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# Family Place Libraries™: Recognizing Best Practices in Child Development

By Lindsey Miller

## Introduction

The Family Place Libraries™ Initiative was created to meet a need for library programming that catered to the educational needs of parents and the developmental needs of very young children.

Established in 1996, the initiative has worked to create a network of libraries nationwide that actively works toward meeting the needs of modern families. Core components were created as a foundation for all programming and training of other libraries, which began in 1999. As of today, 435 librarians have attended training from 25 states (Family Place Libraries, *About Us: Our Mission*, 2009-2011).

Librarians are seeing increasing numbers of modern parents who crave a more holistic and developmentally enriching library experience for themselves and their children. Fortunately, scholarly research on child development now has firm footing and it can help support the pursuit of funding for such shifts. In fact, research has "...shown that the ways in which adults interact with children between birth and five years dramatically affects the brain, influencing a child's intellectual, social and emotional development" (Schull, 2013). The Family Place Libraries Initiative supports any programming that fits community and early developmental needs, but their mainstay program and a requirement of the designation is the implementation of the Parent-Child Workshop. Story time no longer has to be the only program provided by the library's children's services department. The workshop is far removed from the traditional programming that libraries have provided in the past; it focuses on creating a space full of developmentally appropriate toys and books for children ages birth to five where they and their parents can come together to bond, socialize, and learn. Each week a resource professional informally circulates the room conversing individually with parents about any questions or concerns they may have. Professionals may include people with expertise in child development, speech and language, nutrition, play and movement. These professionals should play and socialize along with the attendees. A brief circle time with a few songs and finger plays concludes the program.

The exact structure of the programming varies by library, due to funding, scheduling, and community need. But achieving the Family Place Libraries designation means that the library should be actively pursuing a programming model that fosters the initiative's core components. These core components include strong collections of toys and materials for parents, babies, toddlers, and caregivers located in a specially designed Family Place space within the Children's Department, the Parent-Child Workshop and other developmentally appropriate programming, coalition building with community agencies, outreach to new and non-traditional library users, and library staff trained in family support (Family Place Libraries, *What Makes a Family Place Library*, 2009-2011).

## Literature Review

The mission of public libraries is in line with the idea of educational outreach programming and coalition building. Most also already have the built in space necessary for social gatherings of various kinds. With some simple alterations to programming and resources available to learners, any library can start serving families in this modern and enhanced way.

The literature which has been published so far is quite dominantly supportive of the practices followed by Family Place Libraries. Feinberg and Schull even offer up the concept that "... libraries are uniquely well suited to link families to information and education resources within the library, and also to other community resources and programs." (2000-2001, p 4). These authors discuss the capability of public libraries to change their models of service from simply providing resources to providing resources, programming, and family centered practices. They also give funding ideas and success stories after expanding on key features of the programming. Most compelling, however, is the attention given to one article which cites very positive results after implementing a program entitled "The Parent-Child Home Program". As a part of this program, paraprofessionals visited families in their homes on behalf of the library in order to scaffold the parent's abilities, education, and

practices. The visitors reported more talkative children who were more involved with reading and language, and the library reported more effort by the parents to bring their children in to the physical library (2000-2001, pp 8-9).

Public libraries are not the only sites that have brought the Family Place model into their framework. Johnsen, Brodeen, and Humeston (2001) report on a coalition between a public library and a private college located in St. Paul, Minneapolis. The authors give details about how they came together to provide the immigrant mothers of St. Paul with the mainstay program, the Parent-Child Workshop. Best laid plans went somewhat awry, as they can, and the coalition ended up with a slightly different audience than anticipated. However, flexibility is key, and they drove on with the result of having participants who felt that the program created a more integrated community within St. Paul and was extremely worthwhile (Johnsen, Brodeen, and Humeston, 2001).

The Family Place Initiative has worked diligently to have its message reach all libraries. Along with their website, they are often the subject of articles which highlight national models for best practices. In 2005, Nina Sonenburg authored an article which identified the initiative as a program that all libraries should consider adopting. The article provides an interview with the creator of the initiative, Sandy Feinberg, and upon reading it can be seen that Family Place Libraries was a labor of love, need, and to a degree, desperation. Feinberg recounts her experience of having her first child and feeling as though she was completely unprepared. Along with this came a feeling of isolation which developed from caring for her child alone while her husband worked. As soon as she returned to work, she began the process of creating programming that would fill this gap in education and socialization. Soon, her program was reaching unprecedented numbers and it took on a life of its own (2005, pp 6-7). The heading "Who Knew Libraries Could Be Fun?" is utilized at one point in the article and the idea is pushed home that with all programming, play should be a main component (2005, p 8). Although it sometimes takes time for children to warm up to their surroundings, they eventually will take advantage of all that each

program has to offer them, and proof can be found in any Family Place librarian's anecdotes.

The research on child development has recently caught up to this anecdotal evidence. And in September of 2012, the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences (IMLS) recognized the progress that the Family Place Libraries™ Initiative has been making with a National Leadership Grant of \$450,000 to expand the program to 28 libraries across 8 states. This IMLS grant will seek to explore the impact which has been found from implementation of the initiative's core components, and "[b]y supporting expansion, evaluation, and national communications of the Family Place Libraries service model..." help "...to spotlight libraries that are in the forefront of new research-based practices" (Schull, 2013). Through the confluence of various factors, the initiative has gained footing that is now founded in scholarly literature and the recognition by IMLS will provide the sustainability to make it even more influential on the national level (Schull, 2013).

### **Application to Libraries**

With the general consensus being that this model is making strides in the professional world of family-centered library services, it is difficult to imagine any librarian who would not want to pursue applying the practices to their existing structures—one might even say that it is the natural evolution of libraries.

The first step is for two staff members (a children's librarian and library administrator) to attend the 3 day Family Place Training Institute which provides the philosophical underpinnings and instruction on the core components of the initiative—library and community assessment; child development (including early brain developments) and family support; designing welcoming, developmentally appropriate family learning space within the children's room; building partnerships and coalitions; outreach to new and underserved families; collection development and planning and implementation of the Parent Child Workshop. The final portion of the training is developing an individualized Family Place plan with practical action steps to ensure smooth and successful development of the initiative.

Once trained, incorporating the mainstay programming would be relatively simple. First, one would need to locate the funding to begin re-shaping their children's areas and expanding their resource collection. The initiative actually provides some very helpful guides on locating possible funding and is available for consult if collection questions arise.

After that, the scheduling of developmental specialists can take place. Hopefully the librarian has already decided on appropriate timing for the workshop based on when the families are mostly available. If not, this can be done through a simple survey in person, via the library website, or both. The librarian should be ready to make personal connections when the families start to attend, because if you provide it, they will come. And if they are consistently provided with quality service, they will begin to view the library as a community hub that is integral to community education efforts.

Forming strong relationships with community families makes the library transform into a new version of itself. A version that is assertive and supportive in its belief that parents are a child's first teachers. Promoting that notion as a building block creates an atmosphere that intensifies the idea of lifelong learning, and the library, by providing all learners with options and family based practices, improves the overall sense of community. While this may sound idealistic, it can be seen that children who have exposure to the library and these practices consistently from a very early age, develop at faster rates and begin a relationship with the physical library and life-long learning that lasts well beyond Kindergarten. And is that not what all professionals in child development are pursuing—the practices to foster the skills of a child in order for them to become a life-long learner, and thus a healthy contributor to society? With the advent and growth of the Family Place Libraries Initiative's organized practices and training, we will hopefully begin to see an evolution in libraries towards becoming centers of family education and development, and although it will take much time and effort, perhaps even a shift in cultural priorities.

## Case Study



The Columbus-Lowndes Public Library has held the Family Place Libraries™ designation since 2008. It is one of only three libraries in Mississippi to hold this designation. Based out of Lowndes County, MS, the system provides services through one main building and three branches. The mainstay program has been conducted out of the main branch since 2009, and the children's area was remodeled to reflect the Initiative's core component concerning appropriate spaces in 2012. The library provides a specially located collection of books within the children's area which contains resources relating to child development and family health. This collection is centrally located in the section with a sign above it which reads "Family Place Resources."

Libraries that adhere to the Initiative's components vary in the timing and set up of the mainstay program. The founders of the initiative do ask that library's create their own name for the mainstay program instead of calling the program 'family place'. For this reason, the Columbus library has officially named its mainstay program "1-2-3, Play With Me", though the staff internally refer to them as Family Place sessions. The library has held its sessions at different times over the years due to trends in community programming, and when scheduling the sessions, it is smart to do your research on what other community organizations offer for children during the week. For instance due to recent schedule changes for one of Columbus's popular MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) groups, it made sense for the Columbus library to start its new slate of sessions on Monday mornings at ten o'clock,

instead of Tuesdays at ten, when the MOPS now meet. Most libraries will also make the sessions seasonal and require registration with a max number of participants, based on available space and resources. The program itself is attended mainly by mothers and their children; however, fathers and grandparents might also attend. The sessions are terrific opportunities for these parents to bond and discuss current parenting issues. During the spring, developmental specialists and community officials are scheduled to attend the sessions. These guests take time to informally converse and play with the children while also answering any questions a parent might have. Past guests include speech language pathologists, nutritionists, child development specialists, early literacy specialists, and fire safety coordinators.

Sessions are conducted in the library meeting room and typically last about one hour. Free play begins the session and is allowed for forty five minutes. During free play, parents and children may circulate through the various centers created by the librarian. The Columbus Public Library provides a music center, a kitchen center, a puzzle center, a baby center, a dress up center, tumbling mats, a teeter totter, and books. All realia and manipulatives should work to develop motor skills and expand literacy.

After free play, clean up ensues and the librarian leads a shortened circle time which always includes music and a shared reading experience. On occasion, the librarian will also incorporate a 'novel' activity into circle time, such as allowing the children to play with, sort, and manipulate colored balls placed within a hula hoop.

The Columbus-Lowndes Public Library has found great success with the mainstay program. As an added bonus, statistics for other children's programs have increased since its implementation along with circulation of children's materials and casual library trips by parents with children outside of programming times. The designation has also created a culture shift within the library. The library now recognizes itself as a fixture in early literacy and parent skill building. Instead of simply being a public library with a children's section, it is a destination for

parents and children that cannot be missed! The core components of the Initiative now play into the library's plans for all programming and building. One of the department's most successful projects so far has been the creation of an on-site autism resource center with joint speaker and family events. Two new programs are also currently in the works, one focusing on building relationships with the community's Hispanic families through storytelling, and one titled "1,000 Books Before Kindergarten", which encourages parents to expose/read 1,000 books to their children before they enroll in school. The youth services department has found that it is actually easier to create and sustain new programs when the components are utilized as a foundation.



Library users had this to say about the Columbus-Lowndes Public Library's programming and culture:

- *"As a stay at home mom, [1-2-3, Play With Me] sessions and our family centered library offer lots of opportunities for us to get out and be around other kids in an appropriate learning environment. My son loves attending 1-2-3, Play With Me and Wee Babies music program every chance we get. We live about 30 minutes away and don't make it as often as we wish we could!"*
- *"The Family Place sessions [1-2-3, Play With Me] are a great place for families to interact with other families with children of similar ages. My kids love playing with and meeting new friends. I think Family Place Libraries provide many great, free activities for families with young kids."*
- *"We really enjoy [1-2-3, Play With Me] at our library. My children, ages 4 and 2, enjoy playing*

and interacting with other children while learning as well.”

- “My twenty month old Charles and I love going to 1-2-3, Play with Me. He loves playing with children his age and watching older children. As a stay at home mom I enjoy visiting with other moms. Charles enjoys the “free play” and loves the singing! We went to the library today to pick up a book. Charles cried when we left without going upstairs [to the children’s section].”

## Conclusion

The Family Place Libraries™ Initiative will continue to provide libraries with new and exciting practices to contemplate. Most recently their home base library (Middle Country Public Library) in Centereach, NY, has become the pilot site for a new program titled “Mutt-i-grees® in the Library”. This program provides structured activities focusing on shelter animals to teach emotional and social skills. While therapy dog programs in libraries are not relatively new, this program has a stronger emphasis on building skills outside of the basic literacy skill sets which one imagines when thinking of typical library programming. That’s what the Initiative does. It moves librarians to think beyond its basic tendencies and work towards holistic practices which can help a whole family grow together while specifically scaffolding children’s development. The Initiative is, at its essence, a paradigm shift that encompasses a larger picture of healthy children, strengthened families, and eventually a stronger, more literate community.

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The screenshot shows the homepage of the Family Place Libraries website. At the top, there is a blue header with the logo and the text "Family Place Libraries™ Building Foundations for Early Learning" alongside a group photo of diverse children and adults. Below the header, the main content area is divided into several sections. On the left, a dark blue sidebar contains a vertical menu with links: HOME, ABOUT US, NATIONAL PARTNERS, WHAT MAKES A FAMILY PLACE LIBRARY?, LOCATIONS, BECOME A FAMILY PLACE LIBRARY, NETWORK MEMBERS, TRAINING & EVENTS, FAMILY PLACE IN THE NEWS, RESOURCES, and CONTACT US. The main content area starts with a "Welcome to Family Place Libraries™" section, followed by a "Spotlight: Family Place at Scottsdale, AZ" section featuring a photo of a child reading and a text box describing the library's impact. To the right, there are two smaller promotional boxes: one for "eat play grow™" and another for "National Leadership Grant Supports Family Place Libraries™ at 28 libraries in 7 states".

<http://www.familyplacelibraries.org/>