



# **EVALUATION OF THE SHERMAN CENTER FAMILIES, LIBRARIES, AND EARLY LITERACY PROGRAM**

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**Community Partnerships as an Avenue to Enrich Caregiver Practices and Promote  
Children's Kindergarten Readiness: An Evaluation of the Families, Libraries, and Early  
Literacy Program**

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### **Abstract**

Opportunities to cultivate children's learning and development are not equitably distributed. Early childhood education programs offer a unique opportunity to mitigate disparities directly by supporting children's skill acquisition and indirectly by supporting families to prepare their children for kindergarten readiness. One such program is the *Families, Libraries, and Early Literacy Program*. This program was designed to teach caregivers evidence-based practices and provide relevant resources to help promote young children's academic skills at home and, in turn, improve children's kindergarten readiness. This study utilized archival records (e.g., attendance records, family reports) to evaluate the impact of the *Families, Libraries, and Early Literacy Program*. Caregivers generally reported favorable impressions of the program, including regular usage of the program-provided books and activity materials at home, increased frequency of reading with their children, and enhanced understanding of kindergarten readiness. Next steps and implications for programming are discussed.

**Key Words:** Kindergarten readiness, Family-literacy programs, Libraries, Caregiver training, Early childhood

## **Introduction**

While young children have the capacity to learn and build skills before entering kindergarten, opportunities to cultivate young children's learning and development are not equitably distributed (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2020). Early childhood education programs offer a unique opportunity to help mitigate such disparities early in development, both directly and indirectly by supporting children's skill acquisition and by supporting families as an additional mechanism to support children's kindergarten readiness. However, in the United States, access to high-quality education opportunities is fraught with inequality, with Black children being more likely to attend programs of lower quality than their White/Non-Hispanic peers (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2020).

Previous literature has identified two primary perspectives regarding the conceptualization of kindergarten readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). The first is a child-focused perspective that asserts the importance of children demonstrating a predetermined set of knowledge and skills prior to formal schooling (Meisels, 1999). In line with this conceptualization, state-funded early childhood programs are typically evaluated based on their capacity to meet standards of kindergarten readiness assessments in mathematics and numeracy, language and literacy, and socio-emotional development. The second conceptualization takes an ecological perspective, acknowledging the importance of the contexts in which children develop (e.g., family, school, community) that help shape children's learning (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In line with this perspective, many state-funded early childhood programs also involve caregivers to help support young children's learning. This 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) and

may be particularly beneficial for underserved communities (for further discussion, see Rochester & Mata-McMahon, 2022).

Another important community context is public libraries. Indeed, public libraries are highly regarded as important providers of literacy-rich experiences that support young children's development (e.g., Lopez et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2019). For example, public libraries provide programming to support children's academic and social development, often through program offerings such as storytime (Lopez et al., 2016). Storytime includes read-alouds as well as additional activities such as songs, fingerplays, arts, and crafts (Campana et al., 2016). Storytime is a popular children's program widely available in public libraries across the United States (for discussion, see Cahill et al., 2020).

Libraries have broadened initiatives to include training for caregivers through programs like *Every Child Ready to Read* (ECRR, n.d.). Family engagement is recognized as a vital component in promoting children's literacy development, kindergarten readiness, shaping children's attitudes toward learning, and ultimately reducing academic achievement gaps (Lopez et al., 2016). For example, while remaining child-focused, modern library programming may include caregiver support through modeling and dissemination of learning strategies during storytime (Cahill et al., 2020). One overarching goal of family-engagement efforts is:

...developing the knowledge, attitudes, values, and behaviors that enable children to be motivated, enthusiastic, and successful learners. In libraries, this means having respectful partnerships with families and providing information, guidance, and opportunities for families to be active in their children's learning and development. Families support their children's learning when they believe that they are responsible for their children's education and feel confident that what they say and do makes a difference. Trusted community educators, including librarians, can encourage and inspire families to be engaged in their children's learning at any point in a child's lifetime. (Lopez et al., 2016, p. 2)

Libraries may be an ideal context for family engagement work as parents (and grandparents) of young children are frequent patrons of public libraries, and they serve as a community resource utilized by lower-income families (Lopez et al., 2016).

While many existing family-library programs demonstrate promise (e.g., Supporting Parents in Early Literacy through Libraries [SPELL], Crist et al., 2020; Scottsdale Library Family Engagement Program, Taylor et al., 2021), the extent to which these programs meet the needs of urban families from low-income and racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds is unclear. Many family literacy programs provide caregivers with books, resources, and strategies to improve children's literacy skills and home literacy environments in service of supporting children's readiness for formal schooling. However, these programs have had mixed success 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 programs that might address the specific needs of families in diverse urban communities. The *Families, Libraries, and Early Literacy Program* was designed to help address this important gap. The program was created from a collaboration between early childhood education stakeholders in higher education, urban public schools, and a public library (see Rochester & Mata-McMahon, 2022 for an overview). The program design is grounded in the aforementioned literature and consists of a series of community-based family literacy sessions, but with a specific focus on supporting low-income and diverse families in urban communities.

### **Families, Libraries, and Early Literacy Program (ELP)**

The *Families, Libraries, and Early Literacy Program* (ELP) is a Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities program, in partnership with the Enoch Pratt Free Library

and Judy Centers at two public schools around an urban city center in Maryland. ELP was designed to teach caregivers' practices and provide relevant resources to promote kindergarten readiness in young children (0-3 years old).

The program ran from 2019 to 2022. During this time period, 24 ELP sessions were held. The majority of ELP sessions were delivered in person; however, during the COVID-19 pandemic, ELP sessions transitioned online in order to continue program offerings to the community. ELP sessions generally consisted of a read-aloud activity for caregivers and children, a workshop for caregivers, a gross motor activity for children, a make-and-take resources activity for caregivers and children, distribution of materials and children's books for families to take home, and lunch. ELP sessions were designed to help caregivers promote their children's kindergarten readiness through everyday activities (e.g., bath time, playing outside, cooking). ELP sessions primarily focused on the domains of literacy, math, and science, as well as self-care skills to support children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development. Typically, four ELP sessions were held each year at each site. Each session covered a different theme; see Table 1 for a full list of ELP session themes.

### **Method**

This study utilized archival records, including attendance records and family reports on caregiver literacy practices, the use of books and materials provided through the program, and families' perceptions of the program's benefits, to evaluate the potential impact of ELP. Analysis of this archival data was approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board (#1090).

Table 1. ELP session themes and example content by year

Theme	Example Content	Year(s) Offered
<b>Early Literacy Begins Before 3!</b>	<i>“Use the materials at your table to make a hand puppet for family literacy time (reading, singing, telling stories)” [Make-and-Take Activity]</i>	2019
<b>Kindergarten Readiness at Bath Time &amp; Bedtime</b>	<i>“During bath time, children are seated in one place and aren’t moving - this is an excellent time to sing songs with rhymes and play games with their hands, read a book, or identify parts of the body.” [Presentation Content]</i>	2020
<b>Kindergarten Readiness in the Kitchen</b>	<i>“Kindergarten readiness can happen in the kitchen in different domains: Social (talking, sharing, listening); Physical (measuring, using utensils, mixing ingredients); Numeracy (counting, measuring); Literacy (reading, naming, writing ingredients)” [Presentation Content]</i>	2019 2021
<b>Kindergarten Readiness Outside</b>	<i>“Try these activities with your child! Draw letters outside on the ground with a stick or chalk; create or sing songs about the weather; use your binoculars to look for shapes and colors” [Outdoor Activity Cards]</i>	2020
<b>Kindergarten Readiness through Mindfulness &amp; Emotional Wellness</b>	<i>“Starfish Breathing: Breathe in as you slide up your finger and breathe out as you slide down; Identify faces with your child and talk about the feelings they represent” [Mindfulness &amp; Emotional Wellness Cards]</i>	2021
<b>Kindergarten Readiness: Promoting Literacy Through Learning About Animals</b>	<i>“Learning about animals can: Expose your child to the environment and world; increase your child’s vocabulary; strengthen your child’s comparing, contrasting, and categorizing skills; teach empathy; and be fun!” [Presentation Content]</i>	2021 2022
<b>Learning Math &amp; Science Through Children’s Books</b>	<i>“Families are key! With their children, they can: Play games like ‘Hands, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes’ to teach directions; Dance, run, color with crayons, finger paint, make figures with Play-Doh, eat fruits and vegetables every day to help them develop physically (also remember young children need 10-12 hours of sleep each day).” [Presentation Content]</i>	2019
<b>Storytelling Through Art</b>	<i>Use the materials at your table to help your child draw and tell a story about their drawing! [Make-and-Take Activity]</i>	2022
<b>Using the Five Senses to Explore Spring and Promote Kindergarten Readiness</b>	<i>“Tasting and smelling: Infants and young children recognize certain smells as comforting, yummy, scary, and exciting, which helps them to understand their worlds. Exposing babies to good-for-you foods means they are more likely to eat healthy foods later in life, leading to better overall health. Help children to try new foods and/or new combinations of foods to build their sense of taste.” [Presentation content]</i>	2021

*Note.* In year three of the program, a set curriculum was designed



**Participants**

Based on attendance records, approximately 128 families participated in ELP over the course of 4 years. Participants included parents, grandparents, children, and other caretakers who were recruited through Judy Center Early Learning Hubs situated within diverse urban communities in Maryland. Many of the caregivers were native Spanish speakers; as such, bilingual (English/Spanish) sessions were largely offered with corresponding translated materials and resources. There was some variability across the two program sites (i.e., at Site 1, all sessions were bilingual, and as of 2021, bilingual sessions were also offered at the second community site). No demographic information was collected from program participants.

**Archival Records*****Attendance Records***

At the beginning of each ELP session, parents and caregivers were asked to sign in, and records of the attendance sheets were stored digitally. The number of attendees per session and per year was then calculated.

***Family Feedback Questionnaires***

At the end of each ELP session, participants were invited to complete a short questionnaire (6-11 items, depending on program year) to capture families' reading habits and program experiences. The questionnaires included rating scale items and open-ended questions. The questionnaires were created by the Sherman Center staff as a means to collect feedback from families. Over the course of the 4 years, different iterations of the questionnaire were developed and fielded. Changes to the questionnaire were made for a variety of reasons, including in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, families were consistently asked to report on four items about their families' reading habits. During the pandemic, a new item was

added, probing whether the pandemic affected families' reading habits. Items were also added to assess families' use of the ELP books and materials, as well as to gauge the perceived impact of the program. Due to the different iterations of the questionnaire (and the fact that families could skip individual items), the sample size per item is variable. For some items, the sample size is quite limited. As a result, the analysis focused only on those items that had more than 25 responses.

## **Results**

### **Analysis of Attendance Records**

ELP ran for 4 years with an average of 6 ( $SD = 2.0$ ) sessions occurring per year (Range: 4 - 8). On average, 57 ( $SD = 26$ ) families participated each year. The average attendance per session was 10 ( $SD = 5$ ) families.

### **Analysis of Responses to the Family Feedback Questionnaire**

Across the 24 ELP Sessions, a total of 203 family feedback questionnaires were completed. Of the 203 questionnaires, 62% ( $n = 126$ ) came from unique and/or new families (i.e., families who were attending their first ELP session), while more than a third (38%,  $n = 77$ ) came from returning families (i.e., families that engaged in more than one ELP session).

### ***Reading Habits***

See Table 2 for the means and frequencies of families' reading habits as reported by caregivers. Caregivers were asked to rate children's level of interest in books on a 5-point scale where 1 indicated that reading books was children's *least* favorite activity, and 5 indicated it was their *favorite* activity. More than half of families (66%) reported that their children were very

Table 2. Family Reading Habits - Average Ratings and Frequency Counts by Response Option

Question	N	M (SD)	Response	Frequencies (Valid %)
In comparison to other activities, how would you rate your child's interest in books? [Scale: 1 to 5]	195	3.89 (1.10)	Least favorite	5 (2.6%)
			A little interested	18 (9.2%)
			Interested	44 (22.6%)
			Very interested	54 (27.7%)
			Favorite	74 (37.9%)
How often do you read books to your child? [Scale: 1 to 4]	201	3.33 (0.98)	Never/rarely	18 (9.0%)
			About once a month	20 (10.0%)
			About once a week	41 (20.4%)
			Several times per week	122 (60.7%)
How often do you use the public library for books for your child? [Scale: 1 to 3]	193	1.35 (0.61)	Never/rarely	140 (72.5%)
			About once a month	39 (20.2%)
			About once a week	14 (7.3%)
How many books does your family own? [Scale: 1 to 3]	196	1.80 (0.72)	0 to 10 books	74 (37.8%)
			11 to 50 books	88 (44.9%)
			51+ books	34 (17.3%)
How would you describe your reading habits during COVID-19? [Scale: 1 to 3]	45	2.49 (0.63)	Reading less	3 (6.7%)
			Reading the same	17 (37.8%)
			Reading more	25 (55.6%)

interested in books or that reading books was their children's favorite activity. Approximately 12% reported that their children showed little interest in books or that it was their children's least favorite activity. In terms of reading habits, caregivers reported that reading was a common family activity. The majority of caregivers (60.7%) reported reading books to their children several times per week, despite many families (72.5%) never or rarely using the public library to obtain books for their children. When caregivers were asked how many children's books they

owned, approximately 50% of caregivers reported having between 11 and 50 books. However, a little more than a third (38%) of caregivers reported that they owned 0 to 10 books.

Caregivers ( $n = 45$ ) were also asked whether their reading habits changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Surprisingly, over half (56%) of families reported reading *more* with their children during the COVID-19 pandemic than they did before the pandemic, despite the severe challenges the pandemic posed in terms of child/elder care, disruptions to education, health concerns, and employment challenges (Cook et al., 2024).

### ***Use of ELP Books and Materials***

Table 3 summarizes results from the evaluative items added to the family feedback questionnaire between 2020 and 2022. Note that the sample size per item is variable (27 to 67 responses) as some new items were added in 2021.

Caregivers were asked to report how frequently they used the ELP books ( $n = 67$ ) and program activities ( $n = 28$ ). Caregivers indicated that they were utilizing both the ELP books and materials regularly. Approximately half (51%) of the families reported that their children were reading the books they obtained through ELP several times per week, and another 28% reported that they read the ELP books approximately once per week. Similarly, caregivers also reported regularly using the ELP activity materials, with over half (61%) of families indicating they use the ELP activity materials several times per week, and another 32% of caregivers indicating they used the activity materials approximately once weekly.

Table 3. Use of ELP Materials and Books and Perceived Program Impact

Question	N	M (SD)	Response	Frequency (Valid %)
How frequently does your child read books obtained from ELP? <sup>a</sup> [Scale 1 to 4]	67	3.13 (1.10)	Never/rarely	11 (16.4%)
			About once a month	3 (4.5%)
			About once a week	19 (28.4%)
			Several times per week	34 (50.7%)
How often do you use the activity materials from ELP? <sup>b</sup> [Scale 1 to 4]	28	3.50 (0.75)	Never/rarely	1 (3.6%)
			About once a month	1 (3.6%)
			About once a week	9 (32.1%)
			Several times per week	17 (60.7%)
How would you rate the helpfulness of ELP in your understanding of kindergarten readiness? <sup>a</sup> [Scale 1 to 5; higher numbers indicate greater helpfulness]	59	4.34 (0.96)	1	0
			2	3 (5.1%)
			3	11 (18.6%)
			4	8 (13.6%)
			5	37 (62.7%)
How would you describe your reading habits with your child since participating in ELP? <sup>b</sup> [Scale 1 to 3]	27	2.41 (0.75)	Read less	4 (14.8%)
			Habits have not changed	8 (29.6%)
			Read more	15 (55.6%)

<sup>a</sup> Item administered 2020-2022<sup>b</sup> Item administered December 2021-2022***Program Perceived Impact***

Caregivers ( $n = 59$ ) were also asked to provide feedback on how helpful ELP was in improving their understanding of kindergarten readiness on a scale from 1 to 5, where a score of 1 indicates that the program was not helpful at all and a score of 5 indicates that the program helped a lot. Most families (63%) reported that ELP helped a lot (Rating: 5) in fostering an understanding of kindergarten readiness. Conversely, only 5% of caregivers indicated the program had low utility (Rating: 2).

Caregivers ( $n = 27$ ) were also asked whether the program changed their reading habits with their child - if they read together less, more, or if their reading habits were unchanged. Participating caregivers generally reported that the program promoted reading with their children as over half of the respondents (56%) reported reading with their children more since participating in the program. However, a subset of participating families (30%) indicated that their reading habits remained unchanged, and another 15% reported that they were reading to their children less. This finding and potential implications for programming are further explored in the discussion section.

### **Analysis of Caregivers' Qualitative Feedback**

The family questionnaires concluded with an open-ended question in which families were invited to share any additional comments, suggestions, or questions. Only a subset of families ( $n = 33$ ) provided qualitative feedback. Caregiver responses were coded by the second author into one of four categories: (1) General appreciation, (2) Lessons learned, (3) Questions/Requests for more information, and (4) Other Comments. The data were re-coded by a second coder (the third author) to ensure strong inter-rater reliability (Cohen's Kappa = .74).

#### ***General Appreciation***

The General Appreciation category included caregiver responses that conveyed gratitude for the session and/or materials received. Over a third (36%;  $n = 12$ ) of families provided responses that fell into this category. Example caregiver comments are provided below with accompanying English translation:

Es maravillo que lo hagan por que así fomentan el hábito de la lectura, gracias!!

*It's marvelous that you are doing this because this way the habit of reading is fostered,  
thank you!*

Estoy muy agradecida con todos estos programa son de gran ayuda para todas las familias. Les deseo muchas bendiciones y éxito en todo lo que hacen.

*I am very grateful about all these programs; they are of great help to all the families. I wish you blessings and success in all you do.*

Hermoso programa estoy muy feliz ahora. Comprendo más y mis niños están más preparados para el kindergarten. Gracias a todos los que hacen posible este evento.

*Beautiful program. I am very happy now. I have a better understanding, and my children are better prepared for kindergarten. Thank you to all that make this event possible.*

### ***Lessons Learned***

The Lessons Learned category included responses in which caregivers shared what they had learned through their participation in ELP and/or the goals that they had for themselves or their children. More than a third (36%,  $n = 12$ ) of caregivers provided responses that fell into this category. Several caregivers shared lessons that they learned related to the session content. For example, following the Bath and Bedtime session, a caregiver reported, “*Reading at night helps a lot.*” Other caregivers commented on something they had learned or observed about their child during the ELP session (e.g., “*He likes animal stories*” or “*He loses interest fast*”) or specific goals they had created to improve their child’s kindergarten readiness:

*I want to include learning classes on the alphabet, learning and manual activities.*

*I want to give colorful picture books to my children so they can learn to love reading, distributing digital books.*

Some caregivers also shared that they had learned about the importance of reading:

*Soy nueva en el programa y estoy empezando aprender la importancia de leer libros.*

*I am new to the program, and I am starting to learn about the importance of reading books.*

### ***Questions or Requests for More Information***

The category Questions or Requests for Information captured responses in which caregivers shared an outstanding question they had and/or suggestions they had for topics they wanted to learn more about. Approximately 21% ( $n = 7$ ) of caregivers' responses fell into this category. Some common topics caregivers expressed interest in learning more about included activities or creative ways to engage children to keep children interested in reading. Example questions and topics caregivers expressed interest in learning more about are provided below:

*How do I get her to prefer books over the computer?*

*What can I do to create more interest in books?*

*What is the appropriate age for children to start learning how to read?*

*Recommendations for books that expand a child's imagination*



Que haya más libros en español

*More books available in Spanish*

### ***Other Comments***

Two families (6%) responded with only minimal comments to the prompt to share additional comments, suggestions, or questions. These comments (e.g., *Ninguno / None*; *Es mi primer vez / It is my first time*) did not fit into the three aforementioned categories and were therefore categorized as “Other.”

### **Discussion**

The results from the archival analysis indicate that ELP is perceived by caregivers as an impactful program. Many families regularly participated in ELP, returning to attend multiple sessions and/or years of the program. Participating caregivers generally seemed to prioritize reading. Families reported regularly reading to their children, despite limited use of their local library and, for some families, limited numbers of books available at home. Caregivers also indicated that they regularly used the ELP books and materials. Importantly, more than half of the caregivers (56%) reported that their reading habits had *increased* after participating in ELP, indicating a positive perceived impact of the program on family literacy engagement. However, approximately 45% of caregivers reported their reading habits remained unchanged, or they were reading to their children less after participating in ELP. Given the small sample size, these data should be interpreted cautiously. Nevertheless, it will be important in future research to obtain more objective measures of families’ reading habits in order to disentangle whether families who report that their reading habits are unchanged merely reflect ceiling effects (i.e., families who

already prioritized reading) or if they indicate that some families may benefit from additional support or resources beyond what was provided in ELP. Lastly, families tended to report that ELP supported their understanding of kindergarten readiness, a key initiative goal. Future experimental research should be conducted to more directly assess changes in knowledge pre/post participation to strengthen causal claims about the benefits of the program. Overall, the findings are encouraging and suggest that the program was able to support the unique needs of linguistically diverse families living in lower-income urban communities.

### **Limitations**

Despite the favorable findings, there are a number of limitations that should be considered in future research. First, the present study was an archival analysis conducted by Sherman Center researchers, but who were not the original program developers. The study relied extensively on self-report data. Future research should aim to triangulate caregivers' reports with direct observations of caregivers during the training sessions and caregiver-child interactions in the home. This data, in combination with pre/post learning outcomes, would allow for a clearer understanding of the program's efficacy. Caregiver interviews would also be a significant source of information that could help elucidate any challenges caregivers experience in preparing their children for kindergarten. Caregiver interviews may also shed light on any obstacles caregivers experience attending ELP. Such valuable information could guide program developers on how to reduce barriers to participation.

### **Programming Recommendations**

As part of the program, families received books and activity materials that they reported using regularly at home. These provided materials are a key benefit of the program for families, as caregivers tended to underutilize their local libraries. More than a third of caregivers reported

owning only 0 to 10 books. These findings suggest that access to books may be a barrier for some families; therefore, providing books and activities is an aspect of the program that is important to preserve in future iterations. Additionally, program developers may consider ways to encourage families to visit their local public library and help families leverage libraries as another untapped resource to help promote their child's kindergarten readiness.

Most caregivers reported that ELP helped foster an understanding of their child's kindergarten readiness. However, one area in which some caregivers requested additional support was engaging children in reading and creating a sustained interest in reading. Program designers could consider incorporating future sessions on teaching strategies for shared reading that promote engagement and foster children's interest in reading. Sessions could also include guidance on developmentally appropriate expectations for how long young children can sustain their attention when participating in directed learning activities.

### **Conclusions**

Collectively, the present findings point to promising benefits of ELP as demonstrated by a variety of indices, including program attendance records and caregiver reports, which documented families' use of the program books and materials, an increase in shared reading for over half of the participating families, and reports that the program helped develop an understanding of kindergarten readiness. Although pre/post learning data would further strengthen the conclusions that can be drawn, these findings lend greater generalizability to prior findings in that they extend evaluations of family-library partnerships into urban and low-income communities.

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### **Disclosures**

Conflict of Interest: The authors are affiliated with the Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities. However, the lead researchers were not involved in the design of the programs.

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