

# **Libraries, Early Literacy Outreach, and Book Gift Programming: A Review of the Literature**

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Prepared for the Books for BC Babies Organizing Committee  
Vancouver, BC  
May, 2006

## **Introduction**

In recent years, early literacy has become a hot-button issue, not only in the library community but also in the wider world. A wealth of early literacy research has developed out of this widespread interest, addressing issues of language acquisition, family intervention, and the role of libraries as service providers for young families and children. While the body of research that evaluates specific library programs such as book gift programs like Books for BC Babies is still small, some research issues are important regardless. Community collaboration and partnership is a common characteristic in most early literacy programs, with libraries finding common ground with other non-profit groups such as public health offices or community centres. The importance of print awareness and book behaviour from birth is also significant, and is examined as it can be promoted and furthered through early literacy initiatives. Finally, the role of the parent or caregiver in the early literacy program is undeniable, since it is only through the parent that the child can be reached. This literature review will address these salient issues through the lens of programs similar to Books for BC Babies and will also examine possible models for program evaluation.

## **Community Models**

Much of the recent literature speaks to the importance of collaboration and outreach in family literacy initiatives. Literacy is a socio-cultural concept—Neuman and

Celano's (1998) survey of adults participating in early and family literacy programming found that parents identified literacy as a way of thinking and responding to their environment as well as the act of reading. Childhood achievement is closely tied to social and "ecocultural" environments (Neuman and Celano, 2001; Willms, 2002), and early literacy programming must be mindful of the communities it endeavours to reach. The British Columbia-based Human Early Learning Partnership, coordinated by Clyde Hertzman, has begun to uncover the links between a wide variety of social, cognitive and linguistic developments in children and their school readiness (HELP, "About," 2002). Moreover, the Consortium for Health, Intervention, Learning and Development (CHILD) makes use of collaborative research among academics and community organizations to explore the importance and significance of community initiatives in the health, and consequently, the literacy and school readiness, of young children (HELP, "CHILD," 2002). Likewise, Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth lists vocabulary development in children alongside motor and social skills and temperament as indicators of healthy early development (Willms, 2002). These projects demonstrate the growing awareness of the significance of community collaboration in optimal child development.

According to the literature, the delivery of book gift programs like Books for Babies can take advantage of the benefits of community partnership. Many programs have made use of community volunteers to visit the homes of new babies and their parents and deliver books (Sawa, 2000), while others partner with public health nurses (North and Allen, 2005; More and Wade, 1998). Volunteers and nurses alike in these programs are typically given a brief orientation about the project; according to Sawa

(2000), home-visit initiatives run through the library are popular volunteer opportunities for retired educators and childcare professionals, and as such, less formal training is needed, since volunteers are already familiar with the process.

Other methods of partnership are also discussed, such as holding early literacy events in neighbourhood schools and partnering with elementary school educators in school readiness initiatives (Kelly, 2004; Kissinger, 2004). Of course, this approach is less feasible for programming that targets infants, since school readiness might not even be on parents' radar yet; nevertheless, libraries partnering with schools prior to enrollment speaks to the need for a continuum of literacy support to help ease the transition into school. A book gift program in Australia (North and Allen, 2005) which began with outreach as part of its mandate has evolved to include traveling storytimes delivered to area playgroups by library staff; a link between the librarians and an Aboriginal early years program has been particularly fruitful in terms of connecting families and community organizations to the library. North and Allen's study cites the discovery that health professionals' and librarians' goals for community health are surprisingly similar, and as such, collaborative work makes sense.

### **Print Access and Print Readiness**

A print-rich environment has long been established as a cornerstone for literacy development (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001; McGuinness, 2004). The issue of how to encourage and promote print and reading within families is an important one in the literature on early literacy programs. Neuman and Celano discuss the "indirect influences" on emergent literacy and early health, including "processes of mobility and opportunity, the social isolation in poor neighborhoods and unequal resources that may

further extend a community's social isolation, and the privileges and benefits derived from these resources" (Neuman and Celano, 2001). These barriers, combined with a disparity of everything from places or funds to purchase reading material for children to comfortable public spaces in which to read, lead to lower literacy rates (Neuman and Celano, 2001). According to several researchers (North and Allen, 2005; Sawa, 2000; Hardman and Jones, 1999), book gift programs can work to fill the possible lack of print materials in babies' lives by bringing these materials to parents and helping to advise parents and caregivers on appropriate reading material and related literacy activities for their babies. North and Allen (2005) found that 97% of parents who participated in a book gift program in Australia shared books regularly with their babies. Book gift programs put books directly in the hands of families and encourage active literacy in the home, thus bettering a baby's chances for varied print exposure.

Longitudinal studies of children who have participated in early learning programs like Bookstart in the UK and various Books for Babies programs demonstrate that early exposure to print leads to further success in later learning. More and Wade's (1998) study of children who took part in the original Bookstart pilot project in Birmingham, England, followed these children through the beginning of school and examined their initial subject test scores. Overall, they found that children who had participated in Bookstart scored higher in areas such as literacy, writing, speech, and numeracy skills. The researchers attribute these high scores to Bookstart participants' exposure to books as print stimulus early in life (More and Wade, 1998). While there is an abundance of longitudinal research on child development and social progress indicators being done generally (Willms, 2002; HELP, 2002) and on early literacy intervention as it impacts

later learning (Neuman and Celano, 2001), there is certainly room for more studies, like More and Wade's, of the particular impact of a book-giving program and subsequent related programming on a baby's development of preliteracy and literacy skills.

### **Parental Role in Early Literacy**

The role of the primary caregiver in early book-sharing cannot be undercut; after all, it is only through successfully reaching the parent that the program can reach the child. Many studies identify parents as the scaffolding on which children's literacy development hangs (Hardman and Jones, 1999; Bus et al, 1995), and contend that successful child literacy is absolutely dependent upon parent/adult-child interaction from a young age. Kissinger's (2004) study of parents visiting a school library outreach program found that parents were interested in how to incorporate "daily" literacy into their lives; for instance, how to spark a conversation with their young child about something that happens to him (Kissinger, 2004; Goodman, 1996). Daily reading activities, like balancing a cheque book or reading a store sign, coupled with frequent trips to the library, allow children to link positive emotions with literacy because the experience is conveyed as positive by the child's caregivers (Genisio, 1999). Because the library might not be part of these parents' comfort zone, librarians, social workers, and other community workers must collaborate to reach these families.

Parents also stand to benefit themselves from participation in early literacy initiatives. Participants in programs across the United States identified self-betterment and personal development, both intellectually and socially, as benefits of participation (Neuman, 1998). The literature pinpoints numerous fringe benefits for parents who participate in family literacy programs: they may develop social networks with other

participating parents (Neuman, 1998; Kissinger, 2004), and become more aware of the community organizations and resources available to them (North and Allen, 2005).

Studies arising from other book-gift and family literacy initiatives point to the significant role played by the parent in encouraging literacy activities, as well as the impact a program can have on parents. More and Wade (1998) found that 68% of parents whose children participated in the British Bookstart program identified book-sharing as their child's favourite activity; 75% of parents stated that they often bought books as presents for their children because they enjoyed reading so much. The same study found that parents who had participated in the Bookstart program with their children were more active participants when facilitating reading with their children: these parents encouraged their children to make predictions about the text, related the story to their child's experience, and talked about the text itself more often than parents who had not participated in Bookstart (More and Wade, 1998). Likewise, an evaluation of the Kirklees Babies into Books project found that participating mothers had learned how to properly hold a book in their baby's field of focus, as well as increased awareness of their baby's motor skills, through participation in book-sharing (Hardman and Jones, 1999). These parents were also pleased with the exposure to a range of age-appropriate books for their babies, a sentiment echoed in other studies (North and Allen, 2005). In spite of the importance of the parental role in early literacy programs, however, few programs include a component of adult literacy education or awareness (Jay, 2001). One reason for this gap, perhaps, is the challenge of designing a program to reach and instruct parents from a wide variety of income and language backgrounds in their own right, on top of targeting them as caregivers.

Early literacy research addresses in great depth the common issue of how to reach some hard-to-reach parent groups. Hardman and Jones (1999) remark that the sample of mothers successfully surveyed for the evaluation of the Kirklees program had a higher income and education level than the average levels of parents across the board. It is more difficult to engage parents from lower income levels, or those with language-related barriers to communication (Neuman and Celano, 2001; Kissinger, 2004; Wastie, 1994). This is an ongoing issue not only for book gift program evaluation, but also for public library program delivery in general. Employing outreach librarians with knowledge of common languages, as well as making materials and resources available in many languages, has been successful in numerous library systems (Kelly, 2004) for better communicating with parents across economic and linguistic divides. Hopefully such initiatives can be extended in the future, and librarians with experience working with ESL patrons will be able to contribute to methods of evaluation.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review has provided much insight into common practices for book gift programs, as well as the typical ways in which these programs are evaluated. Surveys and interviews are the most standard formats for evaluation, since they allow for both qualitative and quantitative evidence. It also brings to light some areas in need of more exploration. Evaluation of a book gift program, and of early literacy programming more generally, from a facilitator standpoint (including librarians, public health nurses, and volunteers), has not been examined in great detail, and in order to get a better sense of best practices for program delivery, such research is quite necessary. The development of surveys for library staff and other facilitators, as well as the use of more

open methods such as interviews and focus groups, will allow for the gathering of anecdotal evidence of program successes and drawbacks.

The literature also points to the need for more diverse methods of gaining parent and caregiver feedback. Parent satisfaction has been measured in some studies (Hardman and Jones, 1999; Genisio, 1999; McNicol, 2002), but there is still a need for a framework in which to evaluate parents' responses to surveys and interviews that is mindful of social, cultural and linguistic variations among participants. Moreover, exploring adult-specific program components, such as parent groups or parent literacy education sessions, might provide more opportunities for parents to feel truly involved and engaged in early literacy programming for their child, and as such, might help parents become more educated themselves, both in terms of their own literacy skills and in their role as advocates for the health and literacy of their children. Partnering with adult literacy organizations has been successful in some places (McNicol, 2002), and might be an excellent starting point for this development.

The longitudinal research that has been done on children who participated in very early literacy programs like Bookstart in the UK is invaluable as proof positive of the impact of such initiatives on participants. A longitudinal study of book gift programs that profiles the progress of community development and collaboration, family and child library use, school readiness, and the impact of programming on library employee knowledge and advocacy would be a fascinating, if exhausting, undertaking. Given the obvious positive benefits for children conveyed in More and Wade's (1998) study, it would be exciting to stretch the research further and examine early literacy programming as it affects all the facets we endeavour to target, all the groups we educate, and all the

partnerships we forge. Given the resources available here in British Columbia, such as the Human Early Learning Partnership at UBC and the active and passionate librarians involved in the British Columbia Library Association's Young Adults and Children's Services interest group as well as across the province in general, it appears that the province-wide Books for BC Babies program is in an excellent position to further the body of existing research.

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