

# Preschool Education through Public Libraries

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*This paper examines public library services to young children and their families and the possible effects of those services on preschool learning. The authors find that the American public library's democratic service mission, coupled with its ability to provide children with appropriate preschool educational experiences, has the potential benefit of preparing all children to be ready to learn when they enter school. The types of learning experiences naturally suited to public library services and library-community partnerships are those in the area of literacy, the crucial foundation for the learning that takes place both in and out of school.*

*The four sections of the paper focus on the rationale and context for connecting public libraries and literacy (the introduction); analyzing the readiness-to-learn literature, especially as it pertains to literacy (Readiness to Learn); constructing a framework for literacy based on current theory, research, and exemplary practice (The Framework); and applying the framework to a discussion of readiness practices and programs in public libraries (Exemplary Public Library Practices and Programs for Preschoolers and Their Caregivers).*

At the heart of a true democracy stands the principle that all the people have equal access to the opportunities available in that society. The effects of schooling on the individual in achieving that access, although profound, pale in comparison to the effects of the individual's early childhood and preschool experiences. How a child talks, how a child listens, how a child thinks and learns are all formed before any school experience. How a child interacts with others, solves problems, and resolves conflicts are all shaped by early childhood experiences. It is not simply the logic of its developmental chronology that makes School Readiness the first of the National Education Goals. The learning that takes place in the preschool years is the foundation upon which all future learning is built.

## The School Readiness Goal

In 1989 in Charlottesville, Virginia, the nation's governors established the education priorities designed to prepare America's citizens for the twenty-first century. The president and the governors jointly adopted the six-goal initiative in 1990; two goals were subsequently added, and

the National Education Goals were incorporated into law in March 1994 when the 103rd Congress passed Goals 2000: Educate America Act.

Three objectives were established to meet the School Readiness Goal that “by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn:

1. All children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school.
2. Every parent in the United States will be a child’s first teacher and devote time each day to helping such parent’s preschool child learn, and parents will have access to the training and support parents need.
3. Children will receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and to maintain the mental alertness necessary to be prepared to learn, and the number of low-birthweight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems.” (National Education Goals Panel 1994, 8)

## Public Libraries and the School Readiness Goal

The relationship between public libraries and the school readiness goal is an ideal and natural partnership for four major reasons:

1. From a professional standpoint, public libraries already have identified themselves in that crucial role. Preparing preschoolers for learning was identified as one of the eight major roles that libraries can play in their communities in the Public Library Association’s widely accepted planning and evaluation document, *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries: A Manual of Options and Procedures* (McClure et al.1987).
2. From an advocacy perspective, the importance of this public library role as the preschoolers’ door to learning was presented in a landmark paper entitled “Kids Need Libraries” developed by members of the three youth divisions of the American Library Association (ALA) for the Second White House Conference on Library and Information Services (Mathews, Flum, and Whitney 1990). Among the readiness-related activities advocated for meeting the developmental needs of children are encouraging parents to carry out literacy activities at home, thereby becoming involved in their children’s learning, reaching out to youth who are at risk for learning failure, and sponsoring community reading celebrations. The strength of this position paper was further enhanced by the endorsement of eighteen national organizations concerned with the welfare of young children, including The National Black Child Development Institute, National Council of La Raza, Child Welfare League of America, and the Children’s Defense Fund. Library advocacy for children received an additional boost when it was made the primary focus of the 1996-97 ALA President Mary Somerville’s highly visible “Kids Can’t Wait” campaign. The position paper prepared for Somerville’s campaign continued the strong advocacy message begun in “Kids Need Libraries” (Mathews 1996).
3. From an historical perspective, public librarians already are working directly with preschoolers, providing storyhours and additional readiness experiences, as well as supporting readiness by providing materials for preschoolers’ parents, teachers, and caregivers. Eighty-six percent of the public libraries surveyed in a study by the National Center for Education Statistics report offering group programs for preschool and

kindergarten children (Heaviside and Farris 1995). Forty percent of those libraries also offer group programs for infants and toddlers, an increase from 29% in 1988. Sixty-six percent work directly with preschools, and 56% work with day care centers. Clearly, public libraries already accept their role in providing readiness activities for preschoolers.

4. From a practical viewpoint, public libraries are at the hub of community-wide efforts. In Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the most impoverished rural and urban communities are targeted for community partnerships to support “sustained collaborations” among a variety of educational, community, and business agencies. Libraries are specifically mentioned as appropriate agencies for these collaborations (U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science 1992, 136–37). One might conclude that *every* community serviced by a public library should make that library an integral part of any plan designed to be community-wide and comprehensive, because the nature of public library service is to meet the specific needs of the individuals in the whole community that library serves.

## Literacy As the Main Focus of the Public Library-School Readiness Partnership

Although libraries and librarians can and should support a wide array of developmental needs associated with getting preschoolers ready for school (e.g., physical health by providing relevant material and community resource referrals), the major focus of this paper is on the public library’s contribution to school readiness through the provision of literacy experiences for preschoolers and the support of parents’ and caregivers’ efforts to provide those experiences. Support for this focus on literacy is drawn from four sources:

1. The National Education Goals Panel (1994) selected 16 indicators for measuring the attainment and progress of the 8 National Education Goals. Four of those indicators were assigned to the School Readiness Goal—two pertaining to children’s health and two pertaining to children’s learning. “Participation in preschool programs” and “family-child reading and storytelling” are the two learning indicators, the latter being the prime pathway for children becoming literate. It is clear that the Panel judges literacy as a significant aspect of readiness since the indicators were selected based on characteristics such as comprehensiveness across all goals, how critical indicators are in determining whether the goals are actually achieved, and how “policy-actionable” they are. The Panel’s 1994 report, *Building a Nation of Learners*, states that “early, regular reading to children is one of the most important activities parents can do with their children to improve their readiness for school, serve as their child’s first teacher, and instill a love of books and reading” (24).
2. The 1991 National Survey of Kindergarten Teachers, conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Boyer 1991), found that deficiencies in language—certainly associated with literacy—were named most often as the cause of children entering kindergarten not being prepared for school. The data indicate that 42% of the teachers surveyed believed that their entering students were less ready than the students that entered their kindergarten classes 5 years earlier (7) and that they see an average of 35% of the entering kindergartners as “not ready to participate successfully” (149). Of the problems or missing skills cited for this lack of readiness—e.g., physical well-being (6%), moral awareness (21%), social confidence (31%), general knowledge (38%), emotional maturity (43%)-deficiencies in language were considered the most

serious problem in 51% and a moderate problem in another 37% of these children who were not ready to learn (37, 150).

3. Theoretical and empirical research studies document and support the wide-ranging effects of becoming a literate person—enabling persons to think about the world, to learn through social interactions, to evaluate and debate issues, and to do better in school (Garton and Pratt 1989). A literate learner is the basic requirement for most effective instruction, and literacy is the primary path for all advanced learning.
4. Even with the increased use of technology in libraries, books still retain a prominent role. It seems important to state the obvious—literacy, especially early literacy training for young children, should take place where the primary means of providing literacy instruction reside. The means are children’s books, and their primary home in our culture for the past 100 years has been the public library.

## Readiness to Learn

### Defining Learning Readiness Regarding Literacy

In this section, the foundation for public libraries’ contribution to literacy development in young children is explored through an analysis of the readiness-to-learn literature. This analysis describes the precursors to literacy as they emerge across the preschool years, identifies variables that promote this early literacy, and examines significant variations in early literacy both within and across preschool populations. This latter section has particular relevance for drawing attention to the kinds of individual differences that may put children at risk for failing to acquire literacy during their formal schooling and for suggesting effective educational intervention strategies to increase their readiness for, and success in, learning.

### Literacy

This paper will refer to literacy in its broadest sense, encompassing the mastery of reading and writing skills, and also the skills of listening and speaking. This broader definition is commonly used by those who study literacy due to the interrelatedness of those skills (Garton and Pratt 1989, 1).

Literacy involves more than the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in isolation. Literacy also implies communication and development within a meaningful social and cultural context (Vygotsky 1978). In addition, a truly literate person is disposed toward lifelong literacy in that he or she reads, writes, and converses because those activities improve one’s life by leading to enjoyment, understanding, self-expression, and learning about oneself and the world (Slaughter-Defoe 1992).

In the context of how public libraries contribute to the literacy of preschoolers, literacy is characterized by children enjoying listening to songs and stories, talking about stories and books, and reading, and writing as purposeful, meaningful activities within their own social and cultural worlds.

## Readiness

Readiness is a more elusive concept to define. At one time readiness for literacy was thought of as a set of prerequisite skills (e.g., recognition of alphabet letters or auditory discrimination skills) whose accomplishment would lead to development of conventional literacy. These skills were thought to emerge in a predictable sequence, to be directly measurable, and to be accessible to be taught through direct instruction. For decades school reading programs reflected this view of literacy readiness until research over the past twenty-five years began to challenge the status quo. Naturalistic studies of how children develop oral, reading, and writing abilities demonstrate that young children learn best about literacy through informal yet meaningful interactions with literacy in their homes and communities (e.g., being read to, helping with the grocery list, answering the telephone). This newer view of readiness requires literacy-rich environments in the early years joined by later schooling experiences that build upon the learning and skills children already have developed at home (Morrow 1993, 1–13). Instead of teaching children discrete readiness skills, teachers should endeavor to learn about the literacy that each child brings to school—literacy that has emerged through the influence of family and community throughout the preschool years.

This concept of emergent literacy has influenced the definition of readiness. Literacy readiness now can be viewed as understandings, skills, and attitudes that begin to develop very early in life, develop through meaningful interactions in one's environment, and show different developmental paths and timing among children (Teale 1995). The match between home and school literacy, that is, the continuity and developmental appropriateness of children's learning opportunities, influences how well the child learns when formal schooling begins. Clearly, a child's readiness for school is related to how responsive schools are to children's unique backgrounds and experiences (National Association for the Education of Young Children—NAEYC 1990).

## The Growth of Literacy across the Preschool Years

The foundation for emergent literacy is in preschool experiences with language. Without language play and language practice, there is no future reader, writer, or conversationalist. Although the course and sequence of development vary from child to child, years of research provide a sound collection of developmental abilities *typically* found at particular ages. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp 1992) recommends the following as examples of age-appropriate experiences:

- Infants: caregiver responding to baby's cries and coos, talking and singing to baby, imitating baby's sounds, taking turns vocalizing.
- Toddlers: naming objects and events for child, reading storybooks, helping the child with words to express him/herself, providing crayons and paints for experimenting.
- Three-year-olds: answering child's questions, singing songs and saying rhymes together, using clear and easy-to-understand language with the child, using language for reassurance.
- Four-year-olds: helping the child carry on conversations, pointing out print in the environment, encouraging pretend play, writing words for the child.

In studying the typical progressions of child development, one also can make predictions about likely literacy-related behaviors emerging at particular ages. This kind of knowledge helps adults working with preschool children to recognize, affirm, and expand upon children's emerging literacy—an infant's attempts to attract and hold the attention of the caregiver, a toddler's repeated words and mimicked animal sounds, a 3-year-old's request to hear a favorite story, and a 4-year-old's telling of a joke (Herb and Willoughby-Herb 1994, 10–14).

When studying the literature on typical developmental behaviors of young children and the correspondingly appropriate experiences that adults can provide for children, one notices that the roots of literacy appear to be strongly grounded in the playfulness of oral language interactions between a child and an adult. In fact, playful oral language experiences prepare children to understand and experiment with written language later. In his passionate call for our society to reinvest in our children's literacy, Sanders speaks of a growing number of violent and illiterate young people as “post-illiterates . . . at home neither in orality nor in literacy” (1994, 78). Sanders' historical research leads him to conclude that children need to be immersed in an oral literacy environment—speaking and listening—that is intimately connected to their personal-social lives (within the family) before they will profit from experiences with text and writing. This view of the importance of oral literacy from a personal-social perspective is also a recognition of the importance of “story” in an individual's life, especially the story of one's own existence. Oliver Sacks, in a moving account of Karsakov's syndrome (sufferers often are unable to remember what they did even a few minutes previously, and confabulation, or the invention of stories, may occur to make up for gaps in memory), writes of the importance of one's own story, one's own narrative or history as the very confirmation of one's existence. “To be ourselves we must *have* ourselves—possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must ‘recollect’ ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man *needs* such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self” (1987, 111). Gardner's recent study of 11 world leaders describes that what they had in common was “the fact that they arrived at a story that worked for them and, ultimately, for others as well. They told stories—in so many words—about themselves and their groups, about where they were coming from and where they were headed, about what was to be feared, struggled against, and dreamed about” (1995, 14). If indeed one can define one's life through narrative, what is the nature of the life that occurs in the absence of story?

In summary, two universal themes can be derived from developmental and historical studies of literacy readiness:

1. Enough is known about general patterns of developmental growth across the preschool years to identify when particular literacy-related learning is likely to emerge and to describe the kinds of environmental interactions that fit those emerging behaviors. In fact, resources already have been developed to guide adults in observing and providing developmentally appropriate activities for children's emergent literacy across the preschool years (Glazer and Burke 1994; Hart, Burts, and Charlesworth 1997).
2. Conventional literacy is dependent on a grounding in rich experiences with language play and oral literacy. Infants as young as 8 months old remember and respond to words found in stories they have heard repeatedly, even 2 weeks after last hearing the story (Jusczyk and Hohne 1997). The observations and experiences of Vivian Paley (1990, 1995) and Susan Engel (1995) provide justification and techniques for enhancing children's development through storytelling.

## Providing Supportive Environments for Preschool Literacy

Children’s understandings, skills, and attitudes about literacy develop through each individual’s particular social interactions, which vary considerably from child to child. One cannot create the same pathway to literacy for all children, but rather should create many successful pathways so that literacy can be attained by all children, especially those who have difficulty in learning. This section identifies conclusions from theoretical and research literature that describe how early literacy can be supported. It begins with several broad conclusions derived from developmental and learning theory and proceeds to the identification of research findings that substantiate the effectiveness of specific, replicable variables on literacy development.

### Theoretical Literature

Vygotsky (1978) proposes that children’s mental abilities develop as a function of social interactions with members of the child’s culture. Learning first occurs within this social context, and only later does the child internalize it so that it becomes “part of the child’s independent developmental achievement” (90). Vygotsky further distinguishes between development and learning: “Learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus, learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions” (90).

Learning takes place when a more competent person gives the child the support needed to engage in a task that would be too difficult to do alone at the child’s present developmental level. Vygotsky calls this area in which learning occurs the *Zone of Proximal Development*. Examples of enhancing literacy through working in the Zone are (1) a parent who remembers that her 4-month-old baby squeals excitedly at a particular page in a cardboard book, keeps track of the book, and reads it to the baby regularly, and (2) a librarian who notices a 2-year-old say “pumpkin-eater” when he touches a jack-o-lantern at the library and takes a moment to squat down to chant the whole rhyme with the child, perhaps repeating it at storytime. Notice that in both examples there is a shared cultural context between child and adult: the mother who can “read” baby’s emotions and pairs that with a cultural idea of a favorite book; the librarian who is knowledgeable of the songs and rhymes taught by families at home. This cultural sharing is necessary for learning because it provides continuity between what is already known and the new learning to be offered.

Bruner (1983), in his writing about language, agrees with Vygotsky about learning occurring through social interaction. He uses a concept similar to Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development in his focus on a teaching technique he calls “scaffolding.” Scaffolding involves an interaction that provides support for a child’s learning. For example, the use of “motherese” language—in which parents frequently employ a higher pitch to speak to babies or toddlers in clear, short sentences, and use longer pauses between sentences—increases the chances of the child’s understanding and possibly imitating or using the language. Researchers have found that the prosodic qualities of motherese provide infants as young as 7 to 9 months with cues to the units of speech that correspond to the grammatical units of language (Nelson et al. 1989) In other words, motherese teaches infants syntax.

Scaffolding works best when the adult is able to lead the child just a bit ahead, provide a pace for learning that suits the child, use familiar contexts, and keep the child an active participant. Even the very young child who actively participates in scaffolding is taking an important step in lifelong learning, one that allows instruction from others to be an important part of his or her development.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes that a child's development is affected by interactions within, between, and among various contextual settings ranging from those in which the child interacts nearly daily (e.g., family, child care center, and neighborhood playground) to those that are more removed but affect the child directly and indirectly (e.g., social service systems, parents' place of employment, and local, state, and national governments). This theory of development matches the philosophical wisdom of the African proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

Bandura's (1977, 1986) work in social learning theory contributes much evidence on the power of learning by imitation, one of the primary methods of acquiring literacy. For example, at the most basic level, early readers tend to come from homes where reading can be observed. Bandura's research on imitational learning informs practitioners that children are more likely to imitate models who are similar to them and are respected members of their community.

In summary, learning is facilitated when children have the following:

1. Opportunities to participate in literacy activities that are guided and paced by a more skillful member of the child's social-cultural world (Vygotsky 1978; Bruner 1983).
2. Opportunities for learning that enable the child to be an active participant, regardless of the modality being used (e.g., listening, looking, speaking) (Bruner 1983).
3. Opportunities for intimate learning; that is, learning with support from someone who knows the child well enough to make appropriate judgments about when and what the next learning steps should be (Bruner 1983). The emphasis on parents as first teachers in Goals 2000 is certainly supported by this aspect of Bruner's theory (Goals Panel 1994, 8).
4. Opportunities to acquire positive literacy attitudes through interacting with and observing models who will be most influential for individual learners, especially those models who share similar characteristics with the learner, and whom the learner respects and admires (Bandura 1977). The importance of acquiring a positive "literacy attitude" is amply demonstrated in much of the emergent literacy literature (Morrow 1993, 132–33).
5. Opportunities for support for learning that resides not just in their families and schools, but across a range of cultural contexts that directly and indirectly influence children's development (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

## Research Findings

While developmental and learning theories offer broad guidelines for evaluating and planning literacy programs, this section includes several findings about specific, effective practices in support of the theoretical conclusions. These findings may also serve as recommended practices for librarians designing programs. While there is a large body of research addressing the topic of effective techniques in support of early literacy development, this section focuses on practices derived from literature reviews and from more than one study; practices that seem possible to adapt to librarians working with children, families, and caregivers; and practices that are related to the roles that librarians can reasonably serve.

Some research findings regarding children's books follow:

1. Children's early experiences with children's books are among the most significant correlates with their success in learning to read in school. Specific aspects of these books, such as the interest level for children and ease of understanding and remembering the story, make the experience even more effective (Mason and Kerr 1992; Morrow 1993).
2. Children are more motivated to request being read to, and to "read" or explore on their own, from books with which they are already familiar or have heard or read before and have enjoyed (Brock and Dodd 1994; Dickinson et al. 1992; Herb 1987; Schickedanz 1993).
3. There is a positive relationship between how much children have been read to and how well they will read (Lancy 1994; Scarborough, Dobrich, and Hager 1991; Wells 1985).
4. Storybook reading is a more effective influence on literacy development when children have opportunities to engage in conversation about the story (Mason and Kerr 1992; Norman-Jackson 1982; Pellegrini and Galda 1994).

The research also produced findings regarding additional literacy factors:

1. Children benefit most from the opportunity to interact with on-the-spot literacy events in their everyday lives, such as watching for the McDonald's sign along the highway, finding a correct page in a catalog, or looking at one's own name on an envelope or name tag (Taylor and Strickland 1989; Teale 1995).
2. Literacy is enhanced when adults join in with children's pretend or symbolic play; for example, playing restaurant or playing school (Norman-Jackson 1982; Pellegrini and Galda 1994).

In addition to guiding library practice in programming for preschoolers, these findings also might suggest content for workshops in which librarians, parents, caregivers, and preschool teachers share techniques for enhancing children's literacy.

## Children at Risk for Difficulties in Acquiring Literacy

Identification of the variables or conditions associated with difficulty in literacy acquisition is a good first step toward assuring that all children find a successful pathway to literacy.

### The Socioeconomic Status Factor

The socioeconomic circumstances of a child's world can interact with a child's literacy development in many ways. Hart and Risley have found that one of the most frightening ways economic circumstances affect a child's literacy development is through the relative frequency of social interaction between parents and young children. As Bloom points out in her foreword to *Meaningful Differences* (Hart and Risley 1995):

Hart and Risley discovered that some things don't matter [in literacy development]. For example, race/ethnicity doesn't matter; gender doesn't matter; whether a child is the first in the family or born later also doesn't matter. But what does matter, and it matters very much, is relative economic advantage. First, . . . children living in poverty, children born into middle-class homes, and children with professional parents *all have the same kinds*

*of everyday language experiences.* They all hear talk about persons and things, about relationships, actions, and feelings, and about past and future events. And they all participate in interactions with others in which what they do is prompted, responded to, prohibited, or affirmed. But children in more economically privileged families hear some of these things more often and others less often, than children in poverty and working-class homes. The differences between the families . . . were not in the kinds of experiences they provided their children but in the differing amounts of those experiences. The basic finding is that children who learn fewer words also have fewer experiences with words in interactions with other persons, and they are also children growing up in less economically advantaged homes . . . It turns out that *frequency matters* . . . And the finding is heartbreaking that by the time the children were 3 years old, *parents* in less economically favored circumstances had said fewer different words in their cumulative monthly vocabularies than had the *children* in the most economically advantaged families in the same period of time (x–xiii).

Poorer preschool children and those from working-class homes are also less likely to have children's books in their homes, are less likely to be read to frequently and at an early age, are less likely to have opportunities to talk about books with an adult, and are less likely to have opportunities to engage in imaginative storytelling (Mason and Kerr 1992).

The effects of poverty on a child's learning history may continue into a child's schooling as well. McGill-Franzen and Langford (1994), in case studies of preschool children and their teachers, noted great differences between private and public urban preschools. Two of these differences likely to affect literacy were an absence—the public preschools included far fewer books for children to hear read and to play with independently, and a presence—the public preschool had teachers who already perceived the children as deficient learners in literacy areas. Seeing great differential effects on children's learning caused by these disparate preschool environments led the researchers to note their agreement with Kozol's assessment that these are indeed, "savage inequalities." It is reasonable to further conclude that a paucity of literacy opportunities, due to the economic status of the child, becomes more serious as children encounter less than appropriate schooling experiences along the way. Modell and Siegler (1993) report on the cumulative deteriorating effects of poverty on children's learning-by third grade, children from lower SES groups average one year behind their middle-class peers, but by sixth grade, the gap has doubled.

In spite of Head Start's great efforts, poor children are underrepresented in preschool enrollment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 21% of our kindergarten enrollment in 1992 was lower income children, while only 14% of our preschool enrollment was lower income children (Smith et al. 1994).

Statistics indicate that growing numbers of preschoolers are poor. The Child Welfare League of America's 1993 statistics book reports that "young children are more likely to be poor than any other age group in the United States" (Merkel-Holguin 1993, 13). The report on the state of America's children indicates that in 1994 over 21.8% of all children living in the United States lived in poverty, a slight improvement over the 22.7% reported in 1993, but the youngest children continue to be overrepresented—25.1% of children under 6 years are poor (Children's Defense Fund 1996). One reason posited by the Children's Defense Fund for these growing numbers is that the inflation-adjusted median income of young families with children dropped

34% between 1973 and 1992. The statistics also reveal a disproportionate number (54%) of poor children living in families with a single parent, typically the mother (Children's Defense Fund 1995). To have any hope of succeeding, emergent literacy programming efforts must address the particular circumstances of the single-parent family.

## Children Who Are Ethnic and Language Minorities

Some children who are members of ethnic and language minority groups are found to be at risk for difficulties with acquiring literacy for the following reasons:

1. The lack of congruity between the expectations and routines of the school curriculum and the children's entry knowledge, ways of knowing, and experiences (Gutierrez 1993).
2. Their disproportionate representation among children living in poverty. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 1992, black children were almost three times as likely to live in poverty as were white children (Smith et al. 1994). In 1994, 43.8% of all black children and 41.5% of all Latino children lived in poverty, compared with 16.9% of non-Latino white children (Children's Defense Fund 1996).
3. The lack of enrollment in preschool programs. The majority (62%) of U.S. children enrolled in preschool programs are in private preschools, thereby making the economic circumstances of a family a factor in preschool selection. While U.S. kindergarten minority enrollment is 30%, preschool minority enrollment is only 20% (Smith et al. 1994); therefore, only two-thirds of minority children who attend kindergarten have been in a preschool program.
4. The growing numbers of children coming from homes where English is not the primary language. Many of these children have difficulty acquiring literacy skills in English, not having had the opportunity to listen to and speak English before having to learn reading and writing English. In 1990, 14% of all U.S. children ages 5 to 17 lived in homes where English was not spoken, and one-third of these children had difficulty speaking English themselves (Smith et al. 1994, 130).

## Children Who May Have Few or Less Helpful Early Literacy Experiences

Research documents specific kinds of family literacy practices that seem to place children at a higher risk for failure to acquire literacy. These include:

- Families in which adults are nonreaders or poor readers and do not engage in story discussions (Scarborough, Dobrich, and Hager 1991);
- Families in which adults do read to children, but do so in a word-by-word manner and stop for conversations about letters and sounds as opposed to the story itself (Mason and Kerr 1992);
- Environments in which adults discourage children's verbalizations (Lancy 1994; Norman-Jackson 1982); and
- Environments in which there are no special places for books to be kept, nor special times/routines for sharing them (Scarborough, Dobrich, and Hager 1991).

Data regarding children's experiences in preschools, child care centers, and child care homes also demonstrate many factors that seem to place children at a higher risk for failure to acquire literacy:

- Many children are cared for away from their homes. For example, 60% of married women with children under 6 years work. Approximately 57% of their children are cared for in child care homes or child care centers. Concerns continue to grow about the appropriateness of the care children receive as
  - professional standards for quality care are not in wide compliance,
  - researchers studying family child care homes have observed care so poor in some that they believe it may actually harm children's development, and
  - poor and minority children are more likely to be in lower quality child care situations (Children's Defense Fund 1996, 25–33).
- Concerns about the expertise and consistency of nurturance among staff in child care settings grow in proportion to the escalating staff turnover and in inverse proportion to the declining salaries of child care staff (Merkel-Holguin 1993, 75–78).

## **Children Whose Learning or Behavior Characteristics Put Them at Risk**

Many children develop negative feelings or attitudes toward literacy at an early age, which may interfere with later literacy. There is, for example, a significant relationship between children who as preschoolers spent little or no time exploring/looking at/playing with books on their own and children who have difficulty learning to read (Scarborough, Dobrich, and Hager 1991; Schickedanz 1993).

Children with learning problems sometimes face the additional difficulty of parents and teachers lowering their literacy expectations. Many children who are receiving assistance for specific learning problems are overlooked when it comes to the provision of everyday literacy experiences (e.g., going to the library), or literacy development is not one of the higher educational priorities for the adults working with them (Marvin and Mirenda 1993).

## **Children Who Are Experiencing Great Stress in Their Lives**

The problems some children face in their daily lives seem to transcend the problem of being at risk for failure to acquire literacy. How can one worry about children learning to read if they do not have homes or they are being abused? The answer lies in coupling literacy efforts with all essential social programs, so that children facing difficult enough circumstances do not face the additional burden of illiteracy and its common partner, school failure. It is especially important to remember that education and literacy sometimes can provide an avenue for escape (Elder, Modell, and Parke 1993, 13). It is also important to note the prevalence of children facing these difficult circumstances:

1. Of a total population of nearly 72.3 million children from birth to age 19, 2.7 million were reported abused or neglected in 1991—a 333% increase since 1976. Nearly a third of these children (31.8%) were between the ages of 1 and 5 (Merkel-Holguin 1993, 55–56). The National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse reports that this number rose to 3.1 million children reported abused and neglected in 1994 (Children's Defense Fund 1996).
2. Of the nearly one-quarter million children in foster care in 1989, 26.8% (59) were between 1 and 5 years (Merkel-Holguin 1993, 128–129).
3. Families with children are the fastest growing homeless population in the United States, representing 39% of the total. On any given day, 100,000 children are without homes (Children's Defense Fund 1995).

4. The Children's Defense Fund (1995) reports that each year between 3.3 and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence (depending on definition of violence).
5. The estimated number of children with serious emotional disorders now exceeds 3 million, many of whom go unserved (Children's Defense Fund 1996).

## Successful Intervention Strategies for Children Who Are at Risk for Failing to Acquire Literacy

These intervention strategies are drawn from two types of studies—intervention programs for at-risk children (e.g., Head Start or family literacy training), and studies that compare environmental characteristics of children who do and do not do well in acquiring literacy.

1. Broad-based program efforts are needed that reach the family and child as a whole unit. This strategy is not limited to literacy-based programs by any means, but the library must become part of the community network of agencies, professionals, and other interested persons serving the needs of families (Children's Defense Fund 1995; Slaughter-Defoe 1992; Strickland 1994).
2. Children's developing literacy fares better when we help families and community agencies in obtaining numerous and appropriate (interesting, portraying diversity, good literature and art, meaningful) books for young children; when we see to it that children are regularly read to (Harris 1993; McGill-Franzen and Lanford 1994); and when children and their families are regular visitors to libraries and bookmobiles (Marvin and Miranda 1993).
3. Children who are most at risk need the resources of the very best trained staff—people who know about literacy development, child development, and family and community relations, as well as the content of their profession (e.g., librarianship) (NAEYC 1990; Strickland 1994); and the staff working with these children need to develop appropriate ways to interact with and respect children and families from diverse cultures (Crompton and Phillips 1995; Derman-Sparks 1989).
4. Children learn better when they and their families are involved in programs whose overall designs are characterized by
  - having aspects relevant and unique to their own family, community, and culture (Crompton and Phillips 1995; Strickland 1994);
  - involving families in ways that are affirming, inclusive, and empowering (Zigler and Muenchow 1992);
  - utilizing family and community members as paid employees (McConnell 1989; Zigler and Muenchow 1992); and
  - recognizing that in spite of numerous disadvantages, many parents are willing and able to learn a variety of literacy-supporting techniques with their young children (Mason and Kerr 1992).
5. For the most part, successful intervention programs for children who are at risk for difficulties with acquiring literacy are those with components drawn from the theory and research on how to support literacy development in all children. The following strategies are most effective when implemented in conjunction with the previous four.
  - Children acquire literacy better when they are actively involved in meaningful experiences with it (Slaughter-Defoe 1992).

- Children acquire literacy better when their literacy experiences build on their existing knowledge, strengths, and interests, instead of participating in experiences that focus on their disabilities (Slaughter-Defoe 1992).
- Although experience with high-quality children’s literature is the single most effective influence on literacy development (Mason and Kerr 1992; Morrow 1993), sometimes books are not the most effective starting place for intervention. Other paths (e.g., pretend play, drawing, storytelling, puppetry) also can be successful and may be more appropriate places to start for some children and their families (Pellegrini and Galda 1992).
- Supportive efforts that begin very early in life have the best chances for success. This is especially crucial for children dealing with additional difficulties such as learning problems or family support problems (Children’s Defense Fund 1996; Lancy 1994; Scarborough, Dobrich, and Hager 1991).
- Children need opportunities for intimate, individualized literacy support-to interact with an observant, skilled adult (Pinnell 1993; Strickland 1994). When possible, it is best for parents to assume this role during the early years, but data regarding high school dropout rates, declining reading achievement, and the many stresses facing poor families (Children’s Defense Fund 1995) indicate that young, vulnerable children cannot always wait until their families are ready to support their learning. All young children need this informed, responsive interaction from the start of their lives, whether it is provided by parents or a supporting community.

## A Framework for Literacy

Programs created to enhance literacy in public libraries should be designed, implemented, and evaluated within the following framework, derived from the literacy and literacy readiness literature summarized in section 2.

### Broad Guidelines Derived from Theory

1. Provide children with opportunities to interact around literacy-related events with someone who knows the children well and is skillful in pacing their learning.
2. Provide literacy experiences that are characterized by active and meaningful involvement.
3. Provide literacy models whom children are likely to imitate—persons children respect and with whom they share some similarities.
4. Provide literacy programs that are rooted in the child’s sociocultural world.

### Specific Practices Derived from Research

1. Increase children’s opportunities to interact with a range of appropriate literature—at the library and in their homes, preschools, and child care centers.
2. Support children’s developing positive attitudes toward books by carefully selecting, sharing, and providing repeated readings and enjoyable opportunities for experiencing and playing with books.
3. Increase children’s opportunities to be read to by a skillful reader and to engage in conversations about stories.

4. Help children’s families and caregivers recognize and find ways to support children’s literacy growth through daily routines and events (including storybook reading, pretend play, and participating in everyday family activities that involve reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

### **Additional Practices Derived from Literature Regarding Children At Risk**

1. Make literacy a part of all broad-based family intervention programs in the community. Help make the public library an active part of the community network of service providers who work with children and families in need.
2. Provide literacy experiences that
  - are characterized by all the specific practices recommended for all children;
  - begin early in life and are continuous rather than disjointed;
  - include literature that is appropriate and interesting for the children;
  - are guided by persons who know the child well enough to competently provide interactions that will support the child’s continued learning and who are (preferably) members of their community/culture or are very knowledgeable regarding that community/culture; and
  - are provided by highly trained caregivers, librarians, preschool teachers, etc., who are respectful of and knowledgeable about the children’s culture and are affirming and empowering in relationships with their families and communities.

### **Exemplary Public Library Practices and Programs for Preschoolers and Their Caregivers**

#### **National Advocacy and Initiatives**

The Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), an ALA division, has existed in various forms and under several names since its founding in 1901, but ALSC’s role as an advocate for the library and literacy rights of children has never wavered. ALSC’s current leadership recognizes the importance of many of the concepts in this framework for early literacy as evidenced by ALSC’s recent position papers and guidelines.

In ALSC’s document *Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries* (1989), the Association’s leaders sampled a wide range of children’s services and librarianship sources to define the “role of librarians serving children in public libraries.” All the guidelines identified in the “Knowledge of Client Group” section of the document are directly relevant to the Framework for Literacy presented in Section III of this paper: knowledge of child development; recognition of how societal developments influence children’s needs; developing an understanding of the local community, including the needs of ethnically diverse populations; being aware of and responding to the needs of those who care for children; and interagency communication for the benefit of children. Other role statements for librarians pertaining to collection development, programming, advocacy, and networking skills include a focus on providing outreach programs, providing services to underserved populations, and developing a convenient and positive environment in which early literacy skills and dispositions can grow and be maintained throughout life (ALSC 1989, 219–223).

In 1995, ALSC President Therese Bigelow's message to the members highlighted the division's continued dedication to the welfare of children, as represented in ALSC's new motto: "Preparing the nation's children today for the world of tomorrow" (Bigelow 1995, 1). In that same issue of the *ALSC Newsletter*, the division's Goals and Objectives for the New Millennium were recorded. Emphasizing and extending the *Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries*, much of the content in these goals underscores ALSC's knowledgeable advocacy of education for early literacy. Included are calls for advocacy of important legislation affecting children; advancing the profession of children's librarianship and "achieving a pluralistic work force"; promoting training for librarians, based on the *Competencies* document; and ensuring that children have "full access to all emerging information technologies" (ALSC 1995, 3).

Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development (1979) emphasizes that the welfare of children involves their interaction with complex and changing environmental contexts and systems such as family, friends, school, neighborhood, parent's employment, community resources, social support systems, and the larger culture's beliefs and values. According to Bronfenbrenner's perspective, if intervention programs are to be truly successful, they must include a plan for appropriate impact across these varying spheres of influence. The selected national literacy initiatives and partnerships that are presented below indicate that the members and leaders of ALSC already are working hard to effect change across these varying spheres. Sometimes it is advocacy on the national level that provides the impetus or support for a regional effort that demonstrates results with children and their families. These successes then can be replicated in other communities with similar needs through programs that fit the sociocultural characteristics of a particular area.

"Kids Need Libraries" and "Kid's Can't Wait." The strong advocacy position presented in the papers "Kids Need Libraries: School and Public Libraries Preparing the Youth of Today for the World of Tomorrow" by Mathews, Flum, and Whitney (1990); and "Kid's Can't Wait" by Mathews (1996), has become a rallying cry for libraries and literacy advocates around the country. Representing the service missions of all three ALA youth service divisions, the two papers provide a sound, overarching rationale for libraries' investment in children and contain checklists for assessing what libraries need to serve youth well. Early literacy concerns are prominently featured in both.

The *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, the quarterly journal of ALSC and the Young Adult Library Services Association, divisions of ALA, which published the "Kids Need Libraries" article, is the preeminent source for research, strategies, and practical ideas regarding literacy initiatives in public libraries. One of many excellent examples is "Helping Parents Who Want to Teach Their Preschool Children to Read" by Peterman and Kimmel (1990), which links research to practice and gives sound advice to librarians who are helping parents foster young children's emergent literacy.

Many publications regarding literacy, libraries, and preschool children grow from ALSC's mission and goals, are written by ALSC members, and published by ALA. Three such publications from the 1990s that are philosophically attuned to and practically supportive of this paper's Framework for Literacy are *Achieving School Readiness: Public Libraries and National Education Goal No. 1*, edited by Immroth and Ash-Geisler (1995); *Book, Babies and Libraries:*

*Serving Infants, Toddlers, Their Parents and Caregivers*, by Greene (1991); and *First Steps to Literacy: Library Programs for Parents, Teachers, and Caregivers* (ALSC 1990).

Coalition for America's Children. Using the slogan, "Who's for kids and who's just kidding," the coalition, based in Washington, is an alliance of more than 350 national, state, and local nonprofit organizations working to call attention to the serious obstacles impeding children's well-being and to boost children's concerns to the top of the public policy agenda. Sponsored by the Benton Foundation, the strategic goals and objectives of the Coalition for America's Children are as follows:

1. Articulate a cohesive children's issue agenda that becomes the focal point for collaborative action among advocacy groups.
2. Increase the public consciousness of the scope and urgency of these children's issues in America.
3. Reposition children in America as a public policy issue and articulate the appropriateness and legitimacy of the government's role in addressing their issues.
4. Build an ongoing and powerful constituency for children.
5. Use well-researched public awareness campaigns as the springboard to a broader, long-term effort to win new momentum for children's issues.
6. Strengthen the capability of children's advocacy organizations to collaborate on and mount sophisticated public outreach efforts.

Library-Museum-Head Start Partnership. Sponsored by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress and the national Head Start program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in cooperation with ALSC, the partnership began in the summer of 1992 to produce and test a multimedia resource package that demonstrated how Head Start agencies and libraries could work together in literacy programs at the community level. The materials were introduced at regional workshops for librarians and Head Start teachers and were provided to Head Start teachers around the country. In the autumn of 1994, museums were added to the partnership through the participation of the Association of Youth Museums. The first expanded conference was hosted by Florida's Center for the Book in February 1995. The goal of the conference was "to develop guidelines and ideas for cooperative projects that bring libraries, museums and Head Start programs together at the community level to promote reading and family literacy" (Library of Congress 1995, 129).

In addition to being an exemplary community partnership in literacy for children, the Library-Museum-Head Start effort also stands out in its reflection of the Head Start program's priorities of family literacy, parent involvement in children's learning, and parent training and technological assistance to teachers and volunteers. Recognition of the continuing success of the Partnership Project was received in the summer of 1995 when it was funded for an unprecedented fourth year.

In her research on the role public libraries have and might have in helping urban Head Start families enhance their children's early literacy skills, Nespeca (1995) found that although most of the small sample of mothers did not use the public library due to problems of transportation and scheduling, nearly all saw the library, and reading to their children, as important. Librarians designing programs can draw much from the candid responses of these mothers who, because of their belief in Head Start's value, still manage to get their children to Head Start despite

neighborhood dangers. Nespeca concludes that more research should be conducted to find out how to meet the serious literacy needs of lower income families, and suggests a stronger outreach component for public libraries. One mother in the study suggested that the libraries should have workshops for Head Start parents, a suggestion at the very heart of the Library-Museum-Head Start Partnership.

**Born to Read: How to Nurture a Baby’s Love of Learning Project.** Originally funded by The Prudential Foundation and administered by ALSC, Born to Read—now part of ALSC’s continuing program—builds partnerships between librarians and health care providers. These partnerships are designed to help at-risk, expectant parents ensure that their children are “born to read.” The major goals of the project are:

- to develop models of how library-health care provider partnerships can work together to break the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy;
- to help at-risk expectant parents improve their reading skills and impress upon them the importance of reading to their children; and
- to promote greater public awareness of health and parenting resources available in libraries.

The initial demonstration sites to receive the \$30,000 grants were the H. Leslie Perry Memorial Library in Henderson, North Carolina, The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and the Provo (Utah) City Library. All three projects, which began in March 1995, were selected because of innovation and creativity, evidence of community need, and enthusiasm and commitment to the project goals.

The H. Leslie Perry Memorial Library Born to Read project includes training literacy volunteers, conducting storytimes, and hosting programs for teenage parents of newborns. A collection of picture books was placed at the Granville-Vance District Health Department and parenting classes and storytimes were held at three local housing projects and the Health Department on Prenatal and Well-Child Clinic days.

The Provo City Library’s program includes a special series entitled “Time with Fathers.” This series for fathers and their babies promotes a child’s early interaction with his or her father. In the first six months of the project, parents of 3,000 babies born at two local hospitals received parenting materials and follow-up visits. A van was used to distribute toys and books to at-risk families, and two program series—”Book Babies” and “Mother Goose Time”—were held for parents and their babies at the library.

The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh’s Born to Read project extended the already existing “Beginning with Books” program described later in this paper in the section “Some Community Success Stories.”

Two additional Born to Read sites—the Sutter County Library in Yuba, California, and the Memphis-Shelby County Public Library and Information Center in Tennessee—were selected in the second and final rounds of the project. Targeting a multilingual population in Sutter County, the Born to Read program collaborates with four health care agencies and eleven community organizations, including the local Migrant Head Start Program. In addition to a major public relations campaign, programs are held for parents and storytimes for infants and their parents.

The Memphis-Shelby program expands the services of Training Wheels, a mobile classroom that provides at-risk expectant and new parents with materials and programs on early literacy skills and child development topics. Also planned are the production of three videos, parenting classes, library programs, and home visits by staff from the LeBonheur Children's Medical Center's Healthy Families program (Top of the News 1996).

Following the completion of its third year of funding, the Born to Read project ensured its continuation on two simultaneous fronts. The *Born to Read: How to Nurture a Baby's Love of Learning Planner's Manual* and *Born to Read Video* were published by ALSC. Intended to guide any library and health care agency wishing to pursue the Born to Read model, the manual and video also serve as a model for the importance and potential of library-based literacy programs that focus on the families of young children.

The second boost was provided by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. At a ceremony at Georgetown University Hospital in January 1997, Clinton unveiled a "Prescription for Reading" campaign that focused on the physicians' ability to "prescribe" reading the way they might prescribe cough medicine for a cold. Supported by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Prescription for Reading launching was followed by a huge mass media interest in a growing body of brain research that demonstrates the positive physiological effects of early language and literacy stimulation in infants.

At the ceremony, Clinton recognized the Born to Read project and the Reach Out and Read project (a Boston-based, physician-led effort to prescribe reading and provide books through visits to a pediatrician's office), and named both as national models for those agencies wishing to implement the Prescription for Reading goals. Susan Roman, former executive director of ALSC and the American Library Trustee Association, was the director of the Born to Read project and was present at the Georgetown University ceremony. In follow-up planning sessions for the Prescription for Reading Partnership, as it came to be called, Roman (1997) listed the following as the important goals required to make the project a success:

- To create a nation of readers
- To support at-risk parents in their roles as their children's first teachers
- To ensure that every child has the opportunity for healthy brain development through early stimulation of language and listening skills
- To ensure that every child will develop a love of reading as the basis for lifelong learning
- To meet the America Reads Challenge of having every child reading on level by the end of third grade
- To break the cycle of illiteracy and poverty, and allow all children to reach their dreams

Among the many regional and national efforts working toward a fully literate public by focusing on literacy for children, perhaps the most ambitious is President Clinton's America Reads Challenge, directed by Carol Rasco in the U.S. Department of Education. Although the legislation is still working its way through both houses of Congress, the America Reads Challenge "asks every American to identify what role he or she can play—professionally and personally—to help all of our children to read independently and well by the end of third grade. While remaining sensitive to the unique learning needs of each child, we must work hard to instill in each of them and in ourselves, high expectations for their reading skills" (America Reads Challenge 1997).

Expanding on existing national programs (e.g., the U.S. Department of Education's Read!Write!Now! summer program), the America Reads Challenge focuses on activating an army of tutors, including college students in work-study jobs, to finally draw the line in the sand across which no illiterate child may pass. Another major focus of America Reads is actively promoting the crucial idea that the parent is a child's first teacher, and that every effort should be made to work through families. The Prescription for Reading Partnership is poised to be an active component of the America Reads Challenge across the nation.

**First Book.** Established in the spring of 1992, in recognition of the "central role played by underdeveloped literacy skills in social problems including poverty, hunger, unemployment, drug addition, and crime," First Book's (1996) primary goal is distributing new books to children at risk of failing in school or at risk of failing to develop adequate literacy skills to succeed in life. Two of First Book's great strengths are its ability to work with existing community-based programs that already focus on family-oriented literacy efforts through tutoring and mentoring and the practice of involving children's librarians on local First Book boards. From the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's "Ready to Learn" Initiative [Goal: To ensure that by the Year 2000, all children enter school ready to learn], which places board members in contact with local PBS stations throughout the country, to their scores of partnerships with funders, publishers, booksellers, and professional organizations, First Book's national impact has been felt in the heart of America—the home, where a child's first book now occupies its rightful place of importance.

### **Some Community Success Stories**

**Beginning with Books.** Pittsburgh's "Beginning with Books" program turned 16 this year, and during these years has placed more than 200,000 quality books in the hands of young children and their families and provided "countless hours of informal counseling or more intensive training on why, how, and what to read to young children" (Turning Pages 1995). In 1984, project directors Elizabeth Segel and Joan Friedberg began this program of prevention-oriented literacy in an effort to reach children and families who were unserved and unaware of the value of good literature in nurturing early literacy. The outreach efforts began through collaboration with well-baby clinics, and 1,000 families were reached in the project's first year (Segel and Friedberg 1991). The project has been affiliated with The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh since 1985.

Project directors and staff have remained faithful to their commitment to reach under- and unserved children and families. In addition to the original gift book program, their outreach efforts now include collaboration with adult literacy tutoring programs, read-aloud clubs for Head Start parents, providing storyhour and literacy experiences for children and staff in more than 70 day care homes and centers in low-income neighborhoods, and two storymobiles that visit public housing communities. Finally, the project offers training and support for others interested in implementing or adapting Beginning with Books in their own community.

The Born to Read grant allowed the Carnegie Library to expand the read-aloud clubs to additional mothers and their babies and to add presentations from the staff members of the Allegheny County Health Department and the Magee-Women's Hospital on nutrition, child development, and immunizations. Not only is Beginning with Books a stellar example of a public library's outreach programming potential, but the individual components and the project's

recommended methods and philosophies mirror the conclusions presented in the early literacy framework. The longevity and success of the project help to establish that the guidelines set forth in the framework are sound from a theoretical, as well as a practical, perspective.

**Targeting Child Care Providers.** Donna Dengel, the early childhood specialist at the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon, provides book collections and care providers' collections for children and staff in private and public child care centers and Head Start programs in the communities served by the county's 17 branch libraries. Dengel's belief in librarians' being knowledgeable of their clients and communities is apparent in her visits and conversations with the children and staff in these centers her libraries serve. Her advocacy of librarians using theoretical and research-based practices is also clear from her collaboration with the Oregon Association for the Education of Young Children, as well as her selection of the Core Collection for Child Care Providers—an excellent example of public library and early childhood education people working together to enhance the quality of preschool learning for the community's children (Dengel 1994).

**Targeting Special Populations.** Sometimes the very specific needs or circumstances of a particular portion of a community's preschool population require special attention or services. Originally presented at the ALA Annual Conference in June 1993, and sponsored by the ALSC Committee on Library Service to Children with Special Needs, three librarians and a program specialist for Reading is Fundamental discussed their approaches to serving homeless children in a program entitled "Libraries Can Serve Homeless Children." Pam Carlson at Orange County Public Library in Costa Mesa, California, Sherry (Norfolk) Des Enfants at DeKalb County Public Library in Decatur, Georgia, and Daryl Mark at the Cambridge Public Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, reported success in reaching this underserved population through diverse methods suggested by the characteristics of their communities and the sociocultural world of their clients. All took their support services to the children at the shelter and found immediate effects in children's attitudes toward books, increased opportunities for children to be read to by skillful readers, and opportunities for collaborating with other community agencies in funding and planning programs beneficial to the whole community (Carlson 1994; Des Enfants 1994; Mark 1994).

### **Every Public Library's Duty**

The first step a library must take in serving preschool children well is to proclaim the importance of young patrons in all library business—from building design, to policy formation, to administrative equity in budget distribution and desk staffing patterns, to the conducting of the simplest circulation transaction (Herb and Willoughby-Herb 1994, 55).

Advocacy for preschool children within the public library's service mission should include the following persons and elements:

1. Trained, experienced children's librarians whose areas of specialty include early childhood education and child development, in addition to the more traditional training in librarianship, children's book selection, and storytelling.
2. An administrative spokesperson who represents the views of preschool children and children's librarians in all administrative, policy, and budget decisions.

3. Sufficient budget, resources and staff to adequately serve the literacy needs of all of the communities' preschool children, their parents, teachers, and caregivers—those who enter the library building, and those who are unable to visit but still need the library's resources and the children's librarian's skills.
4. Continuous assessment of the climate of the public library to help ensure the success of its mission of providing equal access to all its services. Barriers to equitable service delivery often develop accidentally because of convenience or tradition. An ongoing examination of the climate of the public library might include reviews of personnel and hiring policies, collection development and selection policies, and staff development and service practices—these are among the many elements affecting public library service to preschoolers.

## Summary

A comparison of public libraries' mission statements and activities in advocacy and program development with the early literacy framework described in this paper indicates a nearly perfect fit in philosophy and methodology. The aforementioned initiatives and programs reflect dispositions and practices rooted in beliefs about working within children's families and within families' sociocultural worlds. They deliver quality programming to underserved children and good books into the hands of all children. They increase children's opportunities to be read to by experienced readers and help families support their young children's developing literacy.

Public libraries have demonstrated their dispositions and abilities to collaborate, to be resourceful, to be adaptable, and to work within a range of communities. Public libraries have been, and continue to be, engaged in the best practices known to the early childhood education field while carrying out their commitment to working with children and their families in ongoing programs, as well as seeking out unserved children and their families. Furthermore, because of their missions to serve all children, as well as their goals for training and recruiting staff, public libraries are unique among public education service providers. The public library is often the only agency poised to reach those children not being reached by various educational programs (e.g., Head Start and early intervention). As Dengel states in her article on providing library outreach to child care providers (1994, 39), "If, as the saying goes, it takes a whole village to raise a child, then the library should be the hub of that village."

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