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# Introduction: Library Services for the Early Years

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Early childhood is high on the political agenda globally, and the political dimension relating to issues around the child and the family is complex. Policymakers have been interested in the importance of social capital, deprivation, and community cohesion, but there are also concerns around the level of reading skills in contemporary society. There is increasing knowledge about the significance of the first five years of life for intellectual, social, and emotional development. This new knowledge and understanding about child development has highlighted the needs of babies and toddlers, which can be incorporated into providing appropriate services and resources by librarians who specialize in supporting the needs of the early years and young children (Rankin & Brock, 2015). This issue of *Library Trends* discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with the provision of public library services for young children between birth and age 5, often referred to as the “under-fives.”

Public libraries are multipurpose institutions that include in their range of services places where families can effectively connect with local services. The public library has a role to play in helping to generate social capital at the individual level by providing support for families and parenting activities. The importance of this trusted public institution has been recognized by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) (2007), which argues that the availability of library services for babies and toddlers is crucial, and being part of the library community is an early social experience that sparks curiosity and the imagination. It is argued that community-based early years libraries are uniquely placed to support families and young children because they offer accessible learning opportunities for intergenerational groups (Rankin, Brock, Halpin, & Wootton, 2007). Librarians have a valuable contribution to make to the early years by providing activities that support the development of language, communication, and literacy skills. Working as partners with other agencies enables proac-

tive library services to develop and customize services specifically for their local communities, and librarians are successfully building partnerships based on bookgifting and early intervention literacy programs.

Until fairly recently, literacy was considered primarily as reading and writing, but the principles behind the concept of *emergent literacy* are that literacy begins at birth and is a social process. The professional intervention provided by the librarian in supporting the development of communication, language, and literacy facilitates access to resources that encourage emergent literacy. The process of participation in cultural routines begins from the time the child is born (Corsaro, 2015). Young children can participate in reading as a social activity. This is very popular, judging by the number of rhyme-time and story sessions offered in public libraries and other early years settings across the British Isles and other parts of the world. In this way, reading can help form and nurture relationships from the earliest act of parents sharing books with babies. In providing this professional intervention, early years librarians offer interactive sessions and have knowledge of diverse resources, such as treasure baskets, toy libraries, story sacks, and Bookstart packs; they select books that are appropriate for babies and young children, additional-language learners, and children with special educational needs.

Parents are the most important reading role models for their children. The early interactions that occur between young children and their parents and caregivers are important for personal, social, cultural, emotional, and linguistic development. Reading together and sharing books encourages talking, which helps to develop communication skills. Shared book reading in families is strongly linked with successful school literacy and identity, belonging, and participation in literate societies. The UK's Bookstart was the first national baby book-gifting program in the world and encourages all parents and caregivers to enjoy books with their children from as early an age as possible (Wade & Moore, 2003). Wendy Cooling, the founder of Bookstart, has said that we know almost by instinct that it is a good thing to read to young children, but it took the Bookstart project, piloted in 1992, to support this belief with research evidence.

The theme of reviewing the research evidence is picked up in the paper by Caroline Barratt-Pugh and Mary Rohl, who examine the nature of family literacy programs, with a focus on bookgifting and the provision of free books to babies and young children. With particular reference to evaluation procedures, they identify important issues that need to be addressed when planning and evaluating these programs, and argue that this area of research needs stronger definition and a more inclusive approach to evaluation that includes both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Their paper examines the independent, longitudinal evaluation undertaken by Edith Cowan University of the Better Beginnings bookgifting program for babies run by the State Library of Western Australia. Barratt-Pugh

and Rohl argue that this has been invaluable to the program's sustainability and contributed to the evidence base that both demonstrates the key role that libraries play in literacy development and has helped to inform further program development.

Jessica Ralli and Rachel Payne describe an innovative program with a play-based curriculum for babies and toddlers developed at Brooklyn Public Library in New York. A key message, and perhaps a challenge to many, is that *playtime* should be seen as a core component of programs and not an afterthought. They discuss potential barriers, as play in the library can create issues of concern; for example, the lack of suitable space, and that noise can cause annoyance and disruption for other library users. Children's energies can be directed to more appropriate play in which small-scale, temporary play experiences can be created in multipurpose program rooms. Research shows strong links between play and early literacy, as well as other key developmental skills. Ralli and Payne review what very young children learn through play, as well as optimal adult interactions that best support early literacy development. Their paper also shares the results of a survey on how librarians in the United States are implementing innovative play programming for babies and toddlers.

In the issue's final paper, Tess Prendergast lays a firm foundation for helping early years librarians consider their role in the provision of inclusive early literacy resources for children with disabilities. She identifies a lack of library studies that consider the needs of such children, and how to adapt early literacy resources to effectively help them. Prendergast reports on a qualitative study of children's librarians working in western Canada and parents of young children with disabilities living in the same region who were asked about their children's experiences in public libraries. The librarians commented on their perceived lack of training and the relative rarity of children with disabilities at their libraries, while parents' interviews revealed a broad range of experiences, including their own reluctance to approach librarians to discuss their children's needs. The study's findings support a rationale for more responsive and inclusive early literacy experience for, and research about, young children with disabilities in public libraries today.

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