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Libraries and Family Literacy Programs

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Illiteracy and low literacy keep people in poverty—not just in their own lifetimes, but in the lives of their children. Adults who did not succeed in school not only have fewer opportunities and fewer tools for success in the modern economy, but they raise children who rarely if ever see adults reading, and who have fewer opportunities for intellectual stimulation (not to mention material security) than their more prosperous classmates. Entering school already behind, these children find formal education just as frustrating, defeating, and irrelevant as their parents did. They may never catch up in their reading skills or in their desire to read, and thus may never find their way beyond minimum-wage jobs. If they seek adult education to improve their literacy skills, they find it hard to stay motivated and stay in the program (Belzer, 2001). It means going back to a classroom, an arena that always meant failure, boredom and punishment.

Family literacy programs seek to open this intergenerational closed circuit by helping low-literate and illiterate adults learn not only to read for themselves, but to help their children to read, and to develop parenting skills and insights along the way. Adults who never found reading a pleasure are introduced to the joy, fun, and depth of quality children's literature—and where they might not be motivated to help themselves, they see a real reason to help their kids. Together, adults and children discover an enjoyment of reading that not only prepares them for the workforce and removes them from the tax burden of social services, but fuels lifelong learning and personal enrichment. The National Center for Family Literacy (<http://www.famlit.org>) and the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy (<http://www.ed.psu.edu/goodlinginstitute>) have documented both the link between the educational achievement of the parent and the success of the child, and the success of family literacy programs in making a difference.¹

Public libraries should be a natural fit for family literacy programs. The library has the collections, after all; it also has staff committed to literacy and to the pleasures of reading, and who are experienced in funding and implementing family programs as well as in recruiting and coordinating volunteers (Talan, 1999; Sumerford, 1997). Libraries also have an established commitment to serving diverse ethnic and linguistic communities, which is a growing focus of family literacy programs. However, while most family literacy programs emphasize the value of having and using a library card (RMC Research Corporation, 2001), few formal family literacy programs include a public library as a major partner. Libraries often act as supports, providing materials and meeting space, but less frequently take a leadership role. With the exception of nationally-sponsored programs like Even Start (<http://www.evenstart.org>) and Motherread/Fatheread (<http://www.motheread.org>), and the local CAPE program Family Resource Centers (<http://www.monroe-county-cape.org>), most family literacy programs are extensions of more general adult education support run by school systems or local literacy councils, and not the main focus. Only one major national family literacy program is library-based: PRIME TIME Family Reading Time, developed by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities and now co-sponsored nationally by the American Library Association Public Programs Office.² Of the forty family literacy programs in Indiana listed in the National Center for Family Literacy directory, none of them are based in libraries (accessed 10/23/05).

Why this disconnect? Evaluation of the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) initiative of the Wallace Foundation (which focused on adult literacy) concluded that libraries are generally unprepared for the social service aspects of

programs like these, where the needs of the audience go far beyond regular library services (Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005). Libraries like the Kitsap Regional Library (KRL) in western Washington (<http://www.krl.org>) have explicit policies stating that they will not duplicate services provided by other agencies. Policies like these have the unfortunate side-effect of making the library hesitant to pursue active partnerships. In Kitsap County, this means that the small Motherread/Fatheread program that is all the Literacy Council of Kitsap (LCK) can afford to maintain has remained just that: small. KRL already provides space and materials for LCK's adult education work, and because of its policies is not likely to offer anything more; LCK is no doubt reluctant to ask, if it even realizes what a vibrant support the library could be.

Sadly, libraries and family literacy programs sometimes approach each other more as rivals for grant support and public commitment than as the collaborators they should be. Initiatives to integrate libraries into literacy programs, such as LILAA (1996-2002) and the Head Start/Library Family Literacy Partnership (1993-1999), have either lapsed at the end of funding or been replaced by configurations that omit the library (<http://www.famlit.org/ProgramsandInitiatives/headstart/index.cfm>). When I interned in the Melton Public Library in French Lick, the local Even Start program should have been an obvious partner—yet forging ties with the agency was surprisingly difficult. When the Melton director was encouraged by an Even Start volunteer to approach the agency's director for support of a fledgling "One Hundred Books Before Kindergarten" program, she met delays and runarounds. This resistance must be surmounted. Meaningful coalitions featuring the library as an active partner make up the strategy for the future.

Footnotes

¹See the Goodling Institute's Annotated Bibliography (Askov et al., 2005) for a regularly updated , detailed compendium of research on the nature of family literacy programs and their impact.

²See the program websites at <http://www.leh.org/primetime/PThomepage.htm> and <http://www.ala.org/ala/ppo/currentprograms/primetime/primetimefamily.htm>. This, in my opinion, is the best-designed of the major family literacy programs, and not only because it is library-centric. It incorporates storytellers as active partners giving live performances at meetings, and does not segregate adults and children. It has been remarkably successful, as testified by ALA's involvement. We all now have to hold our breath that the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities will be able to keep it going in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

References

Askov, E.N., Saenz, E.L., Jones, R., Grinder, L., Kinney, S., & Marvin, M. (2005).

Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy: Annotated bibliography.

University Park: Goodling Institute, Pennsylvania State University. Retrieved

October 10, 2005, from

<http://www.ed.psu.edu/goodlinginstitute/bibliography.htm>.

Unparalleled resource. Must be seen to be believed. Can be downloaded in full, or according to the “themes” that organize it: Interactive Literacy; Parenting Education; Program Descriptions and Models; Curriculum and Instruction; Collaboration within Programs and Among Social Service Agencies; Assessment and Evaluation of Family Literacy Programs; Culture and Context; Government Policy.

Belzer, A. (2002). “I don’t crave to read”: School learning and adulthood. *Journal of*

Adolescent and Adult Literacy 46(2), 104-113. Retrieved May 23, 2003, from

EBSCO Host Academic Search Premier (accessed through Indiana University Libraries).

Finds that negative experiences in school affect attitudes of adults toward adult literacy and adult education, and toward reading in general. When school was a place of tedium and failure, reading represented a chore and an inability to excel or even to please an establishment increasingly viewed as hostile, irrelevant, or both.

Porter, K.E., Cuban, S., & Comings, J.P. (2005, January). “*One day I will make it*”: A

study of adult student persistence in library literacy programs. New York:

MDRC. Retrieved October 9, 2005, from

<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/Literacy/>.

Final report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation as an evaluation of the 1996-2002 Literacy in Libraries Across American initiative (LILAA). Finds that adult literacy program participants rarely stay in the program

long enough to get the help they need to make significant improvements. This only underscores the value of family literacy programs, which have a much higher persistence rate (partly because they're more fun, and partly because adults are motivated on behalf of their children). See also the mid-stream assessments "As long as it takes" (2003) and "I did it for myself" (2001).

RMC Research Corporation. (2001, June). *Guide to Quality: Even Start Family Literacy*

Program, Volum I (revised). Manuscript submitted for publication. Retrieved

October 23, 2005, from

http://www.evenstart.org/publications/guide_to_quality.shtml.

Uses hypothetical case studies to illustrate Even Start program goals. References the library four times, in the context of encouraging program clients to obtain a library card and take advantage of the library.

Sumerford, S. (1997). Creating a community of readers to fight functional illiteracy.

American Libraries 28(5), 44-48. Retrieved October 10, 2005, from EBSCO Host

Academic Search Premier (accessed through Indiana University Libraries).

In response to the Wallace Foundation's LILAA program (announced the year before) and a general political climate in the Clinton administration bringing attention to the consequences of functional illiteracy, profiles various library programs and discusses issues involved. Features a section on the essential nature of family literacy, including the statement that "Children's librarians are uniquely qualified to develop and lead such family literacy programs." (47)

Talan, C. (1999). *Founding and funding family literacy programs: A How-To-Do-It*

Manual for Librarians. How-To-Do-It Manuals for Librarians Number 92. New

York: Neal-Schuman Publishers.

Practical outline for developing, implementing and evaluating a library-based family literacy program. Discusses the nature of and need for family literacy programs, and provides profiles of existing programs. Includes sample documents. Typically for Neal-Schuman, it gives you everything you need, including some extra motivation and encouragement if you needed that, too.