

What Nashville Learned from: “Books Aloud”

While developing the Begin Bright campaign for Nashville, staff looked at the results of a 2-year program that put high-quality children’s books in urban Philadelphia child care centers and provided training for caregivers to help children get more from the books.

The results were encouraging.

David Fox

When the Nashville Public Library Foundation staff began looking at ways to fully develop Begin Bright, it decided to look nationwide for other programs initiated by libraries in coordination with child care centers, to tackle the early literacy challenge.

After much searching, they found a needle in the haystack, a program undertaken in Philadelphia almost 30 years earlier, in 1995, called “Books Aloud.” It proved to be a very enlightening discovery.

Books Aloud was a two-year effort, undertaken by the Free Library of Philadelphia and seven county and city library systems in the Delaware Valley region of Pennsylvania. Its purpose was to “enhance the language and literacy opportunities for children, from infants through age 5.”

The library raised \$2.5 million to undertake the program and established the two-year timeframe. The fundamental partnership in this effort was between the library systems and the child care centers in the region. In all, 325 child care centers and 250 family child care homes participated in Books Aloud. Through those child care centers, a total of 17,675 children were touched by the program.

Much of the money raised for the program was spent on books. A total of 89,000 books were distributed to the centers during the two year period - an average of five books per-child-per-month. In addition, 10 hours of training was provided for the child care providers, because reading to toddlers in a group setting is not easy.

The program began with a premise: that early childhood is a critically important time in establishing a foundation for literacy. And while the funders believed this was true, they wanted “a rigorous analysis of whether or not the project was successful.” In other words, they wanted a team to observe and evaluate the program as it progressed to determine if it made a difference in the literacy of the participants.



Books Aloud Numbers

- **89,000 New Books** in childcare centers serving
- **17,675 children**
- **325 centers**
- **250 family care homes**



Here are a few take-aways from the researchers' published analysis of Books Aloud:

The Magic of Books

The observers pointed out that, for infants, a book is like any other inanimate object - like a rattle or a ball or a doll. They want to hold it, put it in their mouth, tear it apart. But with the help of a teacher/ caregiver, they discover that books are not inanimate. Books tell stories. The words and pictures on the pages change the nature of books. They animate books. And what Books Aloud found was that the earlier children make this discovery, the better.

The difficulty is that books are in very short supply in child care centers - mainly because children tear them up. With less than \$1 per-week per-child spent for supplies in government-subsidized child care, books are rare. This is why an important job for the library teams was not only to deliver books to the centers, but to help the teachers repair the books that were damaged as the children learned to love them. .

As the report said: "Put books in children's hands... they will learn that words tell stories. They will begin to recognize letters and sounds, and without seeming to try, they will build a foundation for literacy."

Getting Books Into the Hands of Children—Where They Are

The premise that child care centers are a good place to introduce books to children was borne out by Books Aloud. It also demonstrated that child care center workers need support. They need resources. They are front-line workers providing a very important, yet extremely undervalued service to our society.

Books Aloud demonstrated that libraries can be incredibly important partners for child care centers, not only as a source of books, but as engaged participants in the task of teaching infants and as mentors in helping workers put books to the best possible use.

What Books Aloud also found was that the typical child care center environment is not conducive to reading. They are loud, energized, often disruptive places where distractions are the rule, not the exception. While there were established methods of teaching basic self help skills to children such as eating, dressing

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and toilet training, there was no established curriculum for teaching pre-k children to read. Working with the child care center staffs, Books Aloud librarians and volunteers developed such a curriculum and helped implement it. And what they also discovered was that, as reading became a part of the day-to-day activities at the centers, there was a "not-so-subtle change in classroom activities." Books calmed things down, at least temporarily.

Books Aloud Found:

- ★ Striking differences in early literacy scores for children from Books Aloud;
- ★ Books Aloud children are better prepared to learn in kindergarten;
- ★ Books Aloud children are better able to
 - Tell and recount stories
 - Recognize letters
 - Understand the conventions of print (*left to right, words, not pictures tell the story*)
 - Grasp early writing skills
 - Expand their vocabularies
 - Toddlers benefited as much as preschool children
 - Books Aloud children are three times as likely to have library cards.

How can we ensure children have an equal opportunity to succeed in reading?

After two years of hard work and deploying 89,000 books, Books Aloud answered that question in this way:

Increase the volume, quality and intensity of young children's stimulating experiences with good books at an early age.

Books Aloud: A Campaign to “put books in children’s hands”

The authors report results of a 2-year program to put high-quality children’s books in urban child-care centers.

Caregivers were trained to help children get more from the books.

Susan B. Neuman | Donna Celano

There’s not much to read on the street in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Deon (all children’s names are pseudonyms) travels every day to his child-care center. In the windows of row houses, “For Sale” signs have long since given way to plywood. Illegible signs and graffiti tags mark much of the former candy-making factory and warehouse. A rusting teacher’s desk barely visible through a blownout window is the only vestige of what was once a neighborhood school.

But inside the child-care center, 3-year-old Deon looks at his favorite book. *Where the Wild Things Are!* (Sendak, 1967) along with a gaggle of similarly aged children who implore him read it again. He flips the pages, jabbing his little finger hard at Sendak’s witty monsters and carrying out a running commentary with his friends on the actions of the wild things “dancin’ in the trees,” and the sea monster “breathin’ fire.”

It looks so simple and natural. And yet there is nothing simple about what Deon is doing. Or where he is doing it. Or when. On this bleak street, at this struggling child-care center, at this age, it is something of a near miracle that Deon has a book in his hands. With less than US\$1 per week per child for supplies in government subsidized child care, books are in short supply (Pennsylvania Department of Education, personal communication. June 8, 1998). That Deon is able to choose from so many selections is the result of a bold campaign to “put books in children’s hands.” The program, called Books Aloud (Neuman, 1999), a joint effort among philanthropists, educators, and librarians, has introduced Deon and others like him to the power and pleasure of reading.

Books Aloud came about as the result of a long plane ride during which two executives from a local foundation were deep in conversation. One was concerned about the state of child care

and the lack of quality in early childhood curriculum. The other was equally concerned about libraries and their outreach to community organizations. What began as a casual conversation later became a US\$2.5 million 2-year effort to improve language and literacy development for over 18,000 children in low income areas. This article gives an overview of the project detailing its progress, processes, and impact on children's literacy development.

The Numbers

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Background

Books Aloud was designed as a loosely structured collaboration between the Office of Public Service Support of the Free Library of Philadelphia and seven county and city library systems in the Delaware Valley region of Pennsylvania. Its purpose was to enhance the language and literacy opportunities for children, from infants through age 5. But its larger focus was perhaps its most innovative feature: Books Aloud was designed to enrich the lives of economically disadvantaged children in child-care centers and support the child-care providers who shepherd those toddlers and preschoolers through long days that stretch from before dawn to past supper time. In doing so, the Books Aloud program departed from the usual theme of getting parents to read to their children, to one of helping child-care workers read and read often to children. "We knew that these children often spend more waking hours at child-care centers than they do at home," reported Dick Cox, the now-retired vice president of the local foundation who conceived and helped launch Books Aloud. "And we hoped that if we could get teachers motivated to use printed material, then perhaps children would get excited about books and would take them home to parents."

The effort to put books in children's hands resulted in a dazzling display of ways in which libraries can support Literacy. With funds from the foundation and special library discounts of 40%, the project provided more than 89,000 brand-new storybooks to 17,675 toddlers and preschoolers in child-care centers and family child-care homes, along with bookcases and storage and display racks to create library corners in classrooms. In a single month, 325 child-care centers and 250 family child-care homes—at a ratio of five books per child—were flooded with sturdy board books, beautiful picture books, and books that rhymed and counted and told wonderful stories. All of them came with special permabound covers, Books Aloud bookplates, and a promise



from the program to help repair the books after they'd been played with and ripped and loved to the point of falling apart. "It felt like Christmas morning," remembers Ann Boyle, the director of Deon's facility. "We had always tried to buy books a few at a time, and even then, it would kill the budget just for glue and scissors and construction paper. Now we got boxes and boxes of them, so many that we were able to have multiple libraries for children to use in one classroom."

But the books came with something else that distinguished this program from other "book floods" in the past: 10 hours of training for childcare providers. The purpose of the training program was to emphasize the importance of the early years in establishing a foundation for literacy, to create environments that engage children in print activities, to foster effective read-aloud techniques, and to make books and story reading a constant presence in their everyday activities not just a "fill-in" activity wedged between arts and crafts and nap time (Neuman, 1997).

To effectively train child-care workers, Books Aloud dispatched a small army of 22 "preschool specialists"-good-will ambassadors-many of whom were retired teachers-to help child-care providers set up library corners and display the new books in ways that would entice children to use them, play with them, and read them. At the beginning of the experiment, just 20% of the classrooms had some kind of a book nook, although 30% had TVs. By the end of the program, virtually all of the 325 centers and 250 child-care homes had a special book corner, with child-size display bookcases provided by Books Aloud.

In 2 years of intensive biweekly visits to centers, trainers like Jean Byrne encountered child-care providers who hustled the new books out of children's reach, in the belief that they were too precious to let children play with. Some simply did not see the point of exposing babies to books when they obviously couldn't read. Trainers heard some providers protest that they didn't read well aloud-a face-saving device, followed by a later admission that they couldn't really read well themselves. They found that some providers were so focused on teaching preschoolers the alphabet that they had no time-and no patience-for indulgences like storybooks.

These preschool specialist trainers realized that though they lacked formal training, childcare workers were hardly empty vessels waiting to be filled by expert knowledge from outside resource specialists. What they were teaching was based on their instincts, values, beliefs, and sense of what was right for young

children. Trainers had to respect those values, and try not to change but to stretch their beliefs, selling what they knew about early literacy practices as something teachers might find of value, and then encouraging them to “take it out for a trial spin.”

And sell they did. In visits to child-care centers, preschool specialists kept the message focused: “Put books in children’s hands, whether it is potty time, free-play time, or nap time. Read them stories and let them play with and touch the books and see the pictures and print. Children will learn that words tell stories. They will begin to recognize letters and sounds, and without seeming to try, they will build a foundation for literacy.”

Progress and Processes of Books Aloud

Several months before the project was to begin, I was invited to conduct a large-scale evaluation of Books Aloud. The funders had seen too many good-hearted service projects go by the wayside, and wanted a rigorous analysis of “whether or not the project was successful. With colleague Donna Celano and 10 research assistants over the course of 2 years, we examined how books and staff training became integrated into the lives of children and their child-care providers in low income child-care centers. We designed an experimental study with more than 500 3- and 4-year-old children in centers across the region, and a series of naturalistic studies. Spending literally hundreds of hours in centers, we watched how teachers in the child care community reacted to the critical message of Books Aloud, and to the importance of early literacy development. The story of Holy Day Child Care Center is one among many.

Holy Day Child Care Center

Holy Day Child Care Center (pseudonym) is housed in Sunday school classrooms of a former Baptist church, in a neighborhood that was once a bustling working-class community, but is now unquestionably poor. Although she has worked in child care for over 20 years and has an associate’s degree in early childhood education, the director is new to the center. The center is run on a bare-bones budget since many of the families it serves are on public assistance. Basic supplies are difficult to come by, and books nonexistent.

Child care for the center’s staff is largely about nurturance and social development. “We do what we can to make sure the children are well cared for and try to get them ready for kindergarten,” said the director. Readiness training emphasizes

self-help skills such as eating, dressing, and toilet training, along with some skills associated with academic readiness. There is no established curriculum. Teachers create lessons using flashcards, coloring books, and worksheets copied from old workbooks. Ms. Helen is one of eight teachers at the school. With little formal training, she is highly experienced, having worked in child care for years. Visitors to her room find a warm and caring environment. As the 3- to 4-year-old children arrive each morning, they are greeted with smiles and informal conversation; parents are welcomed and eagerly exchange information on children's personal hygiene and social behaviors. Her interactions with parents and children make it clear that Ms. Helen enjoys her work.

Lessons begin first thing in the morning, focusing on rudimentary skills like days of the week and letter and number recognition. Ms. Helen arranges the children's seats carefully in rows. She holds up a flashcard, points to the number or letter, and asks the children to repeat it. Children are encouraged to name words that begin with different letters of the alphabet. On some occasions, after the lesson is over, Ms. Helen may try to read a storybook. However, she finds that children invariably turn disruptive, popping up out of their seats, shouting out something about the story or asking questions. Further, the toddler teacher across the way usually insists on turning up the volume on TV just as Ms. Helen is about to read. Resignedly, she has decided that children may not be ready to sit through a story.

Part of the problem, she recognizes, may be the physical design of her classroom. "There are so many distractions here," she explained. "No wonder they can't pay attention." On a good day the room is merely noisy, with the sound of toddlers playing and running around, but on other days, the noise level is deafening. There are sounds of children yelling, crying, roughhousing, and watching videos or daytime TV. Consequently, although the books they anticipate from the Books Aloud project are much needed, the staff is not exactly sure where to put them and what to do with them.

They decide to create a library for the entire center. On a follow-up visit, we find the new books up on the former altar of the church with beaming lights fixed on them as if they were beautiful trophies. The staff is eager for training, wanting to use the new resources to children's advantages. After many informal visits and conversations, Jean Byrne, the preschool specialist assigned to the center, has gained their confidence.

Jean wants to help teachers understand the importance of books in children's development and learning. Her training focuses



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on selecting age-appropriate books, storybook read-aloud techniques, story stretchers to promote vocabulary, and ways to enhance the physical environment to provide better access to books. Each visit includes new ideas and demonstrations, simple handouts that highlight key information, and many suggestions for good reading. For example, in one of her first visits, she encourages teachers to focus on children's age and developmental level when selecting books to read. At the next visit, she emphasizes book-reading techniques and how different types of books may be used for different purposes. A book about feelings might lead to questions such as "How do you think this character feels?" or "How would you feel if this happened to you?"

Subsequent sessions focus on language and conversation as a way of stretching children's learning from the story. Jean describes how children need to ask questions to try to understand and resolve issues triggered by the text. "Children need to think about 'where the story is going,' and link what they already know to what they are learning and what they want to know more about." She shows them some simple ways of helping children reconstruct the story using paper-bag puppets, and gives them a simple ready-made flannel board and felt to make new characters. Throughout the sessions, Jean demonstrates the power of rereading books by showing teachers how children ask better questions, use new vocabulary from the book, and gain mastery of a wide variety of topics. "See what they've learned?" she says. She suggests changes in room arrangements so that children can read independently, and gives a few hints on keeping books healthy for little hands to enjoy.

While the children are napping and the lights are turned out in the large room, Jean and the teachers hold their sessions. As they whisper softly and become more comfortable with one another, teachers raise issues about reading and ask questions. Ms. Fern asks, "How do I keep children's attention?" Jean shows them props and suggests Ms. Fern read the same story several times, each time with a different goal. "On the first day, you can just look at the pictures and talk about them. On the next, you can read it and point to the pictures. And on the third day, you can encourage the children to read along with you during predictable parts."

Jean talks about how to prepare for the story time with age-appropriate books, "You may start with an attention book, one that requires the children to focus, and then a rhyming book to encourage lots of interaction." She discusses the room arrangement and the ways in which children can be better grouped to react to the book. She also raises the sensitive issue of collaboration among staff. "You need to be respectful of others' story times.

When one is reading, the others need to be mindful and not turn on the TV or do loud activities. Don't let disruptions ruin the story."

In subsequent weeks, Jean emphasizes the importance of having children handle books on their own. She suggests that they move the bookcases down from the altar, using them as semi fixed structures to more clearly define classroom spaces. Along with these suggestions, she conducts regular demonstration lessons in each class, showing teachers how to use the flannel board and how to raise questions that might generate discussion among young children. In one visit, the teacher tells us, "That Jean, she's helped move those bookcases down. Before, I would forget that the books were up there. The children would say, 'But we forgot to go to the library today.' And I would feel terrible. But now they are right here in the classroom and they can go get them themselves." We began to notice not-so-subtle changes in classroom activities. One day, for example, we entered a freezing classroom. Children were sitting in this dark, windowless room, wrapped in sweaters and coats, the single fixture high up in the 14-foot ceiling adding little light to the room. Despite these discomforts, eight young children sat happily on the floor surrounding Ms. Helen, who quietly read *Letters From Felix* (Langen, 1994, Abbeville). The children listened intently. "Can you smell the cookies being baked?" Ms. Helen asked as she sniffed the air. The children followed her lead. "Let's smell them together," and each child touched the page with the cookies. After the reading, Ms. Helen told the children to get a book from the nearby open-faced bookcase, which now had about 20 high-quality hardcover children's books. They gathered around the bookcase, asking questions and telling their own stories to go along with the words.

By the end of the year, there are significant changes. Replacing the morning recitation of the alphabet is a regularly scheduled story hour for the children. After group readings, children handle books, reenact stories, and engage in conversations. The toddler teacher, Ms. Robin, has selected age-appropriate books for her 2-year-olds and reads to them in small groups. The TV is off. The teachers are even making some beginning attempts at theme-based instruction, linking books with other subjects and field trips outside of the center. They have also created a small lending library for parents to take home books to read to their children. In short, book use and story time now seem to be a significant part of the day.

Certainly the environment is not ideal, nor is the curriculum particularly developmentally appropriate. But teachers' beliefs

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and practices have clearly evolved from often relentless drill and worksheet practice to book-related activities. Jean's clear, focused, concrete, and realistic suggestions for ways in which to use books successfully addressed teachers' beliefs about their appropriateness and their cognitive value in daily activities. Her demonstrations provided concrete evidence that not only do children need to feel nurtured, but also they need and are motivated to learn, given the setting, time, and opportunity.

Even with a large quantity of new books, Jean reminded teachers that children will eventually tire of hearing the same familiar stories. Children want to be continually challenged with an ever-changing selection of books. As a parting gesture, Jean accompanied teachers and children on a field trip to the local library to help children register for their first library cards.

Impact of Books Aloud

The story of Holy Day Child Care Center is one that we would come to see more often than not. Among the more than 18,000 young children affected by Books Aloud in its first year, about 1 in 5 initially had library cards. Today, about 3 in 5 do. Small wins—not dramatic shifts in educational philosophy or curriculum change. But small wins can be bundled together to lead to big consequences, as in the case of Books Aloud.

Full documentation of the results of Books Aloud is available from other sources (Neuman, 1997, 1999), yet the description of the project would not be complete without briefly summarizing the findings. Comparing the abilities of children not involved in the project but in comparable low-income centers, we found striking differences in early literacy scores for children from Books Aloud child-care centers (see Neuman, 1997 for complete description of research design). Exposed to more storybooks in Books Aloud centers, children were better able to tell and recount stories, recognize letters, understand the conventions of print (that text and not artwork tells the story, for example, and that print moves from left to right), and grasp early writing skills than their counterparts not in the program. What was particularly interesting is that toddlers benefited just as much as preschool children. As a conceptually rich activity, book reading stimulated literacy growth and continuous development, suggesting its flexibility as well as its challenging cognitive benefits. For very young children, age-appropriate book reading involved labeling and feedback activities around board books and concept books; for other children, more continuous dialogue and interactions with

predictable books and beginning narratives enhanced language and other critical skills.

Observations of classrooms, however, perhaps convey the effect of Books Aloud best. In Deon's classroom, book reading has become more than a segment in a day crowded with physical activity. It has become a point of departure for questions and—something that many of these children get little of with parents who struggle to make ends meet. It has become a key to unlock the unending mysteries of how books work. In the act of turning pages gently and slowing down to gaze at pictures, highly active children like Deon have learned, literally, what it feels like to learn. Reports his teacher, "You really can't teach a child to have enthusiasm or motivation to learn, but if I give them a love of reading, their natural desire to keep at it will take them far—farther than anything else I can do for them. It gives them a fighting chance."

Put Books in Children's Hands

Books Aloud has now run its course; trainers have moved on to other teaching or library positions. Their efforts, however, are still producing results. Centers have maintained their book areas. Some are especially attractive and child centered, with spaces for book reading, play, and books in interest centers. Others have put in chairs or comfortable rugs so that children can sit and read nearby. Still others may have only a bookcase. Yet once again, we find small wins. In one class, for example, we locate a bookcase, but are dismayed to see no books on it. Looking more closely, we find four very young children with books all around them, reading, pretending to read, giggling, and playing together. Even in the most sparsely lit, poorly configured spaces, books are in children's hands.

Following many of these children to kindergarten, we have asked teachers. "Do Books Aloud children seem interested in books, ask questions, and contribute to book discussions? Are children developing the skills that are critical for success in reading?" There seems to be a powerful consensus: Books Aloud children are better prepared to learn in kindergarten.

Teachers share many examples. One young girl is already familiar with the stories the teacher is reading to the class, answering questions sometimes before they are asked. Another seems to be reading, and her "book behavior is more advanced than that of the rest of the class." Another child regales the other children with

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his rendition of 'The Gingerbread Man,' reciting, "Run run as fast as you can, you can't stop me, I'm the gingerbread man." Some of the children who already know the predictable phrases chime them aloud along with him. Children's literacy skills, measured against their counterparts who did not have the benefits of Books Aloud, also provide a telling picture. Even 6 months later, there were dramatic differences in phonological awareness, letter knowledge, narrative abilities, and writing (Neuman, 1999). It is not surprising that the shared book experience is considered the single most important activity in early literacy development: Children's growth in reading and writing serves to confirm and extend its power.

Results of Books Aloud corroborates the International Reading Association/National Association for the Education of Young Children declaration in their position statement on "Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children" (International Reading Association/National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998) that language and literacy teaching begins well before kindergarten. Whatever their economic status, young children thrive in print-rich environments with supportive caregivers to engage them, in thinking and talking about storybooks. Through these interactions, children acquire new vocabulary and some level of print awareness, as well as play with and analyze the sounds of language long before formal reading instruction begins in elementary school. Books make a critical difference in this process, providing children as young as infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with models of good language teaching that prepare them for the task of learning to read. Consequently, for those in the early childhood community who still cling to the view that children are not intellectually ready to be exposed to reading or writing, we would urge them to heed the position statement's warning that, "failing to give children literacy experiences until they are school age can severely limit the reading and writing levels they ultimately attain" (International Reading Association/National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p. 10).

Further substantiation for the importance of early language and literacy experiences comes from the National Research Council's report Preventing Reading Difficulties (Snow, Bums, & Griffin, 1998). The authors suggest that opportunities to engage with print may act as a primary prevention of reading difficulties. Stanovich and West (1989), focusing on the role of print exposure, found it to be a potent predictor of vocabulary growth, knowledge acquisition, and a variety of verbal skills. Print exposes children to words outside of their current vocabulary far more effectively

But it is not just exposure to books that makes a difference. Children need skillfully mediated assistance in book reading by their caregivers that can help to explain the workings of literacy.

than conversational talk or other media like watching television (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Anderson and Nagy (1992), for example, estimated that children learn an average of 4,000 to 12,000 new words each year as a result of book reading. It is for this reason that the International Reading Association (2000) has recommended that at the very minimum, school library media centers have 20 books per child, and classroom libraries 7 books per child, with 2 additional new books per child to be purchased each year.

But it is not just exposure to books that makes a difference. Children need skillfully mediated assistance in book reading by their caregivers that can help to explain the workings of literacy. As a large number of scholars have reported (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1994), it is the intensity of engagement the quality of talk and conversational interactions between adult and child that nurtures and helps them to construct vital literacy-related concepts. These conversations allow them to stretch their understanding of phenomena and use their increasingly rich vocabulary in other contexts. Playing with words, letters, and sounds in contexts that are meaningful to them, children begin to attend to the features of print and the alphabetic nature of reading.

Therefore, given the enormous disparities among different income groups, how can we ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed in reading? As we confirmed in this research: Increase the volume, quality, and intensity of young children's stimulating experiences with good books at an early age. Provide opportunities for young children to hear, see, and participate in a wide range of activities with their caregivers who may help them to uncover the mysteries of written language. As Books Aloud has advocated, find every way to "put books in children's hands."

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