



URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

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Leadership Brief: Libraries Supporting Family Learning

Overview

Children who are exposed to books, stories, and reading early in life and have parents and caregivers who are involved in their learning are more prepared to start school and more likely to graduate and achieve long-term success. There is no better resource for families learning together than the public library, with its sustained commitment to a lifetime of learning and its stature as a trusted community hub.

With widespread recognition that traditional education systems alone cannot meet today's learning needs, libraries have emerged as powerful 21st-century education leaders. Public libraries bring significant assets to the education landscape to meet family learning needs, including:

- A flexible, nimble, and agile approach to responding to community needs
- Skill at building the community partnerships that are essential to successful family learning
- Deep community connections that keep them in touch with key players in the learning landscape
- A long history as champions of literacy in the broadest sense—reading, health, digital, and financial
- Open doors and open arms to anyone and everyone

Libraries, schools, and community-based organizations are working together to create centers for two-generation learning that foster stronger family bonds and help parents become their children's first and best teachers.

This Leadership Brief explores the power of family learning to improve education outcomes and the progressive work of public libraries in carrying out intergenerational learning. It provides five action steps for libraries and community partners to broaden and deepen family learning success.

About this Leadership Brief

The Leadership Brief builds on the partnership between the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) and the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) to increase awareness of the role that libraries play in creating opportunities for families to learn together.



“Libraries are natural partners for two-generation learning where all parents and children can learn together and build literacy skills in diverse and inspiring ways.”

—Sharon Darling, President
National Center for Families Learning

Families and Learning

Research and experience confirm that engaging parents in their children's learning increases achievement, strengthens the parent-child bond, and provides a foundation for long-term success.¹

“In the face of real obstacles in the education landscape, families learning together is a major key to success.”

—Dr. Rhea Brown Lawson, Director
Houston Public Library

A continuous approach to learning that begins early, extends beyond traditional classrooms, and actively engages parents can increase educational achievement. As important, building the educational and literacy skills of parents can help disrupt intergenerational poverty. Key dimensions of family learning as a dynamic approach to improving education outcomes include:

- **Parents are the strongest influence on their children's learning in the first five years.** The importance and impact of early literacy is well documented. Reading and telling stories to infants stimulates brain development and cognitive thinking skills, enhances memory, builds vocabulary, and contributes to school readiness.
- **The family unit, in all of its many iterations, is the one constant across the education spectrum.** Family members shape their children's attitudes about learning over their lifetimes. When families routinely include learning activities in daily life from an early age, children are more likely to enjoy learning and experience educational success.
- **Families can take advantage of learning opportunities in everyday activities.** Even brief moments of consistent learning time in the kitchen or the bathtub, or at the playground or the bus stop, can build a foundation for education success. Making the most of the 7,800 hours children spend out of school each year, compared to 900 hours in school, is vital to strengthening educational performance and nurturing a commitment to lifelong learning.²
- **Family Service Learning Programs build adult and child skill development.** When families identify and work to

Why Family Learning Matters⁴

- Children spend 85 percent of their waking hours outside of school.
- Seventy-one percent of parents with college degrees read to their children every day, compared with 33 percent of those with high school diplomas or less.
- One in four kindergarteners enters school not ready to learn.
- Children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers.
- Forty-three percent of adult Americans read at a basic or below basic level.
- A mother's reading skill is the greatest determinant of her children's future academic success, outweighing other factors such as neighborhood and family income.

solve community issues together, they also learn and apply 21st-century skills that lead to college and career-readiness. Multigenerational involvement in service learning contributes to stronger and more self-sufficient families.³

Libraries and Family Learning

Public libraries bring a wealth of assets and expertise to support families learning together via two-generation programming. Their status as safe, trusted, and inclusive community hubs helps parents feel welcome. As important, libraries are the only education institution that connects with individual learning needs from birth through the senior years.

“The library's natural assets are great for family learning—everybody belongs, no one's excluded, and there are books in your native language and at every level.”

—Carolyn Blocker, Educator
Long Beach Family Literacy Program

“The public library as an institution has always been focused on the whole life spectrum of learning to meet the needs of multiple generations,” said Elizabeth Attack, program manager for *Bringing Books to Life* at the Nashville Public Library. “Now we’re thinking more intentionally about doing things together for those generations.”

Today, libraries are:

- Connectors to diverse resources that meet families where they are and help them move to the next rung on their learning ladders
- Experts in many education formats, from playful storytelling sessions with the youngest learners to one-on-one coaching for new parents to introducing and building high-tech skills
- Trusted guides in the digital universe and champions of digital literacy as a catalyst for improved education outcomes

Family Learning in Action

Nashville Public Library’s *Bringing Books to Life* is a comprehensive early literacy program that engages parents, teachers, and preschoolers in building skills to ensure school readiness. The library takes programs to daycare centers, preschools, and community gathering places to make it easy for parents to participate. Parents are often surprised, energized, and thrilled by how much their children enjoy the programs.

“I came tonight because I want to be the best parent I can be, but I worried that I would find out all the things I was doing wrong. Instead I heard all these great ideas about what I can do with my child, and I think it can be exciting.”

—Parent participating at the Nashville Public Library

Richmond Public Library’s approach to early literacy and school readiness is built around collaboration with the city’s early childhood development initiative and constant outreach led by a full-time literacy outreach coordinator and a parent education coordinator. The library created *RVA Reads*, which helps children establish personal home libraries. Every child in the city’s three

preschool centers receives a book each month, while parents get tips on how to read effectively with their children and promote at-home reading.

San Mateo County Libraries offers two-generation learning opportunities in underserved communities, focusing particularly on reading proficiency by third grade. Working with NCFL, the library’s *Toyota Family Learning* staff teams engage Spanish-speaking families in weekly two-generation learning experiences to build English language skills, improve reading ability, and increase family leadership and community engagement. By developing and implementing Family Service Learning projects, participating families develop skills in research, reading, writing, technology, teamwork, civic responsibility, and leadership.

Fort Worth Library works to get everyone in the community reading, learning, and having fun all year long through *Worth Reading*, a partnership among the library, the Fort Worth Independent School District, and 10 community organizations. The program focuses on building and sustaining literacy, enhancing parenting skills, and encouraging parents to get involved in their children’s learning.

Calgary Public Library’s *ELL School Success* program builds vocabulary for English Language Learners in grades 1-3 and their parents. In this eight-week series, children learn new English words working with a youth volunteer buddy while parents participate in a facilitated ESL conversation circle focused on how they can support their child’s language development and school success. Library staff provide tours of the library’s physical and online resources for parents and children and engage parents in discussion topics that help them better participate in their child’s educational experience. After a pilot phase, the program now plans to scale-up to reach more families.

Kenton County Public Library engages Northern Kentucky parents and children in dozens of learning opportunities in science, technology, engineering, art, mathematics, and more. In recent summers, the library tested NCFL’s two-generation, blended-learning approach to summer programming using [Camp Wonderopolis](#), maker activities, and community experts. The online and in-person workshops engaged K-12 students and their parents in learning together in the library and at home.

Five Action Strategies to Expand Opportunities for Family Learning

1. **Connect multiple key community partners that can meet family learning needs.** Libraries, public schools, family literacy programs, daycare centers, community centers, and other local organizations, for example, have existing relationships with families and can strengthen the approach to and delivery of education strategies. **The Madison Public Library** provides training and literacy tools to visiting nurses, so that they can support family learning when making home visits.
2. **Increase community outreach to connect with families where they are.** Reaching parents in places they frequent makes it easier for them to take advantage of opportunities despite busy schedules and limited transportation. Distribute information in health clinics, grocery stores, and laundromats, as well as at bus stops and parks, and offer programs in family gathering places such as playgrounds, places of worship, and daycare and community centers. **The Providence Public Library** employs participants in the literacy program to help spread the word in their communities.
3. **Enhance and align existing library and community literacy programs to serve families.** Bringing parents and children in existing literacy programs together creates expanded opportunities for two-generation learning without the need for completely new curricula.

4. **Keep programming flexible to meet family needs—for both parents and children.** Programs that give families multiple options to engage (e.g., providing meals alongside instruction, allowing drop-ins when families are available, connecting to community efforts, and offering opportunities to extend the learning online and at home) work best for busy families.
5. **Tell the story of the importance of family learning and early literacy.** Libraries are great messengers to audiences that trust them and seek their guidance. Being both a trusted voice in the community and a safe resource for family learning and early literacy can encourage more parents to participate in learning opportunities.

Empowering Families

Engaging the entire family in learning improves essential skills, strengthens family bonds, and creates a culture of learning that is passed on for generations. Even more important, strengthening literacy and life skills among families can help engage hard-to-reach vulnerable families and upend intergenerational poverty.

No one organization can meet the learning needs of families alone. While the individual efforts of skilled organizations will have a positive impact on the families they serve, well-coordinated efforts provide more robust programming and lead to long-term results. Public libraries are key players in creating the partnerships, programming and support systems to build strong families.

¹ National Center for Families Learning website, www.familieslearning.org

² Meta Analysis of the Studies of High Performing Family Literacy Programs, NCFL, page 57.

³ Cramer, Joshua, and Blaire Willson Toso. *Family Service Learning Brief*. National Center for Families Learning and the Goodling Institute, Spring 2015, p. 2. http://familieslearning.org/pdf/NCFL-FSL-brief_F3.pdf

⁴ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Early Reading in the United States*, January 2014, http://kidscount.unlv.edu/newsletters/KIDS_COUNT_GLR_FINAL.pdf

*The **Urban Libraries Council (ULC)** is the premier membership organization for North America's leading public library systems. For more information, please visit www.urbanlibraries.org.*

*The **National Center for Families Learning (NCFL)** is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to helping adults and children learn together. NCFL would like to thank its sponsor Better World Books for support of their production of this Leadership Brief. For more information, please visit www.familieslearning.org.*