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SC Library Spotlight - MUSC Family Literacy Program

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MUSC Family Literacy Program

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Abstract

Spotlight article highlighting MUSC's Family Literacy Program.



SC LIBRARY SPOTLIGHT

The MUSC Family Literacy Program

One of my first assignments as a SLIS student required me to read an article about librarians working in non-traditional settings. The assignment instigated my curiosity, opened my mind, and provided the opportunity to imagine myself fulfilling my role as librarian “connecting people with ideas” beyond the library walls. Little I knew back then that I would be joining the ranks of the librarians employed in those diverse community settings. Currently I work in a family literacy program located in a pediatric clinic, the MUSC Children’s Care Clinic in the city of North Charleston.

More than a decade ago, the MUSC Children’s Care Clinic Network was established to provide direct access to pediatric care to traditionally underserved populations. Professionals and staff aspire to always offer culturally competent, comprehensive, and family-centered care. In this context, the daily practice has evolved over the years to respond to the community demands. Among these, one was particularly urgent: helping parents to understand the importance of early literacy and teaming up with them to foster school readiness. The MUSC Family Literacy Program was born six years ago to respond to this crucial issue. MUSC professionals, staff, and many community partners planned and nurtured the idea of having a literacy rich environment housed in a safe and easy to access location;

the doctor’s office. Trident United Way’s financial contribution made this novel concept a reality.



The MUSC Family Literacy Program services are free, open to any family living in Berkeley, Charleston, or Dorchester County. Generally, our pediatricians provide information about the program and invite (“refer”) parents to participate when they bring their children to the well-child visit at ages three and four. Other families learn about our services by word of mouth or are referred by other professionals.

The program consists of a series of 12-biweekly family sessions. In each encounter parents learn about healthy development, early literacy, and school readiness through play, reading, and conversations. Sessions provide an opportunity for the child and parent to spend time playing and reading together. Children receive a free book at the end of each session.

Because most of our child participants are dual language learners, the sessions are conducted in English, Spanish or both. We encourage every family to talk, read, and sing with their kids in their primary language. We take time to explain to sometimes skeptical parents that they have a crucial role as first teachers and that their children’s first language skills will transfer to the second language and will help on its acquisition.

While most of our families report playing and talking regularly with their kids, books are

rarely part of the family life. At the beginning of the program, we ask parents how many books they have at home and we inquire about family reading habits. About 60% of our families respond they have five or less books at home. The few books they have generally were received at the clinic during well- child visits. Most of the families about 85% of them do not have library cards and are not even aware of library services. A small percentage of families make reading part of their daily routines before coming to the program. When asked why, frequently caregivers respond they do not have books, their kids are not interested in reading, that they did not know that reading was something to do with small children, or that they are illiterate. Nevertheless, even for parents that value reading, finding appropriate books is not always an easy task. For the Spanish speaking families, which are the 90% of our participants, language is the biggest barrier. For many of these families, the MUSC Family Literacy Program offers their first encounter with the wealth of children's literature. Not surprisingly, books are the heart of our program and for us the importance of providing high quality books cannot be overstated. We want to get parents to share or read books that actually help their kids to acquire a rich vocabulary while sparking their imagination and curiosity. We are committed to providing a good quality picture book selection that is culturally and linguistically sensitive. We use the book collection in our sessions and lend books to the families between sessions.

Besides our work in the clinic, we collaborate with other agencies and individuals that share the common goal of improving literacy. These connections enable us to assist our families on accessing educational, health, legal, and recreational resources. We share our expertise with colleagues and promote programs and activities to serve dual language learners.

We constantly evaluate the impact of the program. At the end of the twelve sessions, consistently, parents report a better

understanding of what skills and activities are appropriate for their children's age. In our last report, almost 92% of caregivers reported reading 30 or more minutes every week. This number is remarkable if we consider that 43% of these parents reported reading 5 minutes or less per week at the beginning of the program. On the other hand, 79% of the children improved receptive language scores and 81% improved their knowledge of basic concepts.

While we take pride in our accomplishments, the challenges ahead cannot be minimized. There is still too much to do to improve the education attainment of all children and especially those of Hispanic origin, which currently have the lowest high school graduation rate in South Carolina. Even though this issue is complex and sometimes daunting, I believe, we librarians, have a unique opportunity to contribute to the future of our kids and our state by building collections and developing programs that represent, serve, and support all children, included those that are dual language learners. We, the librarians; wherever we are; at the public library, in the school media center, or in the pediatric office.

Marina Lopez, *Program Coordinator, MUSC Family Literacy Program*

Photos by Marina Lopez