

Library Outreach as a Partner for the Early Childhood Educator

By Abby Brown

High school graduation rates, third grade reading levels - these topics dominate the agenda for educators, reformers, and all institutions that take an interest in the academic achievement of Indiana children. However, studies have shown that access to high-quality early learning opportunities before the age of five is critical for learning success, especially for low-income children (Barnett, 2008). The majority of preschool aged children in Indiana regularly spend at least a portion of their week in the care of someone other than their primary caregiver. According to a March 2013 data report from the Children's Defense Fund, 67.3% of Indiana children under the age of six have all parents in the labor force. With so many children in the care of someone other than their primary caregiver and because these early years are essential to the learning development of children, childcare providers must be equipped to foster language and literacy skills.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to not only serve as an access point for community resources, but also to provide valuable training to early childhood programs. Through extensive outreach efforts, libraries can offer much needed support to childcare providers that will strengthen the quality of program curriculum and the experiences of the children in attendance. Through regular visits to home childcare settings and registered ministry programs, libraries can:

- form partnerships with caregivers that promote best practices in early literacy,
- offer access to books and other learning materials, and
- build a bridge to library services that will benefit both the childcare provider and the families that they serve.

In order to offer the level of support that will provide long term benefits to these childcare providers, libraries need to start thinking outside the box and beyond traditional outreach services. Six years ago at the Indianapolis Public Library, this revelation resulted in the "On the Road to Reading" program, a focused effort to improve the quality of literacy curriculum in childcare centers and help prepare children for kindergarten. In Marion County, families can select from one of the 789 licensed childcare providers or registered ministry programs in Indianapolis. They range from large licensed centers serving hundreds of children to small home programs that are able to accommodate six or less children.

Indiana Libraries, Vol. 33, Number 2

A majority, 84%, of these childcare centers are smaller licensed home centers and registered ministries (Indiana Youth Institute, 2013). Because of their size, licensed centers tend to have more resources and materials available to their educators so the Indianapolis Public Library chose to focus on these programs. Small home centers and registered ministries are often unable to travel beyond their facility, which makes regular visits from the library even more of a necessity. In order to reach more locations, without sacrificing quality, the library moved from a large bookmobile that required a special driving license to a fleet of SUVs also known as "Itty Bitty Bookmobiles." These Itty Bitty Bookmobiles are more cost effective and allow for staff to easily travel around town making programming stops at 130-150 locations each month serving more than 2,500 children.

Along with rethinking the outreach vehicle, the On the Road to Reading program also takes a different approach to staffing. To offer the highest quality experience possible, the library employs two full-time staff and four part-time staff to facilitate the program. The part-time staff are solely dedicated to the planning and execution of the On the Road to Reading visits. They are not hired based on their experience in traditional library service, but rather their experience in early childhood education. This knowledge base makes them much more effective in offering professional support and serving as an ambassador to useful library resources.

Elements of the Program

Bunny Book Bag

Young children need regular and unlimited access to reading materials, but "several studies suggest that less affluent children have access to fewer books and other reading materials than their more affluent peers" (Lindsay, 2010, p. 3). Many of the smaller home childcares do not have books that children can interact with on a regular basis. Instead of hauling an entire collection of books in a large bookmobile or asking reluctant childcare providers to take on the financial responsibility of checking out books that could be lost or damaged, the Itty Bitty Bookmobiles delivers Bunny Book Bags- fine-free grab bags containing 20 age appropriate picture books.

The Bunny Bags eliminate many of the obstacles that childcare centers face in utilizing library services, by supplying a rotating selection of books each month without any fear of accruing fines and without having to drive to a library branch. A 2012 evaluation conducted by Ruprecht and Hoke found that the books from the Bunny Bags were utilized in a number of different ways (pp. 5-6):

- 36% of providers reported that they allowed children to access the books whenever they wanted,
- 33% use the books during special reading or story times,
- 31% allow the children to use the books with adult supervision, and
- 70% of the providers reported reading to the children on a daily basis.

Story Program

In addition to dropping off Bunny Book Bags, library staff present a story program for the children and childcare providers. Story time has long been the backbone of early childhood programming in libraries and when effectively done in an outreach setting, it can be beneficial for both the childcare provider and the children. Children gain a positive association with the public library and have an opportunity to engage with an adult through shared reading. Providers observe the reading program and have the opportunity to learn some best practices to enhance their literacy curriculum. All outreach staff members are trained to model the dialogic reading method, an intentional style of shared reading that encourages vocabulary development and other emergent literacy skills. Studies have shown that “dialogic reading has a positive effect on the language and emergent literacy skills of children” and can be especially effective in closing the language gap experienced by children coming from low-income families (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003, pp. 174-176). Story programs also incorporate the recommendations laid out in the Association for Library Service to Children’s Every Child Ready to Read. This nationwide early literacy initiative encourages caregivers to talk, sing, read, write, and play with young children every day. Each visit includes stories, music and playful activities that can be replicated by the provider or caregiver.

Resources Provided

A primary goal of the On the Road to Reading program is to increase the quality of language and literacy education occurring in childcare settings. In order to meet this goal, libraries must strive to learn the needs of each individual provider through constant conversation and evaluation. During a 2012 evaluation, providers indicated that they would benefit from additional curricular support specifically in the areas of science, math, and social studies. Through a partnership with the local childcare resource and referral agency, Child Care Answers, 50 curriculum enhancement kits were developed for

check out by On the Road to Reading providers. Childcare providers can request these thematic curriculum kits filled with support materials connecting literacy to art, science, and math. All materials and activities are intentionally aligned with recommended best practices and Indiana Foundations to the Academic Standards, specifically those that are identified in Paths to QUALITY, the voluntary Indiana childcare quality rating system. In the state of Indiana, the Paths to QUALITY rating is a strong indicator of a childcare program’s commitment to educational excellence. Participating sites are rated between one and four with a one indicating that a childcare is just beginning to develop an organized and intentional educational environment and a level 4 rating reflects a national accreditation.

In addition to the curriculum kits, each site receives a letter to send home with parents that includes songs, rhymes, book recommendations and other learning extension activities. The parent-provider connection is a key component to the success of any early childhood program and the library seeks to encourage this through these educational materials. These visits also provide an opportunity to share information with parents about current events and activities happening at their nearby library branch, hopefully encouraging more family learning experiences. Staff will also inform providers about additional upcoming professional development experiences occurring at the Library.

Resources from Community Organizations

Due to critical need for services in these types of childcare centers, On the Road to Reading has attracted several key community partners whose involvement has strengthened the services provided by the library. A partnership with the United Way of Central Indiana has allowed the childcare site to enroll in the Early Readers Club, a program that allows children to receive free books and build their home library. This initiative is providing thousands of free books to children in childcare settings.

As one of the few organizations with direct access to these small home daycares and registered ministries, the library is uniquely positioned to share information about important community services that might be of interest to both families and childcare providers. This has included information about health and dental care, literacy training for adults, family learning opportunities, and other valuable community connections.

Bridge to the Library

In addition to offering outreach service, the On the Road to Reading program is designed to build a bridge for providers to access the large number of resources available at the library. Providers are encouraged to obtain a library card and regularly visit their local branch to stay informed about the services available.

A 2012 survey conducted by Ruprecht and Hoke found that 90% of providers have a library card and 60% of these providers had checked out materials in the past six months. On the Road to Reading participants are also visiting the library; 40% indicated that they visit at least once per month.

Encouraging engagement beyond the monthly outreach visit strengthens the partnership between the library and childcare centers and creates a well-rounded approach to early literacy. For example, during the summer months when the On the Road to Reading program is not in operation, many providers share information about the Summer Reading Program with parents. Additionally, 84% of providers reported visiting the library during the summer to obtain materials for their childcare center. These results are encouraging and suggest that outreach programs do more than just extend services beyond the library walls, they also encourage library visitation.

Future of the Program

Although the On the Road to Reading program has enjoyed several successful years, it is important to constantly reevaluate services and adjust to meet the changing needs of the target audience. Sometimes, this means rethinking traditional aspects of the program in order to maintain an effective program. In an effort to promote quality of care, the library is ensuring that the locations they serve are committed to improving their learning environment. To that end, beginning in the 2014-2015 school year, the On the Road Reading vehicles will only visit programs that have enrolled in Paths to QUALITY. This change will allow for more intentionality in curriculum development by aligning with Paths to QUALITY recommendations. The priority will be serving groups at level 1 or level 2 as these are the sites most in need of additional support. This will be an adjustment, as historically, only about half of the sites participating in On the Road to Reading were also enrolled in Paths to QUALITY. Both the library and their community partners believe that this is a necessary step to encourage childcare providers to take the next step in improving their program.

Along with refocusing the target audience, another change on the horizon for the On the Road to Reading program is the inclusion of technology. For the past four years, the library has been incorporating technology into preschool programming at the branch level. This has included offering experiences with robotics, digital video cameras, animation software and tablets. A 2012 study by the Fred Rogers Center found that within a cohort of 1,457 early childhood educators, the majority had access to traditional forms of technology such as computers and television, but very few had access to the newer tools. Only 29% had access to a tablet computer, 21% had access to an Mp3 player, and only 15% had access to an e-reader (Wartella, Blackwell, Lauricella, & Robb, 2013). Surveys conducted by the Indianapolis Public Library suggest that in Marion County, the numbers are even lower. Adding technology to On the Road to Reading seems to be the next logical

step for the program. This will bring new resources to children who otherwise would have very limited access to technological tools and devices.

In the constantly evolving world of early childhood, the future On the Road to Reading program will afford an opportunity for the newest in educational technology to combine with some of the most traditional elements of library services. Hopefully, the result will be thousands of children who are excited to learn and who are ready for kindergarten.

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