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READING ENRICHMENT:

Creating A Love of Books That Lasts a Lifetime

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New Orleans, Louisiana

Early experiences with books, including being read to, lay the foundation for later literacy behaviors. Research has documented the tremendous impact these experiences have on later reading scores, verbal performance, and overall school achievement (DeBaryshe, 1993; Elley, 1989; Scarborough, Dobrich & Hager, 1991). If reading enrichment is a good thing for young children, what are the core components of reading enrichment programs? How can programs inspire a love of books in young children and foster parental involvement in reading and reading-related activities? Positive and frequent experiences with books are recognized as critical elements in the foundation of later literacy. This article will explore a variety of community-based reading enrichment opportunities. Although they are quite different in their approaches, they share a common goal: to inspire a love for books in young children that will last a lifetime.

Reading Enrichment and Development (R.E.A.D.)

On a warm spring afternoon, 2-year-old twins, Patrick and Elizabeth, and their mother walk toward a church building in Uptown New Orleans. "I wonder what we'll do today in our R.E.A.D. class?" their mom asks. As their mom holds the door open, the twins rush into a nearby classroom and begin to look through baskets on the floor. Patrick chooses a book and crawls into his mom's lap so she can read it to him. Elizabeth finds some foam letters in another basket and begins to pull out the purple letters and arrange them on the floor. As other parents and their toddlers arrive, they also select books to read or letters to play with and gather informally on a rug on the floor.

Moments later Marilyn Levin, the creator and director of the Reading Enrichment and Development (R.E.A.D.) program, takes her place in the group. On her lap sits the class mascot, a stuffed elephant named Willowby. Today, Willowby is wearing a lion mask. After Marilyn and Willowby greet the children and their parents, Marilyn asks the children "What is Willowby dressed as today?" Patrick readily calls out "Lion!" Marilyn explains that today, the children will be reading books about the zoo, so Willowby has dressed for the occasion. Willowby then makes his way around the room. As he is passed around, each child and caregiver takes a turn placing Willowby on their heads and introducing themselves.

abstract

Early literacy experiences play an important role in later literacy skills and school achievement. Communities offer early literacy experiences in a variety of venues to meet the diverse needs of families. The author of this article provides 4 vignettes illustrating community-based early literacy activities: (1) private group classes such as the Reading Enrichment and Development Program that incorporates stories, art, music, and acting; (2) the Reach Out and Read early literacy program based in primary health care settings; (3) family literacy programs that promote parents literacy skills at the same time as supporting children's literacy development, such as the federal Early Head Start program; and (4) read-aloud programs in bookstores or libraries. These reading enrichment experiences, while quite different in their approach, share the goal of providing a strong foundation for literacy through the joy of reading.

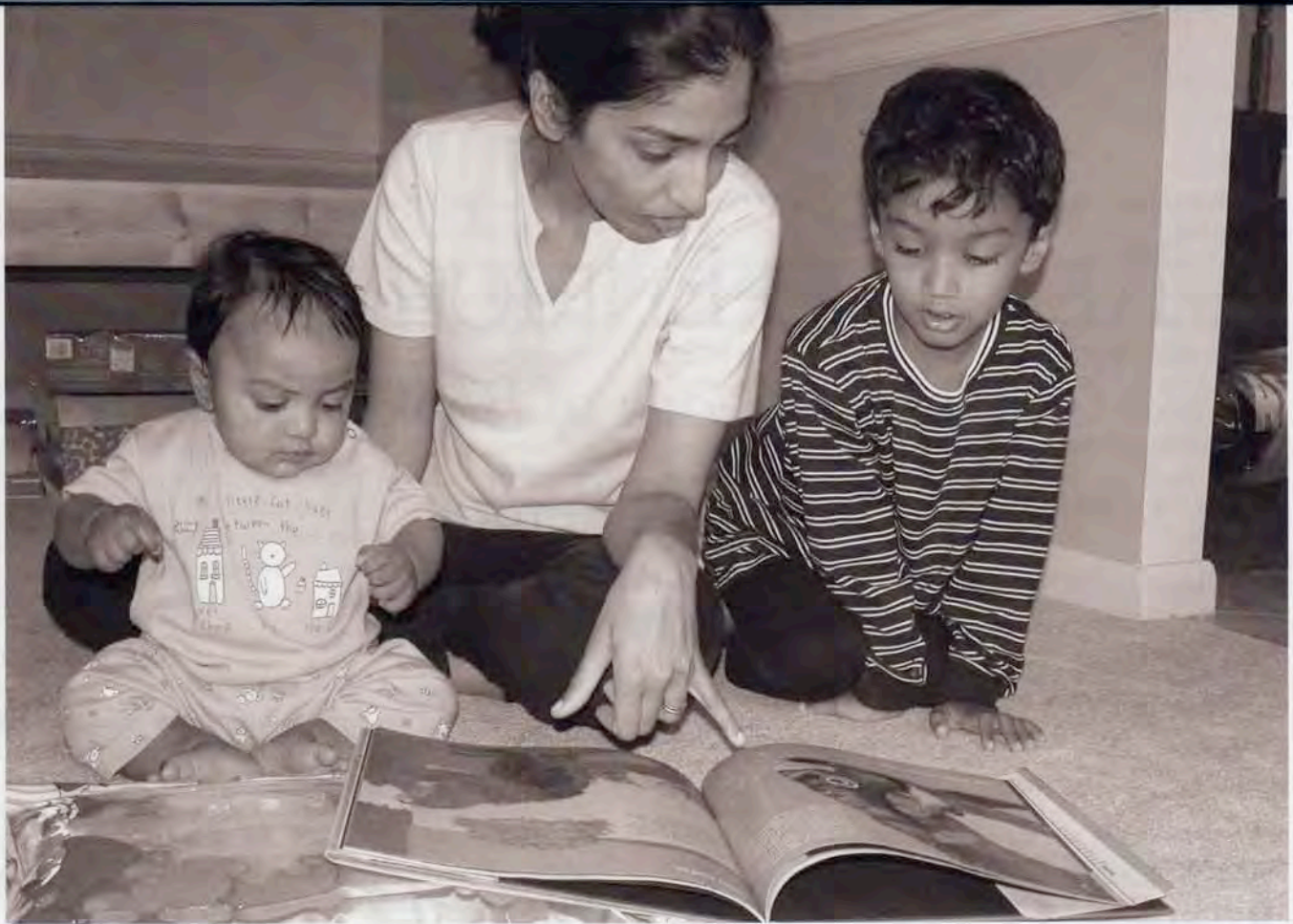


PHOTO: MARILYN NOLT

Marilyn asks the children to find “their letters” on the rug on the floor. As each child and caregiver move to the spot on the rug displaying the first letter of the child’s name, Marilyn begins to play a recording of alphabet song. As the music plays, the children and their parents march in a circle around the rug.

After the song is finished, toddlers and their caregivers again take their places on the rug. Marilyn opens a large copy of the nursery rhyme “Pop Goes the Weasel” and places it on an easel. On a nearby table sit a cobbler’s bench and two stuffed monkeys, one wearing a weasel mask. As Marilyn’s assistant turns the pages of the book and slowly runs her finger under the text, Marilyn recites the rhyme and acts it out with the props. The children giggle as the monkeys chase each other around the bench. Marilyn then asks for volunteers to act out the rhyme while the other children and parents sing.

Next, the R.E.A.D. participants prepare to read another book. Today, Marilyn has chosen *Seals on the Bus* by Lenny Hort (2000). Marilyn and her assistant quickly arrange small chairs in the room to resemble seats on the bus while the children select animal headbands. Each child is given a “bus token” that is placed in a canister before the child boards the “bus.” Marilyn wears a bus driver’s cap and sits at the front of the “bus” while reading the story. From their seats on the “bus,” the children act out the animal sounds as they are read in the book.

When the book is finished, Marilyn and her class move to the adjacent classroom where Marilyn has set up a series

of learning centers, each containing activities related to the zoo theme. Time in the centers is followed by a snack, also related to the class theme: today, children can choose from iced or colored animal crackers. Once snack is finished, toddlers and parents again gather on the alphabet rug while Marilyn turns the pages of *Goodnight, Gorilla*, a picture book by Peggy Rathmann (1994). Marilyn’s assistant uses a stuffed gorilla and some keys to act out parts of the story. As the class ends, Marilyn dons a baboon puppet, and leads the class in a chorus of “Animal Fair.” The toddlers pretend they are monkeys and jump while singing the song.

Before leaving, each child is invited to check out a “literacy backpack.” These backpacks contain several books as well as props like videos, puppets, or toys that are consistent with the books’ content or theme. Elizabeth selects a backpack containing two *Angelina Ballerina* books (Holabird, 1983) and an *Angelina* videotape. Patrick chooses a pack with books related to construction and equipment. He notices the small plastic dump truck and bulldozer inside and immediately takes them out to play with. As Patrick and Elizabeth ride home with their mother, they look through the books they have just checked out.

Marilyn Levin, a former kindergarten teacher, founded the R.E.A.D. program 3 years ago in an effort to offer an enrichment experience to young children and their families that was based upon books and reading. According to Mrs. Levin, “I wanted to expose children and parents to a world of books in a way that’s comfortable, enticing and draws them in” (personal communication, May 17, 2005).

Her tuition-based program is offered throughout the year and recruits families with children as young as 18 months. Families participate in weekly classes for 6- to 12-week sessions. Many families participate throughout the year.

Although she has not systematically collected any data about the families who participate in her program, Mrs. Levin reports that participants are most likely middle to upper-middle class and are generally somewhat knowledgeable about reading and early literacy. Even though these families may already value books and reading, Mrs. Levin hopes that her program will help parents learn to "bring the stories to life" and enhance the book sharing experiences that participating parents have with their children.

Mrs. Levin uses a multisensory approach in her program. She incorporates puppets, stuffed animals, masks, and costumes as well as other props, toys, and art activities to stimulate all of the senses in an effort to interest young children and their parents in a story. Mrs. Levin has amassed an extensive collection of children's books that she shares with her families during a R.E.A.D. session. While children play in the learning center, they may choose to look at a book related to the theme of the center or have a caregiver read it to them while they play. Literacy activities are play-based and Mrs. Levin uses a combination of teacher-directed and child-initiated activities during each class.

Reach Out and Read (ROR)

In downtown New Orleans, 18-month-old Damon tentatively enters the pediatric clinic at the Medical Center of Louisiana. He and his mother wait patiently in the crowded waiting room to be called by one of the pediatric residents who staff the clinic. Finally, Dr. Johnson, a second year pediatric resident at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center calls Damon back to an exam room. "I wonder if Dr. Johnson will have a surprise for you today," Damon's mom queries as they walk through the clinic.

This is Damon's fifth visit with Dr. Johnson and his mother has grown quite comfortable with her. Before talking with Damon's mother about his health and development, Dr. Johnson shares a wonderful surprise with Damon: a copy of *Big and Little* by Samantha Berger and Pamela Chanko (1999). Dr. Johnson examines the reluctant toddler while Damon holds and looks at his new book. "Look," Dr. Johnson exclaims to Damon's mother, "He's turning the pages all by himself!" "You're such a big boy!" Dr. Johnson says to Damon as she notes the new development in his fine motor skills. Dr. Johnson briefly talks with Damon's mother about appropriate ways she might share

the book with Damon. Specifically, she comments that Damon is old enough to turn the pages of the book himself and that he may prefer holding the book when they share a book together. Dr. Johnson encourages Damon's mom to pause while reading a familiar story to him and give Damon a chance to fill in a missing word or complete a sentence. Dr. Johnson also suggests pointing to pictures in the book and asking Damon, "What's that?"

Dr. Johnson, Damon, and his mom are participants in the Reach Out and Read Program (ROR) which is designed to foster literacy within the context of pediatric visits. Dr. Johnson has participated in training designed to enable her to make developmentally appropriate suggestions regarding reading and literacy. Damon's mother has grown to expect these suggestions as part of their visit with Dr. Johnson and she looks forward to getting a new book to share with her son. While riding the bus home, Damon sits on his mom's lap as she

reads his new book to him.

ROR is a national, nonprofit organization that promotes literacy in pediatric primary care settings. The program got its start at Boston City Hospital as a collaboration between early childhood educators and physicians who recognized the important role health practitioners could play in promoting early literacy. Health care providers, particularly pediatricians and nurse practitioners, have a unique and important opportunity to promote literacy in their young clients. The program has now expanded to 2,237 sites across the United States, Puerto Rico, and Guam and serves more than 2 million children each year. ROR goals are threefold: (1) putting developmentally and culturally appropriate books in the hands of children, age 6 months to 5 years, who are at risk for literacy problems; (2) training pediatricians and other health care providers to offer developmentally appropriate suggestions to caregivers regarding early literacy; and (3) modeling good reading behaviors in clinic waiting rooms (Reach Out and Read, 2005).

In New Orleans, the ROR program has been in existence since 1995. The local program coordinator, Ellen Beyer, reported that ROR started at four New Orleans based clinics and has spread to 33 sites across the state of Louisiana (personal communication, May 25, 2005). At the ROR sites in New Orleans, pediatric providers are residents from the Louisiana State University and Tulane University Health Science Centers. ROR provider training has been incorporated into their residency training experience.

An early study of the effects of ROR on parents' reports of literacy-related behaviors at home indicated that parents who had previously received books at pediatric visits were

Public libraries and bookstores, particularly those with specially designed programs and materials for young children, are an excellent resource for families interested in exploring the world of books. In addition to offering a wide selection of books to choose from, many libraries and bookstores also offer literacy-related activities for children and their caregivers.



PHOTO: MARILYN NOLT

more likely to report reading aloud to their young children or that looking at books was a favorite activity (High, Hoppman, LaGasse, & Linn, 1998; Needlman, Fried, Morley, Taylor, & Zuckerman, 1991).

In addition to higher rates of book-sharing at home, a prospective study of the efficacy of ROR using intervention and control groups revealed that older toddler participants (i.e., 18 to 25 months) had significantly higher scores on a measure of receptive and expressive language when compared to controls (High, LaGasse, Becker, Ahlgren, & Gardner, 2000). Mendelsohn and his colleagues (2001) also noted higher scores on measures of receptive and expressive language for ROR participants when contrasted with those of a comparison group. In addition, receptive and expressive vocabulary scores appeared to increase with the frequency of ROR pediatric visits.

More recently, Weitzman et al. (2004) documented the impact of ROR on the home literacy environment. These researchers measured the quality of the home environment, adult literacy, and a Child Home Literacy Index to gauge literacy behaviors. The researchers concluded that ROR visits did have a positive influence on literacy behaviors even after controlling for confounding variables, such as the nurturing quality of the home environment and parent literacy.

Other studies have noted the effectiveness of the ROR intervention with non-English speaking populations. Golova and her colleagues (1999) found that Hispanic parents who participated in ROR were significantly more

likely to read to their children than were similar parents who did not receive the ROR intervention. Sanders et al. (2000) also noted a significant increase in book sharing among Hispanic immigrant families who participated in the ROR when compared to similar families who had not participated. Silverstein, Iverson, and Lozano (2002) found the ROR intervention to be just as effective for non-English speakers, including families of East African and Southeast Asian origin, as it was for a group of English speaking families. Both groups reported an increase in literacy related behaviors following their participation in the ROR program.

Child Development and Family Support Programs

At the Gentilly East Early Head Start program, a group of toddlers gather on a rug in the block and building center of their classroom. On the floor, their teachers have placed a basket of board books, all related to colors. Ms. Chapman, the assistant supervisor of the program center sits among the children and chooses a book to read. "Let's start with one of your favorites" she tells the children sitting around her. Two-year-old Shantell holds a copy of *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* by Bill Martin (1995) while she listens to Ms. Chapman read *White Rabbit's Color Book* (Baker, 1994). Shantell and her classmates are obviously familiar with the story. While reading, Mrs. Chapman runs her finger under the text and pauses at times to have the children fill in the missing color word.

Once story time is over, the children move to other learning center in their classroom. Shantell's teachers have prepared a series of activities related to color for the children to choose from. Shantell heads to the art center first where bowls of paint, sponges, and paper have been placed on the table. She dips her sponge in the red paint then in the blue and spreads it on the paper. "Look! You made purple!" her teacher comments. After experimenting with the paints for a few minutes she heads back to the block center. On the floor, Shantell finds some colorful elephants and matching plates. She stacks the elephants on top of each other and laughs as they topple over. Ms. Chapman joins Shantell at the center and prompts her to sort the elephants by color onto the colored plates.

Moments later, the children and teachers head outside to play. In the yard, Shantell rushes up to the easel and quickly spreads some yellow and green paint on the paper. Next, she moves on to the water table and watches as some of her classmates drip food coloring into the water. Later that afternoon, when Shantell's mother arrives to

pick her up, Ms. Chapman comments "Shantell really enjoyed mixing paints today. We have some books on colors in the library that she may enjoy reading with you at home." On her way out, Shantell's mother stops at the center lending library and checks out two books to bring home.

Family literacy programs, like those incorporated into Head Start and Early Head Start, are designed to address literacy on an intergenerational level. By supporting

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improvements in adult literacy, these programs hope to foster a love of reading within families that, in turn, nurtures the literacy development of the children. The benefits of a family approach to literacy in the early childhood period are many. Head Start programs recognize that parents are children's first and most important teachers and by fostering parental literacy development, programs hope to shape the values young children develop about reading well before entry into elementary

school. In addition, parents may be motivated to improve their own literacy if they recognize the impact it may have on the quality of life for their children. And, parents with



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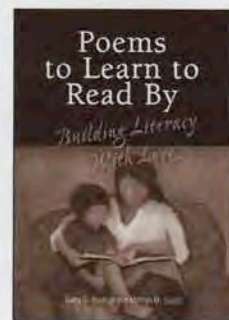
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well-developed literacy skills are better able to participate in their children's education and development. They are also more likely to succeed in their efforts to obtain economic and social self-sufficiency for their families (Promoting Family Literacy Through Head Start, 2005)

According to Pearlle Hardin Ellioe, director of Head Start programs sponsored by Total Community Action in New Orleans, literacy activities are a core feature of Early Head Start programming (personal communication, June 29, 2005). Although reading books occurs often in Early Head Start classrooms, Early Head Start staff encourage parents to do literacy activities at home as well. Parents are asked to sign a contract promising to read to their children for 20 hours each month. Each center has a lending library of books for both parents and children. In addition, Early Head Start staff also work to link parents to other literacy resources in the community, like public libraries, and may assist parents in applying for a library card. For parents who would like to improve their own literacy skills, staff helps them to connect to resources that can address their needs as adult learners, such as adult literacy and GED programs.

Community-Based Reading Enrichment

Two-year-old Cate and her dad rush into a large bookstore in suburban New Orleans. "We're a few minutes late," Cate's dad tells her as they head to the popular read-aloud program in the children's section of the store. Once there, they find the reading area quite crowded. Cate and her dad sit on the floor near the back of the crowd and Cate climbs onto her dad's lap to improve her view. A store employee stands in front the crowd and opens a copy

of *Mr. Seahorse* by Eric Carle (2004). He reads the story aloud, holding the book open so the children and parents can see the pictures.

After finishing the book, the store employee directs the children to take their places at a series of small tables. Cate and her dad take their spots at table and a book store staff member places some markers and cut out seahorses on their table. "Each child gets two seahorses," the staff member announces. After Cate scribbles on her seahorses, her dad begins stapling the two seahorses together. A bookstore employee puts some shredded paper on their table and tells Cate and her dad to stuff it inside the seahorse's tummy before they finish stapling the seahorse together. Moments later, Cate and her dad have finished their seahorse. "Let's look at some new books," Cate's dad tells her as they move through the stacks to find a comfortable spot to sit and read.

Public libraries and bookstores, particularly those with specially designed programs and materials for young children, are an excellent resource for families interested in exploring the world of books. In addition to offering a wide selection of books to choose from, many libraries and bookstores also offer literacy-related activities for children and their caregivers. "Story Hours" at libraries or bookstores are an easy and accessible way for many parents to introduce their children to books. These opportunities often include an art or craft activity that is related to a book's theme. And, most importantly, "story hours" create an opportunity for parents and their children to be in a setting, surrounded by books, with other adults and children who share a similar interest. Parents have the opportunity to observe their own children as well as other children and parents engaging activities that promote literacy.