



**Learning and Growing
with Read, Baby, Read:
An Evaluation of the Free
Library of Philadelphia Initiative**

An Executive Summary to the Full Report

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the RBR librarians and administrators at the Free Library of Philadelphia for their participation in the evaluation, with special thanks to Chris Caputo, Valerie Samuel, and Kimberly Garrison. We would also like to thank the parents, caregivers, and children who participated in the RBR Initiative and shared their insights and experiences with us. Additionally, we want to thank Kenzie Campana for helping with data entry and analysis. Finally, we would like to thank the William Penn Foundation for their support and guidance during this evaluation. Our work would not have been possible without the efforts of all of these people.

Suggested Citation:

Campana, K., Mills, J.E., & Kociubuk, J. (2024). Learning and Growing with Read, Baby, Read: An Evaluation of the Free Library of Philadelphia Initiative. William Penn Foundation.

This work was supported by a grant from The William Penn Foundation. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the William Penn Foundation.

Executive Summary

Read, Baby, Read (RBR) is an infant- and toddler-focused initiative, developed by and implemented at the Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP) and funded by the William Penn Foundation. The goal of the initiative is to increase the availability of early education, resources, and support for early childhood development to families in Philadelphia's underserved communities and provide them with opportunities to engage in purposeful play at the public library and at home. As a part of the RBR Initiative, the RBR library branches offer a variety of infant and toddler focused programming including storytimes, playgroups, and dance parties and special collections of baby/toddler books, toys, and resources. The Initiative also created dedicated permanent "baby spaces" in the branches where babies, toddlers, and their parents/caregivers can engage in free play with developmentally appropriate toys.

The evaluation explored the following questions:

RQ1: How, if at all, are the RBR librarians engaging with and supporting early literacy for young children, 0-24 months, and their parents and caregivers?

RQ2: What, if any, impact are RBR storytimes having on the early literacy behaviors of the children ages 0-24 months who attended the storytimes?

RQ3: What, if any impact is the RBR initiative having on the learning and perception of parents and caregivers and on the home environment?

There are several key findings across the various areas we examined in our evaluation that demonstrate the impact of the RBR Initiative on families with young children.

Early literacy & learning opportunities in storytime

The data from the storytime mapping revealed that many of the RBR storytimes incorporate core baby/toddler storytime elements, such as stories, songs, movement and the use of proximal sensory items that promote bonding and interaction between children and caregivers. Similarly, most of the RBR librarians are modeling important strategies for caregivers, such as verbally encouraging children to engage in storytime movement activities and demonstrating the movements for them. About half of the RBR librarians offered a post-storytime activity that allowed for more diverse learning opportunities and additional social interactions between the children and their families.

The storytime observation data revealed that the RBR storytimes are supporting a wide variety of early literacy skills for both babies and toddlers. RBR librarians are using a variety of early literacy practices with both infants (birth-18 months) and toddlers (18-36 months) that can enable them to develop skills in oral language, expressive vocabulary, phonological awareness, listening, receptive vocabulary and comprehension, and phonological awareness. In addition, the infants and toddlers

are exhibiting a variety of early literacy behaviors in the areas of listening, oral language, receptive vocabulary and comprehension, and oral and written communication while attending the storytimes.

Family Experiences with the RBR Initiative

The family storytime survey and experience sampling data revealed that the RBR Initiative is positively received by and having an impact with the families who attend, both in terms of their experiences at the library and their everyday experiences outside the library.

The storytime surveys revealed that caregivers enjoy participating in the storytime activities, interacting with other families at the programs, and using the baby spaces, toys, and resources outside of storytime. Additionally, data revealed that the Initiative is having an impact on the families outside of the library, as families shared that they use storytime elements at home and on the go, as well as some of the strategies modeled by the RBR librarians, such as reading interactively and using specific toys at home because of storytime.

Recommendations

We identified various areas of growth and opportunity for RBR library staff and administrators that can strengthen their already positive impact with families of infants and toddlers who attended their programs. A few of the key recommendations are included below and the full list can be seen at the end of the report.

For RBR team and library branch administrators:

- Consider expanding services and programs for young children and their families, e.g., during more accessible times for working caregivers.
- Provide early literacy training, storytime resources, and planning tools for the RBR librarians, especially for those skills less commonly observed in the evaluation: grammar and syntax, phonological awareness, comprehension and awareness of print material, among others.
- Provide dedicated time for RBR librarians to engage in intentional storytime planning around these literacy and learning skills.

For RBR librarians:

- Include explanations on how storytime activities can contribute to children's development and learning to empower caregivers to expand these learning opportunities beyond the library into all aspects of their children's daily lives.
- Cultivate a sense of community between caregivers and families through the following methods so that they can learn from and share information with each other: encourage families to interact with each other during the storytime; and provide space and toys to encourage families to play and interact with each other, prior to and following storytime.
- Take time to engage in intentional planning of RBR storytimes around both early literacy and learning skills and encouraging interactive interactions with children and their caregivers.

