

Reaching Outside the Library Walls

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Sarah Stippich is the Early Literacy Coordinator for the Free Library of Philadelphia. She is a current member of the Every Child Ready to Read Oversight Committee and the Early Childhood Programs and Services Committee, and was a member of the 2015 Theodor Seuss Geisel Award Selection Committee.

It truly takes a village to raise a child. When we think about getting parents involved in their child's early literacy, it's a good idea to start thinking outside the box and outside the building. Librarians are not the only ones who are invested in a child's success; we need to embrace the whole child, the whole family, and the whole community.

With the Words at Play Vocabulary Initiative, we have implemented creative ways to reach outside library walls to empower parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and others with whom children interact in their daily lives.

Words at Play

Words at Play Vocabulary Initiative is a community-wide initiative by the Free Library of Philadelphia, funded by PNC Grow Up Great. We are currently in our third and final year, and are looking at ways to continue the work of the program after our funding ends. Words at Play Vocabulary Initiative is a community-wide initiative aligned with the five practices of Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR); the grant's focus is families with children ages birth to five years. Through playing, singing, and reading at "play parties," families discover new ideas to help strengthen their child's vocabulary while playing with their children. In addition to the library, organizations collaborating on this initiative include The Franklin Institute interactive science museum, the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Philadelphia Zoo. Words at Play is one cohort of the PNC Grow Up Great multi-year initiative to help prepare children—particularly underserved children—from birth to age 5 for success in school and life.

Our service area is one of concentrated low literacy levels and chronic poverty. The communities served by these libraries are predominantly Black and have a high poverty rate.¹ In addition, high school dropout rates are above 40 percent.² The 5,279 children under the age of five who live within this community are considered at risk for falling behind at an early age.³

Neighborhood Ambassadors

With Words at Play, we have activated a network of community stakeholders to spread the message in their own words, in their own neighborhoods. We have identified the most enthusiastic and well-connected attendees of our Saturday Play Parties and enlisted them to be the face of the Words at Play program. They are given a small stipend and in return they take fliers to community hot spots, make phone calls to parents to encourage them to attend programs, and to share their stories. Neighborhood Ambassadors welcome families at our programs, offer administrative support behind the scenes, and actively participate in our programs. They assist with Pop-Up Play Parties and help identify new inroads to connect families to our resources.

Barbershops and Book Nooks

Barbershops have long been neighborhood touchstones, providing a familial environment and gathering place, typically for men. Why not leverage this community spirit to be a central point to spread the importance of early literacy?

We have established eight Book Nooks in community spaces like barbershops and laundromats by providing each location with a small bookcase and a collection of new books. But the most meaningful aspect is that we ask the proprietors to attend a small, casual workshop at their nearby library about early literacy and vocabulary development, provided by the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children. This gives them a chance to get to know us a little better and to see that they can reinforce children's early literacy in simple, practical ways at their workplace. For example, talking about all the different tools they use exposes children to new words and new concepts.

Jazz the Barber at Creative Image Unisex Salon, featured on the cover of this issue, is a particularly strong advocate of early literacy in our North Philadelphia community. He and his staff encourage children who are in his large, welcoming storefront location to grab a book while they wait for a parent or for their own turn in the chair. And has even initiated a special promotion to customers: free haircuts for children who read to him during their turn in the barber chair.

What community sites do people gravitate towards? How do they gather, and how can you harness their sense of community to spread the word about early literacy?

Celebrating Our Families

Our program celebrates the role of parents and other adult caregivers in their child's vocabulary growth, while we also acknowledge that many parents may not feel well-suited to be their child's first teacher. To address this, we make sure that every program we plan is fun, interactive, and non-judgmental in its approach.

In our predominantly Black neighborhoods, books and activities are chosen with care, ensuring that children see their own beautiful faces reflected back at them in the books we share and that their diverse backgrounds are respected and celebrated. This means not only that many of our books star Black characters and single parent families, but that we actively encourage caregivers to become part of the story. This is truly the "talk" part of ECRR in action.

Adults are asked to share family recipes, to repeat songs, to tell stories in their own words, and to reflect on their own knowledge and skills. Each giveaway book comes with a vocabulary tip sheet with lots of fun, easy ideas for adults to extend learning at home. This way the learning can extend outside the confines of our time together in the library.

Who lives in your neighborhood? How can you empower them to share their stories with the children in their lives? Who in your community can help you spread the word? How do kids read, write, sing, talk and play out in their neighborhoods? Look around you to see if you can harness some of the energy and dedication that your community members have. After all, they want the same thing as you: that every child is ready to read! 📖

References

1. "North Central Neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (PA), 19121, 19132, 19130 Detailed Profile," accessed November 18, 2016, <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/North-Central-Philadelphia-PA.html>.
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3. "ChildcareMap Report: 19121," Childcare Map, accessed November 18, 2016, <http://www.childcaremap.org/report.html?areaType=predefined&pid=3581244> and <http://www.childcaremap.org/report.html?areaType=predefined&pid=3581244>.

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