

SANDRA FEINBERG  
*Director, Middle Country Public Library, Centereach, New York,*  
and  
DIANTHA D. SCHULL  
*Executive Director, Libraries for the Future, New York, New York*

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# FAMILY PLACE LIBRARIES

## *Transforming Public Libraries To Serve Very Young Children and Their Families*

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All families need access to resources, information, and support in their efforts to raise healthy and productive children, particularly during the early, most formative years. Many individuals and organizations are trying to reach parents with information. There are initiatives designed to promote parental awareness of babies and toddlers' developmental needs, especially in the context of growing attention to early brain development; connect families with literacy, education, and family support programs; and encourage families to take specific action, such as signing up for health insurance, getting immunizations on time, or looking for indicators of quality in infant/toddler child care. These strategies, however, are often uncoordinated, aiming at one or another aspect of family or child development, and directed at individual families or specific family constituencies rather than the full range of families of very young children.

How can parents and caregivers become knowledgeable about appropriate child rearing practices? How do they gain a better understanding of their role as their child's first teacher? Where can they go for information and support?

Public libraries are uniquely well suited to link families

to information and education resources within the library, and also to other community services and programs. Moreover, librarians understand that the future success of public libraries may well lie in the library's ability to serve young children and families. This article describes the

Family Place Library, a model for providing comprehensive, community-based early childhood education and family support that, in two decades, has grown from a single program to a national movement.

### **The Family Place Library Model**

Developed in 1979 at the Middle Country Public Library, in Centereach, New York, the Family Place Library provides a specially designed public place for caregivers with young children. Its founders discovered that children's librarians could make the library a valuable resource for parents through developmentally appropriate activities for young children. Librarians learned how to partner

with local service providers and educators, and how to connect parents with the educational resources and referral information they need during the critical first years of childhood. Today, through a partnership of Middle Country Public Library and Libraries for the Future, a national non-profit organization, Family Place Libraries is operating in





PHOTO: RODNEY L. BROWN

libraries across the country.

The Family Place integrates family-centered practice within the daily routines of library staff and stretches the boundaries of typical library service. The program emerges from the premise that public library services for children, although widespread and highly regarded, do not adequately address family education and support needs particularly during a child's first years. They do not, in general, acknowledge the critical role of parents as first teachers, focus on the information needs of parents, or welcome very young children. Though many public libraries regularly serve children, they tend to limit their service to storytimes and reading clubs. They usually focus on "children" only (mostly ages 3 and older) and not the child as part of the family unit.

Family Place Libraries expand the traditional role of children's services by transforming themselves into centers for early childhood information, parent education, emergent literacy, socialization, and family support. Library staff, trained in developmentally appropriate and family-centered practice, target very young children (including babies) and parents, caregivers and family service providers.

In Family Place, librarians re-focus their energies and develop strategies to engage parents and caregivers as first teachers and primary nurturers. Literacy begins at home, and it is the home that librarians aim to influence. By serving as

facilitators, models, mentors, and coaches for parents, they aim to have a greater impact on the young child as a future reader and library user. By re-designing the environment to be welcoming and appropriate for young children, they ensure that all families can have access to the public resources that they need to be good parents. By reaching out to non-traditional library users, they expand their constituencies and make the library a more vital influence in the lives of families.

Key features of a Family Place Library include:

- The Parent/Child Workshop, a regularly scheduled program presented in an informal early childhood setting that brings parents and toddlers into contact with health and human service professionals from the community;
- A specially designed space for young children, parents, and caregivers, equipped with educational toys, audiovisual materials, and electronic resources as well as books;

- A collection of reference and referral sources for parents, caregivers, educators, and service providers; and
- Specially trained staff who reach out to families, organize partnerships and coalitions with community agencies, and participate in professional development activities that help them respond to the needs of local families.

### at a glance

- Public libraries are uniquely well suited to link families to information and resources — within the library and in the community.
- The Family Place Library is a growing national model for family-centered service to very young children, parents, and caregivers.
- Key features of the Family Place Library are the Parent/Child Workshop, specially designed space and collections, and staff who are trained to reach out to parents and build community coalitions.

## The Parent/Child Workshop

The Parent/Child Workshop serves as the signature program at each Family Place Library. This five-week workshop series brings together toddlers and their parents in an early childhood setting filled with toys, art activities, and books, and encourages parents to play with their children, meet other parents or caregivers, and become familiar with library and community resources. Professionals from local agencies such as child care centers, hospitals, speech clinics, universities, public schools, and health and social service agencies move casually about the room and chat informally with participants about issues pertinent to their children or services that their agency offers for families. The librarian facilitates the smooth flow among the children, parents or caregivers, resource professionals, and library staff, and closes the workshop with a simple circle game, song, or fingerplay. The librarian's most important role is to get to know each family and promote the many resources that the library (or other community agency) has to offer.

Whether offered in large libraries in urban centers such as Phoenix, Arizona or Cleveland, Ohio, or in smaller libraries in towns like Port Washington, New York, or Cobligh, Vermont, the Parent/Child Workshop provides a respite for parents who are raising a toddler and serves as a catalyst for the development of the full Family Place program. The workshop also provides an essential meeting ground for parents, many of whom are isolated and lack peer support. Parents often comment that the workshop

**At a time when supports are in short supply, Family Place Libraries are a focal point to which children and families can turn for comprehensive help. Librarians are working with parents and social service providers to assure that children are given every opportunity to flourish. It's a new and very important alliance.**

— Ben Carson, MD, Chief of Pediatric Surgery, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, Maryland and Board Member of Libraries for the Future

provides them with an opportunity to meet other parents in the community or other children around the same age as their own child. Some create follow-up playgroups or rearrange play space in their own homes, using the workshop as a model layout. Many sign up for other library programs for themselves as well as their children and continue to use the library on a drop-in basis. They regularly check

out age-appropriate materials to use at home and often refer to the librarian when they have a problem with their child and need information.

The workshop makes an immediate impression on how families perceive the resources that the library has to offer. The design of the program (families can come and leave when it's comfortable for them, children select the activity they want to do, siblings are invited to participate, the focus is on play and verbal interaction between the caregiver and the child) helps parents understand that what toddlers need most is autonomy, flexibility, mobility, and adult/child interactions within an appropriately structured environment. The availability of parent materials and community resource professionals — and the interaction with the librarian and other parents — promotes the library as a place to turn to for information and support. Parents often comment that they wouldn't ordinarily bring their toddler to the library or that they probably wouldn't think of asking the librarian for information if they were concerned about their child's behavior or a possible developmental delay. The workshop changes that perception.

## SUCCESS IN BALTIMORE

The Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore, one of the nation's most highly regarded urban library systems, piloted Family Place at two branches. One was in the Cherry Hill neighborhood, where there is a high concentration of families with low literacy, a high school drop-out rate, high levels of teen suicide, and insufficient services and information for parents and caregivers of very young children. The success of Family Place in the Cherry Hill branch in reaching families who were not traditional library users has led to implementation of Family Place as a core component of children's services systemwide. In 1999 the library allocated a special \$500,000 Centennial Grant from the Carnegie Corporation for training, space and collection development in branch libraries across the city. According to Jim Wellbourne, former Assistant Director at Enoch Pratt, "Families who have not used our libraries before now see us as a support network and a partner in preparing their children for healthy, literate and productive lives."

## Specially Designed Space and Collections

Ensuring the availability of public space — the right kind of space — for families is a primary goal for the Family Place Library. Librarians recognize that the behavior of parents and caregivers within the library setting influences how children feel and act when they use the library. They understand that the future success of public libraries may well lie in the library's ability to serve young children and families in a healthy, appropriately designed environment. Placing comfortable furniture for caregivers in the children's room, so that adults can read parent magazines and books while the children play and interact with toys, games, and art materials, creates an ideal setting for learning. In some libraries, the family space occupies a corner of a room; in others an entire room is devoted to

early childhood resources. Securing a permanent area for caregivers and young children encourages families to use the library whenever it's convenient for them, not just when the library is offering a special program.

Librarians involved in Family Place are always on the lookout for interesting early literacy materials that work well in a public setting and will engage the youngest child in learning to communicate. Some of the interesting items found in Family Place Libraries include a fish tank, dollhouse, wooden train, Lego table, puppet stage, art materials, and puzzles, interspersed with board and cloth books, picture books, CDs, audiotapes, and videos (See Kuchner, this issue). Most offer a computer station (sometimes several stations) loaded with early childhood software, just for preschool children and their caregivers.

A parents' collection of books, videos, audiotapes, magazines, and pamphlets and access to electronic resources are key features of a library's family space. In addition, librarians encourage parents to seek the assistance of children's staff when they have a question concerning their child. Often, while attending the Parent/Child Workshop or

spending time in the early childhood space, parents observe that their child's behavior may be different from that of other children the same age. If they are concerned, parents can easily seek the advice of the workshop's resource professional or ask the librarian for additional information from the library's resources.

### **Specially Trained Staff**

The Family Place Library model requires specially trained staff who organize partnerships and coalitions with community agencies, reach out to families, and participate in professional development activities that address the needs of local families.

### **Coalition Building**

Family Place librarians are actively involved in building coalitions and networks with educators, social service workers, and health and human service providers (See Feldman and Jordan, this issue). Through networking with other professionals, they collect local information that can help the families using the library, and often develop a community resource file of professionals to whom they can

refer families who have questions about their young children's health, development, or behavior.

Coalition building and networking directly affect the library's standing within the community. Librarians trained in Family Place practices often become members of local coalitions and networks and begin to work on community issues affecting families. Librarians may find themselves sitting on local committees, writing joint grant proposals, or developing cooperative programs and services as a result of their coalition building activities. For example, librarians at the Providence Public Library in Rhode Island worked with local advocates on a citywide lead-paint campaign as part of their Family Place Coalition activities.

Recently, the mayor of Providence established an Early Childhood Task Force, and the Family Place Librarian was selected as chair of the Education Committee, a recognition she earned through her participation and leadership in coalition activities.

Coalition building also takes place at the national level. When the Family Place Libraries national initiative was first organized in

## **FUNDING FOR THE FAMILY PLACE**

**T**he Rauch Foundation provided support for the early development of the Family Place program model, including seed grants for replication of the Parent/Child Workshop in eight Long Island libraries. The Hasbro Children's Foundation and the Travelers Foundation supported initial development of the national Family Place Network, including the first training institute, development of the communications and technical assistance components, and seed grants for five New England sites. Since 1998, the Pritzker Cousins Foundation has supported the national effort. As the project has been successfully implemented in specific communities, we have worked with local sites to approach local and regional foundations to ensure development and institutionalization. We are enormously gratified by the response of local funders.

To date, grants totaling more than \$1 million to support local site development have been secured from: The John Clarke Trust, Dexter Donation, Fleet Charitable Trust, Grant Sherburne Fund, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Frank B. Hazard General Charity Fund,

Littlefield Memorial Trust, New York State Department of Education, Division of Library Development, Fred M. Roddy Foundation, American Express, VISTA, and Maricopa County Attorney's Office (Phoenix). The Rauch Foundation and the Horace and Amy Hagedorn Fund have recently awarded grants to the Middle Country Public Library to advance work with Long Island libraries. The Carnegie Corporation's Centennial Grants to Urban Public Libraries in Baltimore and Cleveland have supported systemwide adoption of the Family Place Program. The Graustein and Waterbury Foundations have supported programmatic activities in Connecticut. LSTA (federal library funding) has supported adoption of the program in various sites, with Ohio endorsing Family Place as a model program that can be financed through LSTA dollars. The Arizona Community Foundation has committed funds for a network of sites in Arizona. Finally, contributions from individual donors and re-allocation of library budgets have also helped to support local program implementation and institutionalization.

## THE PARENT-CHILD HOME PROGRAM AND LIBRARIES

Sarah Walzer  
Executive Director  
The Parent-Child Home Program  
Manhasset, New York

**"T**here is great excitement when I arrive, the children greet me at the door with book in hand." Home Visitors in library-sponsored Parent-Child Home Program sites regularly report such enthusiastic responses from the families they visit. This intensive home visiting program enables libraries to connect with families by bringing the joy of reading into their homes – "I see an increased interest in books, children developing their own understanding of what books they like," reports one Home Visitor. She also sees the program drawing families into the library: "Families are increasing their visits to the library and participating in library activities."

Through this unique partnership between the Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP), a proven literacy and parenting program, and public libraries, home visits provide literacy and school readiness assistance to families for whom libraries are intimidating or inaccessible. Developed by PCHP in conjunction with the Middle Country Public Library, this library-sponsored home visiting model uses twice-weekly home visits by paraprofessionals to support and strengthen parents' efforts to develop their children's language and literacy skills and to connect families to the library. Library-based Parent-Child Home Program Home Visitors model for parents and their two and three-year old children the fun and value of reading and playing together. Parents discover their important role in stimulating their children's language skills, creating a language-rich home environment, and preparing their children to enter school ready to succeed.

The home visits are the core of the program, but they are also the beginning of an ongoing relationship between

the families and the library. Over time, the families will also accompany their Home Visitors to a library activity or on a tour of the library. They will obtain library cards and begin to explore the library's resources, particularly if assistance with transportation, taxi or public transit vouchers, can be provided. In a twist on the original program model, the library-sponsored Home Visitors combine bringing a book or a toy each week that is a gift to the family with using materials borrowed from the library. The Home Visitors bring library materials, checked out to the families' card, to the home and then pick them up the following week, familiarizing families with the array of materials available from the library and overcoming concerns about children damaging borrowed items.

Four public library sites are now successfully replicating the Parent-Child Home Program. As Denise Anchico, the Coordinator of the Port Washington, New York Public Library Parent-Child Home Program notes, "Libraries and the Parent-Child Home Program are a natural and logical fit." She has found

that "bringing emergent literacy, verbal interaction and learning through play into homes through the Parent-Child Home Program helps solidify the relationship between families and libraries and has the potential for creating generations of lifelong library users."

The families targeted by the library-based Parent-Child Home Program replications are the same families served by successful replications of PCHP's intensive home visiting model by school districts, social service agencies, and community-based organizations. PCHP replications reach out to many different families. They serve teen parents, who have often had little opportunity to play or read themselves and are struggling to complete their own education while also parenting, non-native English speakers, who are often so intimidated by a new language and a new country that they are not accessing available educational



1996, an Advisory Panel consisting of leaders and experts in early childhood and parent education was established to provide the sponsoring organizations with guidance and oversight. Many organizations have provided rich resources for elaborating the concept of the Family Place Library, including the Parent-Child Home Program, Reach Out and Read, the National Center for Family Literacy, Family Support America, Mentoring USA, and the Center for Applied Special Technology.

### Outreach to families

One of the most effective strategies for identifying and contacting families who do not traditionally use the library and bringing them into the Family Place Library is to conduct outreach through coalition partners. Family Place librarians across the country are using this approach. At the Harmon Branch Library in Phoenix, Arizona, located in a low-income neighborhood in South Phoenix, the Family Place Coordinator has worked with organizations including Phoenix Day, a major local child care agency;

and support services, grandparents, other relatives, and foster parents. PCHP sites focus on families struggling to prepare their children to succeed in school despite the challenges of poverty, low levels of education, and language and literacy barriers. Library-based sites serve all these families, recruiting them through health clinics, Head Start, social service agencies and schools.

Longitudinal studies of the Parent-Child Home Program demonstrate that children who participate in the program go on to succeed in school and graduate from high school at much higher rates than children from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Program participants enter school ready to learn and perform at or above the national average on standardized tests throughout elementary school, significantly better than their socio-economic peers. A longitudinal study of high school graduation rates (Levenstein, Levenstein, Shiminski, & Stolzberg, 1998) compared at-risk children who qualified for the program but did not receive it to those who had participated in the program. The control group consisted of children whose families demonstrated the risk factors required for program eligibility, but were randomly assigned to non-program status. Examining children who entered the program or were in the randomized control group over a five-year period (1976-80), the study found that 84 percent of the students who completed the Parent-Child Home Program graduated from high school, the same graduation rate as middle-income students nationally. Only 53 percent of the non-program control groups graduated from high school.

Families embrace the program. An average of 85 percent of families complete the home visits in year one and return for year two. The advent of welfare reform initiatives raised some concerns that families would not be available for twice-weekly home visits. Parent-Child Home Program sites have found, however, that as long as they are flexible as to when the visits can occur – Home Visitors are available early in the morning, at lunchtime, in the evenings, and on weekends – families are making time for and participating in their scheduled twice-weekly visits.

Parent-Child Home Program parent-participants make time for the program because they enjoy it and benefit from it. They are more likely to return to school, obtain their GED, and improve their employment and living situations. School officials note that program parents are involved in their children's education – attending parent-teacher conferences, participating in school activities and helping with homework.

The library PCHP sites report that they too see changes in the families they serve. Children who were non-verbal are now talking and responding to questions about the books they are reading. Families are playing with the toys and reading the books between visits – when the Home Visitor returns for the second visit of the week the children are able to tell her entire stories. Families are not only keeping their regularly scheduled home visits, they are venturing into the library and beginning to seek out activities and materials.

A library-based Home Visitor notes that in her first home visit to a family with four children under the age of 4 one of the children commented that the family owned no books. Through the library's Parent-Child Home Program, the family now has their own library of 23 books and has become connected to the lifetime supply of books the public library has to offer. As Sandy Feinberg, Director of the Middle Country Public Library notes, "The Parent-Child Home Program exemplifies the type of programs libraries should be supporting, programs that effectively create life-long readers one at a time."

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For a complete annotated bibliography of research on the Parent-Child Home Program, see [www.parent-child.org](http://www.parent-child.org).

the local health clinic; the Wesley Center; parents' groups from nearby schools; and the local housing program to identify parents. Also in Phoenix, a library worked with its community partners to recruit ten families whose primary language was Spanish and introduced them to other children's programs and its collection of books and videos for young children and parents in Spanish. The bilingual librarian used both English and Spanish in the library's Parent/Child Workshop. In Northern Vermont, the Cobleigh Public Library has worked with local literacy pro-

grams and the local Planned Parenthood to reach out to families who had not used the library or considered it a place for information and programming concerning young children. In Port Washington – an upscale community in Long Island, New York – the library, with the help of a part-time social worker hired by the library, reached out to families from a public housing development, invited them to Family Place, and greeted them when they came to the initial workshop. In Hartford, Connecticut the library hired a community outreach professional who met families at local

meeting places and recreational centers and invited them to try Family Place activities. The Mastics-Moriches-Shirley Community Library, in New York, collaborated with a school for children with developmental disabilities to include both families of children with special needs and families with typically developing children in Family Place activities (See Deerr, this issue). Taking the mandate to draw new users into the library quite literally, Middle Country Public Library reaches parents of newborns through a New Parents' Discussion Group, conducted by a public health nurse, that emphasizes the role of the library in building a sense of community among isolated parents.

Four Family Place libraries on Long Island used strategies of the National Parent-Child Home Program to specifically target low-income, hard-to-reach families. Working with the Public Health Department, Social Services and the local school district, staff identified low-income families and asked if they wanted to participate in a home visiting program. Library staff members trained to make home visits demonstrate how to use books and toys with toddlers. While the first year of this program focuses on the home environment, during the second year the home visitor focuses on using library materials and getting the family into the library (See Walzer, this issue).

### Professional Development

Professional development, both theoretical and practical, is essential for the process of library transformation. Representatives of new Family Place sites attend a three-day training institute that provides theoretical grounding in family-centered library services, practical training in Family Place components, and a packet of resource materials.

The Family Place Libraries Network provides technical assistance and a national learning community. As the number of Family Place sites has grown, from the initial five pilot libraries to nearly 70 sites in 15 states across the country, Libraries for the Future and Middle Country Public Library have developed support mechanisms and vehicles for ongoing cross-site communications and information exchange. During the first 18 months after training, all Family Place Libraries receive two on-site visits — one during their planning period, in advance of their first Parent/Child Workshop series, and one after they have conducted initial programming, to help them identify needed program improvements. Ongoing technical assistance by telephone or online is provided as needed.

A dedicated electronic listserv connects all Family Place sites to each other and to national staff and advisors. Through the listserv, participants discuss issues, share resources, and develop relationships begun during the training. Through this ongoing communication each library can add something vital to the project. Sites share new ideas for publicity, a creative outreach strategy, examples of materials for the early childhood resource area, or a new source for bilingual materials.

In addition to training and technical assistance, the Family Place Libraries Network enables participating sites to take part in a number of professional activities, including regional briefings and forums, online discussions, and introductions to other Family Place librarians. Sites often host regional seminars in which local and national staff introduce the Family Place model to potential sites. In April, 2000 Libraries for the Future and Middle Country Public Library organized workshops and panels on Family Focused Libraries for Family Support America's national conference. A multimedia presentation on "Libraries, Play and Literacy: Reconceptualizing the Role of Libraries in Reaching Out to Nurture Young Children and Families" was presented at ZERO TO THREE's National Training Institute in December, 2000.

### In sum. . .

Through development and dissemination of the Family Place as a transformative model for children's services, Libraries for the Future and Middle Country Public Library have helped demonstrate the value and potential of libraries as essential tools in the battle for improved conditions for very young children and families. They have also conducted significant research, helped establish local and national partnerships, and created a national learning community of children's librarians and other child-serving organizational partners. As the Family Place Libraries Network continues to evolve and expand, more communities and families are able to take advantage of the library's extraordinary resources for families, and more advocates, professionals, and policymakers are coming to understand that the library is a cornerstone institution for positive development of children and families. ♣

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*For more information on Family Place Libraries, contact Diantha D. Schull, Libraries for the Future, 121 W. 27 St., Suite 1102, New York, NY 10001; voice 212-352-2330; fax 212-352-2342, E-mail: dschull@lff.org; Web site [www.lff.org](http://www.lff.org); or Sandra Feinberg, Middle Country Public Library, 101 Eastwood Blvd., Centereach, NY 11720; voice 631-585-9393 x200; fax 631-585-5035, E-mail: [Feinberg@mcpl.lib.ny.us](mailto:Feinberg@mcpl.lib.ny.us), Web site: [www.mcpl.lib.ny.us/familyplace.htm](http://www.mcpl.lib.ny.us/familyplace.htm).*

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