

# Handbook of Research on Family Literacy Practices and Home–School Connections

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# Chapter 7

## Promoting Kindergarten Readiness During Remote Learning Through Community- Based Family Literacy Sessions

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this chapter is to describe a series of community-based family literacy sessions and the responsive strategies used to modify the sessions for remote instruction to meet the needs of caregivers of young children (birth to age 3). Situated within a two-generation approach to family engagement, the sessions were implemented through a family-school-community partnership with a university-based early learning research center, early learning centers in two urban Title I schools, and a public library. Session attendees included a sample of 44 racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families. In addition to describing the family literacy program, the chapter highlights the ways in which family literacy sessions can positively influence the home literacy environment of families who participate in sessions regularly. The chapter concludes with recommendations for facilitators aiming to work collaboratively with community partners and families to develop mutually beneficial family literacy initiatives.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*One by one, small boxes with caregivers and young children populate the shared Zoom screen that already includes the session facilitators. As children notice themselves on the screen, they start smiling*

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and making silly faces. The center director, Ms. Greene, greets families as they join the virtual family literacy session.

*Ms. Greene: ¡Hola, Miguel!*

*Miguel: ¡Hola, Señora Greene!*

*She continues to greet families as they join by acknowledging those that appear on the screen at the time. For the first few minutes, the screen of some families moves from place to place as they settle into different locations within their homes for the session. One family sits on the couch, another at the kitchen table, and another on the floor. One mom paces back and forth in the background with her infant child as her daughter makes faces in the camera. One family's connection is interrupted and is seen rejoining after a few minutes.*

*The university-based center director introduces herself and asks members of the three program partners to wave when their organization is called. She then turns over the session to the center director, Ms. Greene, to facilitate family introductions.*

*Ms. Greene: "Did everyone receive their materials?"*

*Ms. Hernández: "¿Todos recibieron sus materiales?"*

*Immediately, some children move off screen, while others receive a book or materials from a caregiver. Children, with support, put their book or materials up to the camera for all to see.*

*Ms. Greene: "Excellent! I'm so happy you received them. We'll get to those in just a bit, but first, let's do some introductions and say hello to everyone."*

*Ms. Greene pauses to give Ms. Hernandez, the school's family services coordinator, a chance to translate the requests, and then calls on caregivers to introduce themselves and their children. Some caregivers that are off screen take the device to face themselves and introduce themselves briefly before turning the phone, computer, or tablet back to their child. Some families turn on their device's camera feature for their introduction and return off-camera once finished. During the remainder of the family introductions, some children can be seen turning the pages of a book or playing with the session materials, and one child naps on his mother's chest.*

This vignette provides a snapshot of the first virtual family literacy session during the year at home. These sessions, which during a typical school year were held in community centers and public libraries with ample support staff, took place in families' homes as they cared for their children. As schools considered the best format for instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic closures of 2020 (e.g., synchronous online learning, independent instructional materials and resources), the vignette illustrates how families became increasingly involved in their children's learning experiences. A similar shift took place in early learning centers that were already working closely with families to promote positive child development through caregiver programming and playgroups. While recent research efforts have attempted to capture the

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experiences of teachers who transitioned to remote learning (e.g., Dilberti et al., 2020; Steed & Leech, 2021), the strategies used by early learning centers and their community partners to adapt existing family engagement activities for virtual format remains unclear. In addition, some strategies implemented during the initial global COVID-19 pandemic shutdown thought to be temporary solutions (e.g., technology loan programs; Illinois Early Intervention Clearinghouse, 2021) have persisted in an effort to increase families' access to services, which has changed the structure of existing family engagement activities.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe a series of community-based family literacy sessions and the responsive strategies used to modify the sessions for remote instruction to meet the needs of caregivers of young children (birth to age 3). Situated within a two-generation approach to family engagement, the sessions were implemented through a family-school-community partnership with a university-based early learning research center, early learning centers in two urban Title I schools (identified as having 35% or more students at or below the federal poverty level; Baltimore City Public Schools, n.d.), and a public library. Session attendees included a sample of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families. In addition to describing the family literacy program, the chapter highlights the ways in which family literacy sessions can positively influence the home literacy environment of families who participate in sessions regularly. The chapter concludes with recommendations for facilitators aiming to work collaboratively with community partners and families to develop mutually beneficial family literacy initiatives.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Kindergarten Readiness**

Despite the widespread use of the term, there is no universally accepted definition of kindergarten readiness (Slutzky & DeBruin-Parecki, 2019; Snow, 2006). Previous literature has identified two primary perspectives regarding the conceptualization of kindergarten readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999): a child-focused perspective that asserts the importance of children demonstrating a predetermined set of knowledge and skills prior to formal schooling (Meisels, 1999) and an ecological perspective that acknowledges the contexts in which children develop (e.g., family, school, community) that shape their learning (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). School readiness is often operationalized as children's domain-specific knowledge, skills, and behaviors for state accountability (Slutzky & DeBruin-Parecki, 2019); although there is a research base that acknowledges environmental inputs as important considerations (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). As such, state-funded early childhood programs are typically evaluated based on whether children in their program meet the standards of kindergarten readiness assessments in learning domains, such as socioemotional development, mathematics and numeracy, and language and literacy, including programs that serve families with young children over the course of several years.

### **Two-Generation Approaches to Family Engagement**

Many state-funded early childhood programs involve caregivers in program activities to support learning. A two-generation approach to family engagement aims to provide support to both caregivers and children to maintain their individual and collective well-being (e.g., Adams et al., 2014; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Mosle & Patel, 2012). There is some evidence to suggest that two-generation

approaches builds families' social capital, health, and education (e.g., The Aspen Institute, 2016). From a practical perspective, there is potential for this approach to increase the return on investment in early childhood education for children and in postsecondary education for caregivers, particularly for those in underserved communities (National Conference of State Legislators, 2018). Two-generation approaches also provide opportunities for greater coordination among service providers (e.g., early childhood education, case management, health care, adult education).

In 2012, a group of educators, policymakers, service providers, and community advocates came together to form a coalition based on a two-generation approach to family engagement in Maryland, a Mid-Atlantic state in the United States (Maryland Family Engagement Coalition, 2021). The coalition developed a statewide framework funded by the Maryland State Department of Education to guide family engagement across early childhood systems and within individual early care and education programs (Maryland Family Engagement Coalition, n.d.). The state has embedded aspects of the framework into state early childhood programs through the inclusion of family engagement indicators at various levels of its Quality Rating Improvement System, Maryland EXCELS (Zero to Three, 2017).

## **Community-Based Family Literacy Engagement**

One way that early childhood education programs partner with community organizations like libraries to engage families of young children is through family literacy initiatives. Public libraries are highly regarded as important providers of literacy-rich experiences to support young children's development (e.g., Institute of Museum and Library Services; 2013; Lopez et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2019; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning; 2016). The nature of community-based partnerships for literacy engagement can include a range of activities, such as childcare providers advertising upcoming library events for families on the community bulletin board, librarians hosting read alouds for children at a local childcare center, and co-developing tailored programming for children and caregivers to enhance family literacy interactions (e.g., shared book reading, storytelling). While existing family-library programs demonstrate promise (e.g., Supporting Parents in Early Literacy through Libraries [SPELL], n.d.; Scottsdale Library-Family Engagement Program, Taylor et al., 2021), it is unclear how these programs meet the needs of urban families from racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

## **Summary**

Taken together, research on two-generation approaches to family engagement has found unique benefits for caregivers and their young children. Mutually beneficial community-based family engagement partnership is a cornerstone of successful programming efforts. Many family literacy programs tend to provide caregivers with books, resources, and strategies to improve their literacy skills and home literacy environments in service of supporting children's readiness for formal schooling; however, there has been mixed success among these programs for families from diverse backgrounds. While racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families have participated in family literacy programs (see Manz et al., 2010), few accounts exist of their involvement in community-based programs with public libraries—especially those that might address their specific needs. Early childhood education stakeholders in higher education, urban public schools, and a public library used the aforementioned literature to develop the series of community-based family literacy sessions described in this chapter to support diverse families of young children in urban communities.

## **THE FAMILIES, LIBRARIES, AND EARLY LITERACY PROGRAM (ELP)**

The Families, Libraries, and Early Learning Program (ELP) is a partnership among the early learning research center, two urban early learning centers housed within two center partner schools, and a local branch of a public library.

### **Program Partners**

#### **University-Based Multidisciplinary Early Learning Research Center**

The university-based multidisciplinary early learning research center, established in 2017 at a research-intensive university, aims to “help build a strong foundation for lifelong learning among young children” (Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities, n.d., Mission, para. 1) in an urban city in Maryland. The center’s mission is instantiated through applied research, professional and leadership development, and school-based partnerships to enhance literacy instruction, support, and engagement among stakeholders who educate young children, such as classroom tutors, in-service teachers, and families. The center currently partners with five racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse full-service community schools (four prekindergarten to Grade 8 schools and one prekindergarten to Grade 5 school) in a historically industrial section of the city.

#### **Urban Learning Centers**

The urban early learning centers are a part of a network of early learning hubs across the state that prepare children age birth through kindergarten for school readiness. These centers are located in Title I schools in every education agency in the state (Range = 1–12). A multigenerational approach is used to provide support to children and families in various school readiness areas, such as (a) adult education, (b) case management, (c) developmental and health screenings, (d) playgroups, and (e) family engagement (Maryland State Department of Education, 2021). A critical component of these centers are partnerships with service providers to ensure consistency for families, which is a strategy to promote equity in full-service community schools (Galindo & Sanders, 2019), the type of schools that house ELP-participating urban learning centers.

The early learning centers identified the zero to 3 age range as the target population for whom to develop ELP. Center directors invited select families with children birth through age 3—no more than 15 families per school due to financial and space constraints—to the ELP sessions once a season (fall, spring, summer, winter). Center directors selected families based on several factors, such as extent to which they had participated in other center programs and the number of other children in the family, with preference given to new program families.

ELP served families from racial and ethnic backgrounds that reflected the broader school community. The two partner ELP schools served children from the following racial or ethnic backgrounds during AY 2020–2021: Black/African American children (School A = 42%; School B = 32%), Hispanic/Latino children (School A = 25%; School B = 62%), and White children (School A = 26%; School B = 4%; (Maryland State Department of Education, 2020). Fewer than 5% of students at both schools identified as Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or two or more races or ethnicities (Maryland State Department of Education, 2020). At School A, more than 95% of

students qualify for free and reduced price meals, and about 20% of students are English language learners (Baltimore City Public Schools, n.d.). At School B, approximately 65% of students qualify for free and reduced price meals and 43% are English language learners (Baltimore City Public Schools, n.d.).

## **Public Library**

The city's public library is one of the oldest in the country and includes a central location along with 21 branches across the city. The library, serving more than half a million patrons annually, aims to "empower, enrich, and enhance the quality of life for all through equitable access to information, services, and opportunity" (Enoch Pratt Free Library, 2022a, para. 1). Six goals guide the library's mission: (a) financial sustainability; (b) strategic partnerships; (c) expanded community engagement and communications; (d) equitable and responsive programs and outreach; (e) positive, responsive, and equitable staff development and organizational culture; and (f) literacy (Enoch Pratt Free Library, 2019). Between September 2020 and September 2021, the library offered an average of 106 literacy programs for children ages birth to 5 (Enoch Pratt Free Library, 2022b).

## **ELP Procedures**

Established in the spring of 2019, the goal of ELP is to introduce families and caregivers to services and resources available to them through the city's library system to promote children's literacy and language development (Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities, 2021). In addition, ELP encourages families' use of the library and the university-based center's diverse books collection to create literacy-rich home environments to promote children's love of reading. ELP situates children's early learning in the context of families' use of diverse picture books. ELP is aligned with Maryland's early childhood family engagement framework (Maryland Family Engagement Coalition, n.d.) and utilizes a two-generation approach to family literacy.

Four times per academic year caregivers and their children are invited by their early learning center to participate in a 2-hour ELP session. Facilitators hold each session twice, one for each early learning center. ELP session themes are co-developed by the university-based center and the staff at the program's partner organizations during a session planning meeting and are based on families' needs. Sessions for families at School A take place at the local branch of the public library, while sessions for families at School B are held at the community center next door to the school.

The sessions consist of five parts: (1) program registration, welcome, and introduction (~15 minutes); (2) a family meal (~20 to 30 minutes); (3) story time read aloud and singalong with library staff (~15 minutes); (4) a caregiver-only portion of the session (during which children are in a separate room for supervised activity time with a community partner), in which caregivers (a) learn about upcoming library events and resources from library staff, (b) engage in a facilitated discussion of how to strengthen kindergarten readiness skills at home in ways related to the session's theme with participating caregivers, and (c) are introduced to the caregiver-children activities via modeling by university-based center staff (~20 minutes); and (4) a caregiver-child activity time where families engaged in a collaborative activity (~40 to 45 minutes). At the center's request and based on family racial and ethnic background, facilitators deliver ELP sessions in English at School A and bilingually in English and Spanish at School B.



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### **Registration**

During each session's registration portion, caregivers sign in and complete a survey about their family literacy practices. Specifically, survey questions ask caregivers about (1) the frequency of shared reading practices, (2) their use of the public library, (3) the number of children's books owned, (4) their child's interest in books, and (5) their understanding of kindergarten readiness. After families' first session, returning caregivers, or caregivers who attended more than one ELP session, also answer two additional survey questions about the frequency with which they read books from the ELP sessions with their child and how well ELP sessions helped their understanding of kindergarten readiness.

### **Family Meal**

A family meal is provided at each session for several reasons. First, it provides families with a transition period between arriving at the session location and participating in session activities. Also, it facilitates families in having low-stress interactions with other participating families and session facilitators. Finally, the family meal addresses a common barrier to family engagement that caregivers often have, to prepare a meal or care for other children during the typical session time (Grant & Ray, 2016).

### **Story Time**

During the story time portion of the session, the children's librarian at the neighborhood library branch more formally welcomes families and provides directions for the read aloud activities. The librarian then leads one or two singalongs to serve as an interactive part of story time, help children transition into and out of ELP activities, and promote children's language and literacy development. Children and families then listen to an interactive reading of a children's book related to the session's theme (see Figure 1). After the read aloud, the librarian leads the singalongs from before the book reading to conclude story time.

### **Caregiver-Only Portion**

During the caregiver-only portion of the session, the library's early literacy specialist shares information with families about library resources and events designed specifically for young learners. Library staff also provide caregivers with the opportunity to sign up for a library card. Next, early learning center staff present caregivers with information about supporting their child's kindergarten readiness through activities that target four areas of development included in the state's assessment of early childhood education: (a) language and literacy, (b) socio-emotional, (c) numeracy and math, and (d) physical (Maryland State Department of Education, 2021). Facilitators pose questions to parents to encourage a discussion about the ways in which they attend to their child's development at home. In addition, facilitators model activities for caregivers, answer questions, and introduce caregivers to the make and take activity for the session. Families are also shown end products of activities. While caregivers participate in the caregiver-only portion, children participate in supervised playtime facilitated by a community partner. On some occasions, the community partner facilitates an experiential learning activity that brought the session's theme to life. An example of the experiential learning activity is described later in the chapter.

*Figure 1. Families listen to a read aloud by library staff*



### Caregiver-Child Activity Time

Unlike other family literacy initiatives that often require families to swap out the materials they receive for new materials (e.g., *Raising a Reader*), ELP families receive books and activity materials to keep in an effort to extend learning opportunities at home. Each ELP session includes a make and take activity to provide families with simple, hands-on materials to create an artifact that could be used at home to facilitate learning related to the session's theme (see Figure 2). These materials include markers, blank board books, blank bibs and aprons, and blank puppets that could be decorated with the makers provided. Also, beanie toys, exploration kits, and cooking ingredients are given to families to take home to further the activities shared during the caregiver-child activity.

In addition to the make and take activity, a foundational component of the ELP sessions is the use of children's books to reinforce kindergarten readiness strategies within families' shared-reading practices. In particular, ELP exclusively includes books, most of them bilingual, that represent characters from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Spanish-speaking, racially/ethnically minoritized backgrounds, different ability status), and books that provide opportunities for families to see their shared familial routines reflected. These types of texts embed kindergarten readiness skills within routines that mirror children's lived experiences to buttress family literacy learning (Roberts & Rochester, 2021; Leyva & Skorb, 2017). At the end of the session, families choose up to two books to take home in an effort to reinforce session activities at home.

To illustrate a typical ELP session, the Winter 2019 session, which focused on kindergarten readiness and cooking, included a read aloud of *Cook It!/A Cocinar* (Birkett, 2013). For the caregiver-only portion, early learning center staff facilitated a discussion of how to promote literacy skills in the kitchen (e.g., sharing materials, describing steps for meal preparation, reading ingredient lists) with activity

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*Figure 2. Caregivers making a book about number for their children*



modeling. Families participated in a hands-on apron decorating activity with their young children and received a set of children’s books with diverse characters about preparing family meals (e.g., *My Cold Plum Lemon Pie Bluesy Mood*; Brown & Evans, 2013). One of the books all families received was *Soup Day* (Iwai, 2010), which describes the experiences of a little girl who helps her mother prepare soup for their family, and illustrates how families can work together (e.g., “Mommy helps my hand” when cutting up the vegetables).

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Table 1. ELP session format, participants, and activity information during the COVID-19 year at home

ELP details	Summer 2020	Fall 2020	Winter 2021	Spring 2021	Summer 2021
Format	Asynchronous	Virtual	Virtual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual (A)</li> <li>• In person (B)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual (A)</li> <li>• In person (B)</li> </ul>
Families served	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School A = 16</li> <li>• School B = 9</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School A = 8</li> <li>• School B = 8</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School A = 7</li> <li>• School B = 5</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School A = 5</li> <li>• School B = 13</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School A = 5</li> <li>• School B = 8</li> </ul>
Theme	Potty training	Exploring the outdoors	Promoting socioemotional development	Using the five senses	Learning about animals
Read aloud book	n/a	<i>They All Saw a Cat</i>	<i>My Heart Fills with Happiness</i>	<i>I Hear a Pickle</i>	<i>Brown Bear, Brown Bear</i>
Caregiver focus	Supporting toilet training needs	Using outdoor activities to support development	Understanding and managing emotions	Drawing on senses to explore outdoors	Building vocabulary through storytelling
Child-focused activity	n/a	n/a	n/a	School A staff	Wildlife outreach program
Caregiver-child activity	n/a	Explorer kits to learn about outside creatures	Create a book about identifying emotions	Decorate t-shirt to guide child's outside learning using the five senses	Decorate animal puppets to support vocabulary development
Books	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Big Girl Panties</i></li> <li>• <i>Big Boy Underpants</i></li> <li>• <i>Potty/Bacinilla</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Adventures of Jamear</i></li> <li>• <i>They All Saw a Cat</i></li> <li>• <i>La Abuela en la Cuidad, My Friends/Mis Amigos</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Saturday</i></li> <li>• <i>My Heart Fills with Happiness/ Mi Corazón se Llena de Alegría,</i></li> <li>• <i>Feelings, Big &amp; Small/ Emociones, Grandes y Pequeñas</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Hello Ocean/ Hola Mar</i></li> <li>• <i>Five Senses</i></li> <li>• <i>The Thing About Bees: A Love Letter</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bedtime for Sweet Creatures</i></li> <li>• <i>Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See/ Oso Pardo, Oso Pardo, Que Ves Ahi</i></li> <li>• <i>The Cazuela That the Farm Maiden Stirred</i></li> </ul>

### KEY FINDINGS: RESPONSIVE STRATEGIES TO ADAPT FAMILY LITERACY SESSIONS DURING REMOTE INSTRUCTION

During the year at home, program partners held five ELP events—one event per season from summer 2020 to summer 2021 (see Table 1). Forty-four families ( $n_{\text{School A}} = 25$ ) with children ages birth to age 3 attended one or more sessions during this period either virtually or in person (individual session attendance formats are presented in Table 1 and described in the following sections). It is important to note that some of the families that participated in ELP during this year also attended ELP events before the summer of 2020. ELP facilitators modified sessions considerably from their original format to address the immediate, virtual engagement, and place-based engagement needs of early learning center families at the two partner schools.

#### Addressing Families' Immediate Needs

The first ELP session that was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown was scheduled for June 2020. Staff at the three partner organizations held a virtual planning meeting in May 2020 to determine

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how to move forward with the summer session, and most importantly, how to respond to families' immediate needs. Early learning center staff shared that families were in most need toilet training materials, such as pampers, pull-ups, and underwear. In lieu of a virtual session, ELP facilitators decided to create Family Boxes focused on the health domain of the Maryland Early Learning standards (e.g., students will demonstrate the ability to [take care of his own toileting needs] . . . to reduce susceptibility and manage disease, Maryland State Department of Education, 2016). These boxes were filled with materials to support 25 participating families with toilet training. For example, the library staff agreed to provide families with bilingual books on potty training (e.g., *Potty/Bacinica*; Patricelli, 2016), and the university-based interdisciplinary research center staff agreed to order and deliver materials to the early learning centers. The early learning center directors agreed to disseminate the Family Boxes during the schools' designated pick-up/drop-off days.

## **Understanding and Addressing Families' Needs for Virtual Engagement**

At the beginning of the 2020–2021 academic year, staff members at ELP partner organizations met virtually to plan the fall ELP session scheduled for November 2020. Early learning center staff noted that families wanted to attend ELP sessions virtually; however, families needed access to devices and reliable internet to participate. Library staff noted that they had successfully hosted several virtual events throughout the summer and early fall (e.g., read alouds) and had the capacity to adapt their read alouds/sing-alongs for a virtual online format. University-based interdisciplinary research center staff noted that they wanted to maintain the activity modeling and shared family activity portions of ELP—two things that families reported enjoying the most—but acknowledged the challenge of promoting these activities virtually.

In response to these conditions, the ELP partner organizations adapted the ELP sessions for a virtual format and responded to families' needs in several ways. First, families received hotspots from the library and university-based interdisciplinary research center donated tablets to the early learning centers for families' use. Each early learning center hosted an orientation session in families' preferred language to facilitate device use and enable families to use them to participate in the virtual sessions. To provide families with personalized support with suggested kindergarten readiness activities, the university-based interdisciplinary research center created laminated, 2.5 in. x 2.5 in. bilingual activity cards that promoted kindergarten readiness based on the session's theme. Importantly, materials reinforced information shared during the session (see Figure 3). In addition, ELP facilitators held a virtual—rather than in person—planning meeting approximately a month before each ELP session, and consistently incorporated a final planning meeting a few weeks before the session to address any outstanding tasks.

Families received COVID-19 kits with masks, wipes, and hand sanitizer to encourage the safe engagement of caregiver-child experiential learning activities. They also received all materials in advance of the session along with meals, snacks, books related to the session theme, and learning materials. Due to the virtual format, the majority of ELP sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic year at home did not include separate caregiver-only and child-only portions after story time. ELP sessions instead included a caregiver-focused portion where children engaged with ELP materials as caregivers received information about specific strategies related to the session's theme. To illustrate the flow of and the materials provided to families during the first two modified sessions, the following section describes the virtual fall 2020 and winter 2021 ELP sessions.

Figure 3. Kindergarten readiness cards created for ELP sessions during the year at home



### Fall 2020: Exploring the Outdoors

Sixteen families ( $n_{\text{School A}} = 8$ ) participated in the virtual fall 2020 ELP session, and they all received food and materials in advance (e.g., frozen pizzas, toys, copies of session slides, activity cards). The fall 2020 ELP session focused on exploring the outdoors because early learning center staff noted that children in the program spent little time outdoors due to COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. To address this need, library staff read the book *They All Saw a Cat* (Wenzel, 2016), which describes a cat from the vantage point of different creatures (e.g., a dog, a flea). University-based interdisciplinary research center staff developed activity cards that focused on activities caregivers and children could engage in together outdoors to support their language and literacy development (e.g., draw letters outside on the ground with a stick or chalk), socioemotional development (e.g., play ring and hand games together), math and numeracy development (e.g., play games that include counting, like hide and seek), and physical development (e.g., build strength by jumping, running, and swinging).

Families could also expand their outdoor activities with explorer kits that included items like magnifying glasses, binoculars, and bug tongs. Early learning center directors choose books for families from a list of books related to outdoor learning curated by university-based center staff. School A, which

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served a largely African American population of families, selected *They All Saw a Cat* (Wenzel, 2016) and *The Adventures of Jamear* (Williams et al., 2019). School B with a largely Hispanic/Latino population, chose *My Friends/Mis Amigos* (Gomi, 2006) and *La Abuela en la Cuidad* (Castillo, 2015). These books highlight the experiences of young children of color as they learn (a) how a neighborhood walk can teach you about shapes (*The Adventures of Jamear*), (b) how to find the beauty in a busy city (*La Abuela en la Cuidad*), and (c) how to gain knowledge from unusual places (*My Friends/Mis Amigos*). Anecdotal feedback from families after the first virtual ELP session revealed that families appreciated having a space to connect with other families. Since the lockdown began, it was common for families to interact primarily with their children and immediate family members from day to day. Families also reported enjoying the book selections and session theme. For most families, however, it was difficult to keep their children occupied for the caregiver focus of the session where facilitators provided an overview of family activities. Families also mentioned that they wanted more interactive activities to complete with their children during the session. ELP facilitators took family feedback into consideration when planning the winter 2021 ELP session.

### **Winter 2021: Promoting Socioemotional Development**

The first task in planning the virtual winter 2021 ELP session, which was scheduled for February 2021, was to determine a session theme that (a) was engaging for families and (b) responded to the developmental needs of young children during COVID-19. The team of ELP facilitators decided to focus on promoting young children's empathy and positive peer relations to support children's overall socioemotional development since most children had limited peer interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. To respond to caregivers' concerns about children's attention during the caregiver-focused portion of the session, caregivers received materials that both provided learning opportunities and were engaging for children. Each family received a set of sensory toys with different shapes and emotions. Similar to the fall session, families received all food and session materials in advance. With a total of 12 families ( $n_{\text{School A}} = 7$ ) in attendance, the library staff started the session by facilitating singalongs and reading *My Heart Fills with Happiness* (Smith & Flett, 2016), a book about a young Native American girl who describes the experiences that bring her happiness (e.g., "I see the face of someone I love"). Caregivers learned strategies to help their child identify their emotions, such as describing different emotional states, during the parent portion of the session. Activity cards distributed to families reinforced these strategies and encouraged caregivers to talk with their children about the feelings.

To help caregivers see how young children can understand language used to describe emotional states, university-based interdisciplinary research center staff showed and facilitated a discussion about the viral social media video in which 9-month-old Emani is asked by her mother to "show me your mad face." Emani puts on her best mad face, followed by a smile after she hears her mother laugh (Emani's World, 2015). The clip illustrated how young children can learn to associate emotion language with different facial expressions and how participating in these types of activities can spark conversations about understanding, communicating, and responding to emotions. Because the virtual platform allowed for collaborative video viewing, ELP facilitators allotted additional time for families to share aspects they noticed about their children from observing their emotional states that were similar to and different from those depicted in the video.

For the caregiver-child activity portion, families received markers, blank board books, and sheets of emoji stickers to create a book about different emotions (see Figure 4). All families received the bilingual

Figure 4. Winter 2021 Caregiver-child activity example



book *Feelings, Big & Small/Emociones, Grandes y Pequeñas* (Everett, 2016), which combines vocabulary, pictures of actual children expressing different emotions, and emoji faces to illustrate emotional states. Families at School A received *Saturday* (Mora, 2019), which described how a young Black girl and her mother used mindfulness to overcome a series of unfortunate mishaps during their fun-filled day, and those at School B received the bilingual book *My Heart Fills with Happiness/Mi Corazón se Llena de Alegría* (Smith & Flett, 2016).

### Monitoring Families' Ongoing Needs for Virtual and Place-Based Engagement

In light of the updated set of COVID-19 pandemic mandates in early 2021, university-based interdisciplinary center staff checked in with both the library staff to learn about their revised programming guidelines and the early learning center staff at each school about families' ongoing needs. Library staff shared that they could only participate in virtual events. School A noted that they would like to resume in-person, place-based ELP sessions to encourage greater family participation. School B noted that their families preferred to continue with virtual ELP sessions. To meet families' needs, the spring 2021 and summer 2021 ELP sessions were held in-person for School A and virtually for School B. The following section describes the 2021 spring and summer ELP events designed to address families' ongoing virtual needs and current place-based needs.

#### Spring 2021: Using the Five Senses

ELP facilitators identified the theme of using the five senses to explore spring at the planning meeting for the spring 2021 ELP session. This topic encouraged families, regardless of the session format, to ease into spending time outdoors with their children after remaining indoors for much of the winter months. For the virtual session at School B, library staff read the book *I Hear a Pickle* (Isadora, 2016) and highlighted particular ways that people draw on their senses to experience the world. Early learning center staff facilitated the read aloud at School A's in-person ELP event. Next, the caregiver-focused portion of the session included an overview of the developmental milestones related to each sense (e.g., infants do not see well at birth, but by age 2, they can see lots of details and have improved hand-eye



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coordination). In addition, ELP facilitators shared the ways in which caregivers can promote children's learning by attending to the senses during the springtime. For example, the activity to promote children's sense of taste invited caregivers to give their children different fruits and vegetables and to describe their tastes (e.g., sweet). Families also described ways that their children communicated their preference for certain smells and sounds.

The caregiver-child activity included decorating a t-shirt with a spring scene that depicted a cherry tree, flowers, bees, a sun, and singing birds. ELP facilitators encouraged families to color in the scene with provided fabric markers to guide their children in outdoor learning using the five senses. All families received the wordless picture book *Five Senses* (Reid, 2013) to encourage children to tell their own stories and promote children's oral language development through storytelling. School A families also received the book *The Thing About Bees: A Love Letter* (Larkin, 2019), a book in which a father—who is afraid of bees—draws parallels between the importance of bees (e.g., “Without bees there'd be no more strawberries for shortcakes”) and his young children of color (e.g., “You're my strawberry heart”) in his life. School B families, on the other hand, received the bilingual book *Hello Ocean/Hola Mar* (Ryan et al., 2003), in which the author of Mexican heritage describes what the ocean looks like, sounds like, feels like, smells like, and tastes like from the perspective of a young girl during a trip to the beach with her family. By the end of the session, some children were already wearing their senses t-shirt and caregivers at the in-person ELP session were referencing the shirt as they pointed out their surroundings on the way to the car.

## **Summer 2021: Learning About Animals**

By the final ELP session during the year at home, a greater number of community-based organizations had created successful virtual and socially distant in-person activities. In addition, the library staff received permission to facilitate in-person read alouds. ELP facilitators chose the theme of promoting literacy through learning about animals and decided to reintroduce the experiential learning activity element of the sessions to bring the session's theme to life. In particular, facilitators invited a local wildlife group to provide a hands-on animal exploration opportunity for young children. Children at School A who attended the ELP session in-person held rabbits, pet turtles, and fed chickens. Children at School B who attended the session virtually talked to a parrot and were encouraged to locate things around the house that matched the color, texture of skin, or shape of other animals showcased. During the caregiver-focused portion, university-based interdisciplinary research center staff led a discussion of how learning about animals can support children's kindergarten readiness by (a) increasing their vocabulary; (b) building their empathy for others; and (c) strengthening their comparing, contrasting, and categorizing skills. Families received a set of activity cards that highlighted key vocabulary related to animal body parts and were encouraged to use these cards to initiate conversations about other animal facts (e.g., what kind of sounds they make, where they live, what they eat).

All families received the bilingual version of the book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?/ Oso Pardo, Oso Pardo, ¿Qué Ves Ahí?* (Martin & Carle, 2017), and library staff read the English version of this book during the session read aloud. School A families also received *Bedtime for Sweet Creatures* (Grimes & Zunon, 2020), in which a mother helps her toddler prepare for bed as the child growls like a bear when asked to lie down, freezes like a fawn as the mother reads a bedtime story, and hangs on her like a koala for one last bedtime kiss. Families at School B, on the other hand, received copies of the book *The Cazuela that the Farm Maiden Stirred* (Vamos & López, 2013), which builds a story about

making *arroz con leche* by incorporating Spanish words for ones written in English on the previous page as new ingredients are introduced. Families decorated animal puppets with their children during the caregiver-child portion of the ELP session, and the animals overlapped with those that the wildlife group displayed, the session activity cards described, and the children's books depicted. University-based interdisciplinary research center staff encouraged caregivers to draw connections between the features of the puppets and children's other experiences with these animals throughout the session as they colored together.

## **Summary of Responsive Strategies**

ELP facilitators used responsive strategies to address different types of families' needs at three critical junctures of the year at home: (a) families' immediate needs at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns, (b) families initial and ongoing needs for virtual family engagement through the winter of 2021, and (c) families' return to socially distant, outdoor in-person engagement in the spring and summer of 2021 for families at School A. In modifying ELP sessions for a virtual home-based format, staff from the ELP partner organizations made data-informed decisions to ensure that they (a) met the educational needs of families served by the urban early learning partners, (b) anticipated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on teaching and learning, and (c) provided additional resources (e.g., COVID-19 kits with hand sanitizer, masks, and disinfectant wipes to accompany literacy materials sent to families) that may have been outside of their typical literacy support but eased the burden of remote family engagement. The switch to in-person sessions did not necessarily yield greater family participation; however, anecdotal accounts from caregivers and early learning center staff suggested that having an opportunity to connect with other families and read culturally-affirming texts improved caregiver-child interactions. ELP facilitators distributed 233 children's books to 44 unique families during the ELP year at home, which is slightly more books than distributed during the previous five fully in-person sessions ( $N = 211$ ).

## **INFLUENCE OF ELP SESSION ATTENDANCE ON FAMILY LITERACY ENGAGEMENT**

While anecdotal feedback from families also suggested that the ELP sessions had positively influenced the frequency of shared reading with their child and their overall understanding of kindergarten readiness, the authors examined whether attending more ELP sessions during the year at home was positively associated with families' literacy engagement, literacy materials, and caregivers' understanding of kindergarten readiness. Participating caregivers completed a survey at the beginning of each session that asked them to report their family literacy engagement. No family demographic information was collected.

Family literacy engagement was measured through four items, (i.e., "How often do you read books to your child;" "How often do you use the public library to borrow books for your child;" "How would you describe your reading habits during COVID-19;" "In comparison to other activities, how would you rate your child's interest in books"). Literacy materials was assessed from the question, "About how many children's books do you own", and caregivers selected one of six answer choices: 0-10 books, 11-20 books, 21-30 books, 31-40 books, 41-50 books, or more than 51 books. Caregiver understanding of kindergarten readiness was assessed with the item "Rate your understanding of kindergarten readi-

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ness” on a scale from 1 (*I don’t understand it at all*) to 5 (*I understand it extremely well*). Returning families answered two additional questions about the influence of attending ELP sessions: “How often do you read the book(s) you received from the ELP with your child?,” which caregivers rated on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*several times per week*), and “Rate how well the ELP has helped you understand kindergarten readiness,” which was rated on a scale from 1 (*the ELP didn’t help me at all*) to 5 (*the ELP helped me a lot*).

### **Analyses**

We analyzed data collected from 23 families ( $n_{\text{School A}} = 10$ ), and several factors contributed to the size of our analytic sample relative to the total number of families who participated in the five ELP events from summer 2020 to summer 2021 ( $n = 44$ ). First, early learning center invited families to attend ELP events; however, not all invited families attended the ELP sessions. Second, ELP facilitators did not collect from the summer 2020 ELP event, which involved the distribution of family boxes. Third, three families at School B who attended the spring 2021 ELP session did not return completed surveys. Fourth, early childhood staff at both schools received no returned surveys from caregivers who attended the spring 2021 ELP session. As a result, the chapter presents data from the last survey from caregivers at two schools who attended at least one of the three ELP sessions during the year at home—fall 2020, spring 2021, and summer 2021.

To address our question (influence of session attendance), authors first created a dichotomous dosage indicator of session attendance set to 0 if caregivers attended two or fewer sessions and 1 if they attended three or more sessions. This approach was used to accurately account for families who attended sessions before and during the year at home. Next, a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses were conducted regressing the dosage variable on each caregiver’s last survey responses and accounting for caregivers nested within schools. Finally, to determine whether session attendance during the year at home for families that attended more than one ELP session during this period predicted families’ literacy engagement, literacy materials, and caregivers’ understanding of kindergarten readiness, we conducted another series of OLS regression analyses regressing dosage on the change between caregivers’ first year at home survey response and their last survey response (an average span of four to seven months).

### **Descriptives**

The number of caregivers who attended two or fewer sessions ( $n = 12$ ) was roughly the same as the number who attended three or more sessions ( $n = 11$ ). Overall, caregivers reported reading books with their child a little more than once per week ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ , range: 3–4), and on average, caregivers rarely used the public library to borrow books for their child ( $M = 1.30$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ , range: 1–3). Caregivers noted that their reading habits during COVID-19 remained the same during COVID-19 shutdowns as they were before, on average ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ , range: 1–3), and their child’s interest in books is their favorite activity ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ , range: 2–5). Caregivers reported owning an average of 21 to 30 children’s books ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ , range: 2–5). For families that attended two or more sessions ( $n = 18$ ), caregivers reported reading the books they received from ELP about once per week ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ , range: 1–6) and favorably rated how ELP has helped their understanding of kindergarten readiness ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ , range: 2–5).

## **Results**

Results from first set of OLS regression models indicated that ELP session dosage did not predict families' literacy engagement, literacy materials, and caregivers' understanding of kindergarten readiness. For families who attended two or more ELP sessions during the year at home, analyses revealed that ELP session dosage predicted a statistically significant positive change in how many children's books caregivers reported owning ( $\beta = 1.33$ ;  $p = .019$ ) accounting for school site. No other statistically significant associations predicted families' literacy engagement, literacy materials, and caregivers' understanding of kindergarten readiness.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the description of responsive strategies to adapt family literacy sessions for remote instruction, the authors offer three primary recommendations for family literacy facilitators partnering with families of young children.

### **Keep Family's Needs at the Center of the Planning Process**

First, as evidenced by the family-informed decisions to alter ELP sessions described earlier in the chapter, responsive family literacy engagement requires families' needs to remain at the center of the planning process. Both soliciting and incorporating feedback allows facilitators to preserve relationships with families and respond appropriately to their needs. For example, ELP facilitators consistently checked in with caregivers after each session and gave families options with the books they select to provide a personalized—yet theme-related—experience.

Centering families' needs also made it easy for early learning staff to leverage the resources of staff at the university-based interdisciplinary research center and public library to fill in gaps within existing early learning curricula and activities. If families who attended the center's most recent virtual play group expressed an interest in helping children share with their peers in a way that was outside the scope of allotted time, for example, the university-based interdisciplinary research center staff could find family activities related to managing emotions that would be reinforced by the library staff's suggested books. This organic approach to developing ELP sessions ensured that the theme remained relevant to families' in-the-moment experiences.

### **Strive for Synergy and Differentiation**

Second, facilitators should consider striving for a balance of synergy and differentiation when developing family literacy sessions. Synergistically, ELP facilitator's needs-based contributions emerged during the planning process instead of coming from a predetermined list of responsibilities. In particular, the planning group members pulled from their areas of expertise to contribute suggestions for each session's theme, materials and books observed by them to be of interest to children, child-based activities that could be incorporated in the sessions, and contacts for community-based child activity providers. Whichever of the partner organizations had the expertise, experience, and/or connection followed for session needs, which allowed partners to leverage the resources of the entire group. The planning sessions take place

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with both early childhood centers, allowing the planning group to come together to identify a theme that meets the needs of all partners and use resources judiciously.

From the perspective of differentiation, university-based early learning research center staff provide both early childhood centers with a list of children's books that included the public librarians' suggestions and those from the research center's collection. Early childhood center chose books from the list for their program's families taking into account individual program needs. For example, there could be different cultural and linguistic representation at each early childhood center, or families may be interested in different topics.

### **Outline the Roles and Responsibilities of Partners in Advance**

Another recommendation is outlining the roles and responsibilities of each partner in advance. The staff from each ELP partner organization had clearly outlined tasks for which they were responsible prior to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. For example, early childhood centers had direct connection to the families and their needs, the library had access to pertinent books and child-based activities, and the university-based multidisciplinary research center has the pulse on the research guiding developmentally appropriate practices. As a result, program partners had the capacity to respond quickly to remote learning (e.g., creating a virtual session) and to expand ELP offerings in new ways (e.g., developed bilingual activity cards to facilitate at-home learning, home delivery of literacy materials). The ELP partners engaged in similar amounts of planning before and during COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns to make the sessions fruitful and ensure a timely delivery of materials.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

As the role of community-based family literacy engagement continues to evolve, it will be important to consider how organizations can work collaboratively implement whole-family approaches to support of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families. Existing programs should evaluate their program materials to determine ways to incorporate elements of families' lived experience within the program in meaningful ways. Relatedly, the chapter authors intend to make ELP improvements. Elements designed specifically for the COVID-19 pandemic context (e.g., kindergarten readiness activity cards) will be retained in an effort to promote family engagement activities. In addition, participating families will be asked about their goals for literacy engagement—including goals informed by the year at home and goals based on their interactions with their children.

## **CONCLUSION**

The primary contribution of this chapter is that it highlights a model of adapting a community-based family literacy partnership for early childhood caregivers and their children (birth–age 3) during remote learning. In particular, the chapter demonstrates how responsive programming that takes into consideration diverse families' needs can serve as an anchor to facilitate children's kindergarten readiness and contribute to families growing at-home library of children's books. ELP sessions can serve as a model

for collaborating with racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families to support children's early learning.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Early Childhood Education:** Formal education provided to young children ages birth to eight.

**Early Literacy Sessions:** Collaboratively designed and delivered workshop sessions for families sharing activities, materials, and research-based strategies to promote literacy and language development for children birth to age three.

**Enoch Pratt Free Library:** Public library in Baltimore City providing programs and activities for improving young children’s reading skills.

**Family-School-Community Partnerships:** University-based collaboration model to deliver programmatic activities focused on improving learning outcomes through research-based practices.

**Home Literacy Environment:** Presence of literacy- and language-developing materials in the household.

**Judy Centers:** Learning hubs located at Title I schools across all Maryland counties designed to improve the quality of life for families with children birth through kindergarten.

**Kindergarten Readiness:** Children’s achieved development of required skills necessary to thrive academically in a kindergarten setting.

**Racially, Ethnically, and Linguistically Diverse Families:** Families from a multitude of racial and ethnic backgrounds, who speak languages other than English.

**University-Based Early Learning Research Center:** Multidisciplinary research-based university center advancing programs and projects to improve learning outcomes for young children in urban settings.