

# Beyond Storytime

## Children's Librarians Collaborating in Communities

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Since 2005, many children in Vancouver have been afforded a bonus learning opportunity: a professional children's librarian has joined them where they and their adult caregivers hang out. Responding to research that showed large numbers of the city's children were arriving at school unprepared to learn, the Vancouver Public Library Children's Services directors proposed a concrete way to be part of a citywide solution. The result was the Early Years Community Program—a five-member team of professional children's librarians who work with community members and other family service agencies. They reach young children by first reaching their parents and caregivers in a wide range of community settings. The librarians usually work in partnership with a variety of community groups, helping to strengthen early language and literacy and overall family literacy practices.

### Program Rationale

The public library as an institution is well positioned to provide citizens of all ages and backgrounds with their information and entertainment materials in a variety of formats. Joining book clubs, attending storytimes, and borrowing books, CDs, and

DVDs are some of the ways that people may choose to engage in all that the library has to offer everyone—all for free.

Since the economic downturn, North American libraries have seen increases in usage, indicating that public libraries are well used by people of all ages and all walks of life. Also, feedback from communities all over the continent suggests that libraries are an integral and valuable part of people's lives and always have been.<sup>1</sup>

However, not everyone uses the bricks-and-mortar library. Some people prefer to buy their reading and viewing material or use Web-based information sources from home. Still others do not use the library for a number of reasons that can be referred to generally as barriers. Whether the barrier is a lack of knowledge about libraries, mistrust of government institutions, or any number of other factors, the social result is the same: some people are not accessing library collections, programs, and services that might positively affect their lives.

The Early Years Community Program was created to respond to a well-established need for young children to grow up in environments rich in language and literacy learning opportunities.



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*The author thanks the Vancouver Public Library administrators and board of directors for their support of this unique program over the last five years.*

Ongoing research provides practitioners with a rationale for supporting early literacy in our youngest citizens. Many studies indicate that children who have deficits in language and literacy in their preschool years tend to have more difficulty learning once they start school. Early literacy experts now emphasize that a strong vocabulary is a positive indicator of learning success in kindergarten and beyond. Children with rich vocabularies who have been read to, sung to, played with, and most importantly, *talked to* are set up for success when they go to school.<sup>2</sup>

In reality though, children's librarians, like other community workers, know that many families are isolated. Poverty and health issues have impacts on families' daily lives, making activities that others take for granted simply impossible to provide for their children.

The Early Years team places vulnerable families at the top of their priority list. The Early Years librarians are equipped to meet the needs of families who need extra support in their children's early years because they are able to be out in the community for long periods of time. They have both the time and flexibility to work within a wide range of community settings and adapt as the needs of the community they are working with change. Traditional in-library children's librarians, while providing vital, responsive, and excellent service, may not have this flexibility.

Above all, like their in-branch colleagues, the Early Years team members focus on the family as the conduit for early learning and support parents and caregivers in their role as the child's first "teacher" of language and literacy. Research confirms what people have known all along—children learn best through their interactions with their loving caregivers, whether they are parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, nannies, or childcare providers. Contemporary children's librarians are both trained and encouraged to work together with caregivers to help set young children up for success throughout their lives.<sup>3</sup>

While taking research into practice, the Early Years team works in partnership with other family-serving organizations to provide opportunities for families and other caregivers to experience language together in fun, safe, and supportive environments. They also actively seek participants' feedback about how the library can best meet their needs, in ways that make sense to them.

The Early Years Community Program adheres to a philosophy of service that is strength-based and respectful of the diversity of Vancouver's many communities. As such, they

- offer all families free resources to support their children's language and literacy development in both heritage and second languages (library access and materials, skills, and community resources);



A sister and brother share a giggle at an Early Years community program.

- support early literacy, language, and cognitive development with an emphasis on the whole child;
- support multicultural early literacy approaches that value heritage cultures and languages;
- encourage the magic and love of language, stories, learning, and literacy;
- use community-led approaches wherever and whenever possible; and
- connect caregivers and families to the community resources that suit their needs.

They believe this strength-based philosophy, as well as their collaborative and community-led service model, results in programs, services, and collections that respond to and reflect the needs of the families they serve and will best prepare young children for later learning success in school and in life.

## History

The creation of the Early Years Community Program came about on the heels of a national public library initiative called "Working Together," ([www.librariesincommunities.com](http://www.librariesincommunities.com)) a four-year (2004–08), federally funded project that investigated and recommended new and promising practices in community development in the public library world. Now referred to as "community-led library service," this has been integrated into the key tenets of this project and into the current work of the Early Years Community Program.

Working Together was a service directed at socially-excluded adults. The Early Years team has had to adapt the approaches to suit children and caregivers. When it began in 2005, the Early

Years team went by the name Ready to Read: Children's Outreach Program. This name was initially selected because it was catchy and was in keeping with the Every Child Ready to Read @ your library® initiative by ALSC and ALA's Public Library Association.

While the Early Years staff were and are committed to the focus on parent and caregiver roles in supporting early literacy, after a few years they began to feel limited by what the name Ready to Read seemed to imply. They were not comfortable being seen as professionals who were tasked only with getting young children ready to learn to *read*.

While the type of programs and family support they offer may indeed help prepare children to learn to read, they believed that they needed to reflect the larger goal of supporting healthy child development in partnership with parents, caregivers, and other organizations. In addition, by the time the team's name had changed, they had begun to integrate more community-led approaches and wished to have that reflected in their new name. The Early Years Community Program identifies them as community librarians who focus on the early years of child development.

## Early Years Program Stories

The Early Years Community Program librarians have, over the past five years, collected a number of stories that illuminate the impact of this kind of work. In all the stories, some barrier or vulnerability was addressed, and many illustrate the importance of community partnerships. (Program participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy.)

### Chinese Language Mother Goose Program

The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program® ([www.nald.ca/mothergooseprogram/](http://www.nald.ca/mothergooseprogram/)) is an established international program for parents and their babies and toddlers. Vancouver Public Library has been instrumental in expanding this program into multilingual communities and has been offering such programs in Chinese for many years. Many participants in the Chinese Mother Goose Programs are low-income immigrants. They tend to be very isolated, living without support from extended family or friends in their new communities. Many of them do not speak English very well and often they do not use the library and the services that the library provides.

Karen Lai, a Chinese-speaking Early Years librarian, noticed a young mother named May with a small baby. She had seen her walking past the library many times but had never seen her inside. So she approached May and learned that she never



Puppets are popular at a community family literacy program.

came into the library because she was too shy and timid, and she could not speak or understand English very well and did not feel that she belonged there.

Karen immediately invited her to join her Chinese Parent-Child Mother Goose Program and was thrilled when May attended the program regularly, never missing a session. As part of the Mother Goose Program, Karen always takes the participants on a short tour of the library, helps them to get library cards, and shows them the Chinese language collection, among other things. A few months later, Karen had this to say about May.

I saw May in the library browsing through the Chinese collection. I also introduced her to other family services provided by the local service providers. On another day, during my program visit to the neighbourhood house, May was there too, participating in another family program.

She even made tasty snacks for the Mother Goose Program and shared her recipes with others. In her evaluation form, she mentioned that she has become more sociable, and even her baby became friendly with those who attended the program.

Before May and her baby attended the program, the baby would not let anyone else besides her mom carry her. At the end of the Mother Goose Program, all the mothers, including May, who had been so isolated before, exchanged contact information to arrange to meet in the summer.

### Nanay Gansa

The Early Years Community Program has had the good fortune of having a librarian originally from the Philippines work on the team for several years. Erie Maestro's forays into Vancouver's Filipino community left her with the impression that many young and newly arrived Filipino families were isolated and lacking both family and community support systems.

There were already family support and early literacy programs being offered for Chinese families, and the Filipino families were beginning to ask Erie if they, too, could have culturally specific programs.

This self-identified community need led to the creation of Vancouver's first Tagalog Language Mother Goose Program, also known as *Nanay Gansa* (which means Mother Goose in Tagalog). It drew mothers and grandmothers, and, later on, fathers, with their babies and toddlers, all of whom saw a difference in their children's development throughout their participation in the program.

The Filipino community in Vancouver is diverse, with both class and regional differences that could, in other circum-

stances, have been difficult to surmount. However, the *Nanay Gansa* program of shared songs and stories from a range of Filipino languages' oral traditions helped to overcome initial insecurities, shyness, and apprehensiveness. Families who previously had no support systems began to look to each other for mutual support, and friendships flourished. They exchanged parenting ideas, problem-solved things like sleeping and eating issues, and shared food, laughs, and mutual support. Erie heard this comment by one mom to another one day after the program:

"I used to wait for my husband to drive me to where I wanted to go. But now, I can go anywhere. I take the bus, I walk with the baby, and I don't have to depend on him for this," she said.

After attending *Nanay Gansa*, families started to go together to regular storytime programs in the library and at the family drop-in centers in their communities. The outcomes of this program are not restricted to early literacy, but extend to positive impacts for parents, as they are able to extend their networks in areas that involve employment, continuing education, and recreation.

The risk factor of isolation was minimized by the opportunity to connect and truly build social capital within a group of peers. One of the moms even started a Mother Goose blog for the group, which led other participants to start their own blogs and share support with each other online as well as in person.

### Supporting Parents of Children with Disabilities

Nanci is a professional mother of three who lives on Vancouver's affluent West Side. Her oldest child, five-year-old Andrew, has a significant developmental disability and requires caregiver support for all aspects of his daily life.

Based on her own experience of raising a child with significant extra support needs, Nanci identified a gap in service for families of children with special needs in her own neighborhood. By bringing a number of service providers together 'to talk' at a community health center, Nanci helped launch a new partnership program called West Side Mother Goose.

At the initial planning sessions, Nanci articulated the experience of a parent whose baby needs extra support. Although they would be welcome to join in any baby storytime at any library, Nanci told the planning table attendees (a librarian, two nurses, an infant development consultant, and a community planner) that most parents of children with significant developmental or medical needs do not choose to attend regular library baby storytime programs because they feel conspicuous, pitied, and often overcome with emotions.

Nanci and her friends who share the experience of having a baby with a disability or whose babies are medically fragile confirmed that such programs are often just too painful for them to attend. However, as demonstrated in the story of the *Nanay Gansa* program, there is much to be said about the power that social cohesion has in building resilience within a group of peers.

Nanci asked us *why not* have a program in this neighborhood just for families whose children have extra support needs? No diagnoses need to be given, no explanations offered; these families would welcome a chance to attend a program that simply allowed them to be there, without the feelings of exclusion and loss that they feel at other programs geared to typically developing babies and toddlers.

Once the logistics of the partnership were worked out (a children's librarian and an infant development consultant pair) and an appropriate space, a church's multipurpose room, was found (neither of the local libraries had space available in the mornings), the program took off and was almost immediately filled up. The shared language play of rhymes, tickles, bounces, songs, and stories formed the program's glue—parents revelled in their children's smiles, the adults all visibly relaxed in one another's company. After the songs and rhymes were finished, generous healthy snacks were provided, and social connections began to thrive too.

Parents were soon able to help each other through difficult stages. Rosa brought her son, Micah, who had spent the first two years of his life in a neonatal intensive care unit. Because of his disabilities, Rosa seemed resigned that her child would never be able to attend preschool or daycare, but, at the same time, she was clearly overwhelmed with his care needs.

Nanci, whose own child is now older and in a supported daycare, slowly, over the course of several weeks and many supportive conversations, convinced Rosa that daycare was indeed an option for Micah. Rosa eventually began to see that it would mean a stimulating environment for her son, with professional caregivers to take care of his medical needs, and a much needed break for her.

By the end of that session, she asked for a referral to a special needs daycare, which was provided to her. She also seemed much more positive about her son's potential after meeting other parents who had "been there." In her evaluation at the end of the program, Rosa wrote, "Thank you. Meeting other parents with a special needs child makes me feel that I am not alone."

This program grew out of a community member's knowledge of a gap in service for a unique group of people. Using the vehicle



Kelly Clark reads a favorite picture book to kids and their parents at a community program.



of a fun, literacy, and language-based program, the Early Years' program staff were not only able to support these children's language and literacy development but were, perhaps more importantly, able to bring these parents together and let them give one another what they needed most.

### Young Parents

The Early Years Program works with a community health service in a program that supports young, often teenage, parents. Although the program activities change each week, depending on what the young people are interested in, the visiting librarian always has a conversation about library cards.

They have found that initiating this topic in a supportive, judgement-free zone often leads to a flood of stories about library card disasters from these young parents. Almost all of them have had lost items or insurmountable overdue fines on the cards they had as kids or teens. Several have told the librarians that they had library cards while in foster care, and due to frequent moves and other chaos, their library books were lost or stolen.

One young mother told the librarian that she had recently lost a backpack full of library material; she had been struggling to get her son (who was in his stroller) off a crowded city bus, which pulled away before she realized the backpack was still on board. Despite calls to the transit company lost and found, her backpack was never turned in, and she was very upset about not being able to use the library.

This was a mom who, unlike many of her peers, was already keen to read and sing to her child, a mom who generously shared with the group her own personal lullaby for her son. She was, however, afraid to find out how much she owed the library since it would have been impossible for her to pay for the lost items. The librarian immediately allayed her fears by reassuring her she would have the lost item charges cleared that same day and given a fresh start with no more questions asked. Her baby got a new card as well. She was thrilled, as are all the young moms who are presented with their shiny new fine-free library cards as well as their children's first library cards.

The Early Years Community Program librarians have the support of the Vancouver Public Library to offer fresh starts for those who are unable to pay for lost items. This support makes it easy for the program staff to get young parents to speak up about what problems they may have experienced in the past and then be able to offer immediate solutions. The financial barrier is removed, and the young parents are free to use the library again for themselves and their new babies.

### Food Security

Programs such as food banks and community kitchens are effective draws for isolated families experiencing food insecurity due to low income levels. As a fundamental human need, the drive to satisfy hunger brings families who don't attend more mainstream events out into the community in order to

access food supports, such as grocery vouchers, food bags, and hot meals for themselves and their kids.

In a unique partnership in a vulnerable south Vancouver neighbourhood, the Early Years team has partnered with a local family service agency to offer a welcome "add-on" to a weekly food bank program that takes place at a local church. Before going to the church hall to collect their groceries, families with young children go to the small cozy choir section of the church where, led by two facilitators (a librarian and a trained family support worker), they sit on the floor and sing, read, rhyme, and play with their children.

This program has drawn a wide range of needy families, some of whom have never participated in groups before. The librarian who runs this group reports that many parents and children who were initially withdrawn are now participating with enthusiasm and are telling her that they are better able to soothe their children by singing to them, feel better about themselves, and better understand the developmental stages that their children are going through.

Since this is a multicultural group, the facilitators encourage participants to share rhymes, songs, and stories from their own backgrounds. The common thread in all the feedback from these participants is that parents *feel better* about themselves and their children's overall development, in addition to the fun of actually attending the program each week.

Week after week, the ideas and suggestions of the participants who are now confident about speaking up are woven into the fabric of the program, and the group has grown to more than fifty regular participants, singing, rhyming, reading, and supporting one another.

### Recovery from Addiction

Early Years librarian Anna Swanson visits a residential harm-reduction program for women dealing with addictions. All the participants are either in the late stages of pregnancy or have just given birth. This program provides medical, psychological, and social support for women who wish to succeed in recovering from addiction and retain or regain custody of their babies.

The librarian was initially invited to this program's parenting class to talk about what the library can offer, and what parents can do to support their baby's language and brain development. From this initial contact, a monthly program evolved that focuses on the power of rhymes and songs to help build bonds between mother and child. The participants learn ways to connect with their babies, soothe them when they cry, and find comfort for themselves through lullabies and stories.

Although it is typical for the moms in this group to start out by saying that they refuse to sing anything, they often end up being active participants. Thalia, the nurse who runs the program, has provided both feedback and encouragement as she has seen firsthand the benefits of this open-ended, supportive approach. She voiced her appreciation of this supportive approach when emailing the librarians about how the program was going.

Many of these mothers have never had the experience of being parented by their families, have little in the way of formal education and do not always get treated with dignity and respect by those they meet in their daily lives. Drug addiction alienates and frightens many people. You are teaching the women to connect, to bond with their babies. Teaching women to speak, read to, sing, and gently touch their babies is a valuable gift for these women who so want to be the best parent she can be.

It is, however, what happens among the mothers themselves that is the most remarkable thing about this program. Once they are comfortable with the practice of singing and rhyming, they begin to feel safe enough to share their memories of how songs have helped them. They are safe telling their stories here, and safe in an atmosphere that truly supports what they can do, and do well, with their new babies.

### Women's Shelter Program

The Early Years Program librarians offer a weekly visit to a ten-unit apartment building that provides up to one year of housing for women who have left abusive relationships. They receive services from social workers, lawyers, and other service providers to help them stabilize their families.

The Early Years Community Program staff was invited to provide the parents with preschoolers a Mother Goose Story and Rhyme Program to support family literacy, provide resources, and offer the children a quality group experience in a safe and comfortable setting.

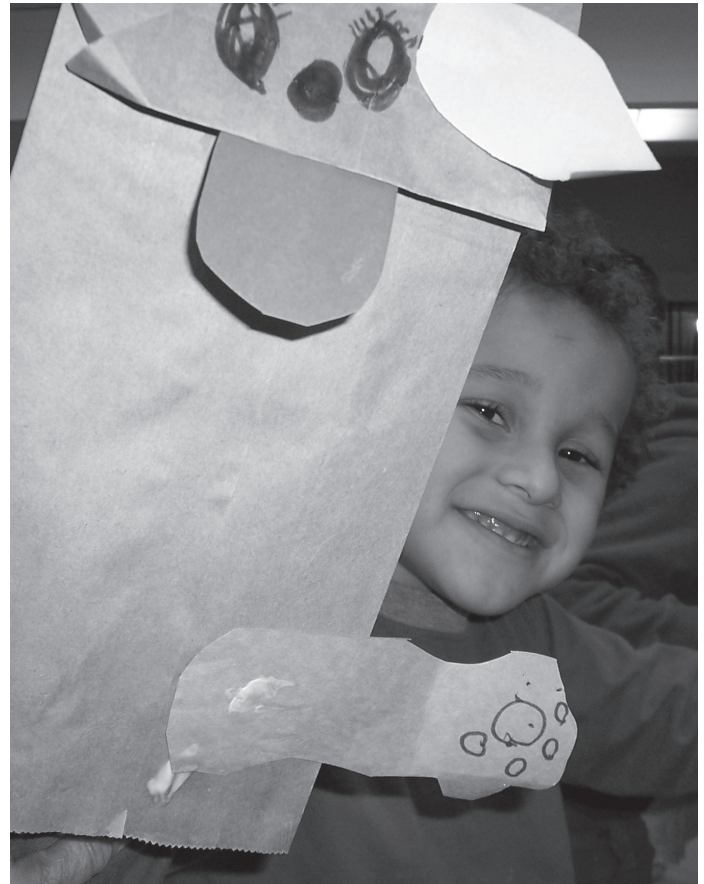
A few months ago, a mother asked if they could make their own feltboard stories; she had noticed how much the children enjoyed them during the storytime, and she mentioned she was studying to become an early childhood educator. Some of the other mothers there quickly caught on to this idea and asked for more patterns.

They recently told facilitator Nona Avren that they try to get together and create felt stories in the evening once a week. Nona now brings felt and new patterns to her weekly storytime program there. She leaves the felt and some sample patterns, and lets the moms decide when and how to create stories. The moms report that they use these felts "all the time," and the kids love them.

Also, Nona has observed that a child with significant challenges in speech has really taken to storytime and is talking much more clearly and confidently. He is thriving and thoroughly engaged with books, oral stories, rhymes, and action songs. His mother told the facilitator that she reads to him more than ever now. This child does not attend any other preschool-age programs in the community, so this weekly storytime is his sole exposure to group early literacy.

### Subsidized Housing Community Program

The Early Years team also runs a family program in the community room of a subsidized housing community in southeast



Hands-on art activities are a huge draw!



I like that color!

Vancouver. Although it is difficult to get parents to bring their children to this program, when they get there, the librarians are always impressed by how quickly the children soak up the stimulation of the art activity, the free reading time, and the storytime.

This is a mainly child-led program; parents are not pressured to participate if they are reluctant. As long as they are in the room, the children can partake of all the activities led by two energetic librarians. This no-pressure tactic works well; parents can relax a bit, read the paper, and have a cup of tea while their children

participate in art and storytime. Thanks to the support of the institution and board, the facilitators are able to purchase and serve healthy snacks and a small hot meal. The generous provision of healthy food and stimulating language activities fill bellies as well as minds. Although time consuming, providing hands-on art activities has proven to be a real draw for many participants, one that has elicited the following response from program facilitator Erie Maestro:

The little projects that the library program provides for the children not only teach them the skills of wielding scissors or of squeezing the glue out of the tubes. But they also give these kids the pride and confidence of making something beautiful with their own hands.

## Perils and Pitfalls

The Early Years team members, although experienced, dedicated, and passionate children's librarians, have all struggled to some degree with the need to embrace the ambiguous in their evolving roles as community workers. They consciously cast themselves as equals and learners alongside their community members and deliberately downplay any perception that they have "expertise."

While they see the value in bringing people together with the services, programs, and collections of the public library, they need to take the time to hear from people about what is meaningful to them and then respond accordingly. One of their main issues, however, is the fact that many of their community partners have mandates that differ from the Early Years Program's community-led approach. This clash of mandates has been a significant challenge over the years.

Community service providers, often called "gatekeepers," are viewed as an essential and valuable resource in the community-led library service approach. However, some gatekeepers provide programs that are driven by mandates that do not include room for participant input or collaborative program planning.

While some service providers seem enthusiastic about having the library on board, they have at the same time excluded Early Years staff from program planning or evaluation meetings. The Early Years team members believe there needs to be a paradigm shift in how all community service providers do their work with families. They believe that all family-serving organizations need to progress along the continuum of traditional "outreach" service to more community-led practice. That way, partnered organizations will both be asking for and listening to feedback from participants and therefore be able to truly collaborate with families in the provision of responsive, relevant programs and services.

Fortunately, community development and community-led models of service are gaining both attention and momentum, and the Early Years Program librarians believe that as time goes on they will find it easier and easier to speak the same community-led language with their program partners in the family support field.

The last five years of the Early Years Community Program have been inspiring and challenging for staff. They have all felt both elated by some of their successes and deflated by some of their less-than-successful experiences. They do not, however, look at setbacks as failures, but as learning opportunities. In general, the team members are buoyed by the many programs that truly highlight what their work is all about.

## Giving Families the Last Word

The Early Years Program librarians want their work to be meaningful to their participants, and they solicit feedback from participants with both evaluation forms as well as anecdotal stories. Here is what a number of our participants have had to say about their work, demonstrating the effect the Early Years Program is having in their communities:

The Mother Goose Program helped me through a difficult time. When my mother passed away, I found this was the one place that focused on my relationship with my own daughter and it really helped me remember the joy of motherhood.  
—Janine, mother to Samantha, 6 months, North Area Mother Goose, Spring 2010

Our little family is "on our own" in the sense that we don't have any family in town and don't have any friends with small children. I suspect many new families are in a similar situation nowadays. This program has been amazing for enabling us to interact with other babies/parents and hear about what other activities there are in the neighbourhood, how other people deal with problems, what other people do as a routine, etc. . . . There is more opportunity for interaction, which creates a much stronger sense of community.  
—Katrina, mother to Ricki, 9 months, North Area Mother Goose, Spring 2010

Having a team of friendly and knowledgeable facilitators is very helpful; they create a family atmosphere which helps us to find and utilize resources in our community.  
—Marie, mother to James, 2, and Thea, 8, Unitarian Food Bank Mother Goose, Spring 2009

It is a happy social experience for the parent and child, and a great way to talk to other parents that may be going through similar things that you are.  
—Cindy, mother to Chloe, 10 months, West Side Mother Goose, Spring 2008

A community-led program targeting the early years is adaptable to a variety of communities. Librarians who can speak the languages heard in their communities are valuable, but not essential. It is more important to have institutional support for the value of this kind of work, and an abiding faith that these approaches will benefit families in meaningful ways.

It may not be possible to quantify that this work is churning out children who are ready to learn at school entry, but the Early

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## Sharing the Idea, Spreading the Fun

The Central Branch of the Brown County Public Library in Green Bay, Wis., also hosted a teddy bear sleepover in January, 2011.

In a bit of a different spin on the Salt Lake City sleepover, the BCPL children's librarians created a PowerPoint presentation and posted the sleepover antics on their webpage so kids (and their parents) could see what the bear they "friended" was doing overnight.

Children's department head Sandy Kallunki helped spearhead the idea, and librarians Katie Guzek and Jessica Pyrek helped develop and photograph the concept.



Snoozing and reading were just two of the activities the bears enjoyed on their sleepover at the Brown County Central Library.

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Years Program staff can prove, qualitatively, that this work is increasing the value placed on literacy, language, and learning in many of the families they work with.

Families are more connected to their communities, are able to make friends who are able to offer lasting support, are learning from one another, and are sharing their new knowledge about what is available in their communities to support them in their work raising their children. They are respected as the experts in their own lives, and they see that the library is an organization that is flexible and responsive to their needs. They learn that a library program, whether it is in a library or in another community setting, is a welcoming place, where they are not judged, but rather encouraged to speak up and participate. Their children are valued, and their role in their children's lives is validated and applauded.

The librarians who are involved in this project are constantly learning about and from the communities; they learn what fami-

lies need, what is important to them, and how the library can play a more significant and meaningful role in their lives. They have learned and are constantly learning that they are *not* the experts, but rather they are the conduits for community members to all that the library has to offer them and the children in their lives. &

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