

Starting Early

A Revised Early Literacy Strategy

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In 2014, Waterloo Public Library (WPL) in Ontario, Canada, threw out the playbook for how early literacy was done and created the award-winning Explore, Play, Learn strategy based on Every Child Ready to Read 2 (ECRR2). This resulted in dramatically increased program participation, noteworthy circulation results, and measurable customer satisfaction with feedback that demonstrates impact.

Like many public library systems, we implemented ECRR2 but knew that our fidelity to that program was lacking in practice. Explore, Play, Learn is a holistic reimagining of what it means for us as a public library to support, model, and facilitate early literacy and learning.

From programs and collections to public spaces and community collaborations, starting over meant thinking about how we might support caregivers as children's first and best teachers every time they interact with the library.

Step one for us was to make a commitment to our community to do better: building an early literacy plan became a strategic goal. A team from across our system, composed of programmers, managers, and outreach staff met to get started on this objective. Research into early literacy best practices, what other libraries are doing, and what is happening beyond libraries helped shape a framework for programming.

For each age and stage of learning from birth to school, we established consistent standards for all of our programs. While stories, songs, parent asides, and resource recommendations were all included, play-based activity hubs became central to our programming landscape. Participants in any program in the WPL system now spend most of their time



Library activities encourage play and spark conversation.

in child-led, multi-generational activities. Our staff support them in exploring open-ended experiences by providing parents with asides contextualized within activities that can be duplicated at home.

The newly implemented play-based centers were a hit. Families enjoyed the surprise of encountering new ways to play together in everything from dress-up to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and wanted more of this. Clearly our children's spaces could and should be transformed to mirror this play-based, third space approach to family learning.



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Play centers provide context for ECRR2 parent asides.

We conceptualized spaces, furniture, and equipment that could be altered into ever-changing opportunities for families to interact. A homemade stand in our children's department became a farmer's market in July and a lab for freaky scientific exploration in October. Loose parts pop-ups and pieces of cardboard invited families to create without structure or time limits, while flexible table spaces offered building zones with varied materials from one week to the next.

Transforming our spaces to intentionally include open-ended discovery materials and toys helps us to underscore our message to parents about the importance of play. We tell parents to read, write, sing, talk, and play—engage in these five practices every day with your child, whenever and wherever you are able, and you will be on the road to early literacy success.

To make this message stick, we needed to model it in the spaces where we invite families to spend time. We could see right away that this was an exciting new way of doing things. At our market stand, very young children were now counting money as they exchanged currency for veggies from their parents. At the Frankenstein lab, little ones traded guesses and grand ideas with grandparents about the kinds of monsters they could make by crossing centipedes and beetles.

The work we were doing to promote the role of play in shaping early literacy was exciting. To build upon that, we wanted to help parents choose reading materials that promoted play as well as the other four practices. Across our system, we solicited recommendations from all child-serving staff for books that bring the five practices to life. We compiled an impressive list of kid-tested, great-to-read-aloud books to make our Explore, Play, Learn (EPL) collection.

Books like *Tap the Magic Tree* by Christie Matheson and *Windblown* by Édouard Manceau are playful books. The rhythm and cadence of *I Got Rhythm* by Connie Schofield-Morrison and *Stretch* by Doreen Cronin make it easy to sing along, and *Scribble* by Ruth Ohi and *A Squiggly Story* by Andrew Larsen highlight the scaffold skills for writing. Books for each practice were given bright colored Read, Write, Sing,



Active spaces foster family play.

Talk, or Play stickers and displayed separately with attractive signage and marketing “sell sheets” for each practice. Intended to be an easy to browse, sure-bet collection, the EPL books have been extremely popular. The collection circulates at more than double the rate of the regular picture-book collection. Books are displayed and shelved separately as their own collection. New titles have been added to the collection to ensure variety and to respond to high interest.

One of the best parts of doing a bold, big-picture refresh in service delivery is the opportunity to create new champions for the work. Restarting early literacy from brass tacks was an organization-wide, multidepartment process. Children's services, library collections, administration, branches, marketing, IT, facilities and borrower services all played important roles in this project.

As a result, there is investment from across the system in this initiative and sustained interest in continuing to improve it. For example, when our website was redesigned, marketing put the practices front and center with tips for caregivers to use at home. Library collections added to this enhancement by making the EPL books discoverable by each practice. Choosing one of the practices from the website brings users immediately to a catalog listing of all of our EPL books for Read, Write, Sing, Talk, or Play.

This integrated thinking about early literacy in our varied work spheres has moved outside of the library as well. We have worked with early literacy partners in the community to adopt the promotion of the five practices as a regional literacy approach and these partners are now working with Waterloo Region's prolific tech community to develop new tools for caregivers to support early literacy development.

Early literacy has gone from being the work and concern of children's services at the library to a dynamic priority that is continually being improved by players across our organization and our community. We are proud that Explore, Play, Learn is a literacy game-changer for children and families in Waterloo. &