

From Off-Screen and Online

Hybrid Programming for Any Situation

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Prior to the pandemic, play was synonymous with our library. As Fred Rogers said, “It’s the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives.”¹

As a Family Place Library, we focus on the importance of building connections among caregivers, children, and our community, particularly through play-based experiences. Some programs adapted quickly to virtual (like storytimes), while others took more thought.

Even as we return to a combination of in-person and virtual programming, we have to evaluate which programs work best with community interest, available space, and staff. Even in “normal” business, things like limited staff or construction can necessitate program adaptations. Here’s how we adapted our popular, play-based family playgroup series into a meaningful online equivalent.

Family Place Model

Family Place is a national network of specially designated libraries focused on early literacy and family support. We create welcoming environments with the resources to help families encourage their child’s early learning. Equally important is building connections within the community. Each location includes specially trained staff, resource collections, specially designed spaces, and partnerships with community organizations.²

Family Place libraries also offer targeted programming for babies and toddlers, including the signature Parent Child Workshop, a five-week program that encourages the importance of play. Librarians facilitate and model interactions between children and caregivers, while connecting families with each other and community resource professionals who can help address concerns. The program thrives on natural interaction and connections between participants.

Platform and Structure

First, we identified a platform that provided secure, face-to-face, real-time interactions. Zoom offered the flexibility and features we needed. Registration provided security, while the abilities to mute, spotlight, and otherwise manage audio and video offered additional control. Families could participate with audio and video to their comfort level, but there was space for anonymity as well. The webinar settings allowed us to send reminder emails and set up a one-time registration for



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the entire series, and the recording capabilities allowed us to capture content for future use.

We needed a program outline that kept the key elements of a playgroup but recognized the differences in an online approach. Not everything successful in-person translates online. We identified three key components: a community resource professional providing information and assistance, staff modeling learning strategies with family engagement, and connections among participants. With those elements in mind, we drafted an outline:

1. Welcome song
2. Information from our community resource professional
3. Staff led, hands-on activity
4. Question and answer time
5. Closing rhymes and goodbye song

Planning and Preparation

Planning a virtual playgroup required coordination. To start, we merged the efforts of both Family Place locations in our system into a single, coordinated effort that maximized staff expertise. We coordinated four main components: community resource professionals, library staff, playgroup activities and handouts, and staff resources.

Community Resource Professionals

We started with our existing partners who normally attend in-person playgroup sessions, explaining the goals of our virtual sessions. We asked partners to provide five to ten minutes of content and answer specific questions from families. Working with our schedule, each partner shared their available dates and topic expertise. These preferences were used to assign dates in the final schedule.

Once finalized, each partner provided a brief bio, content to share with families, and three to five sample questions they typically answer. Partners received panelist invitations to the program, which allowed them to join in advance to test any needed technology and review program expectations. In addition, we sent email reminders with additional details prior to each program.

Library Staff

Clearly defined staff roles help our virtual programs run smoothly. We wanted unique, meaningful roles for all participating staff, but also a consistent experience for attending families. We identified three key roles:

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

As with any new program, our virtual playgroups were a learning experience for all involved.

1. **Engage with each other.** This program works best with interaction among all participants. Each staff member contributed to the conversation, whether asking questions, sharing observations, or adding additional thoughts. This back-and-forth dialogue made the program natural and engaging, but also kept any one person from needing to carry the entire conversation.
2. **Ask questions to start the conversation.** Families were hesitant to speak up, but if staff asked questions and modeled conversations, they were more willing to join in. We used questions to describe the activity, share experiences, and get more information from resource professionals.
3. **Model and move.** Lecture-style content didn't work well for families wrangling toddlers. Keep your content short and engaging, with families participating alongside you as much as possible. If families can't participate, include lots of props and engaging visuals to keep things interesting.
4. **Read the room.** It's important to know what's working (or not) with families. Keep an eye on how families are engaging and adjust as needed. If families are tuning out, it's okay to move on to the next activity. If they're struggling to keep up, slow down the pace. Let the families lead where your program goes next.
5. **Experiment and adapt.** Each week, we made slight modifications to pacing, questions, and props based on the feedback from the previous week. Being willing to learn and improve means our programs continue to thrive.

- The program facilitator: Serving as the host of the program, this person provided introductions, narrated the activity, and ensured the program's pacing and flow.
- The activity facilitator: Serving as the primary demonstration for the activity, this person was the spotlight video and feedback during step-by-step instruction.
- The chat facilitator: Serving as a conversational guide, this person passed on questions and encouraged conversation during the program.

Activities

Each session featured an exploration activity, which mimicked the collaborative art exploration area of a typical playgroup while also encouraging families to explore creativity and learning at home. We wanted open-ended activities showcasing simple, at-home options with readily available supplies. We tested each activity before the program to tweak recipes and instructions as needed, and sent families a supply list in advance so they could participate during the program. We also created program handouts with early learning applications, the supply list, and step-by-step instructions. Also included were suggestions to expand the activity, helpful websites, and library resources related to the activity.

Staff Resources

We also created resources for staff hosting the programs. These included PowerPoint presentations to share during the program with speaker notes, notes for describing the activity's steps, and a chat guide to answer frequently asked questions from attendees. These, combined with practice sessions and troubleshooting in advance, ensured all staff knew what to expect during programs.

Program in Practice

Each session ran thirty to forty-five minutes based on the participants' interest and engagement. Families could be on video with library staff, which helped us read the room and adjust pacing. We quickly learned our original program script didn't reflect successful pacing, and made further adjustments based on patron feedback. While we planned to discuss extension after completing the activity, we found it

took longer for families to complete each step. We adjusted to include this information as commentary during the activity's steps, creating more engaging demonstrations and giving families space to work.

We also found families were initially hesitant to ask questions. Instead, our chat facilitator led with a question which prompted families to feel more comfortable asking questions. Since we received most questions via chat, having a facilitator added those questions more naturally into the ongoing conversation and made sure all family concerns were addressed.

After the first week, we added opportunities for families to connect and share by including space at the end of the activity to share their project, creation, or experience. We didn't capture any of these videos to retain patron privacy, but still had the chance for more personalized interactions. As families became more comfortable with the virtual format, more were willing to share in this group setting.

We also wanted to engage families beyond the program, so for each session, we created blog posts featuring highlighted content. These included activity videos, additional resources, and some of the questions and answers discussed. When resource professionals were willing, we also posted their content. After our first session, we revised our filming setup to create more engaging, clear videos available on our YouTube channel. This helped us engage with both attending families and those who might have had other conflicts but still might benefit from the content.

As we move forward, we continue to evaluate our playgroup and other programming using these lessons. Our hybrid programming approach has allowed us to continue engaging families in a variety of settings, extending the reach and impact of the library in our community. &

References

1. "Play Quotes," The Strong National Museum of Play, August 26, 2020, <https://www.museumofplay.org/education/education-and-play-resources/play-quotes>.
2. "What Is a Family Place Library?" Family Place Libraries, 2021, <https://www.familyplacelibraries.org/what-family-place-library>.