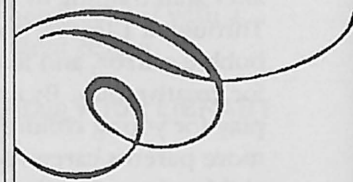# EARLY LITERACY @ OUR LIBRARY:
HOW MCPL IS IMPLEMENTING ECRR

by Christina Jones & Mary Frasier

*E*very Child Ready to Read (ECRR) is an incredibly powerful tool for all librarians serving young children and their families. However, the degree to which your library can implement the initiative depends on existing staff and services. The Monroe County Public Library (MCPL) is a mid-sized library in Bloomington, Indiana. The Children's Services Department is staffed with one part-time and four full-time librarians who hold MLS degrees. We also have three full-time and two part-time reference assistants. Two reference librarians and one children's librarian, with one reference assistant at the Ellettsville branch, round out the team. Our services to preschoolers extend from birth to age six and include lapsits, weekly storytimes, preschool tours, circulating toys, the parent/teacher resource room, sign language and foreign language classes, and the Preschool Exploration Center (PEC.)

Instituting ECRR in library services to children and families has been a gradual process at Monroe County Public Library. Since we already felt busy providing many great programs and services, we were reluctant to add one more thing to our plate. Over time, we came to understand that ECRR was more than just another program as it permeated many aspects of our library service, from programming and outreach, to readers advisory and collection development, even the physical set-up of our PEC.

In 2005, with the encouragement of then library board member Sara Laughlin and Children's Services Department Manager Patty Callison, three MCPL librarians participated in ECRR training workshops given by national trainers. Once trained, we devised a gradual plan for implementation. We agreed that establishing regular workshops at the main library was a good way to practice the presentation in a familiar, intimate setting. We offered our first workshop that spring to an enthusiastic crowd of ten. Since the national trainers stressed outreach as the most effective mechanism for promoting ECRR, we identified two established daycares that serve many students living in poverty: Head Start and Monroe County United Ministries (MCUM). That summer, we presented workshops

for in-service training days for early childhood educators at Head Start and MCUM. We started with early childhood educators with the hope that they would spread the word about ECRR and library services to the parents they served.

In 2006, we expanded the number of in-house parent workshops and included one at our branch in Ellettsville. Since we established a relationship with teachers and administration of Head Start and MCUM, we took the next step of reaching their parent groups. That year we presented workshops for the Head Start parent advisory board and to parents at MCUM with great success. We found that parent attendance was much better when childcare was arranged and the location was one in which they were familiar.

Later that year we offered "follow-up storytimes" which modeled techniques described in the in-service training for Head Start teachers. Head Start opted to come to the library for these storytimes, which had unintended positive results in that it gave us a chance to introduce library services to children and for the children to have a positive experience at the library.

That year we expanded our community partners to include workshops to parents of children at St. Mark's United Methodist Church Nursery School and a teen parent group at Aurora, an alternative public high school in Bloomington.

Since we had presented at in-service training for Head-Start and MCUM the previous year, we identified two other daycares with staff large enough to warrant an in-service training day. We chose these daycares because of their regular use of library services. Another idea we explored was hosting an ECRR workshop for people who have daycares in their homes.

In the summer of 2007 more staff members received training thanks to the generous grant obtained through the cooperation of ITELL and the Indiana State Library. Later, some of the team received further training by Saroj Ghoting in Early Literacy Storytimes. This workshop truly deepened our understanding of how principles set forth by ECRR can be *articulated* in our programs and *institutionalized* throughout our services – which brings us to our 2007 programming.

This year we have had many discussions on how ECRR fits into our existing services. Now our baby programs and preschool storytimes include early literacy tips for parents. While we have always provided graded and themed booklists for school-aged children, this year we developed lists for young children with tips on how to select and share books. Training of new hires and SLIS interns now includes information on ECRR. We are working on signage and activity stations that reflect ECRR principles in our Preschool Exploration Center.

This year we also learned how important administrative support is for the success of ECRR. When that support waned at MCPL, we saw a decrease in funding for workshops. During this time we had to cut back on outreach and focus on enriching existing services. We learned this year that for ECRR to work, everyone must be on board. Now the tides have changed and administration is supportive of ECRR once again. Statewide support has also been critical to our implementation of ECRR. One librarian has represented MCPL on the Indiana Task Force of Early Literacy Librarians. We have found the support from that group and from Marcia Smith-Woodard of the Indiana State Library to be invaluable.

The beauty of ECRR is that the possibilities and challenges are endless. One of the ongoing challenges is to identify places in the community where ECRR workshops are most needed – namely for families with low literacy. We plan to expand services via health clinics that serve low-income mothers. Along the way, we have looked at what other libraries are doing. For example, we are very interested in the early literacy kits offered at the Johnson County Public Library. Multnomah County Library has also been a source for inspiration, particularly their Web content and readers' advisory. We are working to expand our ECRR presence on the web to reach remote users.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED SO FAR ON DEVELOPING ECRR PROGRAMMING

- Start slowly, begin with existing community partners and grow from there.

- Identify early childhood centers that already have parent groups or mandatory parent participation.

- Examine what you are already doing and see if ECRR can enrich those services.

- Everyone has different levels of comfort with ECRR material, and this should be respected.

- The ECRR website is a goldmine of information. The information is packaged in a way that makes it easy to implement the program at any level.

ECRR truly breathes new life into library services for children and families. This program gives us the confidence that public librarians can positively affect early literacy and families with young children. We approach a new season of programming with a renewed commitment to passing this knowledge along to the parents and caregivers of Monroe County.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christina Jones has worked in children's services at Monroe County Public Library for six years and recently began teaching storytelling at IU-SLIS. Along with developing the Every Child Ready to Read program at MCPL she specializes in baby and preschool programming, readers' advisory materials, and Web development.

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