



Family Literacy Playrooms: Preparing Children for School and Parents for Ongoing Involvement in their Child's Educational Development

In 1994, Shaker Family Center and the Shaker Heights Public Library began working together to address an “achievement gap” seen in children entering kindergarten in the Shaker Heights City Schools. They opened the first Family Literacy Playroom within the Library in 1998, offering opportunities for parents and children to come and play together in an environment specifically designed to encourage the development of key literacy skills. The program was free and open to all families with children 0-5, but marketed specifically to those families with children not enrolled in a formal preschool program.

The Family Literacy Playroom has been so successful that the program has expanded each year since its inception, in part thanks to support provided by grants from the Cuyahoga County Help Me Grow Program. The Family Literacy Playroom at the Shaker Heights Library now features a second, adjoining room for children up to 18 months with their caregivers, a dedicated weekly session for Home Daycare Providers and the children in their care, and a total of six program sessions weekly. Furthermore, the program has now been replicated by the two other members of the Greater Cleveland Family Support Consortium, Heights Parent Center and the City of Lakewood Family Room, offering an additional six program sessions weekly in two additional communities.

Program Specifics:

- Environment resembles a preschool classroom with learning centers, but is arranged to facilitate parent-child interactive play.
- Everything is designed to be fun, and everything has a purpose. Emergent literacy concepts are reinforced throughout the room.
- Written “Play Pointers” are posted at each center, explaining the benefits of certain types of play, providing questions to ask and actions to encourage problem-solving, and suggesting ways to follow-up at home.
- Staff models the kind of conversations and behaviors that foster children’s literacy development.
- The program environment and play experiences offered are designed to: 1) develop the social-emotional and cognitive skills of children, 2) increase parents’ knowledge of child development and literacy acquisition, and 3) foster change in parent-child interaction to support literacy development.

Recognizing the importance of documenting outcomes, the Greater Cleveland Family Support Consortium has dedicated significant resources to developing and implementing an evaluation of the Family Literacy Playrooms. Through a grant from the Althans Foundation, David Beimers, then a Doctoral candidate at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, was hired to develop a logic model and an evaluation tool. In 2006, the survey was administered over two separate two-week periods at each of the three Centers comprising the Family Support Consortium. Only parents/caregivers who had participated in programming at least three times were asked to complete the survey, and the majority (60%) of respondents reported attending for over a year. A total of 197 surveys were completed, and following are some of the results.

Changes in Parent Knowledge and Attitude

In one series of questions, participants were asked to think about changes in the time since they began participating in programming at the Family Literacy Playroom. More than 80% of participants agreed with the following statements (specific percentages for each item are in parentheses):

- I have learned more about my child(ren)'s language development (84%)
- I have learned new ways to play with my child(ren) (94%)
- I pay more attention to my child(ren)'s language development (87%)
- I try to be a better listener to my child(ren) (86%)
- I think more about how they respond to questions from my child(ren) (80%)

Changes in Parent-Child Literacy Interaction

In another series of questions, participants were asked to what extent they had increased certain types of parent-child literacy-based interactions, since they began attending the Family Literacy Playroom. Approximately three-quarters of parents responding reported some degree of increase in the following behaviors, with more than half reporting moderate or large increases in the following areas:

- The amount of time I spend at home in interactive play with my child(ren)
- The number of new words that I use with my child(ren)
- The number of questions that I ask my child(ren)
- The type of questions that I ask my child(ren)

Furthermore, nearly 85% of respondents reported recreating Family Literacy Playroom activities while doing tasks at home or while running errands with their children.

Child Literacy Development

When asked to think about the extent to which features of the Family Literacy Playroom had impacted particular areas of their child(ren)'s literacy development, ***nearly 90% reported an impact across multiple skill areas*** including reading or letter/word recognition, writing (pictures, marks, etc.), speaking/using new words, listening skills, sorting and matching (colors, shapes, letters, numbers), sequencing, counting or number recognition, and child(ren) leading or directing parents in play activity.

Overall Impressions of Program Value

More than 90% of parents/caregivers agreed or agreed strongly with the following statements:

- I feel like my child(ren) learn a lot at the Family Literacy Playroom (92%)
- Attending is important for my child(ren)'s literacy development (96%)
- Attending is important child(ren)'s social development (98%)