

It's Never Too Early

Hatchlings Program Reaches Expectant and Newborn Families

CARRIE SANDERS, BETSY DIAMANT-COHEN, DOROTHY STOLTZ,
AND ELAINE CZARNECKI



Just twenty years ago, library programs for babies were rare occurrences, and many librarians were uncomfortable with the idea of presenting programs for children under age three and their caregivers. Now, research regarding the connection between early childhood experiences and brain development is widely known, and as a result, early literacy programming for infants and toddlers is an accepted part of mainstream library offerings.

But why only start there? Research also tells us that a fetus can hear a mother's voice while still in utero, and supports the Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) practices of talking and singing even before the baby is born. That's why children's librarian Carrie Sanders dreamed about creating a program for expectant parents.

In 2016, Carrie became the youth services coordinator of the Maryland State Library Agency and met Dorothy Stoltz, then director for community engagement at the Carroll County (MD) Public Library. Dorothy suggested that she reach out to Dr. Betsy Diamant-Cohen, another former children's librarian and current consultant and trainer for Mother Goose on the Loose.

In true collaborative style, Carrie and Betsy shared their dreams for children and families over coffee together and when Carrie mentioned her desire to offer a program for expectant parents, Betsy offered to create one. A few years later, funding became available and Dorothy, Carrie, and Betsy began their *Hatchlings* journey.

The first agenda item was to hire someone to evaluate the process every step along the way, to ensure that the program was



Carrie Sanders is the youth services coordinator for the Maryland State Library Agency, where she provides consultation and training to youth services coordinators for all public libraries in the areas of early literacy, STEAM programming, teen services, and family engagement.

Dr. Betsy Diamant-Cohen is a children's librarian with a doctorate in communications design. Creator of the Mother Goose on the Loose early literacy program, Betsy

has been a passionate supporter of families and very young children for more than thirty years. She received the ALSC Distinguished Service Award in 2022 and co-edits *Children & Libraries' Research Roundup* column. **Dorothy Stoltz** is a professional librarian, author, and Edward de Bono Creative Thinking Methods trainer who has decades of experience in the field of librarianship, programming, outreach, and community engagement. She currently serves as Director of Library Engagement for The de Bono Group and is owner of Waldo Publishers, inspired by the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. **Elaine Czarnecki** is a literacy consultant specializing in early literacy and evaluation projects. She has provided consulting, professional development, and evaluation services on a variety of initiatives across the country since first beginning her work with public libraries in 2001.



working and to enable tweaks to be made to parts that needed improvement. Luckily, Elaine Czarnecki, literacy consultant with Resources in Reading and a co-author with Dorothy on the *ECRR Toolkit for Serving Early Childhood Educators*, was available and the four-person *Hatchlings* Steering Committee was formed.

The Steering Committee's original idea morphed into a vision of two programs; one for expectant parents and a follow-up program for parents with newborns. With funding from the Maryland State Department of Education, the Maryland State Library Agency hired Betsy to develop *Mother Goose on the Loose: Hatchlings*, a program that helps parents nurture their babies through playful literacy practices, both before and immediately after birth.

The Program

Mother Goose on the Loose: Hatchlings is a unique offering under the *Mother Goose on the Loose* umbrella. It consists of two separate programs, *Ready to Hatch* (RTH) for expectant parents (single session) and *In the Nest* (ITN) for parents with newborns (series of four workshop sessions).

The *Hatchlings* initiative teaches the importance of developing the daily habits of talking, reading, singing, and bonding with

babies. Both programs, *Ready to Hatch* (RTH) and *In the Nest* (ITN), are designed to:

- Empower parents as their baby's first and most important teacher;
- Establish the roots of early literacy development for expectant and new families through in-person and outreach programming so that ALL families can learn the importance of daily early reading (sharing books), singing, and bonding with their babies;
- Inform and inspire families that literacy begins before birth and continues in the earliest months of life;
- Help parents discover how librarians and library-sponsored early literacy programs can support and engage expectant families and families with newborns throughout their preschool years.

The *Hatchlings* curriculum follows the *Mother Goose on the Loose* format and philosophy, which focuses on the whole child, building upon a foundation of ritual, repetition, music, movement, learning-by-doing, joy, fostering a non-judgmental atmosphere, and play.

Hatchlings integrates important **health and child development** information, including eye and visual development, the

importance of tummy time, and how an infant's brain develops in the early weeks and months of life through verbal and tactile stimulation with caregivers.

Hatchlings highlights **early literacy** information and practices while encouraging talking and singing to the fetus while still in utero. Interacting in this way becomes a habit, and parents learn that **it is never too early** to start showing baby the meaning of words through daily singing, talking, and reading.

Hatchlings was intentionally created with delivery instructions for inside the library as well as in community outreach settings. The programs have been piloted and evaluated for three years with selected library systems across the state of Maryland. As of December 2022, *Hatchlings* completed two pilot years with Carroll, Prince George's, Calvert, and Howard County libraries, and concluded its third and final pilot year at the close of 2023. It combines the best of the public library with our early learning community partners, such as health departments, hospitals, pediatricians, early learning councils, high schools, immigration organizations, the faith community, Head Start, and Mommy and Me groups, in its effort to reach families with the important message about daily reading, singing, talking, and bonding with baby.

Focus groups were convened before Pilot 1 began and feedback solicited from Pilots 1 and 2 library facilitators significantly contributed to the establishment and modification of effective practices for content delivery to improve the family experience and to increase the ease and efficacy of facilitator presentation. In addition, the Calvert, Carroll, Howard, and Prince George's County library systems created fresh avenues for community partnership cooperation to better recruit expectant and newborn families. These insights and effective practices helped augment Pilot 3's collaboration efforts.

Pilot Three (2023) created and celebrated a formal collaboration between Maryland libraries and school-based early learning hubs called Judy Centers (named after Judith P. Hoyer, the wife of Congressman Steny Hoyer, for her work enhancing services for low-income families before her untimely death in 1997). Seven additional counties joined the *Hatchlings* initiative via the grant, blending the talent, skills, and dedication of staff in both organizations who love babies—Caroline, Cecil, Harford, Kent, Montgomery, Queen Anne's, and Wicomico counties. Librarians from other Maryland counties (Frederick and St. Mary's), who were not part of the grant, also participated in the most recent *Hatchlings* Facilitator training, and these library systems have found ways to offer the *Hatchlings* program. As of this writing, we are awaiting Pilot 3 statistics. To date, 144 *Hatchlings* programs have been provided across the state serving expectant families and families with newborns. The number of families served more than doubled from Pilot 1 to Pilot 2.

Before *Hatchlings* started, we identified our goals, and at the conclusion of our two pilot years, we were delighted to discover

that we had achieved our objectives. It is especially encouraging that our positive findings have been replicated in the Year Three pilot so far, as well.

Evaluation Plan Outcomes

Outcome 1: Participating **librarians will gain both knowledge and confidence** in providing effective early literacy training for expectant parents (Ready to Hatch) and parents of young infants (In the Nest). **Assessed by:** Survey following training, focus group discussion following workshops

Outcomes 2-6: Focus on **parents gaining knowledge and confidence** in how to support their infant's early literacy development, bond with their infants, and develop daily routines that work for their families to achieve these goals. **Assessed by:** Surveys following workshops and follow-up surveys several months after workshops have taken place

Via surveys and follow-up interviews, parents enthusiastically spoke about the new information they had learned and the new practices they were adopting as a result of attending *Hatchlings*. For example:

Parents' Feedback

Here are some ideas parents told us they said they would use.

- "Read and ask questions even if the baby can't respond. As long as he is hearing, he will be learning at an early age to build his vocabulary."
- "Singing and reading or talking about the books."
- "The inclusion of songs/singing in everyday activities."
- "Singing lullabies or songs in both English and Spanish."
- "Describing daily activities such as birds singing."
- "Reading more to the baby when he arrives."

Data from Ready to Hatch, Pilots 1 and 2

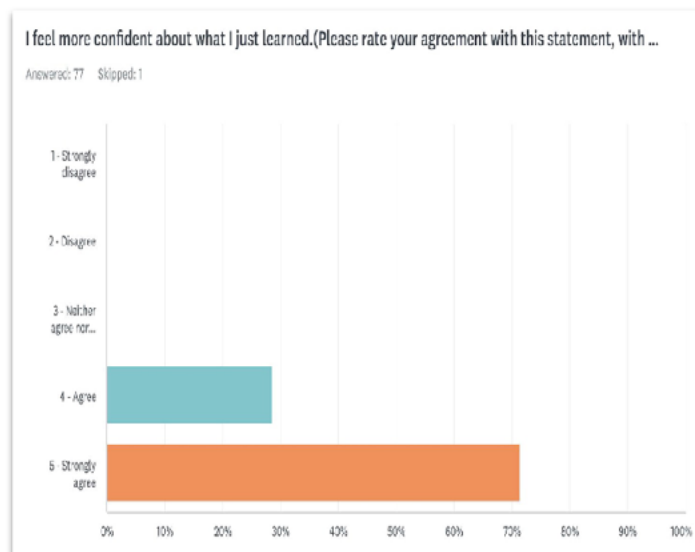
Hatchlings evaluator Elaine Czarnecki compiled the following from her data collection.

Hatchlings, Ready to Hatch is a one-workshop program. Parents are asked to complete an evaluation immediately following their *Ready to Hatch* workshop and a follow-up survey is solicited after their babies are born.

All Pilot 1 and 2 parents (100 percent) surveyed (n=37) agreed that they learned and increased their confidence regarding

Parent Feedback: Areas measured for confidence

- The ability to support my baby's brain development
- How to read aloud and sing to my baby before birth
- How to read (share books) with my baby after birth to support early literacy development
- How to sing, talk, and play with my baby after birth to support early literacy development



supporting their baby's early literacy development (before and after birth) by participating in the *Ready to Hatch* workshop.

Follow-up surveys found that all parents (100 percent) reported using the information from the *Hatchlings* workshop and incorporating early literacy activities into their daily routines with their newborns. Furthermore, all parents (100 percent) stated that the activities had helped them bond with their babies and feel more confident about supporting their new baby's early literacy development.

Data from In the Nest, Pilots 1 and 2

Hatchlings, *In the Nest* is a four-workshop program for parents and their newborns. Parents are asked to complete a workshop evaluation following their first and last sessions. A follow-up survey is also solicited several months after the series is completed.

All parents (100 percent) surveyed (n = 61) agreed that they learned and increased their confidence regarding supporting their baby's early literacy development by participating in the *In the Nest* workshops. Another key finding was that all parents (100 percent) agreed that they planned to make use of library programs and materials with their children in the future.

Follow-up surveys found that all parents (100 percent) reported using the information from the *Hatchlings* workshops and incorporating early literacy activities into their daily routines with their babies. Furthermore, all parents (100 percent) stated that the activities had helped them bond with their babies and that they were doing all the early literacy activities modeled in the workshops frequently to daily with their children.

Challenge to Recruit Families

Participating libraries experienced initial difficulty in reaching families for their *Ready to Hatch* programs. Pilots 1 and 2 designed an enhanced promotion schedule beyond the library's Facebook page, their website, their monthly publication, in-house marketing, and a few key partners. They broadened their promotional reach through a variety of community touchpoints: schools, local early childhood advisory councils, churches, county health and human services departments, Head Start services, Mommy and Me programs, local health networks, local social service board's newsletter, community schools and outreach centers, local YMCA, women's health clinics, Planned Parenthood, local hospital, pediatricians' offices, pregnancy centers, and local multicultural centers.

As with many library programs, once a few families experience and enjoy *Hatchlings*, they tell other families who will be eager to sign up for future programs.

Note: Pilots 1 and 2 helped pave the way to practice patience and perseverance as a keynote to the success of family recruitment. They assessed their collaborations with other agencies, made phone calls, attended meetings, scheduled business lunches, and made a concerted effort to re-energize relationships with already established community partners and jumpstart new partner connections. They devised creative ways to bring awareness and interest about the *Hatchlings* program to expectant and newborn families. Most of all, libraries and other early learning entities together examined how to listen and respond to families, rather than assuming what they need or want.

In addition, feedback from community partners has been positive.

Community Partner Feedback

Carrie Singley, Health Promotion Program Coordinator, Population Health Department | Howard County General Hospital, said, “Not only has this partnership provided an opportunity for our mostly virtual group to meet in-person, but it has also allowed our participants to gain valuable knowledge and skills. The participants are able to familiarize themselves with the library branch as well, which they all enjoy.”

Caren Klein, LCSW-C, Family Options Program, added, “The Hatchling Program is a warmly-presented, research-based program that demonstrates ways for pregnant women to stimulate prenatal and infant brain development through reading, singing, and touch... [it] reinforces the teachings of the Howard County Health Department’s Family OPTIONS program, which

is a program for pregnant and parenting teens and their infants and toddlers.”

The authors would like to thank the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) for their financial support and professional acumen for the *Hatchlings* initiative. Since our initial request for funding to develop a Pilot One (2021) and Pilot Two (2022) project, MSDE has helped us build bridges among librarians, Judy Center staff, and other community partners to better serve expectant parents and newborn families. Special thanks to Cynthia Lessner, Alberta Stokes, and Kaymi Plank, our MSDE inspirational treasures for family engagement, early childhood, and connecting libraries. The unexpected funding for Pilot Three (2023)—with a special collaboration between libraries and Judy Centers—has opened up doorways for a fresh perspective on family engagement, community partnerships, and the mantra “It’s never too early.” &