

A Place to Play

An Assessment of a Public Library's Play Centers

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Play is vital for early learning. It is not 'recess' or a 'time-out' from learning, rather it IS the way young children learn.¹ Because play is the foundation of early learning, the Springfield-Greene County (MO) Library District (SGCL) installed Racing to Read Play & Learn Centers with toys and accompanying activities in their children's departments at all ten branches seven years ago. These centers have been well received, but SGCL staff wanted to determine the value to families in the community and the level of kindergarten readiness provided by the centers. A formal evaluation would help library staff learn how families used the centers, how they could be improved, and opportunities for center growth and development.

Located in southwest Missouri, Greene County is home to just under 290,000 residents.² The cost of living is low, but wages are low as well, which means this community depends on its public resources for increased quality of life. The Springfield-Greene County Library District includes ten branches as well as a mobile library. It is a progressive library system that actively collaborates with preschools, day cares, community organizations, and schools to support the healthy development of young minds.



Early literacy informs all aspects of library service to young children, but some of the most dynamic components of SGCL's services are the Racing to Read Play & Learn Centers. Located throughout the SGCL's service area, the centers provide an opportunity for all children and families to enjoy playing together with quality materials that develop early literacy skills. Each center is stocked with carefully chosen toys, puppets, and books curated by youth services staff to encourage family engagement, open-ended play, and quality language experiences.

Center items and activities are rotated on a regular basis among branches to provide fresh play opportunities. Tip sheets that include ideas for engagement and play accompany the center items to showcase the variety of ways children might choose to play with them and the skills they are building while doing so. These skills are critical to literacy, social-emotional development, school readiness, and lifelong learning, and they naturally flourish during children's play. The Racing to Read Play & Learn Centers offer a safe, clean, high-quality play space for all children in the community.

In the fall of 2017, a dedicated team of youth services staff made plans to evaluate the effectiveness of the Racing to Read



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An example of a library's early literacy play center.

Play & Learn Centers. The team knew anecdotally that families enjoyed the centers and felt they were valuable. However, we needed concrete data to validate the benefits and guide future planning for additions and revitalization. After reaching out to libraries across the country and finding that none had evaluated their play spaces, we created a unique survey to measure exactly what the team wanted to know.

Survey and Method of Data Collection

This survey presented several challenges. Since we found no models, we designed our own survey from scratch. The team focused on learning the ages of those who use the centers, how often families play, whether families noticed and used the play prompts (the tip sheets for play posted near the materials), what values the centers provided, and if the centers had shortcomings. We kept the survey to a single page. Administration of the survey was another challenge. Previously, the team had successfully conducted surveys evaluating storytimes. Since storytimes are at scheduled times, the team could be present at each one throughout a month to administer the survey. But the Play & Learn Centers are available all hours a branch is open, and families visit them at different times and on different days. The team determined the most effective way to get a variety of random responses was to make youth staff at the branches responsible for administering the surveys when families played at the centers. The team worked closely with youth staff to give them a language framework (see table 1) as well as answers to potential questions when approaching families.

Table 1. Language Framework for Staff

The Library is doing an evaluation of our Racing to Read Play & Learn Centers, and we would like to know how they impact you and your children. Please help us by filling out this short survey. It should take less than five minutes and will be anonymous. If you need any assistance filling it out, I am happy to help. When you are finished, please drop it in the box. Thank you for helping us make our Play & Learn Centers even better!

What are you going to do with this information? This information will help us make decisions about how to improve our Play & Learn Centers. We really want to know how valuable the toys and activities are for you.

I already filled out one of these at a different branch/the other day. Do I need to fill out a second one? No, one survey from your family is plenty. Thank you!

Will this help you buy more/better toys? Some of these look old. Please add that to the comments portion on the survey.

Table 2. Comments from Patrons

(The Play & Learn Centers are) A fun safe place to learn and grow.

During a time when many public spaces are underfunded or not safe, the library is crucial for children's development, especially in lieu of no free public preschool in (the) state.

I think it (the Play & Learn Centers) gives kids opportunities to play a different way than they typically would.

It helps me provide the 'early learning' that I could not provide with my own \$.

It provides parents and caregivers opportunities to interact with their children in ways they may not previously have thought of.

My 4 year old can read, I blame you ;)

Without the resources the library provides my family would have more stress & less of our basic human needs met.

The survey collection period ran from February 1 through March 31, 2018. Youth staff asked families to complete the survey, and the library's community relations department created signs encouraging families to complete the survey if staff was not present. Responses were anonymous and collected in boxes located near the centers. The paper-and-pencil survey included four rated questions and two open-ended questions. The rated questions asked about the effectiveness of the play prompts that accompany each activity. The open-ended questions encouraged families to share the value they felt the centers provided and offered an opportunity for feedback and concerns. Responses were sent to the district youth services office and entered into SurveyMonkey.

The Data Results

The team received over two hundred responses to the survey. The majority of respondents noticed the play prompts, and 73 percent answered that they found new ideas to play with their children as a result. This supports the centers' goal to guide families in discovering new ways to help their children learn. It also supports the time staff spends creating the prompts. The team also learned that, while the majority of children using the centers are between the ages of two and four,

considerable numbers of infants, toddlers, and older preschoolers also use the centers, as well as some children age seven and older.

The open-ended questions gave the team important feedback supporting the benefit of the centers. Numerous respondents noted their appreciation of having safe, clean spaces to play indoors. Several respondents mentioned accessibility, recognizing that the centers provide an important opportunity for all families. Multiple respondents commented that their children discovered new ways to play and that their families continued this play in their homes. These responses all support the impact the centers have on early literacy development. Table 2 includes a small selection of comments.

We also saw trends in the kinds of improvements respondents suggested for the spaces. Several comments referred to cramped spaces and the difficulty this presents in playing comfortably and managing children. They mentioned the need for safer spaces for infants and concerns that children age seven and older “outgrew” the centers and had limited interactive opportunities. Families also wanted to see more toys, different toys, and worn toys replaced more frequently. While none of these comments was surprising, they support the need to better arrange children’s spaces and secure regular funding to replace and update the heavily used toys.

An important goal of administering this evaluation was to use the collected data to determine the next steps and future goals for the Racing to Read Play & Learn Centers across the library

district. The centers turned seven years old in May and need updates and replacements. The information in this report supports the need to rearrange and refurbish the current centers to ensure there is adequate room for play and structures to support play activities. The results also tell us that our branches need space for our youngest patrons and that we need to find additional approaches to support learning in playful ways for children ages seven and older. In addition to using this information to improve our children’s spaces, the team is sharing the results of this survey with stakeholders, patrons, and relevant community organizations and partners.

The Racing to Read Play & Learn Centers offer joyful play and learning opportunities for our youngest patrons every day. We are pleased to have data and feedback supporting the critical role these centers play in the healthy development of our future community.

References

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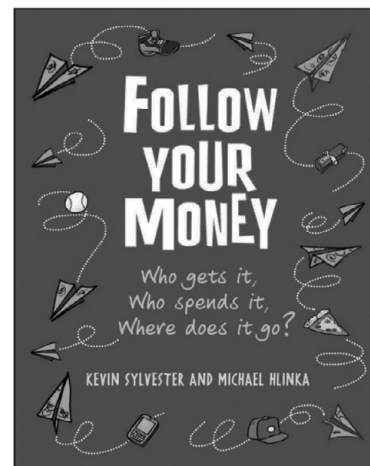
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