

CuddleUppets, Books, & Community: How the Cortez Public Library is Supporting Parents in Early Literacy

"I think it was great for caregivers to see how excited the kids were about being read to."

– Children's Librarian

The SPELL blueprint was created to assist library staff in their effort to support caregivers in practicing early literacy techniques with their children. In November 2014, eight libraries in Colorado were selected to implement the blueprint in their communities. Each library created a programming prototype that guided the library in collaborating with community partners, and providing outreach to low income and high need communities.

Community

Cortez is located in Montezuma County. The county's population of 26,168 is comprised of 73% White, 13% Latino/a, and 13% American Indian and Alaskan Native. Forty-two percent of K-12 students are minority. Twenty-seven percent of households have children under the age of 18. With a median annual income of \$28,772, 19% of the county's residents live below the poverty line.

Prototype

Library staff partnered with the Piñon Project on their prototype. The Piñon Project is an organization that works with over 3,000 high-risk children to increase family stability and self-sufficiency by providing early childhood education, parent education and support, youth development, community capacity, and access to health care. Library staff and Piñon Project worked together to develop early literacy concepts, models, and strategies to use in the homes of low-income families, as well as running family literacy nights at the library.

Library staff also developed an active partnership with Towaoc, a Head Start program on the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's reservation. The partners jointly offered storytimes, family nights, and an Imagination Library program that provided free books to Ute families on a monthly basis.

The Ready Rosie app (an early education tool providing video modeling of brain-based strategies) was offered but was not as successful as other programming; parents signed up for the tool at events but usage was low. Library staff commented that if parents received personalized training on the app it would have created more usage. Towaoc Head Start is still pleased with the app and hopes it will continue to be available to their families.

Library staff also held storytimes at the local farmers market and reported that these were well attended. Most parents stayed with their children throughout the event. Library staff also hosted early literacy parent nights and gave away CuddleUppets (an elephant blanket puppet) to be used when reading with their children. According to parents, the CuddleUppet served as a concrete object that reminded their children to read.

Resources

Financial resources for this prototype came from two sources: \$10,852 from a National Leadership Grant distributed by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and \$4,062 in matching funds.

With these funds, the library purchased 611 books and 500 CuddleUppets. The library also purchased county-wide access to the Ready Rosie app and printed over 1,000 informational materials on early literacy for distribution.

Using these resources and supports, library staff hosted four events for parents and children at the library, two events at Towaoc Head Start, five events with the Montelores Early Childhood Council, two parent events with the Piñon Project, and a Children's Festival at the local recreation center. Outside of scheduled group programming, the library conducted 36 offsite one-on-one parent consultations focused on early literacy. There were 189 caregivers that participated in events throughout the year with 143 children.

Parent Survey Results

A total of 67 parents completed a pre-program survey, 20 completed a post-program survey, and 102 completed a one-time event survey to assess the impact of the program and better understand the community. These surveys revealed that there was a significant increase in parents' knowledge of everyday early literacy activities. In addition, it was found that:

- 91% know more everyday activities to help their child be ready to learn how to read in kindergarten.
- 84% have a better understanding of how children learn to read.
- 93% are more confident helping their child to be ready to learn how to read in kindergarten.
- 94% plan to spend more time doing activities that will help their child to be ready to learn how to read in kindergarten.
- 99% plan to spend more time reading with their child.
- 94% are more committed to maintaining a regular reading routine.
- 96% plan to use the CuddleUppet when reading with their child.
- 37% report using their CuddleUppet when reading once a day or more, with another 10% using it most days of the week.
- 45% report reading to their child several times a day, 30% once a day, and 15% 4-6 days a week.
- 85% talk to their child several times a day.

- 50% sing with their child several times a day, and 20% once a day.
- 75% encourage their child to play with their hands several times a day, and 10% once a day.
- 85% play with their child several times a day in a way that helps them explore their surroundings.
- 47% reported having more than 50 books at home, 21% had 26-50 books, 21% had 11-25 books, and 5% had 3-10 books.

Additional quotes from parents demonstrate what an impact this program had on families:

- "Exposure to books in different environments has helped so they are not just for bedtime."
- "The cuddle puppet makes it more interactive. Treasure chests are amazing!"
- "It [literacy nights] has provided confirmation that we are doing the right things for our son's learning. And structure for encouraging those behaviors/activities."
- "He loves his CuddleUppet! Ellie the Elephant!"
- "She pays A LOT of attention to the reading program. She pretends the CuddleUppet is her baby and loves cuddling with it at night for reading bedtime."
- "She loves to open the mail as she knows a new book is in the mail for her. Thank you!"
- "Tips to help our child remain engaged during reading time have been very helpful"
- "The CuddleUppet - what a great idea to read to it! That can help my routine be more consistent"
- "I think the use of a puppet is classic and will serve to aid in creating enthusiasm for early literacy."
- "I like Reading Rosie tips & plan to use the CuddleUppet with those & reading books at bedtime."

Success Stories

Library staff produced a strong advertising and marketing campaign. Staff was creative in their marketing and used a variety of advertising outlets including: local newspaper ads, local television channels, local radio stations, their own radio storytime show, NPR interviews, and Ute Mountain Ute tribe's television station. Fliers were distributed via the reservation, the Piñon Project, the school district, and placed around town. Staff attended back to school events and farmers markets, sent out email blasts, and used social media. As a result, they achieved their goal of reaching the wider community to draw more participants into the SPELL program, which was clearly demonstrated when the Mayor of Cortez brought one of the CuddleUppets to a city council meeting to talk about SPELL.

A second success was the library's partnership with the Ute Mountain Ute tribe, which will continue into the future. This partnership was not easy to initiate and went through some planning and restructuring to ensure that it was meaningful for both groups. It was challenging to coordinate library events with the priorities of the tribe, and these events sometimes had unexpected results; for example, the first events were poorly attended

and later events would be canceled or changed at the last minute. However, it became an important partnership for both organizations and there are several stories of ecstatic children receiving books at the Towaoc Head Start.

In addition to successes outside the library, the program increased awareness about early literacy within the library itself. The children's librarian has noticed a renewed focus on early literacy, and the former library director felt there was a major shift in her early childhood awareness. Her reaction to the SPELL findings and blueprint was eye-opening, and motivated her to spread the word about early literacy learning in Cortez.

The parent nights were helpful in educating parents. One parent said, "the reassurance that little things, most of which I've already been doing, are helping my kids learn is nice. Being a parent can be scary & intimidating. I like programs like this that reassure, encourage & educate."

The Ready Rosie program was successful for the parents who used it consistently. One parent reported, "With Ready Rosie I've found some great activities to do with my son. It keeps learning fun to have new ways to learn and explore their world." Another said, "the Ready Rosie program is going to help us put aside the time on a more regular basis."

Lessons learned

The prototype program was very successful, but there were still challenges and lessons to be learned throughout the year. Engaging parents is difficult in this community, which is a challenge other organizations have struggled with as well. This led to a concerted effort to try to find the best format for the parent SPELL nights at the library. Questions like "Which day of the week? What time? How long? Do we separate parents and kids?" were answered through trial and error.

Summer is a difficult period to focus on partnerships because children's librarians are giving the majority of their attention to the Summer Reading Program.

Getting parents signed up on Ready Rosie and encouraging them to use it consistently was a challenge. Library staff noted this low enrollment, and realized the necessity in training parents who signed up for access.

What's next?

Cortez has plans to continue working with the Towaoc Head Start, the Butler Head Start, the Piñon Project and health department. The children's librarian is an active member of the Montelores Early Childhood Council and will continue to work with them. The Ready Rosie subscription was renewed and a new partnership was established that will help the library promote usage of the app. They will also continue to experiment with marketing and advertising to increase early literacy awareness in Cortez.



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