

Taking Early Literacy Messages to WIC Centers

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Marisa Conner is the manager of Youth and Family Engagement at Baltimore County (MD) Public Library and the current chair of the PLA/ALSC Every Child Ready to Read Oversight Committee.

As part of a system-wide family engagement outreach effort to promote early literacy in low-income communities, Baltimore County (MD) Public Library staff visit all WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) centers in Baltimore County monthly. At these visits, librarians engage with families who are in the waiting areas before their WIC appointments. Each family is given a bag containing early literacy resources, including books, library card applications and fliers, information on early literacy programs and services, tip sheets for promoting the Every Child Ready to Read 2 practices, and Technology Tips for children ages birth to five.

Librarians also offer impromptu storytimes, sharing and modeling the importance of talking and reading to young children. These visits were made possible by a partnership with the Baltimore County Department of Health and Human Services and the local WIC director.

Our library staff are the only outside staff permitted to engage with families while they are awaiting their WIC appointments. The information and resources we share with families meets the highest goals of the WIC program and are applicable to all families they serve.

Each child we engage with at the WIC visits is given a book to keep. The Foundation for the Baltimore County Public Library supports this by pursuing grants and donations from private donors as well as from other foundations that support literacy. Many of the families that visit our WIC centers speak Spanish as their primary family language, so we strive to provide bilingual books and handouts.

Librarians initiate each family interaction by offering each child a book. Parents and children are equally delighted with this gift, and it serves as a starting point to engage with the family by reading to their child, which in turn opens the conversation to talk about why reading to children is so important for building language and literacy skills. At times, parents will begin reading to their child as soon as they get the book; other times, the librarian will model reading a book to a child or group of children.

Families are asked if they are familiar with their local library, and if not, they are given a handout with directions to the nearest branch. They are offered a library card if they don't currently have one. Thanks to mobile technology, their library card is created while they wait.

Families are often unaware of the many free services that the public library has to offer, so staff spend time talking about collections, story-time programs, and play spaces that support early literacy, as well as other programs and services for the whole family. Families have shared stories of extreme poverty and lack of basic services in their home countries and are excited to learn of the free resources available at the public library.

Visits to each of the seven WIC locations in Baltimore County occur one to two times per month. Librarians from each of our nineteen branches share in a rotating schedule of visits. Over the past year, we have engaged with approximately twelve hundred families.



Because of WIC outreach visits, we have observed the following:

- Families visited a public library for the first time.
- Families got a public library card for the first time.
- Families visited Storyville, our early childhood learning centers located in the Rosedale and Woodlawn branches, or one of early learning play spaces that are located in all of our branches.
- Families attended a storytime at their local library branch.
- Families learned about our summer reading program and free summer lunches for children, and we saw them coming to the library regularly throughout the summer.

Our partnership with WIC has been one of the most effective ways we can introduce families—many of whom are new to our community and our country—to important early literacy practices, books, and resources at the public library. Our interactions are successful because they are personal and nonthreatening. Families eagerly accept the books, information, and invitations to get a library card and visit the library as a direct result of connecting with an individual librarian. &

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