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How Storytimes for Preschool Children Can Incorporate Current Research

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Public libraries have been presenting fun and interactive storytimes for many years, engaging children and helping them love books and libraries. These programs typically include a combination of short and long books, music and action rhymes. Children are surrounded with stimulating speech and interesting topics, creating a language and literacy experience beneficial to children's development. These storytimes provide parents with a model for how to read enthusiastically and involve their children in books. Parents observe their children's interest and excitement and enjoy together what library staff present. These programs have excelled in developing a child's print motivation, an important emergent literacy building block.

Recent research in the field of emergent literacy has led to the development of new best practices for public libraries that want to help parents and teachers of preschool children get ready to read. Storytimes that incorporate these practices differ in subtle ways from the storytimes described above; however, building in the early literacy information does not change the basic nature of these programs. Storytimes continue to present the quality characteristics listed above, but also contain some additional information for parents and caregivers concerning the reasons and rewards for reading to children. Library staff who present age-specific storytimes, from babies to preschoolers, can add short, instructive phrases to help adults who are present understand how children are benefiting from the activities and to show them ways they can facilitate children's literacy development. In this way, the library helps to increase parents' and caregivers' skills in developing narrative skills, vocabulary, letter knowledge and phonological sensitivity, in addition to print motivation.

For example, during storytime for babies, the storyteller might say to parents, "Did you know that hearing language actually changes the structure of babies' brains? Language builds more connections

between neurons in the brain. So the more you talk with your baby, the more connections she will have in her brain." Also: "Sometimes reading looks like chewing. That's okay because he's learning to feel comfortable with books. Babies who play with books will find it easier to learn to read later on."

During a storytime for toddlers, the storyteller might add, "Toddlers are learning about nine new words a day; books are a wonderful source for this growing vocabulary!" Also: "Toddlers understand many more words than they say, so be sure to talk to them all day long about what you are doing and about what they are doing."

In storytime, library staff will also demonstrate specific techniques that facilitate emergent literacy, since how adults read to preschoolers is as important as how frequently children listen to stories. For example, librarians will occasionally model dialogic reading by asking questions in a toddler group so that the child becomes the teller of the story. Because a central basis for learning to read is understanding that words are made up of smaller sounds, librarians will play language games in preschool storytime to demonstrate for parents how to encourage phonological or phonemic awareness. Parents and caregivers will learn how to have fun with phonemes by having children complete the rhymes in songs, such as "Down by the Bay". To encourage narrative skills and to help children learn sequence, the storyteller will occasionally recap a story: "First it started to rain, then the puppy played in the mud puddle, then she got all dirty, and had to get a bath!"

An important thing to remember is that storytime will still be fun if these techniques are used judiciously: some in every program but not every technique with every book. Researchers say that children learn more from books when they are actively involved. All children will benefit

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from the additional effort to incorporate early literacy information into age-specific storytimes, but the changes will not be "directive" or "instructional"—just more fun! 

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Libraries and parents are working together to give children a love of libraries and reading.

