

Family Place Libraries™

By Deanna Gouzie

Family Place Libraries™ are part of a national initiative that has redefined library service to children by expanding the traditional role of the library and recognizing that libraries play a crucial role in helping to build healthy families and community. There are currently 300 sites in 23 states across the nation and 12 in Maine.

A Family Place Library is a center for early childhood information, parent education, emergent literacy, socialization, and family support. This family-centered approach is a shift for some libraries, which previously may have focused mainly on services for the child. To become a Family Place Library, staff must complete the Family Place training and implement core components of the program. These components are a five-week parent/child workshop; a specially designed space; developmentally appropriate programming; collections of developmentally appropriate books, toys, videos, music, and other materials; access to resources that emphasize emergent literacy, reading readiness, and parent education; and outreach to new and underserved populations.

At McArthur Public Library, located in Biddeford, Maine, we received a grant to implement the program. With grant monies and training, we were able to redesign the library environment to be more welcoming and appropriate for children beginning at birth. Additionally, we have found creative ways to connect parents with resources, programs and services of which they may not have been aware.

The most popular component at the McArthur Public Library has been the parent/child workshop. The program runs for five consecutive weeks and happens at least twice per year. The workshop is essentially a playgroup—with a twist. In addition to well-designed, age-appropriate toys, books, and art materials,

we invite a resource professional to each session. Guests have included a nutritionist, speech therapist, pediatric nurse, and other professionals with information relevant to parents of young children. We briefly introduce them at the start of the program to explain what their area of expertise is and invite parents to talk with them if they have questions. Then the play begins! Often, we see the resource professional down on the floor playing alongside the children. This informal environment is nonthreatening and allows parents the opportunity to chat casually about concerns they may have about their children's development. Putting parents in touch with these professionals raises awareness about what resources are available in their community, presents possible early intervention opportunities, and puts many minds at ease.

In addition to all of the other benefits of the program, parents are making connections with each other. The arrival of a new baby signals a complete change in lifestyle and while the first year of a new baby's life is one of the most special, it's also one of the toughest times for parents. I hear from parents all the time how isolated they feel. Having a place to go and socialize with other parents can be empowering as parents become support for one another. The hope is to create networks that families need to nurture their child's development during the first critical years of life and help ensure all children enter school ready and able to learn. Becoming a real "Family Place" has helped us discover how we can expand and connect our services to become a true community hub. 🐟



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