

Best Practices

Starting an SRP for the Very Young

MICHELLE WILLIS

We all have heard about summer learning loss and the value of library summer reading programs (SRPs). For many of us, the SRP is the largest program we conduct each year.

We know that summer reading encourages the enjoyment of books, offers opportunities for children to spend time with books outside of school, provides rich literacy experiences at library events, and, of course, helps children maintain reading levels. Developing an SRP specifically for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers is a wonderful opportunity to provide the benefits of summer reading to the youngest library patrons.

In my library, pre-readers were always able to participate in our summer reading program by logging the amount of time for which they were being read. That worked reasonably well, but we found that our youngest participants were four and five year olds. Infants and toddlers rarely, if ever, participated. After much discussion, we decided we needed to expand our SRP to include a specific component for pre-readers.

We hoped to develop an SRP that infants and toddlers could easily participate in and to increase the number of participants from birth to age five. Because we were regularly including Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) practices in our story programs, we based our pre-reader component on ECRR.

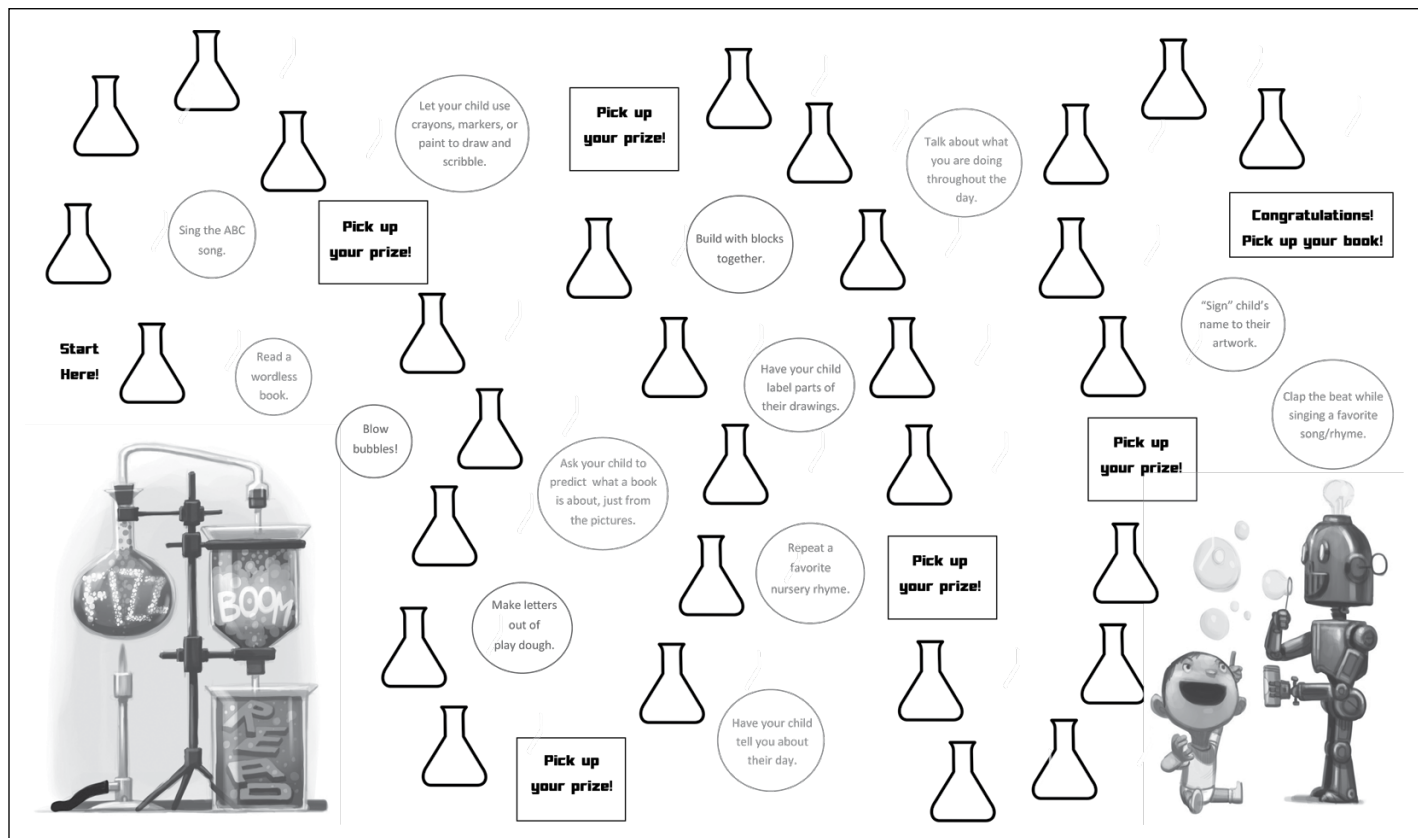
So how did we do it?

- First, we **created an activity log** specifically for children birth to age five. The activity log has thirty activities that children complete with their caregivers throughout summer.

- We included **activities from each of the five practices**—talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing. The activities can be adapted by the caregiver to suit each child. Some examples include talking about a wordless book together, singing a favorite song, reading a favorite book, and, of course, attending a library story program. Each summer, we update the activities and look of the log to reflect the summer's program theme.
- To support the reading activities on the log, we **developed booklists** to distribute to participants. We included books for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers, based on the summer's theme. The task seemed daunting at first, but the summer reading manual was a wonderful resource. We simply customized the manual's booklists to reflect our library catalog and our community. Each summer we change our list to reflect the theme.
- Lastly, we **considered incentives**. Since my library offers incentives for school-aged participants, we felt strongly that we needed to offer them to the younger ones as well. The incentives supported ECRR's five practices and encouraged



Michelle Willis is head of children's services at Scotch Plains (NJ) Public Library.



Sample reading log using 2014 SRP artwork.

interaction with caregivers. Examples included bubbles, placemats that can be colored, rubber duckies, and small puzzles. While we vary the smaller incentives each summer, we do keep the final incentive the same. Upon completion of the activity log, the child receives a book.

The cost of adding the extra component to our SRP was a consideration. We, like most libraries, have a program budget

that must cover everything from reading logs to performers to incentives.

The activity logs and booklists were printed in house at a minimal cost, and books were purchased from a publisher's warehouse at a very low cost. We also have received donations of books we used as incentives.

Once we had our pre-reader component in place, we needed participants. We began promoting the program at weekly

storytimes, and many of our attendees were eager to participate. In addition, when families came to the library to register older children for SRP, we encouraged them to sign up younger children.

At the end of the first year, we had a 75 percent completion rate for the pre-reader component. We accomplished our goal, and each summer, the number of pre-reader participants, as well as pre-schoolers, has increased. ☺