

Critical Stance

Diversity / Inclusion lens was used to explore how community resources can support or not support families whose children have non-normative development. Evidence was sought of intentional and authentic representations of family diversity that might include: ethnicity, culture, language, disability status among other features. This approach was also a good opportunity to test whether public library websites are as representative of community diversity as their mission statements. Concerns persist about the universal accessibility of libraries, despite our best efforts to date, many are still “excluded” – outreach/community development work comprises a strong focus of contemporary public library work. Academic research about early literacy and public libraries is scant but what does exist does not inform enough about the needs of diverse families – mainly mainstream participants in studies that do exist to date.

Some Quantitative Data

- 100% offered storytimes – at least 1 for 1 age group
- Most offered 2 or more for different age groups
- 25% offered Parent-Child Mother Goose or very similarly described programs for babies and their caregivers
- 20% offered programs especially for Dads and other male caregivers
- 50% offered programs in at least one other language in addition to English: these were mostly French with a few Mandarin, Punjabi, Spanish and Farsi storytime programs were found
- 7% offered Aboriginal storytimes
- 7% had ESL specific storytime programs (advertised as such in English)
- 50% had programs specifically for preschoolers to attend “on their own” while caregivers remain elsewhere in the library
- 90% offered a “family storytime” for all ages of children and their caregivers, often “drop-in”
- Reading readiness, kindergarten prep and school readiness statements were common in both storytime descriptions and other early literacy resource information
- Every Child Ready to Read inspired - material was found on 80% of the sample sites.
- 0% advertised any ECRR workshops for parents during the data collection time
- 0% had storytime program information (like times/places and descriptions) in any language other than English, or French (in a few cases) –even the few programs offered in languages like Mandarin and Farsi were promoted via English language descriptions on the web.

Storytimes

The top ten most frequently used words in storytime descriptions: books, love, fun, stories, learning, rhymes, reading, interactive, fingerplays and songs.

Great examples of inclusive program descriptions:

- *Great for ESL! Library storytimes are an excellent introduction to English, and knowledge of English is not required to attend storytimes*
- *A little bit of this and a little bit of that: stories, singing, dancing, puppets and lots of fun and laughter for kids of all ages and stages!*

Images

50% of the sites portrayed “diversity” in its pictures/images. A wider range of diversity (cultural and developmental) would better represent the diversity found in Canada’s communities, thereby reflecting the library’s goal of social inclusion.

Early Literacy Information Summary

Everychildreadytoread@yourlibrary ECRR/ reading readiness/ kindergarten skills are all “borrowed” concepts from the education paradigm and not as well suited to the library’s overall inclusion goals as we might wish them to be. They tend to idealize certain Western notions of “good” early literacy behaviours and support that parents should be giving their children. These idealized, Western notions of early literacy are problematic for librarians because our roles are significantly different than teachers and they may run counter to our own stated aims of being relevant to a diverse range of communities. Expanded views of early literacy need to be apparent in order for our early literacy aims to be truly inclusive and supportive of diverse families. Literacy (and indeed all early learning) is supported by diverse families in diverse ways: reading picture books to children is a commonplace Western way of doing so, but others exist and are legitimate. We have a role in helping families familiarize themselves with the kind of literacy their children will encounter once at school, but at the same time, their own cultural practices around literacy should be recognized, acknowledged and most importantly for this conversation, reflected on the libraries web pages. Additionally, parents whose children have speech disabilities may find many of the traditional ECRR activities irrelevant as they leverage speech / talking as ways into early literacy. Literacy can be built in many ways for children who are nonverbal, and these practices also need to be reflected in our web resources about early literacy.

Recommendations for Canadian public libraries

- 1) Create and maintain separate parent pages (eliminate parent/teacher corners – different roles!) – and make sure they are ALL translated into the languages most frequently spoken in your communities
- 2) Incorporate expanded (non-Western) views and notions of early childhood learning into both images and content offered on websites – emphasize library’s role in supporting families as they transmit and support early literacy for their children in ways that are culturally relevant to them.
- 3) If you use EveryChildReadytoRead, adopt the 2nd edition’s revisions (Play, Sing, Talk, Read and Write) and be consistent – a mix of both editions is overkill and confusing.
- 4) Use photographs that represent the ACTUAL diversity found in your communities (including children with developmental diversity) – this might take partnerships and work, but should not be expensive and will be worth it.
- 5) Relax some storytime rules regarding ages and try to advertise programs as appropriate for a range of developmental stages in one place – and don’t forget to add that ESL families are welcome at all programs whether they or their children speak English or not – TRANSLATE storytime program offerings into the languages most frequently spoken in your communities.