

Rural Resource

The Role of Distance and Community for Families with Toddlers in Rural Areas

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Libraries have been a longstanding feature of diverse communities across the United States, including rural ones. Libraries serve an important role, offering books for loan, connections to resources, and programs for children and families across the lifespan.¹ Additionally, in rural areas, libraries provide patrons with reliable internet.²

These offerings may be particularly valuable for families with young children who have not yet entered school, since many promote parenting practices that support children's literacy and children's own skills.³ This study aims to explore the ways rural families use libraries, if these uses vary based upon how far away families live, and potential associations between library use during toddlerhood and child and family outcomes two years later.

Libraries have had a longstanding presence in the United States. Over the course of the 1800s, federal initiatives to store documents increased, libraries supported by taxes and public funding opened in states, and Andrew Carnegie began supporting the building and growth of libraries through his philanthropy.⁴ The number of libraries in the US continued to grow across the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, and by 1930, there were more than six thousand libraries in the US, 1,795 of which were Carnegie

Libraries.⁵ In addition to traditional brick and mortar libraries, the early 1900s also saw the emergence of bookmobiles traveling to expand the areas that libraries could serve.⁶

Today, there are more than nine thousand libraries nationwide, more than fifteen hundred of which have multiple branches and 549 with bookmobiles, and four thousand of which are located in rural areas.⁷ Individuals in the US report visiting the library nearly monthly—on average, 10.5 times per year (as of 2019).⁸ Libraries are visited by individuals and families of different ages, incomes, and backgrounds.⁹ Importantly, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all libraries in the US shifted their programming and expanded virtual services.¹⁰ The prevalence and modalities of libraries today make them accessible to people around the country.

Libraries as a Resource

An extensive research base comprising largely of studies utilizing a variety of qualitative and mixed-methods has examined how libraries are used, both in general and by families; our study will build upon by examining how libraries are used by families with toddlers in the rural US.



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In addition to loaning books, libraries offer a welcoming and inclusive physical space, internet access (especially needed in rural areas), and activities, programs, and resources for individuals across the lifespan.¹¹ Libraries offer an extensive array of opportunities beneficial for families with young children, and library staff report recognizing the important job of libraries to engage families, however, family engagement has been found to be lower in rural areas.¹²

Libraries offer targeted programming, conduct story hours, and participate in federal initiatives aiming to promote parent-child reading.¹³ Libraries serve an important role in disadvantaged and rural communities, ensuring internet availability, offering programs to connect patrons with resources, making special effort to engage low-income families, and loaning books and entertainment.¹⁴

One of the most common themes among libraries' offerings is the promotion of shared reading and literacy skills. This is a responsibility that libraries take seriously, with 99 percent of library staff in one study saying it was important or very important for libraries to act as catalysts to inspire a love of reading.¹⁵ Informally, research has found that librarians engage in practices intended to promote literacy skills (e.g., asking questions) during storytimes.¹⁶

Formally, many libraries across the country have participated in the Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) national initiative, which provides funding to intentionally support parent-child interactions in public libraries that promote literacy.¹⁷ By exposing children to read stories and promoting family shared reading, libraries serve an important supportive role, given the importance of shared book reading for children's development.¹⁸

Rurality

Nearly one in five Americans live in an area recognized as rural (or non-metropolitan/non-urban) by the US Census Bureau.¹⁹ These rural areas make up nearly all (97 percent) of the land areas of the country.²⁰ Disaggregating urban, suburban, and rural, estimates are that closer to 14 percent of the US population lives in purely rural areas, with a decline in the rural population in recent years.²¹ Rural communities tend to be majority white, have lower immigrant populations, and slightly higher poverty rates than urban and suburban areas, and approximately half of residents live close to some or most of their extended family.²²

Despite challenges associated with living in rural areas, there are notable strengths and important resources to be found as well. Many of the challenges relate to the non-existence of or difficulty accessing material resources and services, such as jobs, public transportation, health care providers, and education.²³ Some have hypothesized that this lack of resources and services may explain lower achievement of students in rural areas.²⁴

Despite some difficulties in access, libraries are used for information, social gatherings, internet access, supporting the community, and more.²⁵ In addition to more material resources and

services, research has shown that non-material resources tend to be prevalent and beneficial in rural areas, including neighborly behavior and social connection.²⁶ For children in rural areas, positive home/family, school, and neighborhood environments and relationships have been found to promote well-being.²⁷

Child Development

During the toddler years, children experience incredible development, particularly with the emergence of more complex social emotional skills and expanded language and communication skills.²⁸ Theory provides insight into the importance of considering development in the context of caregivers, whose interactions and conversations with children contribute meaningfully.²⁹ One particularly important caregiver-child interaction during infancy and toddlerhood is the experience of shared book reading, which has been shown to be positively associated with children's later vocabulary, reading, and even math and socioemotional skills.³⁰ Per the literature reviewed above, libraries serve an important role in allowing children to engage in shared book reading and in promoting parent-child shared book reading. In this study, we will explore associations between library use during toddlerhood and cognitive stimulation in the home and children's early reading skills two years later.

The Study

This study aimed to explore how families with young children in the rural US engage with libraries, and how libraries serve as a resource for them. Specifically, we had three research questions.

- What are the different ways that families with young children who live in rural areas report using libraries? Given that libraries are a public and free resource for families with young children and prior work showing substantial use in rural communities,³¹ we anticipated that families would take advantage of the programs and resources offered by libraries.
- Does library use vary by distance the family lives from the library? Here, we hypothesized that library use would be lesser for families who live a greater distance from the library, given that rural families already live farther from their nearest library than the average American.³²
- Are there benefits of library use on the home cognitive stimulation and children's reading skills? It was expected that greater library use (in both frequency and types) would be positively associated with both the home cognitive stimulation and children's reading two years later, given prior research on libraries' role in supporting parent-child shared book reading that is important for children's development.³³

Data for this study came from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), a nationally representative study of 10,700 children born in the United States in 2001.³⁴ To gather participants for the ECLS-B, births were sampled from

ninety-six core primary sampling units across the US. If children died or were adopted before they were nine months old, they were excluded from the sample, as were children whose mothers were younger than fifteen years old.

The ECLS-B followed children from birth to nine months (Wave 1), two years (Wave 2), four years (Wave 3), and kindergarten entry (Wave 4). From birth, the response rate for the initial nine-month wave of data was 74%; and then from that initial nine-month sample, the response rates for the two-year, four-year, and kindergarten waves of data collection were 93%, 91%, and 92%, respectively.

This study used an analytic sample consisting of children who lived in a rural area at age two who had a valid sample weight ($N = 1,550$) and data from Waves 2 and 3. At Wave 2, when children were approximately two years old, the ECLS-B collected information on the distance families lived from a library and their ways of using the library, which we aimed to describe for rural families.

- This rural subsample was 65% white and 96% English-speaking, but saw more diversity in terms of parental education levels (44% with a high school diploma or less), income ($M = \$43,314$, $SD = \$36,891$), and marital status (66% married). On average, families had 2.4 children in the household and 2.1 adults. Approximately half of these rural families lived in the southern US and a quarter in the Midwest, with fewer families from the northeast and west.

Measures

Parents were asked to respond to questions about their *library use* at Wave 2, when their child was approximately two years old. Parents were asked if, in the past month, they had used the public library to

- borrow books to read aloud to their child
- borrow materials other than books, such as cassettes, CDs, videos, or toys, to share with their child
- get information or materials on a parenting topic or concern, and/or
- take their child to a story hour or program.

For each use, we created a dummy variable indicating if the parent had or had not used the library in each of these ways in the past month (1 = yes, 0 = no). Additionally, we added up the dummy variables to create a count variable representing the total number of ways a family had used the library in the past month ($M = 0.5$, $SD = 1.0$, min. = 0, max = 4).

Families were also asked to report the *distance from their home to the closest public library* or bookmobile stop at Wave 2, when children were two. Distances were categorized as less than one mile, one to two miles, three to five miles, six to ten miles, or more than ten miles. Responses were fairly evenly distributed across these categories, ranging from 17% of families living one to two miles

from the closest library to 22% of families living six to ten miles from the closest library.

Child and Family Outcomes

Children's reading skills were directly assessed at age four with a battery of items sampled from measures such as the English Language Proficiency Assessment for Early Learners and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. The reading assessment was intended to test both language and literacy by measuring Basic Skills, Vocabulary, Initial Understanding, Developing Interpretation, and Demonstrating Critical Stance. The ECLS-B study team used item response theory (IRT) procedures so each child received a selection of questions based upon their answers to previous questions, which ensured that children only answered questions that were appropriately difficult for their skill level.³⁵ The IRT reading scale score is included as an outcome measure in this study.

Parental stimulation of cognitive development is one subscale that parents were scored on during the Two Bags task, a parent-child play interaction when children were four years old. The Two Bags task was adopted from the Three Bags task used in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care. It is a semi-structured play interaction between the parent and child in which they received two bags, one with a book and one with Play-Doh and tools, to play with together for ten minutes. The interactions were recorded and coded by trained observers on five scales measuring parents/parenting behavior and three scales measuring the child/child's behavior. The parental stimulation of cognitive development is one of the parent scales intended to assess the extent to which parents engage in effortful teaching appropriate for their child's developmental level. It is scored on a seven-point rating scale ranging from very low (1) to very high (7).

Child and Family Characteristics

The analyses in this study controlled for child and family characteristics, including dummy indicators for time-invariant child characteristics, including gender (boy, with girl omitted), race/ethnicity (Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, other or multi-race, with white omitted), low birth weight, and twin status. Additionally, children's age in months at Wave 2 was included as a control variable. Indicators for time-invariant family characteristics or characteristics measured at Wave 2 included parental education level (less than high school, high school, college, with some college omitted), marital status (married, with unmarried omitted), immigrant (one or more parents were not born in the US), and English as the primary home language (non-English omitted). Continuous variables were included for family income, number of children in the household, and number of adults in the household, all measured at Wave 2. Finally, indicators for the US region in which the family lived at Wave 2 were included (Northeast, Midwest, West, with South omitted).

Analytic Plan

There was a small amount of missing data within the analytic sample, ranging from 0% (child sex, child age at wave 2, twin status, family income, parental education level, English speaking, region, library uses) to 18% (Two Bags cognitive stimulation). Given that this is an appropriate amount of missing data to impute, and there was no evidence of nonresponse bias,³⁶ a multiple imputation by chained equations to create twenty complete datasets was conducted. All analyses were conducted in the imputed data and had sampling weights applied to adjust for sampling, nonresponse, and differential attrition.

To first describe rural families' uses of libraries, addressing research question one, we calculated percentages of families who had used the library for each purpose in the past month, which are displayed in table 1. We also looked at the average and range of the total number of uses. To understand differences in uses by distance that families lived from the closest library, we reported percentages of families using the library for each purpose within each distance, shown in table 2.

Finally, we examined links between library uses and distances families lived from the closest library with child and parent outcomes first with bivariate correlations and then in a series of regression models controlling for the child and family characteristics described above. The first set of models contained the four library uses as predictors, the second had only the total count of library uses, and a final set of models tested the distance categories as predictors (with less than one mile serving as the omitted group, and differences between other categories examined).

Descriptive Statistics

The ECLS-B study team asked parents about four uses of libraries:

- borrowing books to read aloud to their child
- borrowing materials other than books, such as cassettes, CDs, videos, or toys, to share with their child

- getting information or materials on a parenting topic or concern, and/or
- taking their child to a story hour or program.

Eighteen percent of families reported using libraries to borrow books, 14% reported borrowing materials other than books, 8% reported getting information, and 7% reported taking their child to a story hour. Of the four possible uses, on average, families living in rural communities reported engaging in less than one ($M = 0.5$, $SD = 1.0$) of them. These results are shown in table 1.

Families were roughly evenly distributed across the categories the ECLS-B created for the distances from homes to the nearest library, as shown in table 2. Eighteen percent lived less than one mile away, 17% lived between one and two miles, 21% lived between three and five miles, 22% lived between six and ten miles, and 21% lived more than ten miles away from their nearest library.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on variables of interest

	M (SD) or %
Library Use at age 2	
Borrow Books to Read to Child	18.4
Borrow Materials Other Than Books	13.6
Get Info on Parenting Topics	8.1
Taken Child to Story Hour or Program	7.2
Total Number of Uses	0.5 (1.0)
Distance Lived From Library at age 2	
Less Than 1 Mile	18.5
1 to 2 Miles	17.2
3 to 5 Miles	21.2
6 to 10 Miles	22.0
More Than 10 Miles	21.1
Parent and Child Outcomes at age 4	
Two Bags - stimulate cognitive development	4.2 (0.9)
Children's Reading	23.5 (8.8)

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation. All ns are rounded to the nearest 50 and decimals to the nearest 0.1 per NCES requirements. SOURCE: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), 9-month, 2-year, and 4-year data collection.

Table 2. Library Uses by Distance Family Lives from Closest Library

	< 1 Mile	1-2 Miles	3-5 Miles	6-10 Miles	> 10 Miles
Borrow Books to Read to Child	19.7	19.6	21.8	17.7	14.5
Borrow Materials Other Than Books	17.3	13.6	16.3	11.8	10.2
Get Info on Parenting Topics	7.4	8.3	9.5	9.7	5.6
Taken Child to Story Hour or Program	10.6	4.5	7.7	7.4	5.9
Total Number of Uses	0.6 (1.0)	0.5 (0.9)	0.6 (1.1)	0.5 (1.0)	0.4 (0.8)

Note: % is displayed for each use, Mean (Standard Deviation) is displayed for the total number of uses. All ns are rounded to the nearest 50 and decimals to the nearest 0.1 per NCES requirements. SOURCE: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), 9-month, 2-year, and 4-year data collection.

Differences in Library Use by Distance

There were no statistically significant differences in the total number of uses families reported between the distance categories (at $p < .10$, those who lived less than 1 mile and those who lived three to five miles had more uses than those who lived more than ten miles).

Across the individual uses, families who lived farther from their nearest library generally endorsed them at lower rates. Those who lived more than ten miles away reported borrowing books (15%), borrowing materials other than books (10%), and getting info on parenting topics (6%) at lower rates than families in any other distance categories. Families who lived less than a mile away had the highest rate of borrowing materials other than books (17%) and taking child to story hour (11%), and the second-highest rate of borrowing books (20%).

Interestingly, families who lived three to five miles from their nearest library reported the highest (borrowing books, 22%) or second-highest (borrowing materials other than books, 16%, getting info on parenting topics, 10%, and taking child to story hour, 8%) rate on all four uses.

Links Between Library Uses and Child and Parent Outcomes

We first examined bivariate correlations between each of the library uses and count of total uses with children's reading skills and parental stimulation of cognitive development, both assessed when the child was four years old. Each of the individual uses and the count of total number of uses had small, statistically significant, positive correlations with children's reading skills ($r = 0.07$ to $r = 0.11$, $ps < .01$). Borrowing books ($r = 0.07$), borrowing materials other than books ($r = 0.09$), taking child to story hour ($r = 0.06$), and the count of total number of uses ($r = 0.09$) similarly had small, statistically significant ($ps < .05$), positive correlations with parental stimulation of cognitive development. None of the distance categories were statistically significantly correlated with the child or parent outcomes.

In the regression models, none of the individual uses nor the count of total number of uses were statistically significant predictors of children's reading. There was one difference among the distance categories, with those who lived one to two miles away scoring statistically significantly higher than those who lived less than one mile away ($B = 2.60$, $SE = 1.19$, $p < .05$). There were no statistically significant associations among the library measures and parental stimulation of cognitive development. In all of the models, parental education levels and the number of children in the household were covariates that were statistically significantly associated with both outcomes.

Discussion

Prior research shows that libraries are a wonderful source of information, activities, and learning materials for rural families.³⁷ However, in this study, we found that libraries were not

being used widely by rural families with two-year-old children. We also explored relations between families' use of libraries and parental cognitive stimulation in the home and children's reading, given prior research on libraries' role in promoting shared book-reading, something important for children's later literacy development,³⁸ finding some correlational support.

Library Use

Libraries offer a host of resources and programs that may be appealing to families with young children. The secondary data utilized in the present study, the ECLS-B, asked families about their engagement with libraries in several ways when their child was two years old, including through borrowing books, borrowing other materials, getting information on parenting topics, and participating in story hours. We found that very few (7%–18%) rural families engaged in each of these activities.

In prior research, most does not disaggregate the target age of library services beyond "early childhood," and when there are age-targeted programs (e.g., story hours), they tend to be for preschool-aged children.³⁹ It may be that libraries are seen as a resource for families with children who are more actively preparing for school entry (e.g., learning to read), and that families with slightly younger children, toddlers, have different needs for programming or advertising about what libraries have to offer. In one study of library staff, 89% reported having partnerships with early childhood programs, so ensuring that libraries are making mindful connections with programs that serve toddlers may be a step in promoting library use among families with even younger children.⁴⁰

Does Distance Matter?

This study also explored the role that the distance families live from their nearest library played in their library use and child and family outcomes. Approximately two-thirds of the sample in this study lived three or more miles away from their nearest library, which is farther than the national average of being 2.2 miles from the library, and over 40% lived five or more miles away, which is greater than the national average in rural areas of being 4.9 miles from the library.⁴¹ While generally library use tended to be lower for families who lived farther away, there were no statistically significant differences in library use across distance groups. We did find some indication that families who lived three to five miles away from their nearest library (but not closer) may engage in greater library use than families who live farther away after controlling for child and family characteristics that may also be associated with library use. An area that further research could probe is the transportation options for rural families living varying distances from libraries, and if that impacts their library use.

Libraries and Family and Child Outcomes

We found small, positive bivariate correlations between library uses when children were 2 years old and the cognitive stimulation

occurring in the home and their reading skills two years later, when they were four years old. These correlations did not maintain their statistical significance in multivariate tests that controlled for child and family characteristics, several of which (e.g., parental education level) were also significantly associated with parental cognitive stimulation and children's early reading skills.

An area for future research exploration may be if there are interactions between parental education levels and library use in promoting young children's development. Given the low levels of library use in this sample, retesting these associations in other populations may shed insight into which library uses during toddlerhood are particularly beneficial for later child and family outcomes, and therefore are important to promote to families. Prior research has also explored more specific, targeted interventions that occur in libraries (such as ECRR) and found benefits,⁴² but there is little to no existing work on associations between more general library use and child and family outcomes.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. While the data are nationally representative and provide good data on a respectably sized sample of rural families, the data were collected on children born in the US in 2001, more than twenty years ago.

Since then, and particularly post-COVID, libraries have undergone many changes to increase their digital offerings, which has created a new way for families to access libraries in borrowing e-books, and also lessened transportation-related challenges families may have in accessing the library.⁴³ Regrettably in these data, families were only asked about library use at one discrete timepoint, when their child was two years old, and while we were able to examine longitudinal associations with strong measures of child and family outcomes two years later, we do not have data

on library use over the duration of that time. Future research could consider whether consistent, cumulative library use as something of importance for families with young children.

Implications

Libraries have the potential to be an incredible resource for rural families with young children.⁴⁴ Toddlerhood is a special time of development where children's language skills are blossoming and activities like shared book-reading have benefits for their later skills.⁴⁵ This study found low rates of library use among rural families with toddlers, however, which has implications for practice and research. Libraries can conduct outreach targeting families with toddlers (e.g., through partnerships with early childhood programs that serve children younger than preschool), and ensure that their programming is developmentally appropriate for toddlers and that that is clear to families. Research could further examine barriers to accessing libraries in rural areas (e.g., transportation) to identify potential points of intervention and to provide more resources.

While this study focused solely on library use in rural areas, there is also an untapped area to research if/how library use by families with young children differs in urban areas, if barriers to access are similar, and if libraries promote young children's development in the same way. Regardless of geography and urbanicity, libraries remain an important resource for families with young children in the US,⁴⁶ and promoting the use of libraries and increasing their accessibility are worthwhile policy priorities. &

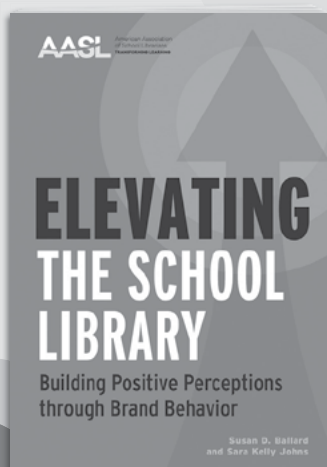
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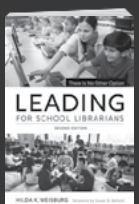
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