

Our Youngest Patrons: Early Childhood Literacy at Potomac Library

by Sarah Wright

The youth services staff of Potomac Library in Prince William County, Virginia, does programming for children in our community in order to encourage use of the library as well as develop literacy and a lifelong love of reading in our patrons. We have performers, storytellers, science enrichment programs, crafts, and story hours. One popular story program at Potomac Library is entitled “Book Babies.” This program is designed for parents and caregivers and their children ages six to twenty-four months. Together we learn about books, sing songs, act out finger plays, and play with puppets and toys. The program encourages important early childhood skills that lead to increased literacy in school-aged children.

Researchers of early literacy like those at the International Reading Association and National Association for Young Children recognize that literacy skills begin at birth. Each time parents communicate with their babies, the children experience language, and these experiences in early childhood encourage future reading skills. From birth, infants are able to distinguish all the



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sounds in human languages even though their speech may be limited to gurgling noises. Through communication with parents, their perceptions become limited to the native language they will grow to speak, read, and write. Early, or emergent, literacy is defined as what children know about reading before they actually read.¹ The

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) of the National Institutes of Health has established six early literacy skills that help children develop the necessary skills to read. The NICHD has named these skills as print motivation, phonological awareness, vocabulary, narrative skills, print awareness, and letter knowledge.²

Book Babies began at Potomac Library in response to the increase in promotion of early childhood literacy by the Library of Virginia and professional literature. Additionally, the patrons of Potomac Library were bringing children under the age of two to regularly scheduled toddler and family story times. The former Children's Department supervisor, Kimberly Knight, saw a program at Pasadena Public Library in California in which they passed a variety of board books out to families

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with babies. This program gave the children an opportunity to hold and enjoy board books, but did not involve interaction between families. Each child got a variety of books to play with and read. When developing the Book Babies program at Potomac in 2005, it was decided to use one set of books with multiple copies and encourage interaction among the activity's participants.

The Book Babies program at Potomac Library is a lap-sitting program. A youth services staff member leads a group of ten parents or caregivers and ten children. Each adult is given a bag with five board books, a song list, and an animal puppet. When we read stories together, the adult holds his or her child and reads along with the youth services staff. The materials used for this program, which include books, toys, animal puppets, and musical CDs,

were provided by the Friends of the Potomac Library, and they are not a part of the circulating collection of the library. During the program, we also sing songs together with movement activities, and the children have a free period where they can play with provided toys. This play period allows children to explore interactive toys that encourage cognitive development while parents get time to converse about the lives of their children and shared experiences. The adults benefit from this social time, which can build community relationships for our library and the children that we serve. This free play period also provides a time for youth services staff to distribute fliers and booklists, describe upcoming family programs at the library, and share new concepts we have learned through literacy workshops. The program usually lasts half an hour.

Book Babies seeks to teach parents how to incorporate early literacy skills in play while having fun with reading board books. Phonological awareness, for example, is the ability to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words using activities that play with rhymes, words, sounds, and syllables.³ Phonemes are the smallest units constituting spoken language; English consists of about forty-one phonemes or sounds. Phonemes combine to form syllables and words. Most words consist of a blend of phonemes, such as the word *go*, which has two phonemes.⁴ In this word, two sounds are represented; the sound /g/ is represented by the letter *g*, and the sound /o/ is represented by the letter *o*. When reading to young children, parents can incorporate the recognition of phonemes. For example, parents often ask their babies, "What noise does the lion make?" The child will respond with a roar. This is one way to play with letters and the sounds that they make. Teaching children to manipulate the sounds in language helps them learn to read. We often make animal noises in Book Babies when we play with puppets or sing "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," which employs lots of letters and animal sounds.

Print motivation can be defined as having an interest in and an enjoyment of books. All children in Book Babies sit on their parents' laps, which creates a pleasant experience around reading. They learn that the library is a place where they can have time with books and fun with our staff. Young children respond to changes in the tone of voice and the rhythm of language when they are read to by adults.⁵ In Book Babies, children are engaged when parents ask questions and talk about the pictures in board books. Our Book Babies storytime is meaningful in the development of print motivation because children bond with their parents or

caregivers in a comfortable environment.

Board books are exceptional for increasing the skills of vocabulary (knowing the names of things) and narrative skills (the ability to describe things and tell stories). The books used in our program all make use of an assortment of words and have brightly colored pictures. For example, when reading the book *Toes, Ears, & Nose!*, parents lift the flap to tell the story. Parents read, “Inside my boots I’ve got ...,” then flip a flap to reveal toes. The pictures have clothing that is brightly colored, including sunglasses decorated in vivid polka dots, neon pink, sunshine yellow, striped clothing, and flowery patterns. Books like this give the parent an opportunity to talk about different body parts using a variety of terms, thus increasing overall vocabulary. Parents may also identify diversity in the children portrayed in the book; describing pictures models narrative skills that the children will utilize once they become more versed in speech.

Print awareness is a skill imparted to children in the Book Babies program. This skill is the consciousness of print in the child’s environment. It encompasses knowing how to handle a book and understanding how the words flow on a page.⁶ Parents, caregivers, and staff in Book Babies model how to hold a book for the children, showing that they should keep the right side up, start with the first page and continue to the end, and read the left page first and then the right. This skill is paired with letter knowledge, knowing that letters are different from one another and that each letter is related to a certain sound. Letter knowledge and print awareness are practiced in Book Babies when adults run fingers under the words they are reading. According to the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in

Young Children, letter knowledge seems to be the strongest indicator of reading success.

Literacy is more than just being able to read; it represents the ability to understand written text, increased writing skills, and other creative activities. Children who will become successful readers tend to exhibit age-appropriate sensory, cognitive, and social skills in the preschool ages.⁷ Book Babies encourages cognitive development and socialization among the young children who attend. Through interaction and experiences, children become more adept with locomotion and engaging in imaginative play, which indirectly increases later literacy. Research clearly indicates that families and other community members are important in the effort to prevent children’s reading difficulties. As librarians and youth services staff, we can provide the tools for par-

ents to ensure they are growing literacy in their children.

Notes

1. Born to Read Project/Preschool Services and Parent Education Committee, Association for Library Service to Children, American Library Association, *Born to Read: How to Raise a Reader* (Chicago: Association for Library Service to Children, 2003), http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscresources/bornread/btr_1205.pdf (accessed August 30, 2008).

2. These skills are widely agreed upon thanks to a collaboration between the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the American Library Association called Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library. For more information: Association for Library Service to Children, “Every Child Ready to Read @



Your Library,” American Library Association, <http://www.pla.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/ecrr/ecrrhomepage.cfm> (accessed October 2, 2008); Public Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children, “Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library Early Literacy Workshop for Four- and Five-Year-Olds: Pre-Readers,” American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/ecrr/workshopsab/trainingmaterials/scripts/scriptPRbasic0208.pdf> (accessed October 2, 2008); and Public Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children, “Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library for Four- and Five-Year-Olds: Pre-Readers, Supplemental Script Suggestions,” American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/ecrr/workshopsab/trainingmaterials/scripts/scriptPRsup0208.pdf> (accessed October 2, 2008).

3. Saroj Nadkarni Ghoting, *Early*



Literacy Storytimes @ Your Library (Chicago: American Library Association, 2006).

4. National Reading Panel,

Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction (Bethesda: National Institute of Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, 2000).


5. Ghoting.

6. Ghoting.

7. Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1998).

Additional Resources

Green, Steven D. “Language and Literacy Promotion in Early Childhood Settings: A Survey of Center-Based Practices.” *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, Spring 2006.

Jager Adams, Marilyn. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 1990. 

Book Titles Included in the Book Babies Program

Bauer, Marion Duane	<i>Toes, Ears, & Nose! A Lift-the-Flap Book</i>
Boynton, Sandra	<i>Blue Hat, Green Hat</i>
	<i>Moo, Baa, La La La</i>
	<i>Barnyard Dance</i>
Kunhardt, Dorothy Meserve	<i>Pat the Bunny</i>
Hill, Eric	<i>Where's Spot?</i>
Hoban, Tana	<i>Black on White</i>
	<i>White on Black</i>
Katz, Karen	<i>Where is Baby's Belly Button?</i>
London, Jonathan	<i>Wiggle Waggle</i>
Oxenbury, Helen	<i>Clap Hands</i>
	<i>All Fall Down</i>
	<i>Tickle, Tickle</i>
Taylor, Ann	<i>Baby Dance</i>
Watt, Fiona	<i>That's Not My Bunny</i>
Wells, Rosemary	<i>Read to Your Bunny</i>
	<i>Only You</i>
Williams, Vera B.	<i>"More, More, More," Said the Baby</i>
Wright, Blanche Fisher	<i>My First Real Mother Goose</i>