

Librarians: Key Partners in a State-Wide Book Distribution Outreach Program

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Keywords: Book distribution programs, My First Books, Idaho Commission for Libraries, literacy programs, library outreach, early childhood

Abstract

Book distribution programs targeted at young children and their families that include the children owning the books have been in existence for a long time. Results are provided from a multi-year program evaluation of a unique, state-wide book distribution program developed in 1997 by the Idaho Commission for Libraries called My First Books. The program is unique among book distribution programs because it relies on local librarians to deliver and showcase the books each month during the academic year in a variety of public and private early childhood care and education settings. My First Books thus becomes a powerful mechanism for library outreach to local childcare and education facilities, parents and caregivers of young children, and the children themselves. Program evaluation results reveal a highly popular and effective program for all of these constituencies that fits well within the resources available in public libraries of all sizes throughout Idaho.

Introduction

“My daughter was so excited on the days the library lady read to them and gave out the books. All of my children, we had to sit down and read the book as soon as we got home. She is proud of those books. They have her name on them. I learned that reading was important and I learned with my children.” (Telephone interview response: Mother of kindergarten child in rural Idaho)

This quote came from follow-up telephone interviews conducted with parents and caregivers of children age birth to eight years who had participated in a unique book distribution program in Idaho called My First Books (MFB). The Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) developed the program and has implemented it each year since 1997 throughout the state of Idaho. The ICfL is an agency located in the Executive Branch of Idaho state government. Its mission is to assist “libraries to build the capacity to better serve their community” (Idaho Commission for Libraries, n.d.). This paper describes the My First Books program and provides results from a state-wide program evaluation.

My First Books is unique in the constellation of book distribution programs for two primary reasons. First, librarians from public libraries distribute one book per month for the nine months of the traditional school year. The librarians go into private daycares and preschools, public school preschool programs, public school classrooms, Head Starts, Even Starts, and such specialized programs as high school programs for teen parents that have onsite daycare. The book distributions thus act as outreach mechanisms for Idaho public libraries while also serving as mechanisms to promote library patronage and early literacy awareness and development. As the opening quotation reveals, the children establish special bonds with the librarian who brings books each month for them to keep. No other large-scale book distribution program so intimately relies on public library librarians.

Second, MFB is a state-run program that was established by and has been maintained by the ICfL for the past 20 years. Most other book distribution programs are primarily private sector enterprises or localized enterprises that rely on donations and other forms of support. MFB shows that a highly effective and efficient large-scale book distribution program can be conducted by a public sector agency over relatively long spans of time.

Literature Review

Book distribution programs that allow children to own the books have been in existence for decades and a substantial amount of program evaluation research has explored them, most of which shows positive effects. Perhaps the most venerable is Reading is Fundamental (RIF). Their Books for Ownership program started in 1966 and received a significant boost in 1975 when the U.S. Congress created the Inexpensive Book Distribution Program, which provided matching funds to RIF sites. Since its inception “RIF has distributed over 412 million books and impacted the lives of more than 40 million children in all 50 states” (Reading is Fundamental, n.d.).

First Book is another long-standing program started in 1992 (Smucker, 2009 Reading Today). Since its inception, First Book has distributed more than 65 million books. Another highly popular book distribution program is Imagination Library started by the celebrity Dolly Parton in 1995 (Imagination Library, n.d.). To date Imagination Library has distributed over 80 million books in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Programs with smaller geographic footprints have also cropped up. For example, in Peoria, Illinois, a concerned citizen began Look, It’s My Book! (LIMB) in 2007 which is a locally funded book distribution program that has spread to 12 of 15 local schools (Arquette, 2014). And there is Idaho’s state-wide My First Books program that will be more thoroughly explored in the remainder of this article.

All of these programs have in common the goal of providing books to children that they keep as their own. The assumption is that when children have greater and easier access to books that are theirs to keep they will want to be read to more by their caregivers, and if they are able to read themselves, they will want to do more independent reading. From this premise, it follows that more reading will occur and the children will become better readers and read more in and out of school. The research exploring the effects of book distribution programs supports both the premise and conclusions.

A review of the recent literature reveals that a host of early literacy indicators improve as a consequence of book distribution programs (e.g., Fong, 2007; Lelle, 2011; Lindsay, 2010; Ridzi, Sylvia, & Singh, 2014; Singh, Sylvia, & Ridzi, 2015). For example, parents involved in book distribution programs report reading more to their children or their children reading more to themselves (Ridzi et al., 2014). They also report their children having greater motivation to read or be read to (Lelle, 2011). And studies show improved reading performance in school when students who participated in book distribution programs are compared to similar students who did not (Lindsay, 2010).

Perhaps the most comprehensive and rigorous review of studies investigating effects of increasing access to print was conducted by Lindsay (2010). RIF contracted with Learning Point Associates to conduct a meta-analysis of such studies. Lindsay (2010) unearthed 108 reports that could be meta-

analyzed. Within these were 27 reports that could be coded as “reports on programs that facilitate children’s ownership of print material” (pg. 5). These were studies of programs most like RIF’s Books for Ownership program, which is also similar to My First Books, the type of book distribution program focused upon in this paper.

Across eight categories of outcomes (i.e., attitudes, motivation, reading behavior, basic language skills, emergent literacy skills, reading achievement, writing achievement, and other academic outcomes) analyses of the 27 studies in the subcategory of reports on programs that facilitate children’s ownership of print material produced moderate effect sizes for attitudes, reading behavior, emergent literacy skills, and reading achievement. A large effect size resulted for motivation and a small effect resulted for basic language skills. There was no effect on writing achievement, and too few studies were available to derive a conclusion for the “other academic outcomes” category (pgs. 45-76).

So overall, book distribution programs that involve children’s ownership produced quite positive results across a wide spectrum of measures. These are important findings since any book distribution program requires significant financial and human resources. Knowing that the programs produce positive outcomes helps justify these investments.

Additional Description of My First Books

The Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) is a state agency devoted to supporting Idaho’s public and school libraries. The ICfL finds existing programming or develops custom programming and then offers it to public libraries and school libraries by providing resources, support, and training during start-up and implementation. They also support libraries when libraries develop local programming requiring additional external support. Through the years, the ICfL has developed close working relationships with most libraries throughout the very rural state of Idaho. My First Books is one program among a number of early childhood literacy programs run by the ICfL. All of the early childhood literacy programs fall under the heading of Read to Me Programs, of which MFB is one.

As was described above, MFB is a library outreach program so all books are distributed at early childhood care and education sites partnering with their local library. Librarians travel to the sites and conduct a story time and sometimes an activity before distributing the books. A total of nine books are distributed, one each month during the traditional academic year. There are three age groups for book distributions: babies and toddlers, who receive board books; preschool; and kindergarten.

Along with books, families can participate in a free early literacy workshop provided by their local public library, and families also receive a monthly newsletter, The Bookworm, which provides tips and strategies to support early literacy at home. The Bookworms are written by program staff with advanced education and/or library science degrees, and are developmentally appropriate for each of the three age groups. There are no requirements for parents/caregivers to sign up for the program, as is the case with Imagination Library, and every child in a program served by My First Books receives books.

Over the past 20 years, over 303,000 books have been distributed to almost 33,000 children at sites throughout Idaho. Funding for the program is provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) through the Library Sciences and Technology Act (LSTA), as well as some state funding

specifically appropriated for this program. Since 2008-2009, the program has averaged 25 partnering libraries each year. To readers living in much higher population states, this might sound quite small, but for a sparsely populated state like Idaho, averaging 25 partner libraries a year represents significant reach throughout the state. Idaho has 103 libraries and when branches are included there are 155 locations. Since the inception of MFB, over 83 different libraries have participated, many of these multiple times.

“In addition to providing children with books, a goal of all Read to Me programs is to encourage contact between participating families and librarians to promote local library services” (Read to Me, n.d.). MFB is no exception to this rule. In addition to this goal, the program lists the following more specific outcomes:

1. Participating children increase their access to books by starting a home library.
2. More underserved families have library cards and use the public library.
3. Participating children increase early literacy skills.
4. Parents of participating children increase their knowledge about early literacy.
5. Parents of participating children increase home literacy activities.
6. Libraries strengthen community partnerships.

These goals are mostly the same as those of other book distribution programs, but what makes MFB different is its focus on deeply involving local librarians in outreach efforts to achieve the goals.

Although there is, for the most part, a high degree of consistency in the way the program is administered by local libraries, some variation does occur. Some participating early childhood programs allow the librarian considerable time for the distribution. When this is the case, the librarians oftentimes go “all out” and provide a full story time centered around the book to be distributed with an activity or craft. Of course, not all librarians do this or are given the time, but at a minimum the book being given to the children is read and showcased to build excitement.

Based on program evaluation data, virtually all of the librarians who distribute My First Books enjoy the program and have wonderful stories about establishing strong connections with the children and participating sites. And similarly, nearly all of the programs that partner with the local libraries report having a positive and valuable experience with the program. MFB is a powerful catalyst for positive library outreach that results in numerous new community partnerships.

Local libraries apply annually to the ICfL to participate in the program. Demand is greater than the resources available so some libraries are turned down each year. Application approval is based on the need of the library’s community, and libraries that have not yet participated are given priority.

The ICfL provides all necessary training for librarians, selects the titles that will be distributed, and purchases them in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of all participating libraries. All of the books are shipped to and stored at the ICfL in Boise, Idaho which then utilizes a team of volunteers to label each book with a special My First Books sticker. An ICfL staff member packages and mails the proper number of books to each participating library each month. This is a large operation that has been ongoing for many years.

Benefits of My First Books

Ongoing MFB program evaluation research shows that libraries benefit in a multitude of ways including closer ties with existing community partners, establishing new community partners, more visibility in the community, increased circulation, increased attendance at library events, new patrons, and increased awareness of and contact with underserved families. The following quote taken from an end-of-year final report submitted by a participating library brings to life the benefits:

I felt My First Books has introduced the library to an entire new group of patrons that weren't using the library previously. The kids have been the best free advertisement for all my events this year. Dr. Seuss's party was the biggest party Smithfield (pseudonym) has seen in years (our City Administrator came back into town and saw all the cars and thought there was a national emergency), my Summer Reading enrollment is the highest it's ever been, we are bursting at the seams. My First Books has also helped my partnership with Smithfield Elementary and I have been able to establish a closer relationship with the teachers. Every grade this year came for an end of the year field trip to the library, this has never happened before. I'm finding new wonderful, unexpected benefits every day. Thank you!

Parent surveys are distributed at all participating sites each year. Thus, the information provided here has been corroborated over multiple years and across many different sites. Parents/caregivers were asked a series of questions about their early literacy behaviors with their children. Figure 1 shows response profiles for over 1,500 respondents from several years of the program. The bars represent percentages of "Yes" responses to the prompts.

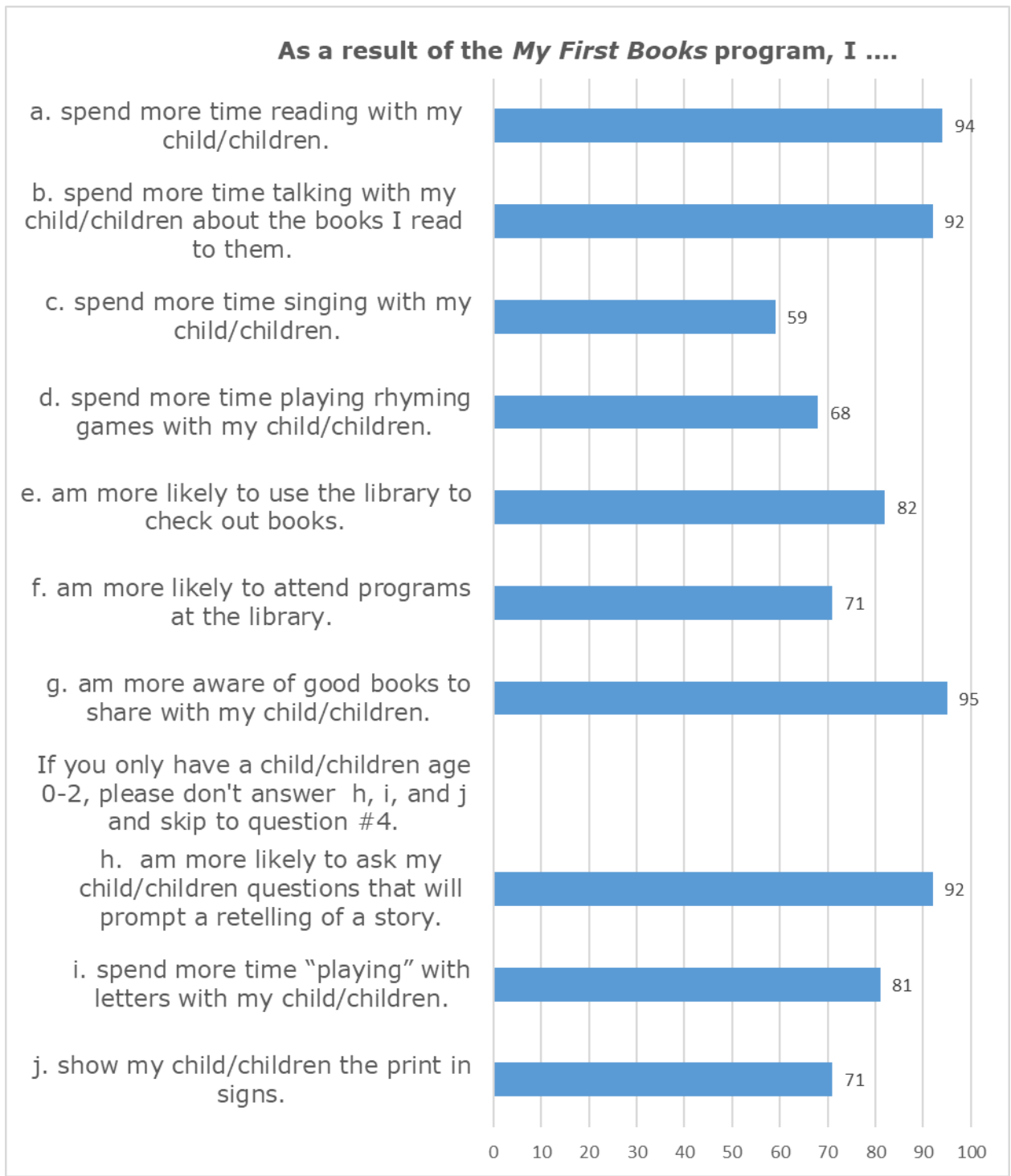


Figure 1: Percentage of “Yes” Responses to Changes in Family Literacy Behaviors

Looking down the list of prompts, in all instances majorities of respondents said “Yes.” The prompt “spend more time singing with my child/children” was the lowest at 59% but the rest were 68% or higher, with four items exceeding 90%.

These percentages were corroborated by results from follow-up telephone interviews conducted to find

out what about the program caused these positive changes in behavior and whether the behaviors persisted beyond the nine months of the program. They did persist, according to a large percentage of respondents contacted six to nine months after the program had ended for them. And respondents attributed the long-lasting effects of the program to the children’s enthusiasm for the books and the children’s excitement about owning them. The quote that opens this article is an excellent example of the responses received.

Also on the written survey, parents were asked to rate a series of items for their usefulness. Recall that along with the books sent home parent/caregivers received The Scoop newsletter that provided timely tips about early literacy. Additionally, some librarians included flyers from their libraries announcing programs and services for children. Thus, parent/caregivers had opportunities to learn about early literacy and their local library each time a book went home. Figure 2 provides the items and the percentages for each response choice.

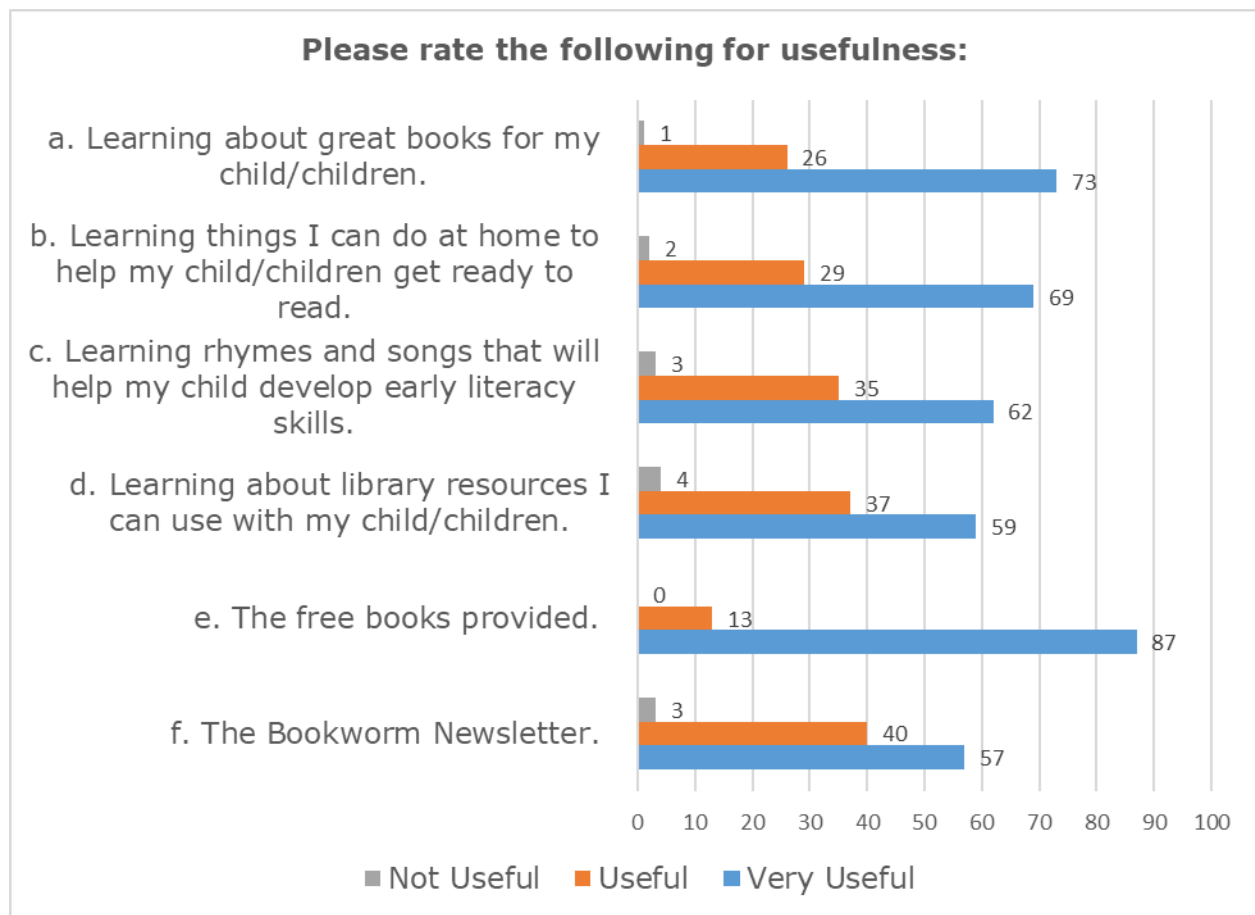


Figure 2: Parent/Caregiver Ratings for Usefulness: Percentage in Each Response Category

“Not useful” responses were negligible for all items. And in most instances “Very Useful” responses far exceeded “Useful” responses. In other words, most respondents found key attributes of the My First Books program very useful. These response profiles were also corroborated by the follow-up telephone interviews which found that up to nine months after the program ended parents/caregivers continued to

be strongly positive about the usefulness of the program, especially about receiving the free books and the high quality of the books.

Along with increasing library awareness in the community, increasing library patronage is an important goal of the MFB program. Parents/caregivers reported on surveys and in interviews that they were more likely to check out books from the library and also more likely to attend library programs as a consequence of MFB (see figure 1). They were also asked on the survey if they had received a library card as a consequence of the program. Over the years, about 10% report getting a library card because of the program, roughly 68% say that they already had one before participating, and 22% say they did not get a library card. Even though 10% doesn't sound like many, when placed in the context of a state-wide program reaching thousands of families each year, the number of people acquiring library cards because of the program is substantial. (Note: As Idaho is highly rural, many families live outside of library district boundaries or outside city limits; thus, there are a number of people and families in Idaho who must purchase a library card, which can cost upwards of \$100 annually.)

And finally, the early childhood programs that partner with the local libraries also complete surveys asking them about their experiences with the program and the outcomes they see accruing from it. Large percentages of partners find the program to be positive for them and their patrons. The partners corroborate much of the information provided by the libraries themselves and the parents/caregivers, including increased reading in the home, increased knowledge and awareness of early literacy, increased awareness of the importance of early literacy, increased knowledge of local library programming and services, and the capacity of My First Books to facilitate positive family experiences around high-quality children's books.

Discussion

Parents/caregivers were asked on the parent survey, "Overall, how satisfied were you with the My First Books program?" Eighty-one percent said that they were "Very satisfied" and 19% responded that they were "Satisfied." Not one parent out of over a thousand surveys spanning multiple years reported being "Not Satisfied." This one question encapsulates the popularity and success of the program. To have a program that is state-wide and reaches as many different constituencies as this one and have no one be dissatisfied underscores its popularity and the consistently high quality of its delivery. In short, My First Books is a powerful library outreach program that produces stellar results.

The results of the program evaluation align quite well with those found from evaluations of other book distribution programs involving ownership by children. Increased reading in the home occurred. Children became excited about books and reading and their parents/caregivers were pleased with this. Pride of ownership was a common occurrence, and for families of limited means the My First Books were sometimes the only books in the home.

All participating libraries were required to complete end-of-year reports. In these were found wonderful anecdotes that provide voice for what has been discussed thus far. Following are some examples:

The children took their books and Bookworms right after we read to them and put them into their backpacks to take home. One of the boys said, "I put my book in my library at home." I asked him if he had lots of books in his library and he replied, "No, I just have the books you give

me.” There is no bookstore for about 100 miles and many families just can’t afford to buy books in our depressed community. The books meant a lot to the children.

I had one little girl tell me that she had set up a special shelf in her room for her own books. She was so excited that the books were hers and that she had her own library in her room.

More than one child told me [a classroom teacher] that it was the only books they own. This is the beginning of a home library for my students. One little girl in my class reads her books to her unborn baby brother. She is proud of her reading and loves sharing her books with all.

I was at a restaurant with my family when one of the Head Start kids came in and when he saw me he started yelling, “That’s Melissa! That’s the lady that reads to us!” It was very cute!

A child approached me in the grocery store, parent in tow, telling mom that I was the book lady. “She gives us the books, mommy.” The mother thanked me and told me her child is so excited to own her own books now. She said that they had to read at least two or three books before bed; her child had never been into reading before.

One of my favorite comments from a parent was that with having these books brought home to keep, the mom was able to read the story to all of her children and work with all of them on the skills she had learned in the ECRR [Every Child Ready to Read] class. She also really appreciated the helpful hints in *The Bookworm* that she could use along with each book. She wanted to know if she could subscribe to *The Bookworm* and if there was another version for younger children.

After our Family workshop we have one family who now comes to the library almost every day. I had not seen them in the library before this event. They are excited to check out books and read them together. They loved the activities so much. I also have children from the pre-school that now come up to me at the library and give me a hug or say hello to me.

One little boy said to me [librarian], “I have been waiting for you ever since I woke up this morning.”

Conclusion

The anecdotes underscore numerous important outcomes of the My First Books program. For example, they attest to:

- The power of providing children and families access to and ownership of high quality children’s books. This access facilitates more reading in the home not just for the target child who received the books but also siblings;
- The power of book ownership to instill pride in the child and motivate them to read;
- The large amount of positive exposure the program provides libraries and librarians; and
- The importance of knowledge and resources about early literacy development for parents/caregivers.

And there is another important outcome of this program that has not been discussed. Adkins and Bala (2004) found a significant relationship between the number of librarians on staff and the odds that a library would conduct outreach. They said, “The number of librarians employed by a library was a powerful predictor of the likelihood of outreach” (p. 347). In other words, the more librarians on staff, the more likely outreach was to occur. This relationship, however, may not hold in Idaho when it comes to the My First Books program.

In rural Idaho, most libraries have minimal staff, which according to Adkins and Bala would predict low amounts of outreach. Of the 83 total libraries that participated in MFB over the years, only 30 of them could be considered to have something more than minimal staff. Yet, My First Books is embraced by Idaho librarians and thrives year-after-year even though in many small Idaho libraries it is nearly impossible at times for staff to conduct outreach that requires time away from the library during open hours. Thus, an organization like the ICfL becomes critically important to the capacity of local libraries to conduct meaningful outreach. And the My First Books program appears to be ideally suited for this purpose and here is why.

As has been described, the ICfL delivers this program, as well as other outreach “turnkey” programs, to local libraries. Importantly, once the My First Books materials arrive, what the local librarians have to do to operationalize the program closely aligns with what they do day-to-day in their libraries. They have to schedule the book distributions with their partners. These schedules can be done well in advance of the actual distributions. A matter of fact, a nine-month schedule can be established first thing in the fall so that librarians know exactly when they will have to be away from the library to conduct a distribution and can thus establish their schedule, get necessary approvals from superiors, and if needed set up fill-in help in the library while the librarian is away. They can also adjust the distributions so that they take just the amount of available time the librarian has. And perhaps most importantly, what the librarians do during the distributions is quite similar to what they do in their own bricks and mortar libraries. That is, they talk about wonderful books, provide story times, and communicate a love for books and reading and the power of libraries and librarians. In other words, My First Books does not require librarians to do something that is new or out of the norm for them, and thus the program requires minimal training and a finite and controllable amount of time.

In closing, librarians regularly talk about the ease of program implementation in their end-of-year reports, providing evidence that MFB facilitates local outreach that otherwise might be seriously constrained by a shortage of local resources. We believe, and program evaluation data supports our belief, that this is one of the most important reasons for the success and popularity of the program. My First Books simply fits libraries of all sizes.

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