

## Cuddle Up and Read: Douglas County Libraries' Baby Library Card

How young is too young for a library card? When I was a child it was something of a rite of passage, an almost-formal ceremony: when you could write your name, you could get a library card. It was a memorable event. In those days it was assumed that you wouldn't be able to use the library unless you could read and write on your own. Today we have moved far beyond those assumptions and libraries are acting on new information about the critical importance of very early language experiences for children.

Research on brain development has given us scientific proof of the immense value of lullabies, nursery rhymes and books to read aloud to babies. Through imaging technology we can now actually see brain synapses connect and grow during those significant early weeks and months. Child development experts now agree that relying on maturation only as a measurement for readiness to learn may greatly limit the potential learning ability of a child. Instead, appropriate language and literacy experiences of all kinds must be an integral part of the early months and years.

This does not mean an endorsement of teach-your-baby-to-read-type programs. It does mean that a steady stream of pleasant, cozy and fun language experiences from the very beginning will set the stage for optimum learning throughout life.

The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children say in a joint position statement on the importance of early literacy: "The single most important activity for building ...the skills essential for reading success appears to be **reading aloud to children**" (Wells 1985; Bus, VanIjzendoorn & Pellegrini 1995).

Librarians have been responding to this current move toward emphasizing literacy for the very young by adding lapsit story times for babies and their parents and caregivers as a way to offer early exposure to books and model good literacy-promoting activities. There has also been an increase in the purchase of new and colorful board books specifically for sharing with babies. We are expanding services to our very youngest patrons, newborn babies.

At Douglas County Libraries we support and provide many literacy projects for people of many ages and various needs. One of our goals is to identify underserved populations and find ways to make library services specifically useful so that all citizens experience a positive and helpful encounter in the library. We began to think of babies as an underserved population a few

years ago. Babies might come to the library with parents and families, but babies do not normally sign up for their own library cards.

When we first contemplated creating a library card for babies there were no hospitals in Douglas County. We approached local pediatrician's asking if they would distribute our materials to parents at their newborn's first well-baby appointment. A few doctors felt too busy to participate, but we soon had offices in each of our communities willing to promote our idea.

In this first set of materials that would serve as invitations to parents to bring their babies to the library, we wanted to accomplish two things: 1. Make the library look like a baby and parent-friendly place with the invitation. 2. Give a book to the family to get them started reading right away.

We created a logo for our Cuddle Up and Read program that features a mother bunny reading to her two baby bunnies that we use on all the related materials. The invitation pack includes a Welcome Letter that speaks briefly about the importance of early reading aloud and explains how a baby can get a library card. A library card application is attached to the letter so that it can be filled out before the visit to the library. In addition we created a keepsake bookmark with a short list of recommended books for babies and space to record "My first visit to the library" and "My first favorite books."

Choosing a book to include was not difficult. *Read To Your Bunny* by Rosemary Wells not only complements our theme, the author also includes a powerful statement about the importance of reading to babies in the back of the book and an endorsement by T. Berry Brazelton, the well-known baby expert. Our budget was, and still is, helped by the extra discount on book purchases we receive by becoming a Scholastic Literacy Partner. Scholastic Books has set up this program to be used in conjunction with book give-away projects only.

Once a family receives the invitation packet, they may bring the application to the library at any time. We want families to find support and lots of wonderful things when they come to the library, so we considered what would happen at that first visit. First, the baby would get the real baby library card.

Designing the baby library card was an easy extension of our Cuddle Up and Read logo, but making the actual card an oval shape ensured the unique look we wanted. The baby library card is charming, but it began to feel somewhat skimpy when we intended to generate more of a celebration-like event with this library visit and bestowal of a first library card. Our budget didn't offer us much choice for more give-away books or other items.

Help was waiting in the wings. As Outreach Coordinator, I serve on the Douglas County Early Childhood Coalition which is a loosely organized group of agencies interested in promoting high quality childcare, training for teachers

and parents and early childhood literacy. Another member of this group is Colorado Bright Beginnings. (Read more about this organization in the article by Valin Brown, Executive Director, in this issue.) The Warm Welcome Program, one of Bright Beginnings offerings, includes home visits to families of newborns. These visits provide support, tips for good parenting, resources for help, up-to-date child development information and encouragement for that all-important early reading aloud. This program is funded through grants and is limited by the availability of volunteers, so home visits are not possible in Douglas County at this time. But, Bright Beginnings does have a “train the trainer” program through which we trained our children’s staff to conduct the visits, making them library visits instead of home visits.

The Bright Beginnings packets are overflowing with wonderful tools for parents and goodies for babies, as well; especially more books for parents and children to own and read aloud and enjoy. A valuable partnership developed between Bright Beginnings and Douglas County Libraries. The Warm Welcome packets get to more families and we have more to offer at the library when a parent registers a baby for a library card.

The Cuddle Up and Read project began in 2002 and since then two new hospitals have been built and opened in Douglas County. Both SkyRidge Hospital in Lone Tree and Parker Adventist Hospital in Parker have enthusiastically embraced the program. We are now supplying them with our Invitation Packs and they give them to brand new parents as they check out of the hospital. Both hospitals expect very soon to reach the rate of one hundred babies born every month. Happily, our numbers will grow to match theirs. More than 1,500 Cuddle Up and Read cards have been assigned. We are heartened to know that we are reaching parents and giving them direction and confidence to be their babies’ first teachers.

We continue to look for other partnerships and recently the Rotary Club of Parker donated 400 books that we will add to the Invitation Packs. More books in the hands of parents and children is always a good thing.

We do hear stories about parents who have heard of the program and ask about it at the hospitals. We receive heartfelt joy from parents who are delighted by the sense of caring and community they gain through the Cuddle Up and Read project.

*Priscilla Queen is the Outreach Coordinator for Douglas County Libraries. She can be reached at the Philip S. Miller Library in Castle Rock. 303-688-7626, pqueen@dclibraries.org*