



# Caregivers' perceptions of emergent literacy programming in public libraries in relation to the National Research Councils' guidelines on quality environments for children



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## A B S T R A C T

A survey conducted at three Florida library systems examines caregivers' perceptions of emergent literacy programming and how these perceptions compare with the National Research Council's features for quality programs for children. The survey results reveal that caregivers' perceptions of emergent literacy programming align with the National Research Council's features. The data demonstrates that caregivers' perceptions are very positive toward emergent literacy programming in terms of learning and the environment. Caregivers' perceptions of the environment answers were mostly strongly agree. These results were more positive than their perceptions of learning, although they strongly agree that these programs prepare children for school, reading, and social interaction. The survey results will inform public libraries as to how to design, market, and deliver emergent literacy programming to caregivers with very young children.

## 1. Introduction

Emergent literacy is a set of prerequisites for reading readiness that children 0 to 3 exhibit before learning to decode words (Justice, 2006). An example of emergent literacy is talking about pictures in a book and turning pages. Irwin, Moore, Tornatore, and Fowler (2012) suggest that the mission of the public library is to play a crucial role in reading development. By doing this, public libraries establish a connection between families and reading materials.

Libraries have freely accessible resources that anyone can use. One of the library's roles is to help caregivers meet the emergent literacy needs of their children. These adults (caregivers) are responsible for children visiting a library. Libraries help caregivers, when they use the library, by increasing their awareness of the early literacy reading habits children need (Irwin et al., 2012). Libraries can aid underserved populations in gaining access to resources that are important for their children's emergent literacy development. Public library support for literacy in underserved populations facilitates access to resources and aids the development of literacy skills (Celano & Neumann, 2001).

## 2. Problem statement

According to Barnett and Frede (2011), parents have a strong influence on a child's language and literacy development, yet there has been a lack of parental involvement in library programming, programming which has had large effects on literacy, including lasting effects on reading (Barnett & Frede, 2011). Martini and Sénéchal (2010) noted that parents' beliefs influence the ease and speed with which a child gains literacy. Caregivers have a strong impact on children's mastery of early reading (Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005), yet more research is needed on how to help parents educate their children, and how they can be more involved in their children's literacy development (Barnett & Frede, 2011). Many children do not experience educational programming on a regular basis; this inconsistency and infrequency keep them from experiencing lasting gains in reading. If caregivers do not bring their children to emergent literacy programming at their library, then these resources will not be effective. Public libraries can take steps toward ensuring their programs are attended by understanding the perceptions of caregivers and using this information to design, market, and deliver emergent literacy programming to their communities.

Teale (1995) and Irwin et al. (2012) established the important role

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public libraries play in children's development of emergent literacy skills. Recent publications on emergent literacy in public libraries emphasize that there is a significant need for more research (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009; Herb, 2012; Irwin et al., 2012; Teale, 1995; Yilmaz, 2009). As caregivers and libraries understand the importance of emergent literacy, they are likely to provide the support children need to become successful readers and lifelong learners (Hume, Lonigan, & McQueen, 2012). Emergent literacy activities have a positive impact on a child's developing interest in learning to read (Hume et al., 2012). Researchers should continue to examine this area to inform libraries as to how to better serve the information needs of caregivers with very young children.

This study investigates the caregivers' views of emergent literacy programs for young children, and compares their perceptions of emergent literacy programming in the library to criteria for learning and learning environments established by the National Research Council (2000). The caregivers' perceptions about library programming for children are important, as attendance of young children in emergent literacy programs depends upon their adult caregivers. If caregivers do not attend programs, their children cannot participate in emergent-literacy activities at the public library. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What elements do caregivers expect to see in emergent literacy library programming for children, ages zero to three?
- RQ2: How do caregivers' perceptions of emergent literacy programming in the library compare with the National Research Council's Guidelines for environments for children?

### 3. Literature review

Emergent literacy typically develops in children ages zero to three. Researchers believe that learning to read is a process that begins at birth (Wedvik, 2010). As very young children are exposed to music, sights, noises, and eye contact with other people, their brains start taking shape (Kars & Doud, 2000). Literacy-building activities are used to show a range of representational and communication modes that involve learning language through pictures, movement, writing, speech, or gestures. Examples of literacy building activities include reading the words on a page and talking with a child about the picture on that same page, asking the child what they think might happen next in a story, or allowing the child to turn the page right to left.

Children of families that engage in several different types of literacy activities with their young children may be more likely than other children to show multiple signs of emerging literacy (Nord, Lennon, Liu, & Chandler, 2000). A sign of emergent literacy in a child age 0 to 3 might be their asking to have a book read to them. Examples of literacy activities that might lead to this sign of emergent literacy include letting children pick out books to read and discussing what a word means or how a word is broken down into syllables. Participation in emergent literacy programming has an impact on children's emergent literacy skills, but libraries need to know what motivates caregivers to attend programming in order to get them through the door (Justice & Sofka, 2010).

The National Early Literacy Panel identified six early literacy skills that point to success for children learning to read are as follows: print motivation, phonological awareness, vocabulary, narrative skills, print awareness, and letter knowledge (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009, p. 4). Print motivation is the interest a child exhibits in book reading. Phonological awareness is the ability a child has to manipulating sounds. For example, a child with phonological awareness could sing the childhood song, "I Love to Eat Apples and Bananas." Vocabulary is built when a child identifies new words and learns what these words mean and how they are used. Ultimately, the child will be able to see new words in a text and resolve the meaning of those words. Narrative skills involve language expressions that include being able to tell a story

or describe things. Print awareness is understanding print and written language, including understanding that words are read from left to right. Letter knowledge is the identification of letters and understanding the sounds those letters make (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).

Early literacy skills developed by the National Early Literacy Panel can be seen through a child's desire to have an adult read to them, or an understanding of how the words and pictures on a page are related. Librarians have integrated these elements (vocabulary, phonological processing, and print knowledge) into programming for children and into workshops designed to train those working with children to implement tools focusing on the six early literacy skills. An example of this includes librarians exposing children to new words and talking about the meanings. Also, when librarians point to words as they are read, children learn the flow of reading and begin to recognize words. Federal initiatives, such as *Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library*, were formed in support of reading using the six early literacy skills (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).

*Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library* helped facilitate emergent literacy programs that encourage reading development in children. In these programs, the library provides support for reading through providing resources to build emergent literacy in the home. *Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library* fosters literacy development in five ways: talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing (Ash & Meyers, 2009). This initiative for public libraries to organize and implement a literacy-focused component serves as the foundation for many of the children's programs that are offered today (Albright et al., 2009). Likewise, emerging concern for the literacy needs of children fostered many of the best practices still implemented in libraries today (Stooke & McKenzie, 2009). Even though children's services became a foundational part of public libraries in the last 50 years, no extensive historical literature is available about the changes that have occurred in this area (Sullivan, 2013).

The study is based on the framework developed by the National Research Council (NRC), which is the research arm of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. The NRC is a non-governmental, nonprofit organization that conducts research activities that drive policy and disseminate information. According to the NRC guidelines (National Research Council, 2000), programs for children should contain the following: cognitive stimulation; rich language; and the fostering of social, emotional, and motor development. The guidelines go on to say that these elements should be part of a learning environment for children where a caring, affectionate adult relationship exists. The NRC (2000) defines the following as desirable features of programs for young children:

1. Active attention paid to cognitive, mental health, and physical development.
2. Responsive interpersonal relationships fostered between teachers and children to develop young children's disposition toward learning and emerging abilities.
3. Low adult-child ratios to facilitate interaction between teachers and children, which correlates to greater effects.
4. Well-planned programs designed to help children meet the demands of formal schooling.
5. Formal training of teachers in early childhood development (p. 7).

These features are used to measure the state of education in the nation (NRC, 2000), and can be used as points of comparison for understanding caregivers' perceptions of learning environments for children. This study examines the perceptions of caregivers in relation to these features.

### 4. Methodology

Survey methodology was used to provide a quantitative description of caregivers' perceptions of emergent literacy programming. The study

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