

# From Parent to Patron

## Stressing Early Literacy to New Parents

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**D**on't look now, but you may be overlooking one of your very best new audiences to the library—new parents are a valuable resource.

Not only will you be able to hook a whole family of future patrons into “librarying,” you’ll also catch them when they are at their most suggestible. An abundance of anecdotal evidence confirms that new parents (new mothers especially) are particularly voracious consumers of information about their precious bumps and bundles (note the bestselling tendencies of various pregnancy books).

While many people today rely on the internet for quick information, new parents are still highly reliant on family and friends for questions they need answered, such as, “What’s the best stroller or car seat? How many kicks should I be feeling each hour? Why is my baby crying?”

All these and more are addressed adequately in most pregnancy guides or parenting books, and while they could always ask their healthcare practitioner, somehow hearing it from an experienced parent in-person is worth more.<sup>1</sup>

Libraries can step in, forming parent social groups or giving classes on pregnancy, parenthood, and early literacy. Hopefully, they’ll be back for more with their kids in tow.

### No Kids? No Problem

Of course, if it’s an option, librarians who have “been there, done that” may be more comfortable running this sort of program. But don’t be scared off. Even if you haven’t had children yourself and feel less “qualified” to discuss parenting, realize that you *are* an expert on children. As a children’s librarian,



You’re never too young for a good story!

you deal with kids all day long! And you know things that these parents might not—the best board books and nursery rhymes, how to research the most relevant resources, and what the library can offer kids.

Keep in mind that all you’re doing is presenting reliable information, not inventing it yourself. If participants do decide to challenge your authority, you can drop a line about the courses you took in early childhood development or best practices in early literacy, or the years of experience you’ve had dealing with kids.

### Where to Start?

Planning and promoting an event like this can be tricky. Consider some of the following options and judge it based on your experience with your demographic.

Many parents are likely at work during the day, so you might want to look at early evening or weekend options. Do you have lots of stay-at-home moms coming religiously to baby storytime? Maybe highlight one as a special. Do you have regular attendance at a popular adult series? Try to devote one session to this. It can be tweaked to fit into the categories of literacy, health and wellness, parenting, and more.

Whatever you decide, make sure to promote it. Of course, include it in your regular calendars and brochures, and

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display a flyer in the building. Venture outside, too. Can you hang up a sign at your local Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) office or at health practitioners that new or expecting parents might frequent? Is there an online discussion group or page for moms where you can post a digital notice?

Do you have a relationship with a local health organization? Getting a guest presenter (say a pediatrician or obstetric nurse) to deliver part of the information takes a load off you and lends added legitimacy to your event.

To set up for your program, consider how you're planning on running it. Will you be seating participants in an auditorium? Or do you want to be family-friendly and have an informal circle gathering in your storytime area, with toys for babies to play with? Keep in mind that parents, by definition, have kids to take care of.

## What to Include

Where do you start? Try gathering information about local resources as a starting point. Here are organizations you might like to include on a handout, with their full contact information and hours of service:

- Local WIC center (federally funded resource for pregnant women and young children, provides vouchers for healthy food staples)
- Local La Leche League group (international organization in support of breastfeeding mothers; may have a membership fee)
- Local SNAP (food stamps) information
- Hotlines to call for advice and resources: New York State, for example, has the 24/7 Growing Up Healthy Hotline that connects callers to resources for health care, nutrition, pregnancy, family planning, and children's needs.
- Information about health insurance/Medicaid/CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program); let parents know that often children can qualify even if parents don't ([www.insurekidsnow.gov](http://www.insurekidsnow.gov) is a good starting point).

The next local resource you'll want to let them know about is the library itself. Be sure to highlight the activities and programs offered for kids, and it can't hurt to mention that parents get to socialize at storytime too. If there are age limits or special rules for children's library cards, give the details. Do you offer fine-free cards for kids, or a way for them to read off their fines? What kinds of homework help or other services do you provide? Hours of service, branch information, and even the names of the children's librarians can help parents feel empowered to come visit.

If you're comfortable doing so, a packet or brochure of pregnancy health and wellness information can be valuable. You can print it directly from a reliable website if you don't want the responsibility of dispensing medical advice.

## Next Up: Early Literacy

Here is your chance to introduce them to songs, fingerplays, games, and books, and offer early literacy tips and suggestions. Part of your program, depending on what you feel comfortable with and how you've marketed the event, can include live demos.

Don't assume that everyone knows "Twinkle, Twinkle" or other basic nursery rhymes; even if they do, you can show them the fingerplay and add asides about songs and rhymes as essential components of early literacy.

The same goes for books: show them what dialogic reading looks like, assure them that books are still good if they aren't read cover to cover (or even read at all), point out your board book and picturebook collections, and highlight a few favorites.

For the very young, simple, high-contrast, black-and-white books (such as those by Tana Hoban or Peter Linenthal) work well, as do books that feature photographs of faces such as the Global Babies series or Margaret Miller's *Baby Faces*. If you circulate touch-and-feel, mirrored, pop-up, or lift-the-flap books, you may want to showcase those.

Review how to play Peekaboo or This Little Piggy, and reassure them that scientific research backs up even these simple games. If you have a demographic that doesn't speak English at home, another good fact to know is that books and words, in any language, are terrific for a baby's development. The more words a child hears at home, the more prepared they will be for success in school.<sup>2</sup>

Even before a baby is born, he or she becomes accustomed to mom's voice and will react to songs and music that reach the uterus.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not reading to a fetus will give it an advantage later in life (there are books out there specifically for this demographic), getting parents in the habit of bedtime stories is a definite good thing.

## Finishing Touches

Any library event should include a book display. Depending on the focus of your program, pull titles on pregnancy, newborns, parenting, and literacy. Don't forget your video collection; there may be a childbirth class or prenatal yoga session

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out at the volunteer table and read—nobody sets a better example than that!

By incorporating volunteers into my advocacy goals, I'm able to expand my reach. Bookleggers come from all walks of life and are able to spread the word to family and friends who may not be library users. My Summer Reading tweens are able to speak kid-to-kid, often reaching friends who haven't been to the library since they grew out of storytime. Because they're volunteers and not employees, they speak out of genuine, unbiased affection for the library, and listeners can tell.

It doesn't take much to turn a volunteer into a vocal advocate. When I train new Bookleggers, I include information that

volunteers can turn around and share. "Did you know the Friends of the Library offers free books for classrooms? Not all our teachers are aware, so bring them a flyer when you visit." This even works with our middle-school volunteers. "Who can guess how many people signed up for summer reading last year? More than five thousand! How many sign-ups should we try for this year?"

The next time you're feeling overwhelmed and unable to advocate, consider your volunteers. Whether you have just three or four dedicated regulars or a small volunteer army, they can revitalize your advocacy efforts without requiring you to do it all on your own. &

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on DVD. At the end of the program, mention that all materials are available for checkout to mitigate the "too pretty to read" phenomenon that often leaves attractive displays untouched.

Have extra copies of handouts ready for latecomers. If you have some other giveaways they certainly can't hurt—again canvass your local pediatricians, WIC office, daycares,

maternity care centers, and anywhere else they might have brochures or goods to share.

Consider offering a tour of the children's room, or a sign-up sheet for your email newsletters. Thank everyone for coming and say that you look forward to seeing them back soon! &

## References

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3. Carolyn Granier-Deferre et al., "A Melodic Contour Repeatedly Experienced by Human Near-Term Fetuses Elicits a Profound Cardiac Reaction One Month after Birth," *PloS One* 6, no. 2 (February 23, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0017304>.