

Catch Them While They're Young

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It's never too early to start reading to a child. The first year of life is now generally recognized as the most important in the development of language skills, which include listening and speaking. Reading aloud widens the variety of language to which a child is exposed and helps to enrich that language. Reading helps the child become accustomed to the printed word. This knowledge, in turn, helps prepare the child to learn to read. Reading aloud to a child serves another important role as well: the personal contact between parent and child helps to increase the emotional bond between them. Even if the child does not understand the words, the time spent on a parent's lap, hearing a familiar voice, is recognized as a warm and pleasant time. This feeling will be remembered and the child probably will consider reading a pleasant experience. After these children become parents themselves, they will likely share the habit of reading with their own children. Imparting to a child, even an infant, a love of books and reading is a gift that will last forever.

Keeping all this in mind, if one follows the changes in children's librarianship over the past few years,

the trend toward programming for younger and younger children should come as no surprise.

Programs

The Anderson Public Library is no exception. We began our toddler program (eighteen months to three years of age) in the fall of 1978. Each session lasts for thirty minutes, and we require a parent or designated caregiver (i.e., grandparent or babysitter) to stay with the child.

In our program, children are given name tags and introductions are made. We begin by sharing large picture books, then continue with flannel board stories (stories or simple concepts: colors, counting, the alphabet, etc.). If the children are still paying attention, we then have some finger games and songs. We always include a simple craft and conclude the session with games, music, or a short film. We tell the children and their parents what will be discussed the next session and encourage parents to discuss this theme with their children during the coming week.

We began by offering the program once a week in the mornings. The

parents spoke highly of our program and they spread the word to their friends. Because of this word-of-mouth advertising, the demand grew to the extent that we added a toddler program during the evening, a program we called "Teddy Bear Time." Children are encouraged to wear their pajamas and to bring their teddy bears.

Our toddler program has been so successful that we have just begun a newborn program (for children from birth to seventeen month of age). Much interest in the library was sparked when we added the newborn program. Many persons asked why we would conduct programs for the very young since these children cannot read. (Because the suggestions mentioned in this article apply to newborns as well as to toddlers, hereinafter all references will be to the "infant/toddler" program.)

Rationale

The staff of the Anderson Public Library believes programming for infants/toddlers is essential for several reasons. Our library has a broad mission to serve the community as an educational and recreational resource, and programming for the very young plays a part in achieving and supporting this mission. Other reasons for providing infant/toddler programs are the following:

1. The bonding between parent and child is enhanced when they can share thirty minutes a day with each other, without another sibling, and without the distractions of the television or a ringing telephone. This bonding influences the child's self-concept, and a child's ability to learn is influenced by his or her self-concept. Our hope, therefore, is that this program in reality adds to the child's ability to learn.

2. Studies have shown that children learn more during the first five years of life than during any other period, and the first year is the most important in the development of language skills. Language sounds are learned by one year of age and, because book language is even more complex, the infant/toddler in our program is learning an even more sophisticated form of language. Their development is enhanced as they have fun.

Parents must realize that they are a strong influence in their child's development and must, therefore, take an active part in it. The home is recognized as the greatest educational institution of all. In our programs, the parents receive handouts of songs, instructions for finger games, and lists of suggested reading. We strongly urge the parents to use their handouts at home for two reasons:

- A. Books, songs, and games (we hope) will become a regular part of everyday home life. We want parents to set aside a quiet time each day for reading with their children.

- B. If parents practice the songs we will be sharing the following week, they may feel more comfortable coming to the infant/toddler session and will participate actively. This active participation demonstrates to their child that involvement is a part of growing up.

3. Establishing a routine is important for a child, and visiting the library on a weekly basis is a routine we, as librarians, want for children. Some parents have told us that their child wakes in the morning and the first question asked is, "Is today library day?" We are having an effect.

4. A child's reading readiness may be enhanced through the books and concepts shared in our infant/toddler time. "It's never too early to start

reading to a child" may be a phrase that is overused, but it is true. Reading helps the child become accustomed to the written word. Visual discrimination can be sharpened through practice. Toddlers can learn that pictures have meaning, that pictures are different from words, that words go from left to right, and that there is a front and a back, an up and a down. We use board books, flannel board stories, puppets, finger plays, games, and songs to teach these concepts.

5. Socialization is another reason for infant/toddler programs. In *Through the Eyes of a Child*, Donna E. Norton says, "Socialization is said to occur when children learn the ways of their groups so that they can function acceptably within them."¹ From week to week we see the progress in a child's social development. The toddlers learn to sit and listen, and they learn respect for other toddlers, as well as how to interact with them.

6. The ultimate reason for bringing children and books together is enjoyment. It is our hope that we are giving quality time to parent and child and that their experience in the library is a rewarding one. Many parents tell us that library service is not what it used to be; when they were children, all the library had for them was books. The goal of our staff is to make the library an easy and enjoyable place to visit and to offer activities that encourage library use.

Programming Guidelines

The following guidelines may prove helpful in programming for the very young:

1. A separate room is ideal, but if one is not available, then a space away from the "madding crowd" is encouraged. (Traffic flow, noise, etc. are all distracting for infants.)

2. Limit the size of your group. We limit ours to fifteen infants/toddlers and fifteen parents. A smaller group is ideal, because most toddlers want your undivided attention. If your staffing situation permits, offer three or four sessions with smaller groups.

3. Do not allow siblings to attend. This activity is for infants/toddlers and the parent. (We have the luxury of having several meeting rooms and can have concurrent programs for siblings in those rooms. Everyone goes home happy.)

4. Advance registration is required, because we need an exact head count for handouts and craft materials. We also maintain waiting lists when demand exceeds space. If a parent and child do not attend two sessions, they are dropped from the program and the first person on the list is notified, and so on.

5. Short sessions are suggested. We allow thirty minutes per session in our program. Be flexible and be aware of the short attention span of young children. Spontaneity is more than an asset; it is a must in infant/toddler sessions.

6. We ask the children not to bring toys or other distracting objects to the session.

7. In our sessions, we share large picture books, finger games, songs, a simple craft, flannel board stories, and, occasionally, we show a short, lively 16mm film for enjoyment and change of pace. We usually concentrate on single concept ideas in story hour, such as flannel board characters showing colors or shapes, or learning the alphabet or how to count.

8. Be sure that the same person conducts the program each week; familiarity is security to the small child.

9. For parents, we display books on parenting, child psychology, and reference materials. Our goal is to make the library an easier place to visit. Having the materials available for quick access is a help for busy parents.

Family Services

We recently began new services for families, including the following:

Newborn Packets: These are 6-inch-by-9-inch envelopes that contain an informative brochure about our library, a brochure about our services to children, an application for a library card, a brochure about reading aloud to young ones, and lists of books for parents to read to their children. Also included are lists of books on parenting and infant care, and guidelines for purchasing toys for children. The packets are distributed to area hospitals and given to the mothers after the birth of the child.

Sick Kits: This service is intended for children who are confined at home for an extended period of time. Parents call and we select books, games, and magazines suitable for the child's age. We also include a get well card and surprises (which may be stickers left over from a program, or coupons from area restaurants).

Preschool film series: Our goal was to have something for children to do at our library every week of the year. We achieved our goal very quickly and inexpensively with the beginning of this program. We have six sessions of story hours throughout the year, for a total of 24 weeks of story hours. In between these sessions we now have preschool films. We show the films on the same day and at the same time as story hour, so parents only have to keep one day and time in mind. We encourage the parents to stay with their children

during the films and they seem pleased to have that time with their children. (Parents do not stay with the preschoolers during story hour sessions.)

Everyone knows that adults (teachers, politicians, and businesspeople) are important factors in a library's progress and success. Catch them while they are young, and you will have them for life as supporters and users.

Suggested Titles for Parents

- American Medical Association. *Children: How to Understand Their Symptoms*. New York: Random House, 1986
 - Gillis, Jack. *The Childwise Catalog: A Consumer Guide to Buying The Safest and Best Products for Your Children*. New York: Pocket Books, 1987
 - Granet Velez, Gail. *The Parent's Resource Book*. New York: New American Libraries, 1986
 - Kersey, Katharine. *The Art of Sensitive Parenting: The 10 Master Keys to Raising Confident, Competent, and Responsible Children*. Washington D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1987, 1983
 - Lansky, Vicki. *Vicki Lansky's Practical Parenting Tips*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982
 - Touw, Kathleen. *Parent Tricks-of-the-Trade*. Washington D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1987
 - Zuckerman, Pamela Meyer. *Your Baby: Basic Care and First Aid*. New York: New York: Hauppauge, Barron's Educational Series, 1987
- ### Suggested Titles for Infants/Toddlers
- Brown, Marc, *Play Rhymes*. New York: Dutton, 1987

- Crews, Donald. *Carousel*. New York: Greenwillow, 1982
- Gibbons, Gail. *Trains*. New York: Holiday House, 1987
- Ginsburg, Mirra. *The Chick and the Duckling*. New York: Macmillan, 1972
- Heller, Ruth. *A Cache of Jewels and Other Collective Nouns*. New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1987
- Hill, Eric. *Spot's First Picnic*. New York: G.P.Putnam's, 1987
- Hutchins, Pat. *Goodnight Owl!* New York: Macmillan, 1972
- Ormerod, Jan. *This Little Nose*. New York: Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard, 1987
- Tafuri, Nancy. *Early in the Barn*. New York: Greenwillow, 1983
- Catron, Ann. *Super Storytelling*. New York: Denison, 1986
- Oldfield, Margaret Jean. *Tell and Draw Stories*. Minneapolis: Arts and Crafts Unlimited, 1963
- Pellowski, Anne. *The Story Vine: A Source Book of Unusual and Easy to Tell Stories From Around the World*. New York: Macmillan, 1984
- Peterson, Carolyn Sue. *Story Programs: A Source Book of Materials*. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1980
- Sierra, Judy. *The Flannel Board Storytelling Book*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1987

Professional Readings

- Bauer, Caroline Feller. *Celebrations*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1985
- Brown, Marc. *Finger Rhymes*. New York: Dutton, 1980

Reference

- ¹Donna E. Norton, *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1983), p. 20.