ‘educational institutions.’” **K**

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