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## Making the library connection for urban families

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The Cleveland Ohio Public Library is an urban system with a Main Library and twenty-eight branches strategically placed throughout the city of Cleveland. The Cleveland Public Libraries thrive as centers of activities lending 5,525,663 items for home use, answering more than 1,926,720 questions and logging more than 11 million inquiries through the Electronic Library during 1996. During 1996, however, the Cleveland Public Library began to reconsider its role in serving children and families and to juxtapose that role against a struggling public school system and a declining rate of proficiency among elementary school children.

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## Making the Library Connection for Urban Families

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The population of the city of Cleveland is 502,539 (1992 data). The poverty level of the population as a whole is extreme, with Cleveland ranking forty-nine in percent of children who live in "distressed neighborhoods" in 1990 according to a study which examined the demographics of fifty major U.S. cities. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1997). The branch library staff had become very familiar with the growing number of children in libraries during non-school hours and the

decline in families using the library together. This social change in library use is particularly critical in areas of extreme poverty. Early childhood research indicates that, "Low literate, poor parents for a variety of economic, social and educational reasons, have a more difficult time in establishing these conditions (the behaviors and attitudes which nurture achievement) for their children (Nickse, Ruth, 1989)." In addition "Low-income families must not now only battle the effects of poverty, but in this information age, in an era in which financial success is increasingly tied to the ability to use computers and gain access to cyberspace, 'It is likely that new

computer technologies will widen the gap between the poor and the well-off.' (Ratan, 1995)." The Board and the Administration of the Cleveland Public Library understood that there was opportunity to begin strengthening services for the children of Cleveland, who must develop strong skills in using information to reach their potential and take advantage of America's opportunities. Involving the whole family was a critical element in creating this program for branch libraries. The Family Learning Connection project, a family literacy initiative, was envisioned with increased opportunities for parent-child interactions of reading, playing and using computers together.

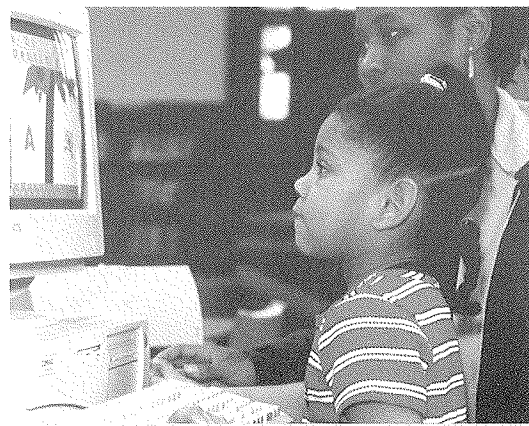
### THE FAMILY LEARNING CONNECTION PROJECT

In 1997 the Cleveland Public Library received federal Library Services and Construction Act funding through the State Library of Ohio and with a match of Library funds were able to initiate the Family Learning Connection. The project was introduced at two branches in high-poverty neighborhoods and moneys were used to purchase computers with furniture, early childhood materials including toys, furniture, and a large collections of board books as well as software and promotional materials. A Project Director was hired as permanent, full-time staff for the Community Services Department. The branches, Carnegie West and Hough, used a rich array of developmentally appropriate materials, family programs and incentives to motivate children and their families. Branch staff and volunteer tutors assisted children with homework and skill building in the areas of reading and mathematics.

The two branches received a face lift and in the early childhood areas, additional computers with software, new furnishings, and toys provided a clearly defined space to welcome families to the library. The furniture and educational toys purchased for the project changed the entire mood of each branch and the early childhood areas were successful in attracting parents and/or care givers with their children. The areas offered an opportunity for communication and interaction between parent and child with the time spent ranging from a few minutes to an hour. Overall, families visited the two branches more often and stayed for longer periods of time to share books, play with a toy or use a computer. Daycare and Headstart groups also enjoyed using the areas.

The staff at the Carnegie West and Hough branches cited the computers as the most successful aspect of the project. Computers were in use from the time each branch opened to closing. The computers were primarily used by individual children and groups of children after school and on Saturdays. The software for very young children provided a wonderful opportunity for parents and preschoolers to point, click and explore together. In many cases both parent and children were using a mouse for the very first time.

Cleveland Public Library—The Family Learning Connection (Family Literacy Project), 1998 Carnegie West Branch



## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES


The greatest challenge of the project was the need to reach parents and care givers with their children but the greatest opportunity was the establishment of partnerships with more than fifteen community agencies and the Cleveland Public Schools. Networking with like-minded groups enabled the Project Director and the branch staff to refine the project and experiment with techniques to encourage family time at the library. Collaborations were established on two levels. Neighborhood Advisory Boards were formed to have a local voice for recruitment of participants and volunteers, learning activities and programs, and promotion of the project. The advisors in each neighborhood were parents, teachers, school administrators and representatives of independent not-for profits. Other neighborhood organizations and agencies were invited to participate in the new services and promoted activities to their client families.

Forming citywide partnerships and networking with institutions in the Greater Cleveland area increased the Cleveland Public Library's role as an advocate for literacy. A collaboration with Cleveland Reads, the Cleveland-area literacy coalition and the America Reads Challenge program at Cleveland State University were an example of a powerful partnership. The students from the university's America Reads Challenge program were trained by Cleveland Reads and Cleveland Public Library to serve as reading mentors at twenty four-library branches during the Summer Reading Club. The Project Director provided expertise to other agencies and organizations developing their own early childhood and family literacy programs.

## FAMILY LEARNING CONNECTION CONTINUES

Based on evaluation of the 1997-98 project conducted by Cleveland State's Urban Child Research Center, and input from community stakeholders, the Library is putting additional effort toward serving families with young children. The evaluation confirmed that the early childhood areas, the computers and the coalition building had the greatest potential for long term impact and increased family activity at branches. The 1998-99 project, still called the Family Learning Connection and funded by the newly named Library Services and Technology Act, will become the first library in Ohio to utilize the concepts of a national project, The Family Place. Libraries for the Future in partnership with the Middle Country (NY) Public Library has developed this successful model for community outreach and programming using a family-centered approach. The Family Place combines traditional literacy support, information literacy through technology and collaborations with partner agencies. Children and their families or care givers will use a full range of library services in four high poverty neighborhoods and the Children's Literature Department at Main Library. There are few other agencies in the city of Cleveland that provide free and without restriction the early childhood literacy support that will be made avail-

able at the Library. The fundamental structure of The Family Place and its focus on parent involvement, access to compelling materials and technology, involvement of resource individuals and flexibility in program structure fits the evolving philosophy of Cleveland Public Library.

We foresee parents and caregivers working enthusiastically with their children to improve all literacy skills. The developmentally appropriate toys, the computers and education software, the Library staff support, the community resource people and the volunteer tutors will create a learning environment that is inviting, motivating, and valuable to inner city families. 

Visit the Cleveland Public Library homepage at [www.cpl.org](http://www.cpl.org)

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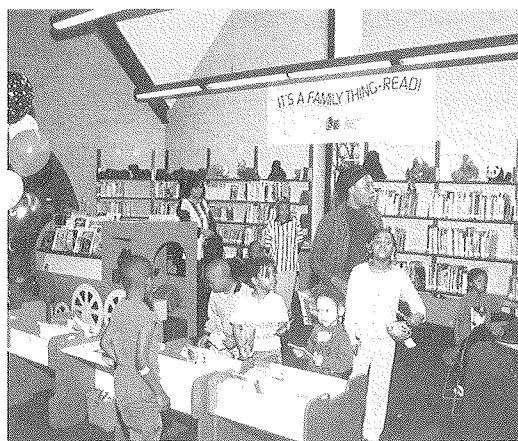
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