

Smart Starts

Creating Meaningful Play Programming

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How many “golden moments” have you had at your library this week?

You know what I mean . . . Dad and Sam discussing how to make their block structure stronger, or Nanny and Emma creating a puppet play intermixing two languages, or Grandma and Parker fitting together puzzle pieces while conversing about words starting with “M.”

How can you create an environment at your library to expand the opportunities for these golden moments? By creating intentional, educational play programming at your library.

Enter . . . Smart Starts

Smart Starts, as we call it, is a hands-on, interactive environment where adults help children develop early reading, writing, math, and science skills through fun play activities. Several craft, game, and experiential stations are focused around a weekly topic and designed to engage children ages two to eight.

We developed this program after observing elaborate play spaces at other libraries. While we are not able to devote permanent space, we can provide learning opportunities for our community in a unique, meaningful way. We have come to appreciate being able to offer Smart Starts as a special, changing program rather than have the activities become routine.

One of our primary goals was to provide a richer, more meaningful library experience for our patrons. We sought to provide something beyond the performance of storytimes and more



Learning through play.

engaging than adults just “watching” the children play. Smart Starts allows adults to play side-by-side with their children, while communicating substantively and enhancing learning experiences.

Setting the Stage

Each Smart Starts program has a theme, developed around an educational goal, which, in turn, supports the local school curriculum and ties into state standards. Examples of themes include measurement and related math concepts, plants for hands-on science, and narrative to promote literacy skills.

Six to eight stations are created for each theme. These vary widely, but often include a science experiment, one or more crafts, practice worksheets, games involving sorting or matching, building or construction play, and related educational toys.

A PowerPoint slideshow is created for each program to display scrolling slides featuring each station. These offer pictures to interest the children in the various activities and hints for adults to interact meaningfully.



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Extension materials are also made available. These include books and other library resources related to the topic that are ready for check-out. A caregiver tip sheet offers ideas for how to repeat and expand learning activities and concepts at home.

Library patron Elizabeth Warren said, “My children and I love Smart Starts! We enjoy the variety of hands-on activities centered around various themes. They allow my children to participate in activities that engage a variety of senses. I particularly enjoy that I can bring both my one- and three-year-old, and they can both participate. The crafts and take home sheets are a fun way to include my husband in the fun at home.”

Starring Roles of the Library Staff

With my background as a preschool teacher and various Internet resources, I am able to cultivate a collection of meaningful activities for each theme. As facilitator, it is my job to gather supplies and promote interest. I also create the PowerPoints, assemble the booklists, and read articles on learning opportunities in each topic area to assist caregivers.

Various individuals lead Smart Starts while it is open. The staff member welcomes patrons as they enter the room and helps get visitors started. We try to have a particularly engaging activity near the door to draw in children who may be hesitant. What preschooler can resist a huge cardboard box to crawl in or “mess-free” finger painting?

The library staff member also models conversation and play behavior to encourage adults to make the most of the experience. A parent may regularly record his or her child’s dictated stories after giving it a try in Smart Starts. After I asked a child who was arbitrarily banging instruments, “Can you repeat this pattern?,” the adult continued the game. One nanny told me, “I have to make one of these!” after experimenting with our simple shadow box. In this informal setting, staff and patrons develop relationships, adults feel free to ask questions, and children enjoy playing with the librarian.

Critics’ Choice

Smart Starts incorporates STEAM concepts as well as early literacy skills, allowing the library to partner with local schools, embracing community and educational initiatives.

Smart Starts is uniquely inclusive. The activities and levels of engagement allow all children to participate, including those with special needs and beginning English language learners. The open format welcomes the entire family, promoting sibling interaction. I once had two teens spend over an hour with their three-year-old cousin exploring ramps. The open nature of Smart Starts also allows for individuals of varied intelligences and diverse learning styles to benefit.

We have been able to use the Smart Starts program as outreach to underserved and non-patrons within our community. Our school liaison has arranged special sessions with at-risk preschool groups, allowing us to welcome many refugee and recent immigrant families into our building who may not otherwise have ventured in. It was fun to witness refugee parents from Myanmar experience glue sticks and watercolor painting for the first time. Additional connections have been made with parent groups within the community.

When we make an effort to seek out those who have been previously unreached or underserved, we give them heightened visibility and significance. The library becomes valuable to those new individuals as well as gaining greater appreciation from the community at large.

Anne Weinland Mulhearn, local Newcomers organizer, said, “Smart Starts at GEPL has been the Glen Ellyn Newcomers Moms + Tots group favorite activity. The stations encompass a variety of learning activities that children of all ages find fun, exciting, and interactive. I love watching the children spread out into different activities, participate, and share. You can tell the kids get a lot out of the activities and the parents enjoy the time with their children.”

Production Costs: Time and Money

Admittedly, Smart Starts has required a large amount of time to develop the themes and related activities. However, this could be divided between staff members. For example, one person could be assigned science experiments and another craft. The actual execution of the program takes very little time commitment. Staff only need be available to interact with patrons and re-stock supplies.

Smart Starts is extremely inexpensive for the number of community members reached. For example, we spent only \$300 over a four-week period, where we had twenty-nine sessions and hosted more than twelve hundred participants. To reduce costs, you could ask for donations of educational toys, shop for supplies at second-hand and dollar stores, and ask colleagues to help collect recyclable materials.

It would be easy to adapt the Smart Starts concept to a smaller scale or for outreach. A different activity could be set up each week on a table within the department. Learning through play activities could be taken on the road to local schools, park district, church, or community events. We plan to use a small version of Smart Starts at sidewalk sales and farmers’ markets in our community next summer.

Once planned, Smart Starts events may be repeated every year. A four-year-old experiences the stations far differently than he or she did as a three-year-old. My only comment about a repeated program was an excited, “I remember this!” Library patron Cynthia Ellis commented, “My son has been enjoying Smart Starts for three years. It gives him ample opportunities to

‘grow into’ the various center-activities. It has also inspired us to explore some of these topics more on our own.”

Over the past three years, we have experimented with the schedule of Smart Starts. We began it on trial, offering each event for two hours every other Monday afternoon. Positive patron response led us to offer Smart Starts as a Wednesday morning alternative within the weekly storytime session. We have since expanded the schedule to be a separate series of programs, alternating with storytime sessions. We hold six weeks of storytimes, take a week break, and then offer four weeks of Smart Starts, working around holidays and school breaks.

During each week, Smart Starts is open as a drop-in program for sixty- to ninety-minute segments over the course of three days. This includes three mornings, two afternoons, and an evening. Outside groups are added at alternate times within the three-day window.

Determining the schedule for any new event can be tricky. But once this type of program is set up, it is advantageous to have it open at various times to allow for maximum use. As always, cater to your library community and adjust your times based on what proves best for your patrons.

Rave Reviews

The reaction to Smart Starts has been extremely positive. Caregivers are delighted that such an enriching program is not

only available at the library, but free. Many patrons intentionally add Smart Starts to their calendar, making sure to come each week. They invite neighbors and arrange to meet friends at the program. Dad John Witte observed, “The chance to interact with other kids in a learning environment is valuable both for the kids and the parents.” Several outside groups have scheduled repeat sessions and prompted other organizations to make similar arrangements. We have been delighted to connect with many previous non-users.

As libraries, we want to prepare our youngest patrons for a constantly changing future that will necessitate lifelong learning. Renowned (and oft-cited) educator O. Fred Donaldson reminds us that, “Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play children learn how to learn.”¹

By offering programs such as Smart Starts, we can equip our children for a life of learning by providing an inclusive play environment that promotes adult interaction and reaches out to the underserved. ↻

References

1. Anne Burke, *Ready to Learn: Using Play to Build Literacy Skills in Young Learners* (Markham, Ontario: Pembroke, 2010).

On Martha Stewart’s Library Shelf

Bibliography prepared by “Eel Bennett Napkins”

Poet and anthologist Lee Bennett Hopkins has written and edited numerous award-winning books for children and young adults, as well as professional texts and curriculum materials. He has taught elementary school and served as a consultant to school systems throughout the country and now lives in Florida.

Imagine if lifestyle maven Martha Stewart had more than just cookbooks and dwelling magazines on her bookshelf; what if she had children’s books? With apologies to the authors, her favorite books might look something like this:

- *Anne of Green Peas*
- *Beauty and the Beef*
- *Clifford, the Big Red Hot Dog*
- *The Day the Microwave Quit*
- *Encyclopedia Brown Gravy*
- *Harold and the Purple Eggplant*
- *Skippyjon Peanut Butter Jones*
- *Snow White and Her Seven-Up*
- *Stuart Little Debbie Cupcakes*
- *The Three Little Pigs in a Blanket*

A tasty selection indeed!