

Delivering Literacy

Stork Storytime Promotes Literacy to Expecting Families

JENNIFER JORDEBREK

My “aha” moment came during a library conference while listening to a session about an early literacy program. Hearing the details about this wonderful program made me suddenly realize that waiting until *after* a baby arrives to give them board books and share with parents the importance of reading was too late. I had a strong desire to stand up and shout those exact words, “It’s too late!”

I’ve always loved reading and knew it was important to do with my first son, Jacob, when he was born. However, adjusting to this new little person, and all the changes that ensued, made starting and maintaining a daily reading routine more hope than reality. My expectations of what parenthood would be like and the reality of those first few months clashed, as they do for many, especially brand-new parents.

Hospitals give you a crash course on caring for your child right before they send you home. We learned how to feed, bathe, change, and even hold our son. However, we didn’t learn how to read to him, or why it was so very important to do—from day one—with him. Even though I instinctively knew it was important, adjusting to parenthood can be overwhelming at times. Adding a daily reading routine to the already chaotic beginning days sometimes proved difficult to accomplish.

It wasn’t until I began my library career a few years later that I began to understand and see firsthand how critical developing a love of reading and becoming proficient in it was to a child’s future success, not only in school, but in life. Of course, it’s never too late to begin reading to your child and helping them develop a love for lifelong learning.



As we librarians know, it’s never too early to read to a baby; this innovative storytime idea hopes to get more parents reading to babies before they are even born!

I realized that if I had difficulties establishing a regular reading routine in the beginning, other caregivers probably did too. Families are faced with many challenges and changes after baby arrives but implementing a daily reading routine with their newborn doesn’t need to be one of those things.

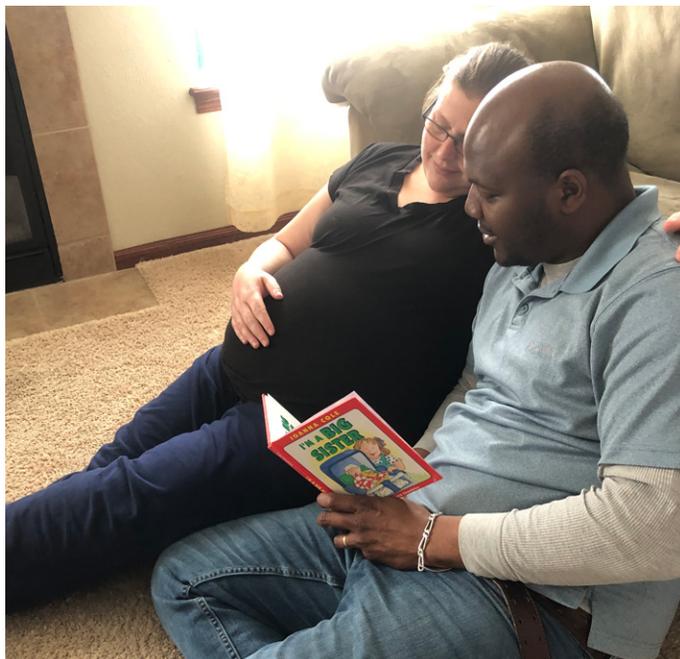
My mind had been set in motion at that conference, and so began my desire to help expecting families develop a reading routine before baby’s arrival and prepare and educate parents and caregivers, right from the very beginning.

Stork Storytime is an expecting family education initiative I began developing in 2015 at the North Liberty Community Library (NLCL) in Iowa. It was originally known as Womb Literacy, but last year, we rebranded and updated the name, but the concept remained intact.

Stork Storytime encourages expecting families to develop a reading routine before baby (and chaos) arrive, learn about early literacy skills and how children learn those skills, and empowers caregivers to be more confident as a child’s first teacher.



Jennifer Jordebek, a former children’s librarian, is currently the assistant director at the North Liberty (Iowa) Community Library.



An expectant couple reads to their baby.

Current early literacy programs are good, are making a difference, and need to continue. They all, however, target caregivers and children *after* the children are born. This initiative is a completely new and original approach that moves up the current timeframe from the birth to twenty-four-month age range libraries are currently focusing on, to deliver literacy before a child's arrival by focusing on the expecting family.

NLCL has developed multiple programs under the Stork Storytime umbrella, including Stork Storytime Reads, an annual expo, and monthly talks podcast.

The Stork Storytime Reads program encourages expecting families to do one-hundred read-alouds before baby arrives. For convenience, read-alouds are determined by the family, counting either books or times spent reading. Books are earned as the family progresses through the program. This gets books into the home and starts the child's own personal library. The family begins to develop a daily reading routine so that habit can be continued after baby's arrival. Adults become more comfortable reading out loud and children can practice their literacy skills, and it provides a wonderful bonding experience and sets the tone and expectation that reading is important and valued at home. The Reads program is also a great segue to the 1000 Books before Kindergarten program that many libraries currently offer.

Our annual expo connects new and expecting families and caregivers with valuable resources in the community and with each other, to begin building a network of support. Nonprofit organizations, social services, and businesses share their expertise with attendees and each other. Families can browse, collect information, and learn about what our community has to offer for both before and after baby's arrival at this free

community event. We are currently in the process of planning our fifth expo and had approximately fifty vendors last year.

Mini library programs and screenings are available for families with children. The mini programs give attendees a chance to sample regular library programming, and screenings have included car seat checks, vision, dental, and speech/language/hearing checks. The expo is free for the public and nonprofit vendors; for-profit vendors pay a small fee (which provides funding for the Reads program prizes).

The monthly Stork Storytime Talks podcast enables adult caregivers to listen and learn from local experts when it's convenient for them, whether that's during their commute, child's naptime or a 2 a.m. feeding. While we're not professional podcasters, we enjoy sharing useful information. A few of the subjects covered so far have included autism, car seat safety, newborn screenings, milk banks, surrogacy, and safe sleeping.

During our Learn About Literacy episodes, we talk with a different local library each time on a specific early literacy skill. These recordings can be accessed from our website, SoundCloud, iTunes, or however you currently listen to podcasts.

Forming and developing partnerships has been crucial to the success of our Stork Storytime initiative. A local hospital has sponsored our yearly expo and was instrumental in providing and coordinating the funding, design, and construction of our Locally Grown Lactation Room in our children's area. Many of the guests featured on our Talks podcasts are vendors from the expo, and we partner with our local food pantry to offer the Reads program at their site.

Research Supports Stork Storytime

Besides intuitively knowing as a mom and professionally as a librarian that reading to children as soon and often as possible is critical to getting them off to a good start, there continues to be a growing body of research and statistics supporting this. Only half of parents read to their younger children daily and less than 10 percent read to their children from infancy.¹

The Stork Storytime initiative will not enable babies to know how to read and write in the womb nor be born knowing how to. However, The Reading Womb provides a wealth of research and information on why it's important to begin reading to the bump.²

Libraries offer storytimes that incorporate early literacy skills. These skills enable children to enter school ready to learn to read and write. With the advent of baby storytimes, librarians are able to introduce these skills earlier. Now it's time to move that benchmark up earlier still by focusing on expecting families and babies before they arrive.

We continue to develop and expand this initiative and are excited to roll out the first Stork Storytime Summer Reading Program this summer. Expecting families can earn prizes by completing a reading log of activities, such as reading and singing out loud, learning nursery rhymes, touring the children's area, introducing themselves to the children's librarian, and checking out board books and materials from the pregnancy and parenting sections.

Reading and literacy skills are a critical part of a child's future success. As a child's first teacher, caregivers are a vital part

of how kids learn the value of literacy and build the habit of reading.

Children's librarians are in a unique position to contribute to this process and offering Stork Storytime programming is another tool we can utilize to set children on their lifelong learning journey, from the very beginning. &

Visit www.northlibertylibrary.org to learn more about this initiative, access the toolkit, and begin delivering Stork Storytime programming at your library.

References

1. Reach Out and Read Iowa, www.reachoutandread.org/our-story/importance-of-reading-aloud.
2. The Reading Womb, <https://belly-books.com/research-and-information/>.