

More than Just Kids

Sharing Literacy Messages with Caregivers Outside of Storytime

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When Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) was first released, part of the conversation in libraries was all about recognizing and owning the idea that storytimes were and are early learning experiences and could be excellent forums for sharing literacy messaging with parents and caregivers.

That has now become a standard concept, and storytime literacy messages are a frequent best practice. Today, the conversation about early learning includes discovering next steps and new ways of incorporating early literacy information into programs and services.

This is an exciting process because as children's librarians know, we don't reach all the families in our communities through our storytimes. We don't even reach all our library-using families through our storytimes! Storytime remains a keystone service for public libraries, yet the more we can spread our early literacy support beyond storytimes, the more children we can help get ready to read.

In addition to storytime, librarians serve families and communities in many other ways: through reference questions, readers' advisory, collections, children's spaces, programming, technology, and print and social media content. Each of these areas provides diverse opportunities for interacting with families

and for sharing information and encouragement about early literacy support.

How can we recognize and take full advantage of these opportunities? We can start with a program plan, a child's actions, and a book.

Start with a Program Plan

Our programs for our youngest patrons—from Block Parties to Playdates to Toddler Drive-Ins to Messy Art Cafes—all offer the same sorts of springboards for early literacy messages as do storytimes. At my library, we pair a literacy message with a storytime activity, to help caregivers make the connection between what children do and what children learn. After we sing "Itsy Bitsy Spider," for instance, we might talk about how some songs are little stories that help children learn how stories work and build comprehension skills.

Look for those connections in our other programs as well, and look for opportunities to share those ideas with the caregivers. Those opportunities might include printed tabletop cards at activity stations, a handout to take home, or a planned verbal message to the group before storytime begins.



Melissa Depper is the storytime supervisor for the Arapahoe Library District in Colorado, where she works primarily with early childhood programs and services and leads a team of fifteen storytime providers. She serves on the ALSC/PLA Every Child Ready to Read Oversight Committee, is on Twitter @MelissaZD, and starts every week off right with baby storytime.

In an art program, we could say, “Talking about how paint, glue, and other art materials feel and how they act when we use them are great ways to help build your child’s vocabulary, by introducing new words in a hands-on context. The bigger a child’s vocabulary, the more words they will recognize on the page when they start to read.”

Start with a Child’s Actions

When we walk through our libraries, what do we see? Is a child putting some puzzles together or arranging alphabet letters on a magnet board? Many libraries have added small or large spaces for play to their children’s areas. A child’s actions as he plays offer a chance to talk with the child and engage the grown-ups in conversation.

At a puzzle table, we might say, “I love watching your child working with the puzzle. I can just see her thinking so hard about how to fit the pieces. When kids work with shapes like that, they are building the same skills they will use later to recognize the different shapes of the alphabet. Thanks for coming to the library to play today!”

Another powerful version of this strategy is to start with a caregiver’s actions. If we see a grandmother and grandchild reading together, when they are done with the book, we could say, “I really enjoyed overhearing you as you shared that story. We love seeing readers together at the library! Every book a child hears helps him get ready to read. You’re doing a great job.”

Or if we see a mother waiting while her toddler looks for just the right book, we can mention, “You are such a superstar for being so patient while she chooses. We know that kids are extra engaged in books that they select themselves, and that keeps them motivated about reading. Sometimes it’s hard to wait but you are doing a great thing.”

Start with a Book

Last but not least, start with a book. I encourage this technique with newer staff who may be less confident about talking about early literacy practices in programs or playtime. They are almost always very confident about sharing their love of books!

Whether we help families find books on the shelf or engage in a reader’s advisory interview, books are a wonderful way to help us share encouraging messages about getting ready to read. When we are talking about a favorite title, we can say, “I love *Rhyming Dust Bunnies* because of all the silly rhymes. Learning how rhymes work is one of the ways kids get ready to sound out words when they read. Books like this are perfect for that.”

Keep building on the great work you do in storytimes and look for opportunities in programs, in library spaces, and in the stacks to bring even more early literacy messages and support to families. ☺

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