



## Enhancing Literacy Rigor in Ready for Kindergarten Storytime

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Public library staff play a key role in educating and supporting parents and caregivers as they teach their children early literacy skills. At Columbus Metropolitan Library (CML) in Columbus, Ohio, Ready for Kindergarten programs and services are part of the library's top strategy. As such, CML initiated a professional review to ensure the fidelity of the library's work. Dr. Lea McGee, retired professor of early literacy at The Ohio State University, was engaged to review targeted programs and make recommendations based on early childhood principles.

CML focuses Ready for Kindergarten efforts on four early literacy skills, with a menu of programs and services designed to reinforce letter identification, initial sounds, rhyming and vocabulary. This approach was predicated on the desire to focus on a few skills for increased impact. In April 2015, CML engaged Dr. Lea McGee to conduct a thorough review in order to ensure the developmental appropriateness and fidelity of the programs and services offered. She observed programs at eight locations and reviewed all materials related to Storytimes and Book Lessons. Dr. McGee also accompanied Ready to Read Corps staff as they conducted home visits to families with young children, birth-age 5.

Dr. McGee concluded that CML is focused on appropriate and important early literacy skills. However, she did find a number of practices which were not developmentally correct, especially connected to homework activities for the parents of babies and toddlers.



She observed some incorrect pronunciation of letter sounds and letter formation techniques. In addition, Dr. McGee suggested enhancements in parent directed messages along with the addition of activities critical for early literacy development that were lacking, most notably in the area of writing. While these suggestions may seem simple, it is important not to underestimate the significance of them to the program.

## BACKGROUND

Ready for Kindergarten is one of the three areas of focus in CML's number one external strategy: Young Minds, or children and their parents and caregivers. CML chooses to invest heavily in this area of the Young Minds strategy, becoming the first public library in the U.S. with a dedicated team making home visits to at-risk parents to help them learn and implement early literacy activities in the home. In 2014, CML deliberately moved away from ALA's Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library's five practices, choosing instead to focus on four key skills. These skills were identified in a landmark Ohio State University study, *Ready to Read and School Success: Kindergarten Readiness and the Third Grade Reading Guarantee*. In this study, researchers found that at kindergarten entry, the three highest predictors of success on later passage of the third grade reading assessment were letter identification, initial sounds and rhyme production.

Realizing that children's librarians are not early literacy specialists, Dr. McGee was engaged to observe and review:

- 1. Storytime:** Baby, Toddler, Preschool.
- 2. Book Lessons:** Brief tutorials for parents on increasing literacy through specific book sharing techniques.
- 3. Ready to Read Home Visits:** Monthly visits to at-risk families with a child birth-age 5.



## FINDINGS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Following Dr. McGee's review of Storytime, Book Lessons and Home Visits, recommendations were made identifying improvement areas for each program. Each finding was carefully considered as a potential change to CML's Ready for Kindergarten approach while also considering factors such as library resources and translation into the public library setting.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**Suggestions for changes to Storytime activities in baby, toddler and preschooler programs:**

### 1. Add a writing component to each Storytime.

Writing is an important precursor of literacy and it supports letter learning and acquiring concepts about words not directly addressed during Storytime. Children begin to write letters when they can make lines which appear in letters. Helping children practice making these lines allows them to gain motor control used later in writing letters. Because of the direct application to letter knowledge, a writing activity is now included in all toddler and preschool Storytimes. While Storytime writing activities vary, practicing the letter

of the day and name writing are encouraged. Individual whiteboards were purchased for all CML locations to serve as a tool for encouraging writing activities.

## 2. Enhance the Storytime framing to create a stronger connection between the program, skills and parents.

To more effectively engage parents during Storytime, it is important to clearly state why Storytime is important and define the parent's role. Therefore, a statement directed at parents is made while introducing all Storytimes. This message, or "tight framing," covers the purpose of Storytime, literacy skills that will be addressed, books highlighting these skills and expectations for parental participation.



## 3. Use of a standard approach to writing and voicing letters.

- a. Letters are written using lines that are produced in a particular order and direction for maximum writing efficiency. These standard letter formations (see example below) are demonstrated for parents during "letter of the day" activities in Storytime.
- b. To use knowledge of "letter sounds" in spelling, children have to isolate the first sound they hear in a word and then make a decision about what letter spells that sound. When teaching a letter sound, it is important not to add an "uh" sound at the end of the letter. For example, the letter "s" should sound like a snake hissing, with no throat sound. Letter "s" says "sss," not "suh."

### Examples of standard letter formation

<b>C</b>	<b>circle back stop</b>
<b>O</b>	<b>circle back</b>
<b>T</b>	<b>Down over</b>
<b>L</b>	<b>Down over</b>
<b>E</b>	<b>Down over over over</b>

**BOOK LESSONS** is a parent-focused service where staff demonstrates how to use picture books to intentionally teach early literacy skills to pre-kindergarten children. Book Lessons encourage parent-child conversation guided by the four targeted skills. Book Lesson "homework" sheets for parents identify literacy activities corresponding to specific books for three age groups: babies, toddlers, preschoolers.

## Suggestions for increasing customer use of Book Lessons:

### 1. Promote Book Lessons during Storytime.

To increase customer use of the Book Lesson titles and connect families with literacy rich activities at home, Book Lessons are now promoted during Storytime.

### 2. Revise baby and toddler homework sheets for developmental appropriateness.

Revised homework activities align with Dr. McGee's recommendations. For example, although CML advised parents to write down words for babies and toddlers, in fact, neither benefit from this activity. Instead, parents should point to and talk about the pictures. Additionally, parents of toddlers can write down highly salient words such as their child's name.

For the purposes of this paper, home visitation feedback will not be shared. Home visits are a focused outreach effort that operates outside of typical library programming and therefore has fewer transferable recommendations.

## MOVING FORWARD

The results of Dr. McGee's review lead CML to advocate for public libraries to consider the following:

- Engage an outside expert to review early literacy efforts implemented by public library staff. Because library staff are capable researchers does not mean they are early literacy experts implementing developmentally appropriate activities.
- Consider narrowing the focus of early literacy efforts to fewer skills for deeper impact.
- Re-examine all programs and services for birth-5 year olds for alignment. Legacy programs such as traditional Storytime may not be structured to directly support parents, particularly at-risk families.

