

Creative Storytimes: How Garfield County Libraries are Supporting Parents in Early Literacy

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

The Parachute branch of Garfield County Libraries is located in a small community comprised of young families and retirees. This branch serves the town of Parachute and surrounding unincorporated areas of Battlement Mesa, Rulison, and Morisiana. The town's population of 1,172 is comprised of 54% White, 41% Latino/a, 2% American Indian and Alaskan Native, and 2% two or more races. Fifty-two percent of K-12 students are a minority. Thirty-seven percent of households have children under the age of 18. With a median annual income of \$60,179, 13% of the city's residents live below the poverty line.

Prototype

Library staff created 60 early literacy kits ("Lit Launch Kits") in both English and Spanish which are available for check out. Kits contain books, manipulatives, games, and a handout demonstrating early literacy activities.

The library also offered Ready Rosie, an app that provides video modeling of early learning skills.

In terms of partnerships, the library partnered with Raising a Reader, an organization that helps families develop, practice, and maintain home literacy routines. Raising a Reader staff attended numerous storytimes throughout the year to demonstrate effective and engaging learning activities with caregivers.

Parachute Library staff invited multiple performers and artists to attend monthly storytime events to encourage and engage children and their caregivers:

- The library partnered with Raising a Reader to hold a "Lit Launch" storytime. Raising a Reader staff attended one storytime session to read with the children and speak with parents about effective and engaging reading strategies. Raising a Reader provided books to all the children who attended this special event and gave parents early literacy information sheets. Raising a Reader and the library also hosted the "Lit Launch Storytime Party" to celebrate early literacy with families who have participated in the SPELL program.

- Raising a Reader conducted a bilingual event in support of the Spanish speaking community. "Picture Walk" storytime featured an early literacy storytime for children in the library. Raising a Reader staff spoke with parents and caregivers about the developmental importance of encouraging talk and imagination while reading wordless picture books with their children. Raising a Reader engaged the children in a story and demonstrated reading a wordless picture book to parents/caregivers. Parents were then encouraged to practice what they had learned and read a wordless picture book with their child.
- A Pediatric occupational therapist presented "Baby Play" storytime, a fun interactive program for caregivers and babies. Participants were guided in developmental play including fine/gross motor and sensory activities. The program was directed toward infants 6-24 months. Library staff also provided a storytime on the adjacent patio for the older siblings.
- "Rhyme" storytime introduced rhyming and rhythm through books, songs, and activities to babies and toddlers. Raising a Reader staff talked to parents about the importance of rhyme and rhythm for brain development. Rhyming activities with the children featured a fun twist on well-known nursery rhymes and songs - children would sing along to the original version and then were encouraged to change the main rhyming words to find words or sounds that rhymed with the new version.
- "Lap-Sit" storytime was led by a performer with the help of her monkey puppet. She modeled interactive rhymes, songs, and motions for caregivers and their children. As she read stories, she encouraged everyone to stay seated in their places, explaining that she would walk around to show the babies and toddlers the pictures as she read because the development of eyes at this stage in infant growth limits their range of vision. She also brought a parachute and a ukulele, both of which were very exciting for the children.
- "Little Sign Language" storytime was presented by staff from the Aspen Camp of the Deaf & Hard of Hearing. The presenter engaged with children and caregivers in American Sign Language. During a section on colors, children chose a colored scarf to hold and the presenter taught everyone how to sign the color of each scarf. A similar activity using puppets taught the children how to sign animal names. After reviewing all the signs the participants had learned, staff engaged the caregivers and parents in a conversation about which signs they believe will be most helpful in their groups. There was such a positive response to this program that the library is planning another session in the late fall of 2016.
- "Rocky Mountain Puppets" storytime included a ventriloquist and her puppet. She developed her storytime with a focus on literacy.
- Staff from the Love and Logic Institute hosted a presentation called, "Parenting with Love and Logic" for caregivers. This event was promoted county-wide and included attendees from throughout Garfield County. The presentation was interactive and the content was tailored to include information pertinent to the audience's needs and questions. Childcare was included for this program; while caregivers attended the presentation, children participated in special-focus early literacy activities.

Throughout the year, 168 caregivers and 286 children participated in SPELL programs.

Resources

Financial resources for this project came from two sources: \$12,000 from a National Leadership Grant distributed by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and \$3,030 in matching funds.

With these funds, the library purchased 29 books for parents and 578 books for children. Librarians were also able to purchase books and 140 manipulatives to create early literacy kits available for check out. The library printed and distributed 116 informational handouts on early literacy and 344 promotional materials for SPELL programs, and 22 themed early literacy activity booklets. Funding was also used to create a logo for the Lit Launch Kit book bags and to purchase the Ready Rosie app for the entire Garfield County Library District.

Parent Survey Results

A total of 18 parents completed pre-program surveys, 24 completed post-program surveys, and 38 completed one-time event surveys to assess the impact of the program and better understand the community. Results from the surveys include:

- 96% know what everyday activities to do with their child to help them be ready to learn how to read in kindergarten.
- 92% are confident they can help their child be ready to read in kindergarten.
- 87% plan to spend more time doing activities that will help their child be ready to learn to read in kindergarten.
- 84% plan to spend more time reading with their child.
- 84% are more committed to maintaining a regular reading routine.
- 81% know more about the activities the library offers for families with young children (ages 0-3).
- 81% plan to attend more library events for families with young children (ages 0-3).
- 69% plan to check out Lit Launch kits; 57% actually have checked out a Lit Launch kit.
- 61% report reading to their child several times a day, 39% once a day.
- 100% talk to their baby several times a day.
- 91% sing with their child several times a day, with 9% once a day.
- 100% encourage their child to play with their hands several times a day.
- 100% play with their child in a way that helps them explore their surroundings several times a day.
- 75% of families report having 51 or more books in their home, with 10% reporting 26-50 books, and 15% reporting 11-25 books at home.
- 35% subscribed to Ready Rosie. Of these, 29% watch videos daily, 14% watch videos most days, 29% watch some days; 29% do the activities most days, 14% do activities some days, 29% do activities once a week.

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

- "Great social & learning activity, all my kids look forward to & enjoy it"
- "My kids love [the librarian] and look forward to storytime every week!"

- “My child loves the interaction with other children. I think it's great to have someone else read to her also.”

Success Stories

The children's librarian feels that participating in the SPELL program indicates a shift for her professionally. She is more comfortable talking with parents about all the programs held at the library that teach early literacy strategies and feels confident that the SPELL program boosted the library services, citing the increased attendance at storytime.

Storytime events averaged 30 people in attendance. Attendance ranged from 14 (on a slow day) up to 60. This high attendance indicated that storytime was a good time to connect with families in the area. Parent engagement and participation during storytime increased over the year, especially during storytime events that featured performers.

The Lit Launch kits were checked out 72 times in six months. GarCo Sewing Works, a local organization that helps women develop skills in sustainable textile manufacturing, connected the library with a local designer to print the logo and create bags out of recycled material for the kits.

SPELL library events were successful. “Parenting with Love and Logic” was a popular event and the presenter is excited to continue their collaboration with the library in the future.

Parachute Library staff created new partnerships, connecting with and inviting local centers that worked with young children to join their events. A contact from Early Learning Ventures attended a storytime and shared information with her supervisor, who contacted library staff with additional information about community resources available for parents and children. They began discussing the possibility of working together, since both institutions have a similar focus on educating and training early childhood educators and home daycare providers. This led to the Early Head Start contact promoting SPELL by bringing early literacy information and Launch Kits to the early learning center's community resource fair and inviting the library to visit during the children's graduation/continuation ceremonies to speak with caregivers about library programs and events during the summer.

Lessons learned

While the project was successful, the library faced some challenges and learned valuable lessons along the way. The children's librarian was required to resolve challenges within library partnerships and struggled to determine how to engage parents in their small community. Despite these challenges, her solutions to these problems led to exciting accomplishments that will be sustainable for this library and community.

Determining when to schedule storytime programs was a challenge. Library staff learned to work with parents in creating a convenient programming schedule that matched with the parents' routines. Routines are helpful to those with small children, so adding another event to an already busy schedule can often dissuade parents from participating. Instead of changing the current storytime days and times, library staff used existing events and added special SPELL components with partners and performers.

Library staff learned that it is important to be flexible, clearly communicate expectations with partners, and use available resources wisely. Difficulties of winter travel were not taken into consideration when planning for special performances during the winter months; some of the performers could not make the trip from Denver. When travel became an issue, library staff planned for local artists to perform during winter months and invited Denver-area performers in spring and fall when travel was easier.

It was important to make expectations about caregiver participation clear from the beginning of every event. For example, a presenter could introduce the program by saying, "this is an interactive experience for child and caregiver and we encourage you to do the activities with your little ones along with [the presenter] and appreciate that you save all conversation for afterward, or visit in the library or the lobby during the show." Keeping these expectations in writing somewhere visible also helped prevent disruptions.

The Ready Rosie app was not as successful as anticipated. The library was pleased to provide new technology for Parachute families, but the program includes a lengthy registration process, and families did not feel it was relevant. By the end of the SPELL program, there were only 16 parent users of the app, reaching 25 children.

Trying to promote SPELL programming and early literacy information became successful through trial and error. The SPELL survey results showed that word of mouth is the best way to spread the word about library events. Encouraging participants to tell their friends about the library's programming is the best way increase participation, especially in small communities.

What's next?

The Parachute Library plans to continue working with Raising a Reader for the summer reading program, as well as with partners and performers once a month during storytimes. They will also be sharing the Lit Launch kits with the other six Garfield Library branches.



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