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Babies and libraries: serving the youngest patrons of a community

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Abstract

Study of infants and children up to the age of 2 years shows that literacy and learning begin at very early stages of development, but a discrepancy exists between provision of public library services for babies and toddlers, for whom preschool programs are primarily developed. This article examines the cognitive development and socialization processes encouraged by early childhood literacy programs, then explores what programming efforts are involved in this area at libraries around the United States. The author describes her experience at two branch libraries in Dallas, Texas, as a case study of weekly infant/toddler programs for children and their caregivers. She also explores opportunities for collaboration between public libraries and pediatric clinics in the Born to Read program, which provides children with bilingual learning materials at very early ages.

Introduction

Babies are not welcome in theaters. They are not welcome in restaurants. And they are not welcome in libraries. They cry, smell, do not pay taxes, and have no apparent function except commotion. So at what point do these places embrace that growing human being? When they get a job and can give money? When they can sit quietly and not drool? When they can boost ratings?

There seems to be a discrimination issue happening right before our eyes and no one seems to care. Let's call it "underageism." In libraries, toddlers and preschoolers begin to have some worth around age four because preschool story times are provided. School-aged children definitely have a place with the summer reading programs. Even teens are given worth with teen centers, young adult book collections, and volunteer opportunities. But what about those under-three patrons, who diligently show up with their parents and are willing to eat a book at a moment's notice? There are rarely programs for them, and board book collections are small and insignificant when compared to the rest of the acquisition budget.

Yet, according to research, literacy can begin even before birth. Studies have shown that reading to an infant can imprint phonic and sight word patterns. The practice of holding a book and turning a page can imprint a sense of connection that something wonderful is associated with the reading material.

So why are these future readers being overlooked?

What can a baby do with a book...besides eat it?

According to Dr. Lise Eliot (1999), "Babies' brains are learning machines. They build themselves, or adapt, to the environment at hand." She compares a baby's brain to a "brand new computer without software," explaining, "you just plug it in and the computer does the rest: assembling its own operating system, building its own drivers, adding its own programs as needed." They learn what they need through taste, sound, motion, smell, touch, sight, and experience. Babies will follow their parent's gaze to look at objects and will communicate through eye contact with that parent. If a parent picks up a book and looks at it, a baby will also look at it. A study by Brooks and Meltzoff (2005) suggests that a baby's early ability to follow a parent's gaze is directly correlated to early language development. Eliot (1999) further emphasizes that language development takes place when a parent talks to a child often, uses simple, clear, and positive tones, actively listens to the child's needs, and repeats words and sentences while speaking. In a 2005 study on parent-child reading styles, Huebner and Meltzoff found that "reading to a child in dialogue fashion, paraphrasing a story, asking questions after sentences, and personalizing a story plot enhanced both early language and early reading development."

Ostrosky, Gaffney, and Thomas (2006) suggest that building a verbal relationship between parent and child through literacy activities is a key element in emerging literacy. Catherine Tamis-LeMonda, a developmental psychologist from New York University, found in her studies that babies whose parents acknowledge their babbling and facial expressions as communication, mimic their sounds, and verbally label items they touch, will talk earlier with more advanced language skills (Bornstein et al., 1996). Ross Thompson (1998), a psychologist at the University of California at Davis, believes, "People are toys for early brain growth, providing a rich variety of stimulation through vision, sound, touch, movement, smell and other experiences that are integrated and enlivened through the emotional arousal that social interaction creates in infants." Thompson adds that an infant brain needs the sort of stimulation that can be obtained from a parent interacting with ordinary household items such as pots, waxed paper, and paper cups, dismissing the thought that a child needs an expensive educational toy to progress intellectually. He emphasizes that babies learn through repetition and consistency, practicing over and over until they master a task. They track this information, connect ideas and build on knowledge to learn newer information.

Susan Neuman (2005) suggests there are five essential elements of helping a child learn to read: 1) talk to them; 2) play with them; 3) share personal stories and read books to them; 4) connect songs with language; 5) and encourage them to write. Traditional library story times usually incorporate points 1, 3, and 5, but the key element of point 2—"play"—is usually missing. She writes, "For the most part, play is where reading actually begins....Play appears to have two potential links to learning to read: it allows children to develop and refine

their capacity to use symbols (or props) to represent life experiences and construct imaginary worlds, and it helps children develop a sense of narrative.”

Here's an idea!

So, if babies can benefit from reading, and reading is what libraries do best, then why aren't we doing more to welcome babies in libraries? Since babies do not have the ability to drive themselves to the library or to fill out a library card application, they must rely on their parents' willingness to get them through the library doors. If a parent has access to a program that will encourage parent-infant interaction, there's a good chance that the baby may get some of that important stimulation: repetition, consistency, parent gazing, acknowledgment and mimicry of babbling, active listening, verbal labeling of objects, and formalized reading in a dialogue fashion.

Do such developmental programs exist in today's libraries? Rarely, but they do. There is a trend in the infant stage (no pun intended) of growth. Jane Marino and Dorothy F. Houlihan (1992) addressed the need to reach infants in a library setting with their book, *Mother Goose Time: Library Programs for Babies and Their Caregivers*. Marino and Houlihan included bibliographic lists of picture books, resource books, songs, rhyming games, and ideas for interactive parent-child sessions. Lapsit programs, fingerplays, songs, and information on infant learning from birth to age two were included in this early attempt at infant library programming. *Books, Babies, and Libraries: Serving Infants, Toddlers, Their Parents, and Caregivers* (1991) by Ellin Greene also provided librarians with information on child development theories and stages, lapsit program planning, and bibliographies.

Since 1999, city public libraries have begun their own campaigns to include early literacy programs at their branches. The Saginaw (Michigan) Public Library initiated child development-based toddler story times in 1999. Staff were trained in child development, parent classes were set up, and child development material was purchased. Librarians discovered how and when babies learn and were able to incorporate this knowledge in programming and collection development. Shinnars (1999) sums up the new trend of Youth Librarianship: "Children's librarians are daily placed in the position of a 'child-development expert' and 'parenting expert.' What we have done in Saginaw is simply acknowledge that our staff is being asked to play these roles, and we have taken the necessary steps to provide new models and training. The winners are staff members who are better prepared to deal with these new child-development and parenting issues and a public that gets what it needs!"

In my experience...

From April 2005 to May 2006, Park Forest Branch Library in Dallas, Texas provided a weekly Infant/Toddler Development Time for babies and their caregivers. As the Children's Librarian at Park Forest, I was often asked the question: "How can I teach my toddler to read?" Parents asked, "At what age should I start reading to my baby?" and "What can I do if my child won't sit still while I read a book to him?" My career background includes years as a counselor and developmental assessor, so I decided to combine that experience with the public library setting at Park Forest. In April 2005, I developed a bilingual infant/toddler development time, accepting babies from two months old up to age three. Each week we focused on a different developmental

area such as speech, cognitive, motor, receptive listening, and language development with an overall review of other areas. Parents were encouraged to hold their child and read board books provided to them while in attendance. They were also encouraged to play with their child and talk to them interactively, naming objects and actions. Parents were given ideas on how to play with everyday objects such as cups, cotton balls, stickers, bubbles, and balls, showing by example that educational learning does not entail buying "educational toys." Songs and fingerplays were repeated each week, which helped to cue infants on the beginning and end of the session. Educational material, compact discs, research articles, and manipulatives were available to parents to borrow on an honesty basis and library books were always encouraged to be checked out. Parents talked to each other and to their children, asked questions concerning development, and practiced newly learned skills at home. During the 2005-2006 session at Park Forest, 128 families became involved in our program. Parents reported early speech, early cognitive milestones, early recognition of objects and concepts in books, and improved parent/child relationships after their attendance in the program.

In May of 2006, I transferred to the Skillman Southwestern Branch Library in Dallas and began two infant/toddler development times there. Both groups are presently filled to capacity with an average of 35 parents and babies per group. Baby ages range from two months to 36 months old. A third group is being considered to meet the demand of the library community. Attending parents have reported improved recognition of objects, early speech milestones, and improved eye-hand motor coordination for their infants and toddlers in attendance. Parent

comments have included: "I'm learning to work naturally with my child's learning style," and "I wish I knew all of this when my older son was young. There would've been a lot less stress and maybe both he and I would enjoy reading more."

More success stories

The City of Dallas is also involved in a city-wide campaign for infant reading programs. The Born to Read program pairs branch libraries with Parkland Health and Hospital Community Pediatric Clinics to provide early literacy information to pregnant and new mothers. Teams of librarians visit the clinics roughly every two months for library card registration. Each child at the center is presented with a package which contains a bilingual book, tee shirt, bibliography of recommended reading, library program information, and information on brain development. The patients are then encouraged to visit their local library branch. This program's premise is the belief that reading is another way to create a happier and healthier community. One goal of the program is to break the cycle of poverty and low education which perpetuates itself from generation to generation. A secondary goal of the cooperative program is to improve access to books, which has been shown to positively impact literacy.

Other large cities are also becoming involved in infant programming. From November 2005 to January 2006, the Brooklyn Public Library in New York City presented a two-month campaign called Brooklyn Reads to Babies. This outreach campaign presented 12 literacy programs including Babies and Books, which stressed to caregivers the importance of letting babies hear an adult voice. The program encouraged caregivers to read, sing, talk, and

become involved with their child. According to Judy Zuckerman, Brooklyn Public Library's Assistant Director of Neighborhood Services, "The main message is to read to your baby whenever, wherever, and to not tie it to [just] coming to library programs" (Weiss, 2006).

Infant literacy programming is also developing on a national level. In 2000, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and ALA's Public Library Association (PLA) created the Preschool Literacy Initiative. Twenty programs that involved sensory stimulation, parent/child narrative conversing, repetitive songs and games, and physically active play with infants showed clear evidence of reading readiness over traditional story time venues. These studies suggested that libraries are well suited to provide programs such as these because they are already in place in communities and are seen as institutions that foster literacy (Arnold, 2003).

In 2004, the PLA published a strong case for public library influence in an early childhood reading readiness program called Every Child Ready to Read. The PLA has been working toward training and material development to help public librarians learn a more developmental and researched-based approach for "Toddler Time" in their branches. According to Deputy Executive Director, Barbara Macikas, "[As of July 2006] Every Child Ready to Read program has been very successful. We have developed training materials that librarians use to help parents and caregivers get their children ready to read." (personal communication, July 19, 2006).

Conclusion

It is my hope that the trend toward infant pre-literacy programs will be adopted by more library systems. In essence, we are giving customer service to our future patrons. Sure, babies will continue to make noise in the library, eat our books, and ignore our library fines. But our mission as librarians is to foster and enhance literacy to all in our library community. Someday these little ones will open a book and begin reading. If we are capable of helping that process along, then it seems imperative that we try.

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