

# PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A Vital Space for Family Engagement



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## About Harvard Family Research Project

Harvard Family Research Project has over 30 years of experience with promoting children's learning and development through family and community engagement. We serve a diverse national audience that includes policymakers, researchers, educators and practitioners. Network building, documentation, policy analysis, evaluation, and professional development are core elements of our family engagement work. Visit [www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org) for more information.

## About the Public Library Association

The Public Library Association (PLA) is the largest association dedicated to supporting the unique and evolving needs of public library professionals. Founded in 1944, PLA serves nearly 9,000 members in public libraries large and small in communities across the United States and Canada, with a growing presence around the world. PLA strives to help its members shape the essential institution of public libraries by serving as an indispensable ally for public library leaders. Visit [www.pla.org](http://www.pla.org) for more information.

## Acknowledgements

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## To Our Colleagues: A Note from Harvard Family Research Project

Children and youth learn in countless ways, anywhere, anytime. And one of the most powerful levers of children's learning—from the early childhood years through adolescence—is families. Children exhibit healthy development and academic success when families foster warm and nurturing parent-child relationships, take responsibility for children's learning, support children's interests and curiosity, and encourage children to focus on effort and learn from failure. Libraries are important learning spaces and poised to engage families more meaningfully across children's development. The rich digital and hands-on resources libraries offer—especially when guided by librarians—can prompt families to steer children's learning, pose questions, make connections, exchange information, and instill in children not only a love of learning but also the skills for learning that last a lifetime. Even more, libraries embrace the entire family—from infants and toddlers to teens to grandparents—making it a space that is not limited to just one age group, but rather a place that spans generations.

With this in mind, we partnered with the Public Library Association (PLA) to better understand family engagement in public libraries. To do this work we surveyed library directors around the country about their family engagement practices, met monthly with a learning community of nearly 20 librarians interested in family engagement, interviewed librarians from cities and towns big and small, and reviewed the literature to closely study family engagement practices in public libraries.

Simply put: What we've learned is extraordinary. We heard from a librarian in Alaska who reaches out to families—so geographically dispersed that you need a plane to get to them—by setting up satellite book shelves in fire stations. We talked with a librarian in California who brings the ideas of predominantly Spanish-speaking parents from low-income households to all of its services. We learned that a librarian in Ohio goes on home visits to help reinforce literacy concepts among families who seldom come to libraries. We spoke with a librarian in rural Maine who offers, with the help of a community volunteer, a weekly opportunity for families to play games together and meet their neighbors. We even heard from a library system in Pennsylvania that has reenvisioned the supportive role that libraries can play for families by running the city's afterschool programming.

Through our work we've learned that libraries are in a prime position to create and reinforce a pathway of family engagement that promotes children's learning across time and across community and virtual spaces. It is our pleasure to bring to you this “call to action” as the first in a series of resources to support and further the efforts of libraries in promoting family engagement. In the coming months, as a follow-up to this document, we will bring you a set of resources with a compendium of ideas and practices that you can adopt and adapt in your library.

Heather B. Weiss, Director  
Harvard Family Research Project

## To Our Colleagues:

### A Note from the Public Library Association

The family engagement partnership between the Public Library Association (PLA) and Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) helps public libraries take a natural next step in their already strong support of children's learning and development. Early literacy efforts PLA has led—like [Every Child Ready to Read@ your library](#)<sup>®</sup> (ECRR)—support parents and children and create a springboard for new ideas and practices libraries can use to engage families even more successfully. These initiatives combine new knowledge and skills with the programs, services, collections, and community goodwill libraries have long provided. HFRP's deep experience and expertise, as well as the staff's understanding of and commitment to public libraries, bring new perspectives and rich resources to libraries at a critical time, as they position themselves to be even stronger community partners in education.

In implementing ECRR and researching its impact on public library service and on parents, PLA is supporting the library's emerging role as a community partner in family engagement. The potential highlighted by this work, and the recognition that family engagement goes well beyond just support for early literacy and our youngest children and encompasses the wide range of services offered by libraries for families and children of all ages, led the PLA Board of Directors to establish its Family Engagement Task Force in the spring of 2015. The task force is cochaired by Clara Bohrer, chair of the PLA advisory committee for the early literacy research grant, and Kathleen Reif, past chair of the ECRR oversight committee.

Successful examples of library family engagement projects are plentiful. In Maryland, the state's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) recognized that public libraries are in a unique position to interact in meaningful ways with all members of a family. The state was awarded a U.S. Department of Education Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant, and one of the grant's family engagement projects utilized public libraries across the state to achieve its goals. Librarians received support to work with local partners to reach families most at risk, presenting ECRR workshops and conducting Library Cafés, which included facilitated training, to engage families who were not using libraries. As a result, librarians in all 24 Maryland library systems reached new families with ECRR workshops and Library Cafés, and they expanded their partnerships with local community organizations.

Examples like these illustrated for HFRP the ways libraries can impact family engagement. M. Elena Lopez, associate director at HFRP, learned about the Maryland initiative and worked with her team to include it in the [FINE \(Family Involvement Network of Educators\) Newsletter, Expanding Opportunity: The Potential of Anywhere, Anytime Learning](#). The HFRP team recognized the potential of public libraries to engage the community and families. In the [report](#) they wrote,

The research is clear: libraries have the resources and expertise to assist in preparing early learners for school.

HFRP was eager to learn more about public libraries and how we could collaborate to support effective family engagement activities for our communities. An important next step in our partnership was HFRP securing initial funding from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

The project, [Libraries for the 21st Century: It's a Family Thing](#), included an assessment of the public library field, creation of a Learning Community to share program ideas, and presentation of a highly attended program at the PLA 2016 Conference. Through the project, HFRP and PLA also produced this “call to action” document, and are developing a set of resources with a wealth of information and examples of family engagement services provided by public libraries.

The PLA Family Engagement Task Force truly believes that Libraries for the 21st Century: It's a Family Thing will result in new and improved public library practices that will serve all families more effectively. PLA and members of the task force look forward to supporting this work with HFRP, and we thank HFRP for partnering with public libraries.

### **PLA Task Force on Family Engagement**

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Public libraries are going through significant changes and interacting with patrons in new and different ways. The Institute of Museum and Library Services, for example, has called for libraries to play a stronger role in early learning for young children.<sup>1</sup> The Aspen Institute sees libraries as centers of community support for citizens in today's digital age.<sup>2</sup> And national surveys underscore that as libraries stand at these crossroads, the public wants and needs new services for themselves and their community.<sup>3</sup>

Libraries are also changing the way they engage with entire families, including those that are increasingly diverse—linguistically and culturally. Librarians are intentionally providing services to support and enhance family well-being and to guide children's learning in ways that extend well beyond early literacy. From makerspaces to water-wise gardening, STEM activities to writing clubs, libraries are responding to parents' desire to spend quality time with their children in constructive and mindful ways.

After all, family engagement is no longer just about how families are involved in schools—it is much broader. Children and youth learn anywhere, anytime—not just in school. They thrive when they explore and discover things they are curious about, whether it's in school, at home, in libraries and museums, during afterschool programs, and in parks and recreation activities. When families connect with children in these various learning spaces, they are building a pathway for lifelong learning.

Engaging families in anywhere, anytime learning is critical for children's academic and social development, but it is also a matter of equity. Families with high incomes spend nearly seven times more money on out-of-school enrichment activities—such as music lessons, summer camps, and travel—than families from low-income homes.<sup>4</sup> The opportunities for success for low-income children are diminished. Libraries are free, trusted, safe, and welcoming places in virtually every community that can help counterbalance these inequalities. Libraries have books, digital resources, and expertise that are now available or accessible to every family in every home. And they are spaces where children and adults can learn together to use these resources and strengthen their relationships.

## What Is Family Engagement?

Family engagement is a shared responsibility among families, educators, and communities to support children's learning and development. Family engagement begins at birth and continues through young adulthood. It happens everywhere children learn—especially at the library.

## Family Engagement Is a Shared Responsibility

Family engagement is about developing the knowledge, attitudes, values, and behaviors that enable children to be motivated, enthusiastic, and successful learners. In libraries, this means having respectful partnerships with families and providing information, guidance, and opportunities for families to be active in their children's learning and development. Families support their children's learning when they believe that they are responsible for their children's education and feel confident that what they say and do makes a difference.<sup>5</sup> Trusted community educators, including librarians, can encourage and inspire families to be engaged in their children's learning at any point in a child's lifetime.<sup>6</sup> They can provide this inspiration and reaffirm family members' important roles in their children's learning by:<sup>7</sup>

- Creating welcoming spaces for families and children;
- Inviting families to participate in learning activities in the library;
- Giving families opportunities to be involved in young children's learning activities; and
- Modeling specific actions that family members can take to support learning.

## Family Engagement Is Important from Birth through Young Adulthood

Family engagement in learning helps children get ready for school, succeed in school, graduate, and go on to college and careers.<sup>8</sup> However, specific family practices change as children grow and become more independent.

- Young children benefit when parents provide direct support, such as coreading books and using digital media together.
- In the elementary grades, parents provide the motivation and structure for homework, afterschool programs, and extracurricular activities.
- In middle and high school, family members encourage teens to make thoughtful decisions about the use of media and take responsibility for their actions. They set high educational expectations and link in-school and out-of-school learning to careers and future success.<sup>9</sup>

Family engagement can also address achievement gaps. In the early years, family engagement is associated with children's positive growth





and development, and often sets children and families on a pathway of lifelong learning.<sup>10</sup> When family involvement levels are high during the elementary grades, the achievement gap in average literacy performance between children of more- and less-educated mothers disappears.<sup>11</sup>

### Family Engagement Happens Anywhere, Anytime Children Learn



Each year, children spend about 1,000 of their 6,000 waking hours in school.<sup>12</sup> That means most of family members' engagement in children's learning is happening during those other 5,000 hours. Whether during a conversation over dinner or while swinging on the playground, learning is more likely to happen within the context of supportive family relationships. Parents can also help influence what children want to learn and improve children's reading comprehension by reading together,

talking about school-related matters, and visiting the public library.<sup>13</sup> When parents help children choose library books and navigate Internet-based learning resources, children spend more time reading and acquire more knowledge than those who are left to figure out library resources on their own.<sup>14</sup>

### Why Do Families Matter?

**N**urturing and supportive families are important for children's healthy development and positive feelings toward learning—but not only during the early years. Even into early adulthood, guidance and encouragement from family members help shape young people's attitudes toward school, relationships, and life.

### Families Matter for Brain Development

Over the past decade, brain science has drawn attention to the importance of parenting and family engagement. Starting at birth, parent-child interactions influence the development of a child's brain. The way a parent responds to a child's gestures, smiles, and cries affects the

neural connections forming in the child's brain that support communication and social skills.<sup>15</sup> Infants' brains grow when caregivers make eye contact and repeat babies' words and smiles. Young children who grow up in a rich, home-reading environment develop strong brain connections that promote long-term memory, oral language development, and executive functioning skills,<sup>16</sup> such as the ability to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, exercise self-control, and delay gratification.

Family engagement is important from the early childhood years through young adulthood. While 95 percent of brain development takes place before age five or six, a second wave of development takes place during adolescence, beginning around puberty and continuing through approximately age twenty-four. Over this long period,<sup>17</sup> strong, supportive relationships with adults—including family members, teachers, coaches, and afterschool instructors—can help youth learn how to make informed decisions, develop relationships with peers, and avoid impulsive and risky behaviors.<sup>18</sup>

## Families Matter for Children's Language, Literacy, and Reading Abilities

Of all the ways in which families matter for children's learning, perhaps most important is how they support children's language, literacy, and reading abilities. Learning to read is a complex process that begins in the earliest years of a child's life and involves the ability to weave together knowledge of sound systems, comprehension of words, and environmental print cues. Reading also involves the more advanced skills of using text to learn new ideas, integrate information, and form critical opinions.<sup>19</sup> But children do not develop literacy skills on their own; they need support from and experiences with others—particularly the people in their families. Through reading at home, everyday conversations, telling stories, sharing books, singing, and playing, families help children's language and literacy skills grow.<sup>20</sup> Family engagement is also important for young dual-language learners as they attempt to maintain their native language while also learning English. Children who live in bilingual homes show more advanced executive-control skills than their monolingual peers and are better able to take perspectives that are different from their own.<sup>21</sup> Social interactions, from the earliest stages of infancy and language learning, help these bilingual skills develop.<sup>22</sup>

## Families Matter for Mathematical Skills

The home environment also impacts children's mathematical development. Numerical learning activities in the home, school outreach to families, and supportive parenting activities—including positive and high-quality parent-child interactions—are all related to mathematics achievement in young children.<sup>23</sup> When parents and children interact together with digital media tools and apps focusing on math, children grow in mathematical reasoning. These activities are especially helpful for parents who have their own anxieties over math.<sup>24</sup>

## Families Matter for Children's Social and Emotional Learning

When families offer children and youth opportunities to explore and cultivate their interests—both in and out of school—children develop feelings of competence and a desire to learn. Family members motivate children when they make them feel accepted and supported while learning, stress effort over performance, and encourage responsibility by offering choices.<sup>25</sup> Among young children, this might be allowing them to choose the type of toy or book to enjoy with parents. Children take cues from their parents. When parents show an interest in children's development, praise them for their efforts, and offer constructive feedback, they are helping their children develop a growth mindset. This means that children will learn that effort is important and that knowledge and skills can be developed through struggles, mistakes, and perseverance.<sup>26</sup> Perseverance and self-control—which families can foster through words and actions—predict how well students do in school. These qualities also help children avoid risky behaviors, and over the long term lead to higher educational attainment and the capacity to stay with a job.<sup>27</sup>

## Families Matter for Literacy in a Digital World

Families play an active role in guiding and monitoring children's use of digital media. On average, parents of two- to ten-year-olds spend about an hour a day using media with their children, including watching television, using mobile devices and computers, and playing video games.<sup>28</sup> These parents view their participation as protecting children from inappropriate content as well as spending time together. When parents use digital media alongside their children, the educational value of the experience is enhanced. Young children are more likely than older ones to coview digital media with their parents.<sup>29</sup> Among older youth, families often play multiple roles in the development of technological fluency, including teacher, collaborator, teaching broker, resource provider, nontechnical consultant, employer, and colearner.<sup>30</sup>

Children and youth use digital media to acquire information, produce new content, make social connections, and work collaboratively with others to solve problems and develop new knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Functioning effectively in this “participatory culture” requires not only technical proficiency but also a new set of literacy skills. These include problem solving, synthesizing, evaluating, and disseminating information; experimentation and creativity; teamwork; and collaboration. Family members also look to schools, libraries, and their own social networks for guidance in this area, especially digital safety. Libraries offer support by guiding youth in making meaningful choices with their use of media.



## Why Do Libraries Matter for Family Engagement?

**L**ibraries are an important space to engage families for three main reasons—there is public will behind it, they are ready to do this work, and they have the resources to do it effectively.

### Families and Communities Want to Be Engaged in Their Children's Learning through Library Settings

Surveys show that family members believe libraries are in a unique position to support families in their children's learning and development. For example, parents with young children are more likely than other adults to use library services, and having a child or grandchild increases an adult's use of library services.<sup>32</sup> The rich digital and hands-on resources offered in libraries—especially when guided by librarians—can prompt parents and caregivers to steer children's learning, ask questions, make connections, and exchange information with each other. These experiences instill a love of learning in children as well as skills for lifelong learning. Libraries also have the resources and programs to embrace entire families—from infants and toddlers to teens and grandparents—making them spaces that span generations.

Public libraries are particularly important for families in low-income neighborhoods, providing them equal access to the resources and skills they need to live productively in today's knowledge-based economy. Families living in poverty are more likely to visit a library than any other community venue, such as a bookstore, theater, or museum.<sup>33</sup> Compared to families from upper-income homes, parents earning less than \$50,000 per year say the library helps them find information for their children, allows free access to the Internet, and provides quiet study spaces, broader selections of e-books, and more interactive learning.<sup>34</sup> Lower-income families and communities of color are also more likely than other groups to turn to libraries for training, job searches, and services for immigrants or first-generation Americans.<sup>35</sup>

### Libraries Are Poised and Ready to Be the Heart of Family Engagement in a Community

Library services have evolved, moving beyond traditional “story time” to providing children and other family members with opportunities to play together, make and tinker with objects, and explore digital media. Librarians are also on hand to provide families the knowledge and resources they need to support young children's literacy and school readiness skills. The Every Child Ready to Read @ your library (ECRR) program, sponsored by the Public Library Association (PLA), is one example of a program that has helped librarians include all family members in supporting children's literacy.<sup>36</sup>



Libraries are also poised to provide leadership beyond the area of literacy. They help families connect with each other and find other community resources and organizations. Many libraries are already doing this, but much more work can be done to make sure that all libraries are willing and prepared to engage with parents, and have the vision, ideas, and capacity to do so systemically.

## Libraries Have the Assets and Infrastructure to Support Family Engagement

Perhaps most importantly, libraries have three key assets to build a foundation for family engagement that promotes children's lifelong learning. The Aspen Institute has identified these three overlapping, yet distinct assets as people, place, and platform.<sup>37</sup>

**“Libraries as people”** means libraries are no longer just about building collections. Instead, libraries are about building people. Librarians serve in the role of coaches, mentors, facilitators, and teachers. From this perspective, family engagement means librarians are creating trusting relationships with families to make them feel comfortable coming to libraries with questions and ideas. They are listening to families and codesigning with them programs and services for children, and sharing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that promote children's development.<sup>38</sup> They support children, youth, and families from birth through high school, and work with those facing extra challenges, such as special learning needs or learning English.

Librarians are also adopting the role of media mentors, meaning that they are guiding families in how to use technology and digital media to support children's learning. Research shows that it is not enough for families to have access to digital media tools; they also need the knowledge and skills to be able to use these tools well. In a nationally representative study of 1,557 parents with children age two to ten, more than half of parents said that they needed more guidance locating quality educational media to support their children's learning.<sup>39</sup> Low-income, Latino, and less-educated families were even more likely than others to express this need. Librarians, with their expertise and access to technology, are particularly well-positioned to take on this role.<sup>40</sup>

### Family Engagement in Libraries

#### People

Libraries develop the capacity of all families to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to support children's learning.

#### Place

Libraries bring families together in a welcoming and supportive space to create social bonds and networks that benefit children and families.

#### Platform

Libraries offer opportunities for families, schools and communities to come together to innovate and build creative and unique pathways to empower families and support children's learning.

**“Libraries as place”** refers to the library as a mainstay institution in a community. Today’s library is both a physical and virtual space, but it continues to be the *physical* presence of the library that helps strengthen social bonds, community identity, and helps people get to know one another. Libraries have collections of books, digital media resources, as well as desks and meeting spaces, where families can come together. Libraries are welcoming, responsive, and active community spaces that connect neighbors and people to one another and provide a safe and trusted location for all families, children, and youth.

Library spaces are also incorporating health, wellness, and exercise programs into their services. For example, the Urban Libraries Council has recognized a free summer lunch program for children who might otherwise go without a healthy meal as one of the top library innovations.<sup>41</sup> Today’s libraries also extend beyond their physical walls. Bookmobiles and satellite branches in unlikely places, like shopping malls, housing projects, or health centers, help bring the library to families.

**“Libraries as platform”** advances the idea that with its variety of tools and resources, the public library also provides a “platform” for individuals and families to discover, innovate, and create new knowledge. The library supports the learning and civic needs of the community and becomes a jumping-off point for innovation and evolving ideas. Families interact and explore new ways of making and doing things, and libraries are collaborating with schools and community organizations to offer new and innovative programs that fill gaps in community services and link families to the resources they need. Libraries enhance family well-being by providing written and digital resources, as well as adult education classes, such as GED, English as a Second Language (ESL), and computer literacy courses. These programs contribute to lifelong learning and lead to reductions in stress, real savings in time and money, and the acquisition of important job skills. ESL and adult literacy classes also help immigrant parents better communicate with their children’s teachers so they can be more involved in learning.

Libraries are also a platform for creating new ways to engage and support diverse families. The U.S. is more culturally and ethnically diverse than ever. The English language learner population is expected to grow rapidly, and the number of school-age children from immigrant families is expected to increase to 17.9 million by 2020, up from 12.3 million in 2005.<sup>42</sup> As platforms for innovation, libraries work with families and community leaders to become the



hub of resources on the histories and cultures of different nationalities. Libraries help different cultural communities connect with their past so that they can better shape their future.

## 5Rs: Ways Libraries Encourage Family Engagement

**M**any libraries throughout the country are leveraging their assets to design new ways of engaging families. Extensive conversations with librarians and library directors have revealed five promising ways that libraries engage families in children's learning and development. Examples from across the country are also provided.

- **Reach Out:** Libraries reach out to families to promote the programs, collections, and services that are vital in a knowledge economy.
- **Raise Up:** Libraries elevate family views and voices in how library programs and services are developed and carried out.
- **Reinforce:** Libraries provide guidance on and modeling of the specific actions that family members can take to support learning, reaffirming families' important roles and strengthening feelings of efficacy.
- **Relate:** Libraries offer opportunities for families to build peer-to-peer relationships, social networks, and parent-child relationships.
- **Reimagine:** Libraries are expanding their community partnerships; combining resources and extending their range; improving children and families' well-being; and linking new learning opportunities.

A coherent family engagement system begins to develop when libraries engage with families in each of these ways and in all aspects of how a library operates—program leadership, space, daily operations, and programming.

### Reach Out: Libraries Reach Out and Serve All Community Members, Wherever They Are

Libraries are continually striving to link with families in their communities, especially those that are less likely to use library resources. Libraries with effective outreach efforts identify the characteristics of families that might not be using the library consistently, whether it's because they are unaware of the tools, resources, and expertise a library has to offer or simply because they choose not to come. Libraries then use various strategies, such as partnerships with schools, health clinics, or special needs agencies, to invite families to visit

and participate in library programs. These strategies include placing posters in community spaces, attending community events, offering transportation to events, and asking highly involved parents to reach out to others they know.

**Waukegan Public Library** in Illinois has community ambassador volunteers who are active and embedded in the community. The ambassadors meet families and work with them to assess their needs. Fifty-seven percent of the community is Latino, and literacy rates are low; ambassadors who are trusted members of the community help connect with families by alerting them to all available services that can be found at the library, such as bilingual story times and conversational ESL programs.

Reaching out is critical because there are troubling disparities—based on race and class—in families’ access to the resources and opportunities that promote learning. The quality of schools in disadvantaged communities has received considerable attention, but now it’s clear that there is unequal access to rich learning opportunities for children outside the classroom as well. The statistics are sobering. By the time they reach sixth grade, middle-class children have likely spent 6,000 more hours learning—through home literacy, preschool experiences, field trips, summer learning, and afterschool and extracurricular programs—than children born into poverty.<sup>43</sup>

Because of a lack of resources and the stresses related to poverty, parents from low-income households are less likely than those from upper-income homes to provide young children with access to books, other literacy materials, and the language-rich conversations that help children prepare for school.<sup>44</sup> These differences impact children’s language and cognitive development from even the earliest ages. When children enter kindergarten, the average cognitive score of those from the highest-income homes are 60 percent higher than the scores of those from the lowest-income homes.<sup>45</sup> There is also evidence that these differences exist as early as eighteen months of age.<sup>46</sup> Disparities exist in library usage as well. Families from low-income homes are less likely to use the library than families from upper-income homes.<sup>47</sup> Studies also show that the lowest rates of utilization of children’s services at public libraries are concentrated in areas of the U.S. with the highest need.<sup>48</sup> In this context, libraries need to be actively and intentionally reaching out to disadvantaged families, empowering them to lead their children to successful educational pathways.



## Raise Up: Libraries Uncover, Strengthen, and Raise Up Families' Voices

Libraries incorporate family voices into how library programs and services are developed and delivered. Families have important feedback and input for libraries. By soliciting, listening, and responding to family members' views, libraries empower families to improve their libraries and their communities.

Two promising approaches to raising family voices have emerged. The “funds of knowledge” approach is the notion that all families have resources, strengths, experiences, and knowledge to impart to their children, often rooted in everyday routines that communities and cultures value.<sup>49</sup> Libraries that adopt this perspective reject the idea that parents need to improve, and instead focus on what families are already doing and provide them with support.<sup>50</sup>

Human-centered design or design thinking<sup>51</sup> is another approach that enables families and caregivers of young children to share their insights and cocreate library services. Design thinking allows libraries to get to know families and their children deeply, through observation and informal and formal data collection. At the heart of design thinking is empathy—understanding and appreciating families' experiences, hopes, desires, fears, and frustrations. Librarians might ask: “What do parents and family members see, hear, and feel when they enter the library? How do librarians regard parents and caregivers? How do I know?” Asking these questions increases the chances that libraries will pull in families that traditionally have not participated in library programs.

Raising up parent voices gives families opportunities to lead and connect to other families while also giving librarians the important information they need to build collections and design spaces that families want.

Librarians from **Watertown Free Public Library** in Massachusetts keep families coming back by involving them in creating the programming. By offering programs and services that families say they want, libraries demonstrate that they are listening and responding to feedback. This fosters a positive library-family relationship as well as a sense of ownership among families.

## Reinforce: Libraries Boost and Enhance Families' Roles in Teaching and Learning

Libraries model and provide guidance on the specific actions that support learning, and in doing so, reaffirm family members' important roles and strengthen their feelings of efficacy. A broad research base supports the idea that families and home environments matter a great deal in the development of children.

Libraries are implementing a variety of programs and services to reinforce parents' role as their child's first and most enduring teachers. These programs span all stages of development—from early literacy efforts like Every Child Ready to Read @ your library, to college and career and readiness programs for youth in high school. Libraries have a role to play in giving *all* families not just access to resources but also the knowledge, skills, and confidence to use these resources effectively to support children's learning.<sup>52</sup> This is particularly true when it comes to librarians mentoring families around digital media.

Libraries, however, face a core challenge—how can they ensure that families come to programs, workshops, or events consistently enough to reap the benefits of library services? The nature of the library is such that many families just drop in when they have time or visit at different times or on different days of the week, depending on their schedules. This creates unique challenges for libraries when they develop programs in a series. Even the most exciting and well-designed programs can struggle with recruiting sufficient numbers of families and ensuring that they keep coming back.<sup>53</sup> Some libraries have created programs with mandatory attendance provisions, and others offer programs with extended and longer hours and multiple times a day over the course of a week so that parents have several opportunities to participate.

The **Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh** works in partnership with the Ready Freddy program, bringing together educators from the Pittsburgh Public Schools, parents, and community partners to focus on kindergarten enrollment, transition, and school readiness. Through this partnership, the libraries host a weekly storytime program that begins in late winter and focuses on the transition to kindergarten. With the support of the librarians, families read books, sing songs, and engage in various other activities to ease children into the routine, daily activities, and expectations of kindergarten.

## Relate: Libraries Connect Families to One Another and to Other Resources in the Community

Libraries offer welcoming and safe spaces for social interaction for all children and families. Libraries have influence over the type of social networks people make and maintain with each other.<sup>54</sup> While families might spontaneously meet and connect or reconnect at the library, libraries can also intentionally introduce families to each other through their programs and services.<sup>55</sup> These linkages can offer families informational support (e.g., “Where is the nearest food pantry?”), emotional support (e.g., “Tough day today?”), and logistical support (e.g., “Can you help me? My car broke down”).

When family members are less isolated and are part of a community, they are less likely to experience depression and have trouble providing for their basic needs—both of which are risk factors for child maltreatment and child behavior difficulties, especially among families living in poverty.<sup>56</sup> And simple library practices, such as asking parents to introduce themselves at the beginning of a story time or activity, can influence how families connect with each other. Many libraries sponsor regular adult events that foster these social connections, such as book readings, arts and crafts projects, parent cafés, early literacy workshops, and author visits.



**Public libraries in Maryland** hold Library Cafés, bringing together families of young children. After a group meal, the kids play and enjoy literacy activities separately while the adults get a chance to socialize with each other and share useful information in a relaxed and supportive environment. Librarians talk with parents, focusing on parent strengths and assets. They direct families to local resources while also asking families what libraries can do to better serve their needs. Families—including those with educational, financial, and emotional needs—report satisfaction and gratitude for the programs offered and the relationships made at the library.<sup>57</sup>

## Reimagine: Libraries Expand Community Partnerships in Support of Families

Today, libraries are linking to a more varied group of community partners than ever before, such as schools, early childhood education organizations, social service agencies, health care providers, and local businesses.

These partnerships expand the web of support for children and families and create a network that endures over time as children grow and families frequent various settings.<sup>57</sup> Partnerships allow organizations to combine resources, such as funding and personnel, but also to pool expertise. Libraries are sought-after partners because they are regarded as valuable hubs in the community, with the infrastructure to reach many families and the capacity to improve community well-being.<sup>58</sup> As demographics change and more people live in dense, urban areas, libraries will be adapting their programming even with increased restraints on budgets.<sup>59</sup> Engaging in partnerships allows libraries to do more than they could alone, such as conducting home visits with an emphasis on literacy, or implementing school-readiness initiatives with families experiencing homelessness.

High obesity rates among youth and adults are a significant health concern in Houston. To address this community need, more than fifty agencies have partnered with the **Houston Public Library's** Healthy L.I.F.E. (Literacy Initiative For Everyone) program, which empowers families—particularly youth and families from low-income backgrounds—to lead healthy lives. The program uses a family-learning approach, where family members learn together by attending events, such as a community resource fair. The program offers access to resources, such as books, fresh fruits and vegetables, immunizations, and health screenings. Families can also sign up for a library card or enroll in the Your Texas Benefits program. Healthy L.I.F.E. has served more than 3,100 family members, many of whom would not have had access to such programs otherwise.<sup>61</sup>



## A Call to Action

**T**he PLA and Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) are collaborating to make family engagement an integral part of library services and functioning.

Conversations with librarians and directors across the country, the results of a national survey, and a review of the current research reveal that libraries are taking action. They are leveraging their assets to establish a foundation for family engagement that begins in the early childhood years and has the potential to continue throughout the school years. They are taking action in five areas—reaching out, raising up, reinforcing, relating, and reimagining—to engage all families in children’s learning.

Libraries are in a great position to create and reinforce a pathway of family engagement that promotes children’s learning across time and across community and virtual spaces. Libraries are “effective at supporting informal learning, connecting diverse learning experiences, filling gaps between learning opportunities, and offering new learning models that may not be feasible in schools.”<sup>60</sup> The services libraries provide are especially important for the youngest learners and those from impoverished and disadvantaged circumstances.

PLA and HFRP are committed to this work, and understand that librarians and library directors need access to promising ideas and practices for how to make this work a reality—such as those described in the examples above. For this reason, PLA and HFRP will soon release a set of resources that will provide libraries with more concrete ideas and guiding principles for building family engagement systems. The resources will highlight promising practices from libraries across the country that are doing this work well.

**There is no better time than the present** for libraries to pull together with schools, community organizations, and service providers to establish a system of family engagement that extends throughout a child’s life, supports children and families, and optimally prepares children for success in school and life.

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