The Evolution of Early Literacy
A History of Best Practices in Storytimes
Meagan Albright, Kevin Delecki, and Sarah Hinkle

What do you think of when you picture storytimes from decades past? Do you see rows of children sitting silent and attentive as a story is read aloud? Are parents in the room, active participants in their child’s early literacy experiences, or are they banned from storytime and relegated to the stacks?

An understanding of the storytimes of the past enriches those of today. Research into early examples shows surprising similarities to modern storytimes, which owe much to the techniques and methods developed during these early years.

The concept of today’s preliteracy skills is rooted in concepts (such as reading readiness) and storytelling techniques (such as repetition and rhyme) originally used in the 1940s. Other concepts, such as dialogic reading, are a more recent innovation, but nearly every aspect of the best practices and standards of today’s storytimes has evolved over decades, using both time-tested techniques and modern research and development, to provide children with storytimes that entertain, educate, and make them lifelong learners and readers.

The Evolution of Literacy
In the 1940s and early 50s, librarians began to understand their value as a resource for children learning to read. Libraries began offering a form of story hours in the early 1940s as a response to the emerging theory of “reading readiness.” Reading readiness was the theory that children needed to be mentally prepared for reading by being exposed to literature before being given physical books to read.

The stated goal of these first story hours was to begin a child’s socialization with peers, as well as to foster a love of books and facilitate a child’s adjustment to school. It was not until the mid 1950s, however, that libraries and librarians across the nation began to use their skills and resources to actively participate in helping children learn to read. This wide-scale effort, which resulted in literacy-focused story hours for preschool-aged children nationwide, was the library’s first step toward becoming a major player in early and emergent literacy. It is in these early story hours that the framework for today’s best practices can be found.

Meagan Albright (left) is a youth services librarian at the Alvin Sherman Library, Research and Information Technology Center at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Kevin Delecki (center), manager of the Main Library Children’s Room at the Dayton (Ohio) Metro Library, is chair of the ALSC Early Childhood Programs and Services Committee. Sarah Hinkle (right) is children’s librarian at Emhurst Community Library/Queens (N.Y.) Library.
The Evolution of Early Literacy

Story Hour in the 1950s: Selecting Stories for Story Hour

Fifty years ago, story hours began using many developmentally positive techniques, including dramatizing stories, repetition, and clapping to songs and rhythms. However, these techniques were not known by their current terminology, or pointed out to the parents as positive learning techniques. Instead, libraries used them because of their obviously engaging effect on children.

Librarians also used two of these developmentally positive techniques to assist them in selecting books for story hours: rhythm (or rhyme) and repetition. Not only did a book with strong rhythm make for an excellent story to read aloud, the cadence of the story also held a strong appeal for a child’s developing mind. Parents in the 1950s were told,

You discovered that long before your child could speak he responded to rhythm. So the lullabies came to be. Then came pat-a-cake and other rhymes which, mixed with action, held your child’s attention.4

Additionally, while the theories of early literacy had not yet been developed, librarians recognized the depth and importance of the rhymes they shared with children, stating that

Mother Goose rhymes have much more to offer than their rhythmic construction. A Mother Goose rhyme is really a little drama, and so should be a little child’s first story. It has a beginning, bringing on the characters and starting the action. This action rises steadily to a climax, corresponding to the big scene of a play and then comes down rapidly to a satisfactory conclusion.5

Nursery rhymes were also used to prepare children for larger books that followed the same literary patterns. According to Marie B. McDonald, “There could not be any finer model for stories [than the nursery rhyme] for very small children, and you will find it present in the best stories.”6

Librarians also considered the importance of another tool, repetition. Repetition was intentionally incorporated into story hours in a number of ways, even though it was already inherent in the books selected, for “most programs have a certain amount of repetition in opening and closing . . . this is done in order to give the children that confidence which comes with a feeling of familiarity.”7

Many of the books favored for story hour—such as Margaret Wise Brown’s The Runaway Bunny, H. A. Rey’s Curious George, Robert McCloskey’s Blueberries for Sal, and Virginia Lee Burton’s Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel—feature a combination of repetition and rhyme and are still favorites of modern children’s librarians.

The Values of Story Hour

In the 1950s, story hour was generally seen by both the public and library administrators as a fun diversion, not an educational experience.8 Despite this, many librarians tried to change the focus. As early as 1945, the idea that story hour could encourage learning was already being suggested. Different methods were used, including “stories, games, Victrola records, and other things of educational value.”9

In 1954, the Newark (N.J.) Public Library created a list of the things children could be expected to learn at story hour. The list included the following learning activities:

- Enjoying looking at picture books
- Listening to stories
- Borrowing books
- Talking in a group
- Listening to and following instructions
- Playing with others
- Leading a group
- Being a follower
- Thinking and talking about problems
- Counting
- Distinguishing between colors
- Learning the names of animals
- Practicing the concept of rhythm
- Learning rhymes, jingles, songs, games, and dances10

Also at this time, librarians began to encourage young children to read with the inclusion of what is known today as basic preliteracy skills. These theories were applied without knowing the concepts as defined by modern standards and research. Previously, librarians selected stories based on what children were interested in and what they enjoyed, but not why they enjoyed it, or why it was developmentally important. However, even in the 1950s and 1960s, many librarians intentionally chose books that contained repetition and used traditional rhymes to bolster learning.11

While storytime usually focused on services to children of a preschool age, librarians also supported reading to younger children. As early as 1959, librarians began noting that “interest in books begins far earlier than we often realize . . . as young as eight or nine months of age the infant may pick out a book from an assortment of toys.”12 In 1959, children’s librarian M. Elizabeth Leonard wrote that the “development of a love of reading is dependent, to a great extent, on exposure to books in early childhood.”13

She further stated that a “child [who] finds himself in an environment of books and, moreover, is encouraged by an interested person to read books . . . will come to realize what wonderful companions books can be to him.”14 While the concept of preliteracy skills was not defined at this time, librarians...
often emphasized many important factors that later developed into these more modern ideas.

The Role of the Parent

One issue that often perplexed librarians in the past, and still is undecided today, was whether or not parents should stay with children in story hour. In libraries of the 1950s, there were differing ideas. Some libraries allowed parents to remain in the room with their children, while at others parents were encouraged to “take an hour for themselves.”15 Other libraries only asked that parents remain “in the building while the children's programs are in progress.”16

Librarians always encouraged parents to play an active role in reading to their children at home. Librarians recognized the importance of this role and also realized that by modeling appropriate reading behavior, they could encourage this further. Just as in today’s libraries, storytime in the 1950s was used to offer parents an idea of how to go beyond basic reading and fully use books at home.17

Best practices in story hours have evolved over the years. A number of practices commonly employed in modern storytimes are a result of methods begun by librarians of the 1950s. For example, preliteracy skills, which began with librarians selecting books with strong rhythm and rhyme, have been heavily researched and incorporated into modern programming.

Reviewing the current tenets of story hour with those of the last fifty years, it is easy to see that there are many more similarities than differences. From selecting stories to struggling with the role of parents in story hour, librarians of yesterday and today believe that no matter how often things change, whatever is deemed best for the children is what the library will do.18

Current Best Practices: Early Literacy Skills and Standards

Since the advent of the modern model of library storytimes in the late 1950s, librarians have been responsible for selecting materials using a set of criteria that fused personal preferences, professional advice, time-tested practices, and more recently, published research. Those in charge of library storytimes have always selected books, songs, finger plays, and activities that are developmentally appropriate and advantageous for the children being presented with them, such as materials emphasizing rhyme, active participation, rhythm, and repetition. Only recently has research been conducted that studies why these emphases are beneficial to young children and what can be done to further accentuate their benefit. One of the most direct and easiest ways to disseminate this information to children and their caregivers is through judicious use of this new research when planning storytimes at the library. Through some simple planning, it is possible to select materials for storytimes that are not only entertaining, but also developmentally suitable for the children in attendance.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), using their own research and that of other organizations such as the National Reading Panel, has identified and named six early literacy skills that are paramount to the success of a child learning to read:

- **Print Motivation**: A child's interest in and enjoyment of books
- **Phonological Awareness**: The ability to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words
- **Vocabulary**: Knowing the names of things
- **Narrative Skills**: The ability to describe things and events and to tell stories
- **Print Awareness**: Noticing print, knowing how to handle a book, and understanding how to follow the written words on a page
- **Letter Knowledge**: Knowing that letters are different from each other, that the same letter can look different, and that each letter has a name and is related to sounds

Anyone familiar with the joint Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and Public Library Association (PLA) initiative Every Child Ready to Read @ your library® will notice that these six skills sound familiar. Already, many librarians have promoted these six skills in workshops created for parents and caretakers of young children. Recently, those in charge of planning and implementing library programs have discovered that an additional way to teach these skills to caregivers and children is to incorporate the materials and activities into storytimes.

As noted, librarians have been implementing these skills since the advent of traditional library storytimes. The use of rhyme (phonological awareness), oversized books (print awareness), and dramatizations (narrative skills) has been noted in professional literature since the late 1940s.

Now, as the research into early literacy is growing daily, it becomes important for these skills to not only be brought to library storytimes, but for them to be presented to the caregivers as something important to know and use with young children on a daily basis.

This can be done in a variety of ways. Most simply, the person in charge of the storytime can talk about what skills are being used every time they read. This repetition will allow caregivers to see that incorporating early literacy skills at home does not need to be a labor-intensive endeavor. Visual aids are also useful; something as simple as a bulletin board with the different early literacy skills and definitions posted or as complex as displaying the skills with lists of books and activities to read and do at home. Librarians can also build storytimes around the different early literacy skills. There are a variety of books and websites available to help with this; the most comprehensive being *Early Literacy Storytimes @ your library®,* written by Saroj Nadkarni
The Evolution of Early Literacy

Ghoting and Pamela Martin-Diaz, which includes sample storytimes incorporating these standards, as well as tips and tricks for creating individualized early literacy-based storytimes.

Another resource for early literacy skills and standards that can be included in storytimes is the state-based early learning standards. While they vary in name from state to state, most now have these standards. In many cases, they are intended to be used as precursors to the Academic Standards used for grades K–12. These early learning standards spell out what the state believes children entering kindergarten should know to have the necessary skills to begin school.

These are wonderful to use for planning storytimes because they often include suggestions of ways to implement the standards with young children, as well as book suggestions to emphasize what is being taught. In fact, librarians at the Dayton (Ohio) Metro Library are being encouraged to work together to develop storytime programming from the Ohio Early Learning Content Standards. The idea is to use different standard indicators to help select books, songs, and finger plays, and then provide caregivers and parents with ideas of what they can do at home to reinforce that indicator.

Dialogic Reading

Dialogic reading is one of the most important methods practiced in presenting the early literacy skills and standards to children in storytimes. It is also one of the few developmentally appropriate practices not seen in the story hours of the 1940s and 50s. While traditional storytimes were not entirely composed of children sitting still and being quiet while a librarian read them a few stories, there was less interaction between the child, the librarian, and the story compared with today.

Dialogic reading is a way of reading with a child that encourages conversation about the story; this is done with the story as the main talking point. On a basic level, dialogic reading can include an adult asking children what they see in a picture, or what they think the main character is going to do next. In more in-depth examples, the adult can help a child create a new story based on the characters in the book, or have children predict what is going to happen in the rest of a story based on just a few pages or pictures.

This form of active reading is incredibly important to the development of preliteracy and early literacy skills in children, and that is why it needs to be practiced at library storytimes. In fact, “research has shown that it is not enough to just read to a child. How adults read with children is as important as whether and how often adults read to them.”

The best part? Dialogic reading is not an inherent skill, but one that can be learned and honed with practice and repetition. As stated, the simplest form of dialogic reading is started by asking “What” questions, such as “What is that?” “A dog.” “Yes, a dog. A small, black, furry dog.” Encouraging this type of response and conversation is essential for bringing dialogic reading to storytimes and for promoting the idea that it is good for children to speak appropriately during the story.

Using dialogic reading in storytimes is only one important thing to do for children’s development. The other is to explain and demonstrate to caregivers what is being done, and how it can continue at home. While some parents have always read dialogically, many merely read straight through a story, or at best, ask questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no.” By showing caregivers how to incorporate dialogic reading, children’s early literacy skills will be reinforced on a regular basis.

Librarian as Teacher and Coach

The library has, for many years, held the same functions—to provide a variety of high-quality books, to perform reference assistance to connect child and book, and to teach and entertain the children once or twice a week at library storytimes and other programs. Only recently have librarians begun to realize, or at least vocalize, that they can be more influential in the life and development of a child if they focus less on trying to teach the child exclusively and more on teaching the parents how to foster early learning skills in their children. It is now becoming accepted that “the parent is the child’s first teacher. The librarian is the parent’s first literacy coach.”

Weekly storytimes are the best way to practice this idea of literacy coaching. It is necessary to incorporate early literacy information and developmentally appropriate practices into a storytime not only to benefit the children, but also to encourage the caregiver to use these techniques outside of the library. As Ghoting and Martin-Diaz explain, librarians not only support children’s early literacy development by presenting storytimes that emphasize the skills and standards deemed necessary, but also by emphasizing the importance of the caregiver’s role in the development of these skills. Librarians should do this by explaining to caregivers the components of early literacy and by providing caregivers with activities that support these components.

This is not as daunting of a task at it may seem. Just making mention of what is happening during storytime is a simple way to enforce preliteracy and early literacy skills to caregivers. Once this becomes comfortable, the next step is to not only explain what is happening, but why. Children will not mind, or really even notice, the extra information being given.

Finally, librarians can go one step further and give suggestions, either verbal or written, on how caregivers can continue implementing the components of early literacy at home. These few extra steps can make a substantial difference; the child is now receiving early literacy education not just an hour a week at the library, but, hopefully, on a consistent basis at home.

Inclusiveness

With all the exciting ways to help children develop their early literacy skills, one aspect is often overlooked. It is impossible to
model early literacy skills during traditional library storytimes to parents and children who are not able to attend. Since the inception of library-based storytime, most programs have been offered early on a weekday morning, many times to a registered number of children, and almost exclusively in English.

With the family climate changing drastically throughout the country, it is becoming more obvious that the traditional storytime model must also change or risk missing many children. The following are a few trends being seen. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, and it does not fully explore the range of issues (both positive and negative) that accompany these trends. It is meant only to be a starting point.

The first trend is a shift away from enforcing smaller numbers of children at weekly storytimes. While fewer children may be easier to handle and provide more one-on-one interaction, small storytimes may also exclude more children. As Amanda Williams emphasizes, “[i]f librarians can provide successful storytime programs for larger groups of children, there could be more opportunities for children in child care to attend a public library storytime.” By either not limiting the number of participants at storytime or offering an additional storytime specifically for large groups, it is possible to reach a much larger number of children and their caregivers.

Second, as more households consist of either a single working parent or have both parents working full time, traditional library storytimes held on weekday mornings are increasingly inaccessible. In fact, “59 percent of children under six have all available parents in the labor force.” What this means is that nearly two-thirds of the children that live in any given library service area cannot attend storytime held at a traditional time. This is why offering storytimes at common off-work hours, such as evenings and weekends, has become more and more popular.

This practice can be difficult for libraries experiencing limited evening and weekend hours or staff coverage; however, finding ways to offer storytimes at nontraditional hours can bring in children and parents who truly need the teaching and coaching of the library. These can be billed as normal library storytimes or can be specialized as a “Family Storytime” or “Evening Story/Pajama Time.” Adapting to the needs of the community can make a difference in the lives of patrons and bring in people who may otherwise never have thought of the library as an important place for themselves and their children.

Finally, as the communities around libraries change and diversify, offering storytimes only in the librarian’s native language may not be enough to fill the needs of all children. No matter where a library is located, there will be people who do not speak English and therefore will probably not attend a storytime presented entirely in a language they do not understand. That is why there are a growing number of libraries across the country offering bilingual and even trilingual storytimes. While most incorporate English and Spanish, the idea is to offer programs in whatever language would be the most beneficial to the specific communities around the library.

Even if no library staff member speaks a language other than English, it is still possible to have a successful bilingual storytime. As the article “De Colores: The Universal Language of Bilingual Storytime” by Sara Howrey points out, all it takes are the right partnerships and the willingness to try things that may be initially uncomfortable. Also, making it known that these storytimes are for children who speak any language will not only draw in larger crowds but also allow for the components of early literacy skills and standards to be shared with a more diverse part of the population.

**Conclusion**

Children’s librarians of the past often intuitively promoted early literacy skills before such a concept or body of research existed. As a result, their work and ideas helped to form the basis for modern theories on early literacy, though not all of their concepts stood the test of time. From the reading readiness concept that began in the 1920s to the emergent literacy theories of the 1980s, early literacy has been a constant concept in public library services. Children’s librarians today are able to use classic storytelling techniques from the past as well as draw on the latest emergent literacy research and provide justification for the services we offer.

**References**


How I Got My First Library Job

Tips from Library Directors

The following was taken from the ALSC Student Session on March 19, 2009.

Some say when it comes to getting a job, it’s not what you know, it’s who you know. Although that’s not exactly true, when it comes to being an ALSC member. We can help you in both respects by connecting you with fellow members and helpful information—and in this case, virtually!

Thirty-five people logged-in to OPAL (Online Programming for All Libraries) for the second ALSC Student Session, “How I Got My First Library Job: Tips from Library Directors,” with speakers Therese Bigelow, Chesapeake (Va.) Public Library Assistant Director, and Gene Nelson, Provo (Utah) City Library Director.

Both involved with hiring at their libraries, the duo shared a wealth of information with attendees, ranging from where to look for jobs and what to do in an interview, to tips on making a resume stand out, and some of the challenges new librarians face.

Beginning with the basics, Bigelow and Nelson talked about job interviews for children’s librarian positions. Surprisingly, both panelists said that they’ve recently noticed fewer applicants interested in children’s services than in adult services. For those who have a desire to work with children, the field is wide open, but applicants need to look for a community that will be a good match for both parties.

“In my 30 years, I’ve had the opportunity to interview literally hundreds of candidates, and I think the best applicants are always the ones that are interviewing me as much and as closely as I’m interviewing them,” said Nelson.

“I’m looking for that perfect person—creative, high energy, child friendly, and approachable. I am also looking for someone who can relate to parents, as well as children. It takes a special personality, a well balanced person, to be a great children’s librarian.”

When it comes to creating a resume, both suggested that honesty is the best policy. It’s a great idea to list other experiences with children if you have any and to show stability in your work history. The interviewer wants to know that if he makes an investment in you, you’ll be there for more than a year.

Nelson also suggested keeping resumes professional and to the point—trying to be “cute” on a resume is never a good idea. As someone who had a gap in her work history when looking for a job as a librarian, Bigelow also suggested telling interviewers what you were doing during that time if it’s appropriate and not too personal.

ALSC Student Sessions are free, one-hour virtual workshops that give students the opportunity to learn about hot library topics, based on experiences of ALSC members around the country.

Although the sessions were designed with students in mind, anyone is welcome to participate. A schedule of upcoming ALSC Student Sessions will soon be available at www.tinyurl.com/alscstudents.