More Than a Story

Engaging Young Learners Virtually

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Art in a bag (left) and Discovery Time: Shadows

The content of this article was originally developed as a presentation for the Texas Library Association Annual Conference in March 2020. We intended to share about the importance of intentional early literacy-based programs, staff training, and using programming templates to create sustainable programming outlines. In light of current events, we have adapted our content to include strategies for shifting to a virtual programming environment while continuing to support early literacy and caregiver engagement.

Reaching children during their first three years is critical to early brain development.[1] Connecting with caregivers is also vital to developing successful habits. As library programs constantly evolve (and even shift to virtual platforms), how do we adapt? Now more than ever, libraries need intentional strategies to engage young learners.

Reaching your audience requires being intentional about your work. It's easy to say children's programming is fun, because it is. We also can't forget programming is critical to children's development, and libraries have a unique role in educating and supporting the adults who love them. Get intentional about your programming and the results will follow.

Define Your Learning Outcomes

Successful programs use learning outcomes as roadmaps. To be a good guide, outcomes must be measurable. What do you want attendees to take away or learn from your program? Be as specific as possible. Consider focusing on a certain area or teaching a specific skill. Outcomes might look different for in-person versus virtual programs. Consider how your outcomes translate to the adults. A baby painting program might give caregivers an understanding of why to paint with their babies. You're sharing both how to do something and why they should do it.

Determine Your Focus and Goals

Early learning spans many unique needs. What's appropriate for infants may not work well for active toddlers. Start by choosing your target age and focusing on what's age and developmentally appropriate. Community surveys help you connect with your patrons to find their interests and preferences. Think about where limits make sense. Restricting your age group allows for a more targeted, meaningful approach. Reducing your participation range also focuses on the quality of interactions rather than attendance.

Identify Your Resources

While designing programs, think about your available resources and supplies. With virtual programs, also consider what patrons have at home. You can't engage families if your activities require supplies they don't have. Since we hope to make early learning accessible, simple supplies like cotton balls, crayons, and clothespins work well. These encourage caregivers to make use of everyday learning opportunities. Also think about how these resources encourage your target skills, like sensory play, fine motor skills, or comparison skills.

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Plan for Caregiver Involvement

Engaging adults in your programs isn't accidental. Design activities with direct engagement so adults lead their children in the activity, not you. Provide ample hands-on training for repeating the activity at home. Handouts and other resources also engage families. For virtual programs, provide detailed instructions and suggestions for adults to encourage participation. As new instructors, the adults at home need both the how of the activity and the why behind it. They can easily find activities. It's the library's role to demonstrate why each activity helps build early literacy skills in ways caregivers understand.

Developing Meaningful Program Templates

Program templates identify the audience and intention of the program. Templates help content creators organize and know what information presenters need. Presenters receive succinct information and don't need to do additional research before hosting the program. This lets you present programming even if you have limited staff or filming capabilities. Templates also guide consistent patron experiences and create program archives.

Include a description of the program, target audience, duration, and staffing/volunteer needs. List required technology, room setup, and attendance limits. The supply list should include prices and vendor links. Share supply information as a resource for virtual programs. Also include any background information, resources, slides, handouts, and activity instructions.

Choosing Your Program Type (and Platform)

Standalone programs don't build upon previous sessions, but can be done more than once. Consider programs on specific topics (like dinosaurs) or activities (like painting). Series are usually hosted in consecutive weeks. Attendance at the first program isn't required, but succeeding programs usually build on concepts it introduces. Consider specific concepts, like math, science, or nursery rhymes. Be careful not to overdo your series with too many sessions. Three to four programs introduce the topic without being overwhelming or overdone.

Virtual programs offer different engagement levels. When choosing your platform, consider what matches your goals. Do patrons need to be passive attendees or active participants? Do they need access to handouts or other resources? Facebook posts allow patrons to interact with the library through comments, pictures, and videos as they engage alongside staff. YouTube easily gathers content and creates playlists. Blog posts on early literacy topics allow for more caregiver content than videos and target an adult audience. **&**

Successful Program Ideas

Here are a few of our favorite programs that have been successful, both in-person and virtually, at engaging children and caregivers at the library.

Baby Picasso

This come-and-go program is for children up to eighteen months old. It introduces babies to art and shows caregivers how to replicate activities at home, connecting fun with development. Babies use finger paints to create their artwork. A "mess free" alternative uses paint drops on cardstock, sealed in a gallon zipper bag.

Online, we highlight the benefits of infants and art while demonstrating the activity. While geared toward infants, this activity is also applicable to older children.

Discovery Time

This is an abridged, concept-based storytime, followed by hands-on activities introducing simple STEAM concepts. It makes STEAM understandable from an early age, and helps adults understand that bigger concepts start small.

Online, we forgo storytime for a revised format focusing on the benefits of each activity and the importance of exposing children to their natural world. We encourage adults to take cues from what's already popular. For example, a gross motor spiderweb can be done with chalk or tape.

Ocean Lab

This traveling program demonstrates how everyday activities develop early literacy skills. It can adapt to any popular theme, like dinosaurs or insects. A take-home activity encourages continued learning outside the library.

We're in the process of adapting this program virtually to focus on the at-home activity with everyday supplies. The host will provide more information about the activity's benefits and what children learn.

Reference

1. Elaine Czarnecki et al., *Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library: Toolkit for Serving Early Childhood Educators*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: ALSC & PLA, 2017).