



Leadership Brief: Libraries Supporting Family Learning

ABOUT THIS LEADERSHIP BRIEF

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

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

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

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



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

- Sharon Darling, President, National Center for Families Learning



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

FAMILIES AND LEARNING

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

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

- Dr. Rhea Brown Lawson, Director,
Houston Public Library

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

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

to 900 hours in school, is vital to strengthening educational performance and nurturing a commitment to lifelong learning.²

- ▶ **Family Service Learning Programs build adult and child skill development.** When families identify and work to solve community issues together, they also learn and apply 21st-century skills that lead to college and career-readiness. Multigenerational involvement in service learning contributes to stronger and more self-sufficient families.³

WHY FAMILY LEARNING MATTERS⁴

- ▶ Children spend 85% of their waking hours outside of school.
- ▶ Studies show 71% of parents with college degrees read to their children every day, compared with 33% of parents with high school diplomas or less.
- ▶ One in four kindergarteners enters school not ready to learn.
- ▶ Children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers.
- ▶ Forty-three percent of adult Americans read at a basic or below basic level.
- ▶ A mother's reading skill is the greatest determinant of her children's future academic success, outweighing other factors such as family income or neighborhood.

LIBRARIES AND FAMILY LEARNING

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

"The public library has always been focused on the whole life spectrum of learning to meet the needs of multiple generations," said Elizabeth Attack, Program Manager for *Bringing Books to Life* at the Nashville

Public Library. “Now we’re thinking more intentionally about doing things together for those generations.”

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

- Carolyn Blocker, Long Beach Family Literacy Program

Today, libraries are:

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

FAMILY LEARNING IN ACTION

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

- Parent participating at the Nashville Public Library

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

Richmond Public Library’s early literacy and school readiness programs are built around collaboration with the city’s early childhood development initiative and constant outreach led by a full-time literacy outreach coordinator and a parent education

coordinator. The library created *RVA Reads* to help children establish personal home libraries. Every child in the city’s three preschool centers receives a book each month, while parents receive tips on how to read with their children and promote at-home reading.

San Mateo County Public Libraries offers two-generation learning opportunities in underserved communities, focusing particularly on reading proficiency by third grade. Working with NCFL, the library’s *Toyota Family Learning* staff teams engage Spanish-speaking families in weekly two-generation learning experiences to build English language skills, improve reading ability, and increase family leadership and community engagement.

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

Calgary Public Library’s *ELL School Success* program builds vocabulary for English Language Learners in grades 1-3 and their parents. In the eight-week series, children learn English words working with a volunteer youth buddy while parents participate in an ESL conversation circle focused on how they can support their child’s language development and school success. Staff provide tours of the library’s resources for parents and children and engage parents in discussion topics that help them participate in their child’s educational experience.

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

FIVE ACTION STRATEGIES TO EXPAND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILY LEARNING

- 1. Connect key community partners that can meet family learning needs.** Libraries, public schools, family literacy programs, daycare centers, community centers, visiting nurses, and other local organizations have existing relationships with families and can strengthen the approach to and delivery of education strategies.
- 2. Increase community outreach to connect with families.** Reaching parents in places they frequent makes it easier for them to take advantage of opportunities despite busy schedules and limited transportation. Distribute information in health clinics, grocery stores, and laundromats, as well as at bus stops and parks, and offer programs in family gathering places such as playgrounds, places of worship, and daycare and community centers.
- 3. Enhance and align existing library and community literacy programs to serve families.** Bringing parents and children into existing literacy programs together creates expanded opportunities for two-generation learning without the need for completely new curricula.
- 4. Keep programming flexible to meet needs of both parents and children.** Programs that give families multiple options to engage (e.g., providing meals alongside instruction, allowing drop-ins when families are available, connecting to community efforts, and offering opportunities to extend the learning online and at home) work best for busy families.
- 5. Tell the story of the importance of family learning and early literacy.** Libraries are great messengers to audiences that trust them and seek their guidance. Being both a trusted voice in the community and a safe resource for family learning and early literacy can encourage more parents to participate in learning opportunities.

EMPOWERING FAMILIES

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

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



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

The Urban Libraries Council (ULC), founded in 1971, is the voice for public libraries and the force that inspires them to evolve. ULC creates the tools, techniques, and ideas to make ongoing improvements and upgrades in services and technology. ULC also speaks loudly and clearly about the value public libraries bring to communities, and secures funding for research that results in the development of new programs and services. And by serving as a forum for library leadership, ULC produces innovative ideas and best practices that ensure community impact.

For more information, visit www.urbanlibraries.org.

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

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

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

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