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Enhanced Storytimes: Effects on Parent/Caregiver Knowledge, Motivation, and Behaviors

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Over a decade ago, the Every Child Ready to Read @ your library initiative designated six early literacy skills as cornerstones of early childhood programming. It wasn't long before librarians began to write about how to incorporate the six skills into storytimes—mainstays of early childhood programming at libraries—giving such formats names like literacy-based storytimes, early literacy storytimes, and early literacy-enhanced storytimes.¹

In 2011, the Public Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children released the second edition of *Every Child Ready to Read @ your library*, which collapsed the six skills into five, wrapping them inside five practices intended to effectively and naturally teach the skills. The five practices, grounded in high-quality oral language development in children, include talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing. Once again, resources have emerged discussing how to conduct storytimes using the new framework.²

There are distinct similarities and differences between the first and second editions, but both are underpinned by a fundamental assumption that incorporating the skills into early childhood library programming produces two important benefits: children will be helped in early literacy development and parents and caregivers will be educated about it.

Our study tested the second assumption, specifically the impact on parents and caregivers when incorporating the first edition skills into storytimes. Some might think that using the six skills instead of the newer five skills/five practices model invalidates the importance of our study, but we don't think so. Our study represents first efforts at establishing a research base for such storytime formats. Apart from books and articles discussing the importance of including skills or practices in storytimes and publications describing how to conduct such storytimes, we found no research exploring whether or not the previously mentioned assumptions are valid.³

We recommend that future research replicate our study using the second edition model to ensure that a dynamic and growing body of work emerges exploring the key assumptions. Because we did not explore impacts on children's early literacy, future research is also needed in that important area.

There are many ways to include early literacy skills in storytimes. We did this through the inclusion of systematic adult asides (a tip on early literacy directed at parents). Lasting thirty to ninety seconds, an adult aside addresses an aspect of early literacy skills and may include a supportive activity. We called our format "enhanced storytimes," and three hypotheses underpinned our study. As a consequence of systematically incorporating adult

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asides over a six-week period, participating parents and caregivers will report increased knowledge of the six early literacy skills; increased motivation to apply and reinforce the six skills; and changes in their early literacy behaviors with their children.

This study was guided and supported by the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL). The ICfL has a successful Read to Me Program that has supported early literacy programming in Idaho public libraries for more than fifteen years. The implementation and evaluation of enhanced storytimes are examples of the ongoing work conducted by the ICfL.

The Study

Eighteen public libraries representing all geographic regions of Idaho volunteered to participate. Libraries represented rural, urban, and suburban populations and varied in size from a staff of one or two people to staffs of several dozen. A pre-survey/post-survey design was employed to explore effects. Parent/caregiver attendees were surveyed during the two weeks leading up to implementation of enhanced storytimes. They were asked questions about their knowledge of the six early literacy skills, their motivation to apply them, and their early literacy behaviors with their children. To see a copy of this survey, the other surveys referenced in this report, and additional statistics and information please go to the following web address where there is a more complete evaluation report: libraries.idaho.gov/page/read-to-me-resources.

Storytime presenters were also surveyed during the two weeks prior to implementation. They were asked about their storytimes and their knowledge of the six early literacy skills. After pre-surveying, storytime presenters participated in one-and-a-half days of training focused on how to implement adult asides.⁴ After training, storytime presenters returned to their libraries and incorporated adult asides for six weeks with each skill being the focus during one week. After six weeks, storytime presenters and parents and caregivers completed follow-up surveys.

Presenters were provided scripts suggesting how to conduct asides. For an individual storytime, there were three adult asides: an introductory aside, an example aside, and a closing aside. Presenters introduced the literacy skill with the introductory aside. Then at an appropriate point, they did the example aside, which illustrated and modeled the literacy skill. The closing aside restated the literacy skill and its importance, provided helpful tips on how to model and reinforce the skill at home, and showcased the handout provided by the ICfL for each skill.⁵

The eighteen participating libraries submitted 374 completed parent/caregiver pre-surveys and 251 completed post-surveys. It is not known how many potential respondents there were at all of the participating libraries so response rates cannot be computed, but based on anecdotal information from participating libraries and past evaluation research conducted in many of these libraries, response rates were likely quite high.

Attendance was important since the skills were presented over six weeks. If parents and caregivers sporadically attended, then an accurate assessment of effects would not be possible. Participants were asked on both pre- and post-surveys how many times they had attended in the past six weeks. Only 23 percent of respondents on the pre-survey attended six or more times during the previous six weeks, and on the post-survey, 25 percent did so. Only sixty-three respondents received all six skills. We realize that having such a low number of attendees receive all six probably impacted our treatment, but we had to compress the treatment cycle for this study because we wanted to assess the impact of adult asides within a reasonable span of time in which surveys could be administered and collected by volunteer libraries. In the future, however, instead of collapsing the skills into six consecutive weeks, they should be incorporated throughout the nine-to-twelve month period when storytimes are offered, returning to them regularly with new books and activities so attendees receive multiple exposures no matter their consistency of attendance. This recommendation fits nicely with the second edition's focus on the natural incorporation into programs of the five practices. Research, however, is needed to test this hypothesis.

Parents and caregivers were also asked on the pre- and post-surveys whether or not they had previously attended Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) Family Workshops, provided by their local library that focused on the first edition skills. During the three years prior to our study, the ICfL supported family workshops throughout the state that were well attended and highly evaluated by parents and caregivers. A state-wide evaluation showed participants gained considerable knowledge about the six skills and also changed their behaviors with their children.⁶

It was thus important to ascertain whether enhanced storytime participants had attended workshops since their content and focus were quite similar to our enhanced storytimes. Twenty-one percent of pre-survey respondents and 26.9 percent of post-survey respondents attended workshops. They were not included in the analyses in this report.

To maintain respondent anonymity and to minimize logistical burdens on libraries, no identifier was used, so most of the surveys could not be matched pre to post. Thus, there are respondents in each group that took only that survey. Matching, however, was possible on a limited basis because at the end of each survey respondents could voluntarily provide contact information. Using this information, fifty-seven surveys were matched pre to post. Matched survey analyses will be reported separately given that they provide confirming or disconfirming evidence for results from the entire group.

Thus, because of the research design constraints that shaped this study, the following analyses were conducted on a subgroup of pre- and post-survey respondents. The subgroup contained only those respondents who said they had *not* participated in ECRR Family Workshops and who had attended four or more enhanced storytimes. Applying these criteria, 146 respondents comprise the pre-survey subgroup and 111 compose the post-survey subgroup.

Storytime Attendee Responses

To test our hypotheses, survey questions asked participants about changes in behaviors, knowledge, and motivation. Behavior questions included such things as pointing out words while reading, spending more time singing or rhyming, pausing to talk about the book, and finding their children more interested in books. All of the questions began with the following stem: “As a result of attending library storytimes, I . . .” Response options were “Yes,” “No,” “Not sure,” and either “Did this before” or “No change,” depending on the question. Although behaviors increased pre to post, none of the shifts were appreciably large and none were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. Thus enhanced storytimes did not impact these behaviors, but this conclusion needs to be contextualized within the response options. Respondents reported high percentages of yes, did this before, and no change responses on the pre-survey. Because of these high combined percentages, there was perhaps little room for change as a consequence of attending enhanced storytimes. What this might constitute is a ceiling effect where the instrument was not sensitive enough to detect changes, if they did occur, because respondents already believed they were doing these things at high levels before treatment. We are not asserting here that changes occurred, but instead making a point about potential limitations of the instrument and how sensitivity may need to be enhanced in the future.

One other behavior concerning vocabulary development needs to be discussed. The question used the same stem followed by “build my child’s/children’s vocabulary by using rare words from books or other sources.” This question had a relatively low percentage of yes and did this before responses on the pre-survey, yet yes responses only increased about 5 percent. Perhaps the parent asides were not clear on what rare words are and how they should be addressed. This item is highlighted because vocabulary development is critically important to later literacy performance. Vocabulary knowledge in the primary grades is a strong predictor of reading comprehension in the later grades.⁷ Future research exploring enhanced storytimes might pay particular attention to vocabulary given that our study revealed that this variable was not impacted.

Results were quite different, however, for the questions on knowledge and motivation. These questions began with the same stem as above and asked “am more knowledgeable about the six early literacy skills” and “am more motivated to do things at home that reinforce the six early literacy skills.” Fewer respondents said yes and no change on the pre-survey, leaving room for change, and change they did. Statistically and practically significant differences pre to post occurred, leading to the important conclusion that post-survey respondents believed they were more knowledgeable and more motivated as a consequence of attending enhanced storytimes.

Matched survey results for the questions on behaviors, knowledge, and motivation corroborated those from the entire group. No appreciable changes occurred in behaviors but yes

responses increased substantially for knowledge and motivation, 43 percent and 25 percent respectively. This compares to 39 percent and 21 percent for the full subgroup.

Additional early literacy behaviors appropriate for older children were also explored. The same stem was used. Questions asked about prompting retellings, playing with letters, showing print in signs, and reading information/nonfiction. None of the shifts pre to post were statistically significant, but similar to the previous discussion, high percentages of “yes” and “did this before” responses occurred on the pre-survey, which might have left little room for change. Matched survey subgroup analysis corroborated these findings, thus providing additional evidence that enhanced storytimes had no discernable effect on these additional behaviors.

We asked parents and caregivers what caused the changes because knowing this is perhaps as important as knowing that changes occurred. Not all respondents completed this question and the reasons for this are unknown, but if the survey is used again, the wording, format, and placement of this question need to be examined. It is heartening that storytime presenters were overwhelmingly the primary agents of change on both pre and post surveys.

We have found this to be the case in previous program evaluations. And, importantly, the consistently high level of positive presenter influence across pre and post surveys shows that including adult asides did not compromise storytime quality. Other change agents mentioned were learning about the six skills and receiving handouts. Matched survey analyses corroborated these findings.

As mentioned above, handouts caused change, so given the time involved in their preparation and the cost to reproduce them, it is important to carefully quantify these effects. Attendees were asked on the pre-survey if they received handouts at storytimes. Forty-three percent said yes, 51 percent said no, and 6 percent were not sure. Respondents were also asked to rate the usefulness of the handouts. Overall handouts received prior to implementation were highly rated, but in the case of “Recommended reading lists” and “Early literacy information,” enough respondents rated their usefulness as “neutral” or “don’t know” that future presenters may want to consider revising these or experimenting with how they are presented to patrons. Post-survey respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of the IC/L handouts provided for each skill. For all handouts, 60 to 71 percent of responses were very useful or useful. This finding, along with the finding reported earlier that handouts were change agents, supports their continued use.

Because handouts appear to be effective, making sure that all participants receive them is important. In our study, the number of respondents who didn’t receive one or more of the IC/L literacy skills handouts was relatively low and no handout was missed appreciably more than others. The frequencies, however, of people reporting not receiving handouts were high enough that future training should emphasize the importance

of distributing and showcasing the handouts, especially since results support their use. Storytime presenters were also asked to rate the usefulness of the ICfL handouts. All eighteen libraries responded to this question; of these, thirteen said the handouts were very useful or useful.

Because of the unmatched survey design, we asked post-survey respondents if they recalled taking the pre-survey. This was done to estimate similarity of the two groups. For example, if all of respondents on the post-survey said they had completed the pre-survey, it could be concluded that the pre-survey and post-survey groups were identical. Pre- and post-surveys would remain unmatchable, but at least the similarity of the two groups would be known. Out of the 111 post-survey respondents, 98 answered this question—45 percent said yes, 55 percent said no, and one person said not sure. These are not positive results for this study. It appears that the pre- and post-survey groups might be different. It is probable some respondents forgot taking the pre-survey since time between administrations was about two months, but how many did so cannot be ascertained. What can be concluded is that there is evidence that the groups were different. This calls into question the comparisons being made between the two surveys; however, results from the matched survey subgroup consistently corroborated those from the whole group, which ameliorates a portion of this concern. Future research should employ matched survey designs even though these are more complex and difficult to operationalize.

Storytime Presenter Responses

Although the hypotheses driving this study focused on parents and caregivers, it was also important to explore the presenters themselves to understand the contexts within which enhanced storytimes were implemented and to what degree the enhanced storytime model was followed.

Not all presenters at participating libraries chose to implement enhanced storytimes, so it was important to compare experience levels between the group of implementers and the group of non-implementers. The 24 presenters who implemented asides averaged 78.2 months experience; this was comparable to the non-implementing group. Twenty of the 24 had either conducted or attended ECRR Family Workshops. This was much higher than in the non-implementing group. These results show that the group of enhanced storytime presenters was experienced and had a strong foundation in the six skills and how to present them—a plus for our study.

On pre-surveys, all presenters were asked about their experience including parent asides; this baseline information was important since the study design required that storytimes prior to treatment had not included six skills parent asides. When asked if they included asides, 10 of 19 respondents said occasionally and one said always. This is not ideal given the research design, but it is not surprising given that 47 percent of the presenters listed on the pre-surveys had either conducted or attended ECRR Family Workshops. For the 11 respondents

who answered occasionally or always, additional questions explored the specific skills and number of asides included. Four presenters addressed two skills, two addressed three, one each addressed four or five skills, and three addressed all six skills. Ten provided information on how many asides they included. Six respondents included one, three reported including two, and one reported including three. In aggregate, this information about asides incorporated prior to training and treatment implementation revealed substantial knowledge of the six skills but a lack of systematic inclusion of skills and asides in storytimes. This is not a negative judgment of participants since we expected that variance prior to training would be higher than after training.

On the post-survey, questions ascertained the amount and consistency of parent aside implementation. We anticipated that some enhanced storytime presenters might not implement all three asides during a session. Twenty-one of 24 presenters included all three parent asides in six or more storytimes. One presenter each included three asides in four or five storytimes, and one presenter only provided three asides in one storytime.

It was also important to assess how many of the skills were included. Nineteen of 24 presenters addressed all six skills with three asides. Of those not addressed, no particular skill stood out as being more apt to be missed since each was missed by no more than one or two presenters. If some skills had been missed more, then this might mean that presenters had greater difficulty implementing asides for some skills. Since this was not the case, the skills probably present roughly equal demands when included in asides.

When aggregated, these results reveal that a few presenters had difficulty including all of the skills and asides, but most did not. To explore this variance, post-surveys asked open-ended questions about presenters' experiences. Those who had included asides prior to training and implementation were asked to describe how their asides had changed. Responses revealed that presenters were more consistent and systematic in presenting asides, and that even though they might have incorporated early literacy skills prior to training, afterwards they realized the need to more directly address parents and caregivers about the skills.

Presenters were asked about parent reactions to asides. The reception from both presenters and parents and caregivers was not overwhelmingly positive, but instead more neutral and appreciative. This is not meant to imply that asides were disliked, but there was a somewhat muted tone to the comments. This is important because if adult asides are to become an integral part of storytimes—part of the storytime culture so to speak—then more positive responses from parents and presenters will probably be necessary for presenters to be positively reinforced for including them.

We also asked about difficulties. A number were mentioned, including breaking the flow of storytime, general awkwardness implementing asides, unsure about whether parents were listening and understanding, keeping everything in memory,

increased preparation time, and book challenges. Book challenges occurred because some presenters had historically built their storytimes around themes, and finding books that fit the themes while also illustrating the skills proved challenging for some. This can be addressed by altering training to clearly model how most any book can support most any of the skills. The other difficulties encountered are most likely due to the fact that presenters were quite experienced, had their storytime routines developed and thoroughly practiced, and were comfortable and confident in what had worked for them so well in the past.

We asked presenters to suggest changes to training. They mentioned including more modeling and practice, more information about how to structure storytimes with asides to better meet parent and children needs, and the inclusion of suggestions for successful additions to enhanced storytimes. Additionally, respondents wanted more details about how to structure enhanced storytimes for the diverse audiences who attend, including better ways to capture and sustain parents' and children's attention during asides, and how to adjust asides for various age groups and lengths of different storytimes.

In closing, two of the three hypotheses were supported in this study. Parents and caregivers reported that enhanced storytimes increased their knowledge of the six skills and their motivation to apply and reinforce them. The hypothesis that was not supported explored parent/caregiver early literacy behaviors. There were no changes in these, but this might have been due to the fact that parents and caregivers reported already doing the behaviors, so appreciable changes would be unlikely as a consequence of enhanced storytimes.

The changes in knowledge and motivation may have occurred because enhanced storytimes provided a foundation and rationale for behaviors that were, for the most part, already occurring. As they learned about the skills, parents and caregivers achieved a deeper understanding of their importance, which in turn motivated them to apply and reinforce the skills. Future research is needed to establish the veracity of this causal chain.

Parent/caregiver attitudes toward enhanced storytimes were neutral to positive. No one expressed strongly negative opinions, but instead most showed neutral attitudes while some exhibited muted, positive reactions. Presenters' overall reactions were similar but they did manifest more of a range. A few had positive experiences, some had neutral experiences, and some struggled with implementation and expressed concern that adult asides disrupted their normal storytime routines. Storytime is an instance of teaching and teachers manifest many different teaching styles, so it stands to reason that asides will be received and implemented in a variety of ways.

Our data supports this since it revealed a continuum of implementation that had multiple dimensions. For example, some presenters adhered quite closely to the aside scripts and materials, while others substantially diverged from them. Moreover, some presenters thoroughly enjoyed including asides and

found them to be easily implemented, positive additions to their storytimes while others won't continue with the three aside model but may incorporate some aspects in future storytimes. When taken in aggregate, these results reveal that for asides to be consistently implemented, the format needs to be flexible to allow various teaching styles.

Our study reveals that embedding asides in storytimes is a complex process. One enhanced storytime presenter compared the many positive parent/caregiver comments she had received while conducting ECRR Family Workshops to the lack of enhanced storytime participants' comments about parent asides. She explained this difference by contrasting parent/caregiver motivations to attend the two events. She said that storytime attendees come "to hear stories" whereas ECRR Family Workshop participants attend to learn about the six skills. Her comment implies that mixing the two, as we did with enhanced storytimes, might not always be optimal for some presenters and parents and caregivers, and we found this to be the case. Prior research has revealed that storytimes are highly ritualized activities for both presenters and attendees where the focus is on rich literature experiences and entertainment for children.⁸ Therefore, when asides are introduced, they may not be embraced because they are considered too disruptive. In the future, enhanced storytime trainings should go into greater depth including more modeling, practice, and coaching so that enhanced storytimes achieve the fluidity and tight choreography that presenters appear to have achieved with their traditional storytimes. Training should also reflect a variety of teaching styles so that trainees form clear mental pictures of themselves implementing asides. And finally, additional research is needed exploring this diversity to see which styles are most effective with children and their parents and caregivers and the overall effectiveness and sustainability of this variety of approaches. ☺

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5. The handouts can be accessed at <http://libraries.idaho.gov/page/read-to-me-resources> under the heading “Six Skills Activity Sheets.”
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KEATS AWARDS PRESENTED: Pictured left to right are Linda Davick, Pat Zietlow Miller, Ame Dyckman, Christian Robinson, and K.G. Campbell. These 2014 Ezra Jack Keats Book Award winners and honorees were honored this spring at The University of Southern Mississippi’s Fay B. Kaigler Children’s Book Festival. Dyckman is the New Writer Winner for her book, *Tea Party Rules*, and Robinson is the New Illustrator Winner for his book, *Rain!* Also pictured are New Writer Honorees Davick for *I Love You, Nose! I Love You, Toes!*, Zietlow Miller for *Sophie’s Squash*, and New Illustrator Honoree Campbell for *Tea Party Rules*. The awards were presented by the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation in partnership with the de Grummond Children’s Literature Collection at The University of Southern Mississippi. Photo by Kelly Dunn, Southern Miss Photo Services.

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