

Public Libraries: Florida's Best Kept Early Learning Secret...Revealed!

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This article, which explains how public libraries support early learning, was developed by Susan Mankowski at the request of the Florida Library Association Executive Board and was accepted by the FLA Board on April 20, 2012.

At this time with heightened concern about students' performance in school, public libraries offer early literacy and learning programs, activities, and resources that can help prepare children for success in school.

According to the 2010 results of the Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading (FAIR), 30% of Florida Kindergarteners do not have the necessary skills that determine later reading success. Most public libraries offer young families programs that feature the skills needed for success in the classroom.

"Early literacy (reading and writing) does not mean early reading instruction or teaching babies to read; it is the natural development of skills through the enjoyment of books, the importance of positive interactions between babies and parents, and the critical role of literacy-rich experiences.

Literacy development begins at birth and is closely linked to a baby's earliest experiences with books and stories. Babies learn language through social literacy experiences - parents interacting with them using books. These experiences also serve to associate books with parental affection, attention, and approval."

-Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations

This basis of early literacy is rooted in the six pre-literacy skills that are featured in each early childhood program. The public library supports and encourages parents and caregivers to help children, from newborns to preschoolers, develop the skills of:

- Oral Language & Vocabulary – promoting conversation skills, learning new words and using them everyday
- Emergent Comprehension – experiences, questions, activities that build background knowledge and promote understanding
- Print Motivation & Awareness (Concepts of Print) – engaging with print on the page and in the environment, understanding that spoken word can be written down and has value
- Letter Knowledge – ability to distinguish between letters, numbers, shapes, and punctuation; identifying letters and the associated sound
- Phonological Awareness – playing with words and sounds
- Pre-Writing – building of hand strength, flexibility, and dexterity; understanding that spoken word can be written down and has value

All six need to be well established prior to Kindergarten and contribute to later literacy success in school. Children learn to read and write by practicing these skills and the public library provides interactive and engaging literacy activities during storytime programs knowing that children learn best through play and practice.

Library storytime experiences are obviously connected to pre-reading and writing as well as school readiness. Storytimes feature stories, songs, finger plays, and action games in a literacy-rich environment centered on the written word. When sharing and talking about books, library staff use approaches with infants up through pre-schoolers that:

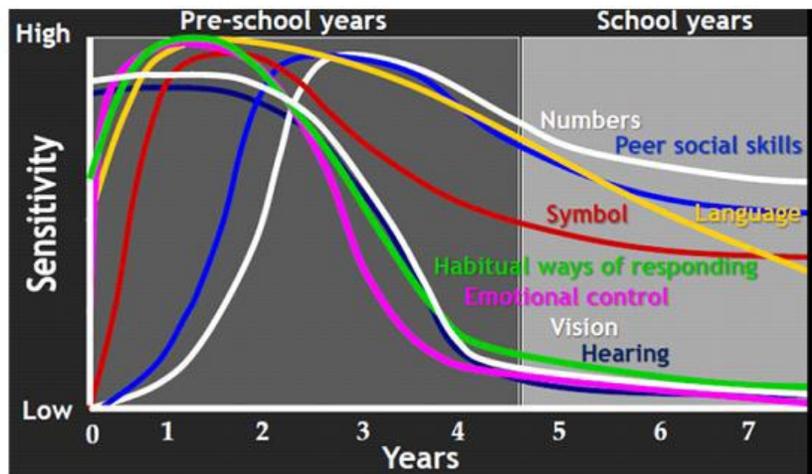
- inspire additional conversation
- address the areas of socio-emotional support, reasoning and self-regulation
- encourage curiosity
- stimulate language acquisition
- introduce mathematics and scientific thought
- promote physical development

Book selections, songs, and physical activities are selected to address the areas identified by the Florida School Readiness Standards as the school-readiness domains of:

- Physical Development
- Approaches to Learning
- Social and Emotional Development
- Language, Communication, and Emergent Literacy
- Cognitive Development and General Knowledge

The library does not just provide programming for pre-kindergarten children to support school-readiness. Understanding that the brain is highly sensitive from birth, library programs address the needs of our youngest patrons and their families to support developmentally appropriate learning experiences focusing on the caregiver/child relationship, peer interactions, and language development.

SENSITIVE PERIODS IN EARLY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT



Source: Council for Early Child Development, Dr. Clyde Hertzman Presentation, (Reference: Hash 1997; Early Years Study, 1999 Shonkoff, 2000)

Libraries are in a unique position to support the parent and caregiver's involvement with education from the beginning. With the understanding that children learn through play, library staff demonstrate for caregivers engaging and active games and literature that promote language and learning across various environments.

Libraries conduct storytime with the caregiver present, as opposed to a school setting where learning takes place without the immediate family participating. In this way, the caregiver and the child learn simultaneously, and the learning experiences continue beyond the library, e.g.

- singing in the car on the way home
- checking out more books based on the storytime theme
- talking about what happened during storytime
- sharing the same positive social experience

In these ways libraries help parents learn to be their child's first teacher.

"The earlier parents become involved in children's education, the greater the benefits. When parents participate in library storytime it sends a strong message to their children that what they are doing is important to Mom and Dad, too." (*School Library Journal*, 2009)

So how do public libraries support our youngest children and their caregivers? Here are the top ten ways libraries provide learning opportunities for the birth to 5 year age group:

Through age-specific library storytimes:

1. Introduce the six pre-literacy skills in a casual setting to support a joy of reading and learning
2. Provide social opportunities that support emotional health and an opportunity to practice these developing skills in a non-threatening environment
3. Actively involve parents and caregivers in their child's learning and education before the start of formal schooling
4. Focus on the child and caregiver working together to achieve learning success,
5. Demonstrate a variety of books, songs, and interactive games that promote literacy in the library setting and at home.
6. Integrate music, science, math, and art into literacy and early learning programs
7. Demonstrate age- and developmentally-appropriate ways to accomplish literacy milestones

Through additional library services:

8. Offer resources to state and community agencies that benefit the entire family.
9. Provide outreach storytime opportunities to bring books and materials into the home or childcare center
10. FREE for all members of the community!

Check with your local library to find out about infant, toddler and pre-school program opportunities that are available in your community.

Resources

- Zero to Three - www.zerotothree.org
- Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations: http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/altaff/products_services/booksforbabies/earlyliteracy.cfm
- Council for Early Child Development

Dr. Clyde Hertzman Presentation (Reference: Hash 1997; Early Years Study, 1999 Shonkoff, 2000)

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=M89VFIk4D-s
- Early Learning Coalition of Duval: <http://elcofduval.org>
- Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library (2nd Edition) - www.everychildreadytoread.org
- Florida Birth to 5 Standards - www.flbt5.com/Default.aspx
- Jacksonville Public Library - <http://jaxpubliclibrary.org>
- School Library Journal: "Ready, Set, Go! Storytime Can Help Children (and Parents) Become Kindergarten Ready" www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6685541.html
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- American Library Association - research and statistics to help advocates make the case for libraries at every stage of youth development and education. <http://librariesmatter.ala.org/additup>