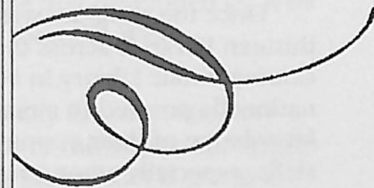


# INDIANA LIBRARIES EMBRACE EARLY LITERACY

by Pamela Martin-Diaz



## INTRODUCTION

What value is there in the work of children's librarians? Does what we do make a difference, or is it merely "nice"? Like many children's librarians I have long been convinced of the importance of reading books with children of all ages. My conviction was based on instinct, on the sense that poetry, rhyme, and the many other elements of storytime were not just fun for children but an important part of their development. Imagine then my delight in learning about research that confirmed my previously unfounded belief in the value of what children's librarians have traditionally been doing.

## THE EARLY DAYS

Staff members from Allen County Public Library were fortunate to attend the Public Library Association's Spring Symposium in Chicago in 2000, which introduced many of us to words that were soon to become part of our every day vocabulary – *emergent literacy* (yes, we called it that before switching to "early literacy," to get away from the idea that literacy is a natural occurrence, when in fact it needs to be taught), *phonological awareness*, and *dialogic reading*, to name a few. These terms gave a name and, because of the research behind them, educational validity to many of the activities that children's librarians have been doing in storytime. Not only were we introduced to new concepts, we also became familiar with the National Reading Panel, the literacy investigations of the National Institutes of Child Health and Development (NICHD), and the work of literacy mavens like Dr. Grover C. Whitehurst and Dr. Christopher Lonigan and their colleagues. Indeed an entire new body of knowledge became familiar to us. Most important of all, we saw the early stages of the program that would later be named Every Child Ready to Read@ your library. (For lists of resources and more information about this program, go to [www.ala.org/everychild](http://www.ala.org/everychild).)

## THE RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Every Child Ready to Read @ your library is firmly rooted in research delineating the six skills that young

children need to become readers. The six skills are *print motivation* which is interest in and enjoyment of books; *vocabulary*, or knowing the names of things; *narrative skills*, which is the ability to understand, tell and retell stories and events; *phonological awareness*, knowing that words are made up of sound and those sounds can be manipulated; *print awareness*, which is knowing that print follows rules (in English we read from left to right) and that the print on the page is what is being read; and *letter knowledge*, knowing that letters have names, are different from one another, and that each letter goes with a specific sound. The time that library workers spend with children during storytimes is not of sufficient duration or intensity necessary to make a significant impact on young children's early literacy skills. However, their parents and careproviders do have the time and opportunity to have a positive impact on their early literacy development. Not only do these adults have the requisite time, they can be taught how to interact with young children and books in a way that will have a significant impact.

In association with the Public Library Association, Dr. Grover Whitehurst and Dr. Christopher Lonigan developed a program for librarians to use with the adults who are most likely to help their children become readers. The library-specific programs are geared to the adults in the lives of three age groups – newborns, toddlers, and preschoolers. All the parent/caregiver workshops talk about the six early literacy skills as they relate to the designated age group. The program for newborns is called Early Talkers (newborns to two), and focuses on the relationship between the adult and the baby and books. It is designed to encourage language-rich interactions between the grown-up and the baby. The Talkers' program (two to three) is designed for children who have at least fifty words in their vocabulary. Adults are instructed how to practice dialogic reading, a specific way of sharing books that encourages active participation by the child, resulting in significant growth of children's vocabulary and narrative skills. The program for careproviders of preschoolers is called Pre-talkers (ages four to five), and has two components, one of which is designed to

strengthen phonological awareness by showing adults how to break words into their parts, while the other focuses on letter knowledge.

Once the program was developed, it was piloted in thirteen libraries across the country, including Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Results nationally pointed to a marked increase in adults' knowledge of their young children's early literacy skills, especially among young, low-income parents. Another consistent finding was the need for libraries to take the program outside of their buildings and into the communities of people who are not our traditional library users.

The pilot libraries enthusiastically embraced the program, encouraging PLA (Public Library Association) and ALSC (Association for Library Service to Children) to turn the program into a national initiative. With the help of early literacy and training experts, the two associations developed a train-the-trainer module, which has been used by libraries across the United States and Canada. For more information see [www.ala.org/everychild](http://www.ala.org/everychild).

## THE NEED IN INDIANA

National research on the impact of poor early literacy skills is sobering indeed. In fact for many librarians, the research imbued the project with a sense of urgency and was a key factor in its initiation. Learning that a child's knowledge of the alphabet is predictive of reading knowledge in the tenth grade and that a child who is a poor reader at the end of third grade is likely to remain a poor reader throughout school, put early literacy in an entirely new light.

Indiana is one of just twelve states in this country that does not fund preschool. (Note: Head Start is federally funded. For more information on state funding, see <http://nieer.org/mediacenter/index.php?PressID=71>.) In 2005, 17% of our children lived in poverty, according to the Indiana Youth Institute (see [http://www.iyi.org/media/pr\\_details.asp?ArticleID=433](http://www.iyi.org/media/pr_details.asp?ArticleID=433)). Risk factors for failure in school, such as poverty, are mitigated by high quality preschools. Many public school districts are struggling with the educational goals as established by the No Child Left Behind legislation. One of the centerpieces of this legislation is the demand placed on schools to decrease the gap in achievement between minority and low-income students and the majority and more affluent students. Again, participation in strong preschool or Head Start programs has shown to help young children who live in poverty catch-up to their peers. Library workers who have good access to such organizations are well-poised to help adults guide their children's early literacy development.

Given the dearth of affordable, quality preschools in Indiana, helping children get ready for school at

home or in daycare centers is all the more important. Every Child Ready to Read@your library® (ECRR) can help adults help their children establish a strong foundation in early literacy skills, enabling youngsters of all socio-economic levels to begin school with a solid foundation to become a fluent reader.

## EVERY CHILD READY TO READ@ YOUR LIBRARY IN INDIANA

Early in 2006, Joyce Welkie, Children's Services Coordinator in Plainfield-Guildford Township Public Library, convened a group of librarians interested in bringing ECRR to Indiana. Over the course of the next year, the group named itself the Indiana Taskforce on Early Literacy in Libraries, or ITELL. As Joyce Welkie, Head of Children's Services at Plainfield-Guildford Township Public Library, recalls,

The Indiana Taskforce of Early Literacy Librarians (ITELL) was formed and currently meets to promote ECRR in the state. ...ITELL members have presented sessions at state library conferences. Two members of ITELL successfully lobbied Indiana University School of Library and Information Science to offer a 1.5 credit workshop "Understanding and Promoting Early Literacy." Those two members have taught two sessions of this class with great success.

I like to think that ECRR has had an Emeril (the popular television chef) effect on children's library programming in that it has "kicked it up a notch."

The work of the ITELL group culminated in 2007, when the state library sought and obtained an LSST grant, with the guidance and support of Marcia Smith-Woodard, Special Services Consultant, Indiana State Library, Library Development Office, which funded training sessions on ECRR for library workers statewide. To date, 171 library staff and 85 partner/agency participants have been trained. Included in the grant was money to purchase PLA/ALSC's train-the-trainer kit, as well as a copy of *Early Literacy Storytimes@ your library: Partnering with Careproviders for Success* by Saroj Ghoting and Pamela Martin-Diaz. The goal of the grant is to ensure that every library in Indiana has staff trained in the program and thus able to hold the workshops in their respective communities. On-going planning and support for the program is part of a strategic plan that Indiana State Library staff is developing. Reports were made at the last CYPD Conference (Children and Young People's Division) sponsored by Indiana Library Federation last September, with more reports scheduled for both CYPD and ILF this year.

Libraries in Indiana have used the ITELL program to enhance their existing programs in a variety of ways. Joyce Welkie relates that "Every Child Ready to Read @ your library® has had a tremendous impact on what we

do here..." at Plainfield-Guilford Township Public Library. She elaborates as follows:

The first early literacy skill that we emphasized, after staff training in 2004, was narrative skills. Through a Target® grant we added a music table, bubble mirror, and felt board stories to our room for creative play. By encouraging the importance of play for young children, we have noticed many more parents/caregivers actively engaged with their children, resulting in a dramatic increase in narrative skills in young children. Our children's room has become a popular destination for moms' groups in our county.

Not only has space been changed, but programming as well. Joyce continues,

Our storytimes have been restructured to reflect the age divisions of ECRR. We have changed some of the songs and activities in our storytimes to build on the early literacy skills of phonological awareness and vocabulary development.

The staff was able to spread the message about early literacy in additional ways, as Joyce describes below.

ECRR training has empowered many of my staff members to speak to parents/caregivers, informally and at workshops, about their child's development and early literacy. In fact, my staff, along with Saroj Ghoting [one of ECRR's national trainers and co-author of *Early Literacy Storytimes@ your library®*], produced a video/DVD to help spread the early literacy message in our community. A Target® grant provided funds for production and eventually two revisions of the video. The video was distributed at outreach functions and workshops in the community and at library conferences in the state.

ECRR came into existence at the same time as Allen County's participation in one of the Lily Foundation's Community Alliance to Promote Education (CAPE) grants. Allen County Public Library (ACPL) was able to incorporate the research and parts of the ECRR program into its proposal as part of the countywide grant. ACPL received funding for three years to develop its unique take on the national program. Library staff developed a multi-pronged, including creating Parent and Child Sets (PACS) to help adults teach children the alphabet in engaging ways; the creation of share-a-book bags, where age-appropriate books in a canvass bag were taken to childcare centers and then sent home for shared book reading; and the printing of *Playing with Words on the GO!*, activities on a ring for adults to do with children to help them develop phonological

awareness and alphabet knowledge. Libraries also held a six-part series to help four year olds get ready for kindergarten. Called *Countdown to Kindergarten*, the program was modeled after one first developed by West Bloomfield Township Public Library in West Bloomfield, Michigan.

ACPL is in its sixth year of Lily funding. Staff has made some significant changes to the original program as originally funded. This year library staff is going to present *Countdown to Kindergarten* to childcare providers who work with four year olds in childcare homes and centers rather than holding the program in libraries. The ECRR workshops are held all in one day and count toward free (to the participants) continuing education units; library staff that does the training has been approved to offer credits by IPFW and the grant pays for them to be awarded to the participants.

Every Child Ready to Read @ your library® has not only changed the way in which library staff does business, but also where! Allen County Public Library's newly renovated main library in downtown Fort Wayne has a separate room for adults and their young children to use to encourage early learning. Inspired by the research-based vision of ACPL librarians who helped to design and bring to fruition their dreams of an Early Learning Center focusing on preliteracy and prenumeracy skills, the space is part of the Children's Room. It features an alphabet tree as well as areas designed to encourage adult-child interaction around the six skills. Library staff was so determined to offer this kind of early learning environment that they gave up what was to have been their workspace. The room is being well used and much appreciated, bringing in large numbers of new patrons to the main library. In fact, over 5,000 people are using the space per month.

## CONCLUSION

As we walked through the doors and into this new world of early childhood research, we entered a place where we were soon to not only feel at home but become leaders in our communities on some very important issues surrounding the education of young children. Many of us have become inspired to deepen our understanding of how children learn how to read. Every Child Ready to Read@ your library® has breathed new life into library programming and staff alike.

## REFERENCES

Indiana Youth Institute. Retrieved September 19, 2007, from [http://www.iyi.org/mediapr\\_details.asp?ArticleID=433](http://www.iyi.org/mediapr_details.asp?ArticleID=433)