Hot Topic Paper:

The Role of Public Libraries in Early Childhood Literacy

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**Introduction**

 Today, the modern public library is an integral part of our society, especially as it works to serve the wants and needs of the varied and diverse populations of the communities in which it exists. One crucial part of the public library today is its expansive array of services specifically directed towards children and youth. This large variety of services can generally be broken down into four broad categories: public sphere, cultural heritage, education, and information (McCook, 2011). Within the educational mission of the public library fall several different service responses (McCook, 2011). Often, when we think about the education of children, we focus on their formal education years, which generally begin either during preschool or kindergarten in the United States. In light of recent scientific discoveries and advances about human brain development, we have learned that children begin to learn after birth, which is long before they enter the formal educational system (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003). The failure to provide these young children with the proper foundations they need can cause educational difficulty or even failure later in life. Recovery from these failures is often very difficult, if not close to impossible (Klingler, 2008). The public library addresses these aspects of the education of very young children through two service responses, “Create Young Readers: Early Literacy”, and “Learn to Read and Write: Adult, Teen, and Family Literacy” (McCook, 2011). In this paper, we will take an in-depth look at why and how the public library today works to fulfill its educational mission, specifically in terms of services to very young children and through the development of solid emergent literacy foundations.

**Early Childhood Brain Development**

 Before we discuss what public libraries have done, and can do in terms of early childhood literacy, we must first understand what happens in human brain development, especially in the first years of a child’s life. Recent scientific advances and discoveries in the field of early brain development have shown that “the translation of early experiences into neuronal connections…may influence later child development” (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003, p. 651). Specifically, when children are born, all of their brain neurons are already formed, but the connections between these neurons are not formed and strengthened until after birth (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003). After birth, synapses “proliferate, forming and branching dramatically during early childhood, and reaching a peak count by 3 years of age” (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003, p. 651). The experiences a child has helps to strengthen the connections between neurons through synapses, which in turn shape the child’s brain.

By age fifteen, half of these synapses are lost, because unused neural connections go through a system of pruning (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003). As a child ages, the “plasticity of the neural networks decrease” (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003, p. 651). So for example, when a child is very young it is able to recognize any phoneme (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003). But as the child lives in a certain linguistic environment (i.e. where a certain language is spoken) for a period of time, it begins to only be able to differentiate those phonemes used in that language and loses the ability to perceive other phonemes (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003). What happens is that a child’s environment and experiences (the specific linguistic environment in which it exists) shapes and strengthens the synapses between neurons needed to understand the specific language. In turn, the less used synapses between unused neurons that are able to differentiate all phonemes are not strengthened in the same way due to the child’s environment and experiences, and so these are gradually lost through pruning as the child ages (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003). An example of how this brain development phenomena expresses itself in the world is observable in the fact that it usually is easier to acquire a second language at a younger age, and much more difficult at an older age (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003).

As a result of these important revelations of how the young brain is developed from a scientific standpoint we see that, in fact, children not only are actively learning (characterized by the growth and strengthening of synapses between neurons in the brain), but that the foundations of these connections are set beginning at birth. So what do these understandings about how the brain develops mean in terms of early childhood literacy (also referred to as emergent literacy, school readiness, and reading readiness)? As William H. Teale (1999) notes, “For generations, it commonly was believed that children began learning to read and write when they entered school at age five or six” (p. 9). The shift in understanding about the brain development of young children has thrown a wrench in this previous logic, because it has now been shown that learning begins at birth. As such, the development of literacy much also be shifted to the understanding that literacy also begins at birth (Diamant-Cohen, 2007). Specifically, the experiences that are so crucial to brain development must be examined so that the developmental foundations necessary for the child to later become literate are properly set. The logical problem that arises is when children are not in the ideal environments or do not have the proper experiences that allow for their brains to develop the necessary foundations for them to be readers later in life. In the following section we will take a historical look of how this issue has been tackled by children’s librarians in the past.

**History**

 Long before scientists understood the brain development of early childhood, children’s librarians were employing techniques in their services to children that helped to form the basis of what we now consider early childhood literacy. In the 1940s, reading readiness, “the theory that children needed to be mentally prepared for reading by being exposed to literature before being given physical books to read” (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009, p. 13), was responded to by children’s librarians through story hours. In the 1950s, librarians actively began to use their skills to help children learn how to read (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009). Though theories of early literacy at this time had not been developed, librarians used a variety of techniques based on their experiences of work with children, such as sharing books with rhyme and repetition during story hours (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009). As early as 1959, children’s librarians recognized that supporting reading of younger children was also important, and began to focus their efforts on preschool aged children (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009). As Albright, Delecki, and Hinkle (2009) importantly note, “while the concept of preliteracy skills was not defined at this time, librarians often emphasized many important factors that later developed into these more modern ideas” (pp. 14-15).

**Demographics and Characteristics of Early Childhood Literacy**

 As has been stated, the brain development of early childhood sets the stage for the rest of a child’s life. In fact, “ninety percent of a typical child’s brain is developed by the age of 5” (Ward-Cameron, 2013, p. 16). The experiences and environments of children, which form the basis for their neural foundations, are so crucial at this young age that they can determine “how successful a child will be in school and in life. School and reading readiness translates into life readiness” (Ward-Cameron, 2013, p. 16). Studies have shown that in the United States, “more than a third of first grade children are not able to read at grade level, and…[this] in turn places them at high risk for overall school failure…along with other childhood and adolescent problems” (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003, p. 652).

A recent survey found that “16% of parents of children age 3 years and younger do not read at all with their children, and 23% of them do so only once or twice a week” (Klass, Needlman, & Zuckerman, 2003, p. 652). It has been shown that this difference is often related to the socioeconomic status of families and the literacy abilities of parents (Klingler, 2008). For example, “highly literate parents…are more likely to make family literacy a natural part of life…But the less literate parent…may not have the skills or the resources to provide the experience” (Klingler, 2008, pp. 36-37). This creates a “cycle of low literacy (or illiteracy)” (Klingler, 2008, p. 37), and can perpetuate for generations. Children who do not come from language and text-rich homes, do not have the necessary experiences in their lives to properly create the foundations needed once they enter preschool or kindergarten (Klingler, 2008). Research has found that children from low-income families enter the first grade with only 25 hours of one-on-one reading, whereas children from middle-class families have had up to 1,700 hours (Klingler, 2008).

Though the brains of children are wired for learning, certain impediments can slow down the process (Diamant-Cohen, 2007). Stressors including, “poverty, racism, dislocation, and violence can affect a child’s development” (Diamant-Cohen, 2007, p. 41). When young children are exposed to these stressors, “chemicals are released in the brain that damage its developing architecture” (Diamant-Cohen, 2007, p. 41). According to data from the United States Census Bureau (2013) in the year 2010, there were a total of 19,175,796 (or 6.8% of the total population) children under the age of 5 years old in the United States. Data compiled for the report, “America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being” by Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2013) found that 64% of children (ages 0-17) lived with two married parents, while 24% lived with only their mothers, and 4% lived with only their fathers. Two important factors to consider in early childhood literacy are parent employment and child care situations. Though it is acknowledged by early childhood literacy specialists that the parent is a young child’s first and primary teacher, both of these factors have an impact on the amount of time children spend with their parents or away from home with child-care providers. In 2011, it was found that 49% of children ages 0-4 with employed mothers were primarily cared for be a relative, while 24% spent the most amount of time in a child care arrangement (i.e. day care, nursery school, preschool, Head Start), and 13% were cared for by nonrelatives in a home-based environment (i.e. family day care, nanny, babysitter) (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2013). 73% of children in the United States had at least one parents working year round (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2013).

As noted above, poverty can be a serious stressor on young children, and can negatively affect their development. From households with children under age 15 with two parents, 68.9% of mothers were in the labor force, and 96.4% of fathers were in the labor force (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2013). Data compiled by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2013) found that in 2011, 22% of all children (ages 0-17) lived in poverty. It is important to note that the poverty rate was much higher for Black (39%) and Hispanic (34%) children, than for White (non-Hispanic) children (13%). Interestingly, it was also found that children ages 0-5 were more likely to be living in families with poverty (25%) than children ages 6-17 (20%) (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2013). Looking at these statistics about young children living in the United States indicate that many are not currently in ideal situations in which emergent literacy skills can be developed and fostered. In the next section we will take a look at how the educational role of public libraries puts it in a unique and ideal situation to make a positive impact on these young children and their families, in terms of preliteracy skills and development.

**Role of Public Libraries in Early Childhood Literacy**

As stated in the introduction, education is one of the key components of the public library in today’s society (McCook, 2011). As has been discussed, learning for very young children starts at birth, which is long before they enter the formal schooling system. As such, the public library is an ideal location to supplement, promote, and reach young children at this stage in their lives, and to support the solid foundations needed to ensure their success as readers and learners later in life. Children who, because of the numerous stressors identified and discussed in the last section, are not set on a path to develop the necessary emergent literacy skills can be supported by the offerings of public libraries in their communities. Betsy Diamant-Cohen (2007) notes that though “public libraries do not have the same day-to-day influences on young children as their daycare centers or homes, they offer positive literacy environments and nurturing settings that…can aid healthy brain development of babies and young children” (p. 41). Byrne, Deerr, and Kropp (2003) identified four key services that public libraries provide to help promulgate emergent literacy skills: age-appropriate spaces, materials, programming, and the opportunity for parents to gain skills. A discussion of these different areas in which public libraries can help make a difference in the emergent literacy skills of children fall into the categories of, reaching children, parent skills, and partnerships, which will be explored in-depth in the following sections.

***Reaching Children***

William H. Teale (1999) notes that, “literacy learning flourishes in preschoolers when they have chances to experience and explore reading and writing…Librarians have enormous potential to enrich young children’s literacy learning in numerous ways” (p.11). The three different components which make up the ways that very young children can be influenced in a positive way by the public library in terms of early literacy are through programming, materials, and spaces.

*Programming*

As discussed in the history of the incorporation of emergent literacy in public libraries, children’s librarians have traditionally provided story hours for children. This program continues to be an important aspect of emergent literacy in the library today; especially as research on brain development has shown that exposure to reading and literacy-rich environments are crucial to babies and toddlers. Though story times have historically been a part of the public library’s offerings to children, Teale (1999) argues that, “insights from recent research and program development projects point to ways that librarians can make story-hour programs even more effective” (p. 11). There are many techniques that can be incorporated into existing storytime programs for young children that will enhance their literacy environments and impart crucial preliteracy skills.

One important reading technique, that was not a part of the historic storytimes of the 1950s, which can be incorporated into early childhood storytimes, is the method of dialogic reading. Dialogic reading is “a way of reading with a child that encourages conversation about the story” (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009, p. 16). This form of reading is important to the development of early literacy skills in young children, because research has shown that “it is not enough to just read to a child. How adults read with children is as important as whether and how often adults read to them” (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009, p. 16). Dialogic reading can be used during storytime simply by asking children “what” questions about the story, which encourages dialogue and discussion. These discussions are just as important as the reading of the text itself, and the “more librarians can promote rich discussion to accompany a book and give young children chances for oral responses after reading, the more young children will benefit” (Teale, 1999, p. 11).

Teale (1999) also makes the suggestion of allowing children to respond to story time texts in creative ways. These include allowing children to create unique artworks, in which they can respond to how they feel about the text, which can help to “deepen the literary experience and their understanding” (Teale, 1999, p. 12). Using dramatic elements, like props, flannel boards, and finger puppets can also heighten and enhance children’s experiences with stories and text (Teal, 1999). Music and singing can also be incorporated as a part of story time. Books that can be sung can be used, or children can create their own music in response to books (Teale, 1999). The use of these novel and creative methods as part of storytime creates a more meaningful and rich experience for children, and are also “more likely…to enhance their love of them and to learn from them” (Teale, 1999, p. 12).

In addition to giving children more opportunities to interact and discuss the text, Teale (1999) also suggests that storytimes can be enriched by including a wider range of texts, and enlisting a diverse group of people to conduct readings. When reading to young children, “it is important to use not only narratives, but also informational books, concept books, poetry, and books that provide young children with plenty of opportunities to play with the sounds and words of language” (Teale, 1999, p. 13). One of the most significant impacts on library programming has been research evidence that has shown that “phonological sensitivity and letter-knowledge skills are high predictive of later reading success” (Ward-Cameron, 2013, p. 18). Use of nontraditional texts such as poetry, nursery rhymes, and songs not only are fun for children during storytime, but can also support phonemic awareness (Teal, 1999). Additionally, the use of information and concept books can help to expose children to a greater number of vocabulary words which is important to reading readiness as “the number of vocabulary words known and used by children entering kindergarten affects their entire education” (Diamant-Cohen, 2007, p. 45).

In a study where teachers were asked to rate the importance of factors for a child to be ready for kindergarten, it was revealed that skills such as enthusiasm, curiosity, and the ability to follow directions was more important than technical skills (holding a pencil) or even rudimentary reading and math skills (Diamant-Cohen, 2007). This is another area where story times can be a positive influence on school readiness skills. Learning how to be a member of an audience, how to sit and behave, knowing when to answer questions, controlling emotions, and positive interactions with peers, are all things that a child who attends story time programs at the public library will learn, practice and develop. The inclusion of a variety of readers during storytime can give children positive interactions with different readers, in addition to more interactions with adults in general, also another important school readiness skill. The development of these skills are needed by young children before they enter kindergarten, because they “help provide the foundational skills for cognitive performance” (Diamant-Cohen, 2007, p. 42).

*Materials*

 A variety of materials should be made available for very young children. Though most young children cannot read, access to board books, cloth books, and big books as part of the public library collection is important, because they help to create a text-rich, literacy based environment. Research has shown that play is a big part of children’s cognitive development, and has been linked to early literacy skills (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003). As such, materials that encourage children to play should also be a part of a library’s collection. Some libraries have developed circulating toy collections for their patrons (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003). These libraries are “committed to the philosophy that play is a learning experience and toys are valuable learning tools; public libraries are a natural location for such a service because toys are helpful in the development of prereading and prewriting skills” (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003, p. 43). Public libraries can also help to incorporate play by making available circulating story kits, which “blend the traditional (books) with the no-so-traditional (toys)—thus building for local families a solid rung on the emergent-literacy ladder” (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003, p. 43).

*Spaces*

 Lastly, an important way that public libraries can reach children directly and promote early literacy skills is through developmentally appropriate spaces (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003). The environment and the atmosphere of the public library plays an important role in emergent literacy and these spaces can “encourage young children and their parents to engage in age-appropriate activities” (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003, p. 43). These areas should be cozy, welcoming, and fun for children, in addition to developmentally appropriate. Comfortable places to sit, colorful rugs, and living things (plants and animals), can all help make public library spaces welcoming to young children and their families (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003). A creative play area that includes fun elements such as a train table, Lego table, a storefront, or post office, can also be included to promote play amongst children. The materials and collections that have been selected for these youngest patrons should also be easily accessible to them in these specially designed areas, so that they have a chance for meaningful interaction. For example, Teale (1999) suggests placing books and toys in small bins on the floor, instead of on tall bookshelves, making them more accessible to little ones. Using these techniques to create a welcoming space for emergent learners encourages development through interactions with easily accessible collections and other materials. Additionally, these techniques help to make the entire experience of interaction with literacy (both books and toys) positive, which will in turn help to foster a love of books and reading in children.

***Parent Skills***

Though libraries have the opportunity to directly reach young children when they visit the library, either when they attend programs or when they visit the specially designed spaces for them to play and use their collections, ultimately, parents are their children’s first and best teachers (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009). The identification of this fact is one of the key understandings crucial to emergent literacy in babies and toddlers. What is needed by these young children are “parents and caregivers who talk to them, sing to them, and read to them daily. They need loving interactions that help them feel safe and secure” (Arnold, 2002, p. 24). Ultimately, the most important factor is the shared book experience between children and caregivers; children need someone to make sharing books a fun and interactive experience (Arnold, 2002). When a child has healthy emotional bonds with his or her parent, not only does the child feel secure, but they are also in the ideal situation to learn (Arnold, 2002). Only recently have librarians realized that, “they can be more influential in the life and development of a child if they focus less on trying to teach the child exclusively and more on teaching the parents how to foster early learning skills in their children” (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009, p. 16). The issues that arise from these understandings are that parents may not understand the benefits of reading to their children, or that parents may want to share books with their children, but may not know the proper techniques to do so in the best way possible. Though the parent is the child’s first teacher, librarians are in the ideal position to serve as the “parent’s first literacy coach” (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009, p. 16).

*Training and Modeling*

One easy way that public libraries can help to educate parents and caregivers about the best ways to share books with their children are to model these behaviors during library programs. Sometimes parents may see storytime at the library as a place where they can have some “me time”, away from their children for half an hour. Instead, the library should make it clear to parents that they are welcome to attend these programs with their children. Once parents attend these programs, librarians can model key emergent literacy techniques, such as dialogic reading and print referencing. Additionally, librarians can also emphasize the importance of a caregiver’s role in the development of their children’s literacy skills. Librarians can do this by “explaining to caregivers the components of early literacy and by providing caregivers with activities that support these components” (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009, p. 16). Librarians can also go a step further of explaining the benefits and techniques, by creating and distributing pamphlets, brochures, booklists, and other informational handouts to parents (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009). Even more in-depth preliteracy programs for parents can include parent-child, parent only, or caregiver workshops about different emergent literacy topics and techniques (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009). Lastly, some parents may be embarrassed or not happy with their own level of literacy skills, which may prevent them from sharing books with their children (Klingler, 2008). The library can offer adult literacy training to these parents so they can bolster their own skills so that they are able to confidently share books with their children, and to show them that literacy is meaningful and important to their lives (Klingler, 2008). All of these opportunities help to foster the important partnerships needed between the public library and parents in order to cultivate the emergent literacy of children.

***Partnerships***

Albright, Delecki, and Hinkle (2009) make the important point that despite all of these exciting ways that the library can help children to develop emergent literacy skills, the one aspect that is often overlooked is that, “it is impossible to model early literacy skills during traditional library storytimes to parents and children who are not able to attend” (pp. 16-17). As noted in the demographics section, the majority of parents work, and many children attend childcare in some capacity. Traditionally, storytime programs occur in the morning during weekdays, possibly preventing many working parents and their children from attending (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009). There are also many factors such as poverty, lack of transportation, and the lack of knowledge about what the public library is and what it has to offer that traditionally keep people from using it. These underserved and unserved populations will not be able to benefit from any of the important offerings of the library, which may be needed in the lives of their children to support their emergent literacy and their later educational success.

 One way that public libraries can help to reach these populations is by going to them, through partnerships. There have been many examples of partnership programs between public libraries and community organizations that already have direct contact with these traditionally underserved and unserved populations. One such program is the Born to Read initiative, which was a partnership between the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and healthcare providers. The program began in 1998, with four hundred different sites in the United States and Canada (Nemec, 2011). Many of these sites directly targeted at-risk families by offering parents and children literacy training, storytimes, training on nutrition, and books and toys, in order to support the healthy development of children, including their emergent literacy (Nemec, 2011). Unfortunately, the program which had it’s heyday in the 1990s, was unable to keep up a level of momentum to make it last to present day (Nemec, 2011). Currently, ALSC has been trying to revitalize the Born to Read initiative, but unfortunately due to a lack of adequate funding, has had to drop the partnership with healthcare providers (Nemec, 2011).

There are many opportunities in which public libraries can partner with organizations already present in the community. For example, libraries in New York have joined forces with the Parent-Child Home Program. This program trains home visitors “in how to introduce age-appropriate toys and books to parents and young children. Such families, who may face the challenges of poverty, language and/or cultural barriers, and low educational levels, may also lack access to public institutions due to poor or no means of transportation” (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003, p. 44). By bringing books and toys directly to these families, they are able to reach children and positively influence their emergent literacy development. Public libraries should also consider working with schools and teachers as they are already actively involved in the emergent literacy skills of children (Ward-Cameron, 2013). Children’s librarians can offer their expertise of children’s literature and knowledge about early childhood development to form partnerships with community organizations already working with underserved and unserved populations, in order to really make a widespread difference in the literate lives of all children.

**Model Public Library: Multnomah County Library**

 There is no better way of understanding how public libraries can be actively involved in the emergent literacy of young children in their communities, than seeing the work of an exemplary public library already doing so. One library doing important work in the realm of early childhood literacy is the Multnomah County Library (MCL), located in Oregon. MCL has worked to focus on early childhood education and to demonstrate that the library is a crucial resource of the community. A key document guiding the library’s actions was its, “Extending the Promise: Multnomah County Library’s Five-Year Plan 2001-2005.” The first goal stated in the plan was that the library would “provide emergent literacy and reading programs for babies, toddlers, preschoolers, children, and young adults” (Arnold, 2002, p.24). In order to meet this goal, MCL engaged in a multipronged approach of providing programs, services, and partnerships.

At the library level, MCL offered storytimes to children from birth to six years old. At each of these storytimes, the children’s librarian planned and implemented developmentally appropriate techniques, supplemented with puppets, music, and art (Arnold, 2002). Librarians also made more than 650 annual visits to child-care centers to present storytimes (Arnold, 2002). Additionally, the library made sure to provide large collections of picture books, and board books. The library also encouraged young children to participate in summer reading programs by creating a specially designed flyer (Arnold, 2002). Lastly, the library made sure that everyone in the library received training, which helped staff to understand and respond to the needs of children and the best practices for “facilitating children’s literacy development” (Arnold, 2002, p. 25).

 MCL also offered many opportunities for outreach to parents and caregivers through their Early Childhood Resources (ECR) unit. The ECR helped to deliver books to child-care centers. In 2002, these numbered more than eight thousand books to more than three hundred different child-care center sites each month (Arnold, 2002). These child care centers included parent-child development centers, preschools, adult basic education classes, and social service agencies (Arnold, 2002). Recognizing that many child-care providers spend much time with young children, the ECR also created a training programming for this group to cover a variety of early childhood topics.

 In 2002, MCL received The Early Words Language and Literacy Initiative, a two-year grant, the purpose of which was to increase the number of children in the county entering kindergarten prepared to learn (Arnold, 2002). MCL developed a three component approach to meet this goal: training and mentoring, new paper gifts and a public communication campaign (Arnold, 2002). MCR helped to develop a curriculum design to “help early childhood care and education providers learn positive ways to interact with children to support language and literacy development” (Arnold, 2002, p. 27). New parent gifts arrived at the parent’s home when their first baby was two months old. Each box contained informational items for parents, and MCL mailed out approximately 350 new parent gifts out each month (Arnold, 2002). MCL also partnered with Oregon Zoo as a special event media campaign to bring attention to emergent literacy (Arnold, 2002).

MCL also provided many opportunities to serve parents through their Born to Read, Reach Out and Read, You Can Count on Mother Goose, and Mother Goose Asks “Why?” programs. Many of these programs, including Born to Read and Reach Out and Read, were partnership programs with community organizations to reach at-risk parent populations such as teen parents and parents in drug and alcohol recovery (Arnold, 2002). The Mother Goose programs were parent education classes, in which parents were encouraged to play and read to their children to develop their understandings of math and science concepts (Arnold, 2002). Lastly, MCL provided books in waiting rooms and lobbies of state agencies where parents and children waited through their Books While You Wait Program.

As can be seen, MCL was able to provide a multifaceted approach to the issue of early childhood literacy in its community. MCL did not focus solely on reaching the children who walked in the doors of its branches, but also focused on many different levels of outreach and community partnerships to educate parents and caregivers about the importance of sharing books with very young children. Public libraries everywhere can study MCL’s approach to the issue of early childhood literacy and adapt them for use and as model for their own outreach to these populations.

**Conclusion**

Education is a fundamental part of the mission of public libraries. With recent scientific discoveries about human brain development, we now realize that learning does not begin once a child enters the formal schooling system, but rather starts as birth. Because of their long history of connecting children with books, public libraries are uniquely situated to serve the developmental preliteracy needs of babies and toddlers. In addition to providing traditional programs and services to children, the public library is also in an ideal position to directly connect with and educate parents about the importance of sharing books with their children, and to partner with community organizations also vested in the well-being of all children. Through this multidimensional approach, the public library can demonstrate not only its commitment to the needs of young children, but also to the educational success of all members of the community. When children are given solid emergent literacy foundations, they enter the school system ready to learn, and destined for academic success. The public library can work together with children, parents, and caregivers to help develop this foundation to ensure that not only will these children have a brighter future, but we all will.

**Recommendations**

* Traditional storytime programs can be enhanced to meet the emergent literacy development of children. Techniques such as dialogic reading can be used during readings. A variety of different texts should be used, including informational books. Children should be given multiple ways to respond to books, including art and music.
* Public libraries should work to educate parents directly about early childhood development and emergent literacy. This can be done through modeling of emergent literacy techniques during story time and other programs. It can also be done through informational brochures and pamphlets. Workshops can also be offered to provide more structured learning environments for parents.
* Public libraries should partner with community organizations and schools to reach underserved and unserved populations. The focus should be on organizations that currently work with parents and children.
* Public libraries should offer developmentally appropriate collections and materials for very young children, including board books and toys.
* Public libraries should specially design spaces with young children in mind. These should be welcoming, cozy, and fun to create a positive experience for children and their parents.
* Storytime programs should be added during nontraditional times (weekend, evenings), so that working parents have an opportunity to attend.

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