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Early Learning @ the Library:

A Production in Three Acts

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ACT ONE. Libraries become leaders in the promotion of early literacy skills and activities. We are the champions of encouraging parents and care providers to read, talk, rhyme, play and write with their young children. We role model at storytime the many ways to make reading aloud fun, while being focused on skills such as phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and print motivation. Storytime is no longer just about reading aloud.

ACT TWO. Libraries embrace STEM. Librarians read information books at storytime, and set up stations for preschoolers to explore concepts such as texture, size, addition and subtraction, and construction. Yeah, LEGO's! Young children have the opportunity to discover what floats (or not), look at objects through magnifying glasses, and build structures out of marshmallows and toothpicks (with parental guidance for the sharp points!) Libraries aren't just about books, but about discovery, learning, thinking, creating. And they make sure that the arts are continued through puppetry, crafts, dance and play. STEM becomes STEAM and storytime is no longer just about literacy.

ACT THREE. Library staff begins to think, "what if?" What if the library offered learning opportunities that weren't restricted to a certain time? What if children can play, explore, and discover every time they visit the library? What if nonusers become users because they just want to hang out with their young children at the library? What if the idea that the library is a quiet place becomes obsolete and the library becomes an active, engaging, fun place? What if early learning IS the library?

Deschutes Public Library advanced through each one of these acts, with the Grand Finale (at least for now) being the installation of early learning spaces at each of our libraries. Children don costumes, sell items at a market, make pizza and tacos, and build giant block constructions that make a satisfying BOOM when knocked over. They explore rhymes and letters under their feet and in their hands, they work a cash register, they compose music, and they figure out which shape goes through which opening. All the while they are building vocabulary, increasing their letter knowledge, practicing math and writing, and learning



essential skills for kindergarten readiness such as sharing and taking turns. They're also developing the belief that the library is exactly where they want to be.

When we began the early learning spaces we started small and simple. Each library received a free standing puppet stage with puppets, and an "imagination station," which is similar to a puppet stage in design but serves a different purpose. These were paid for with library funds, as well as a grant from the Oregon Community Foundation, and donations from the Friends of the Libraries. We also sought community sponsors, a business or organization that would give us \$500 for six months of having their name and logo prominently featured on top of the Imagination Station. We used the money to create the sign, as well as purchase manipulatives that related to the business. Our first sponsor was Eberhard's Dairy in Redmond, and the children had a blast pretending to make ice cream sundaes, trying on a cow costume, and "selling" dairy products to customers. Other sponsors included Mazatlan Mexican Restaurant, High Country Disposal, Ace Hardware, the Sisters Folk Festival, and Schoolhouse Produce. These have all proven to be excellent community partnerships.

It quickly became apparent that these additions to the children's areas were very popular, and resulted in what we wanted—parental interaction, play, creativity and learning. So we began thinking about Act Three, Scene Two. What if? What if the space was more?

We began researching the possibility of expanding the early learning spaces into more of a mini children's museum, with panels, play houses, and more advanced manipulatives. Cathy Zraggen from the La Pine Library attended a PLA Conference and discovered at the exhibits that Gressco (<http://www.gresscoltd.com/>), whom we knew only for its DVD cases, also sold—ta dah!—early learning space structures that matched our vision. Who knew?

Meanwhile, we pursued funding. Ah, yes, the proverbial road block. Who pays for all this? Luckily, we have a Library Foundation, as well as the Friends groups in each of our communities who donate money to the Foundation for our Youth Services Initiatives and other library services. Each early learning space has cost \$15,000–\$18,000, and that includes the panels from Gressco, comfortable furniture for reading aloud or observing children at play, a rhyming or alphabet rug, and the manipulatives—puzzles, alphabet discovery bags



(<http://tinyurl.com/q6c8jes>), giant construction blocks, letter boxes (<http://tinyurl.com/przbxgg>), costumes, etc. One of the panels serves as an Imagination Station so we continued the sponsorships and have added, among others, Papa Murphy's Pizza, Longboard Louie's, and SCOOTR (a motorcycle club), to the list. We're currently creating a list of all the sponsorships we've had, and the related manipulatives, and will be rotating those every six months between the libraries.



Early learning spaces are now in three of our libraries, and we'll be adding two more this year. Staff at each library figures out the panels they want, and the design. I particularly like the one at East Bend because they separated the panels that are for the youngest from the more active panels for the older. The spaces, which we call Mango's House (named for our early literacy mascot, Mango Monkey) are busy, busy,



busy all the time. One of our greatest pleasures was noting that, after storytime, children no longer make a bee line for the computer games, but head for Mango's House and interactive fun and learning with Mom, Grandfather, Babysitter and friends. When I recently visited Mango's House at the Downtown Bend Library I noticed a four-year-old girl making a pizza (<http://www.amazon.com/Melissa-Doug-167-Pizza-Party/dp/B0000658L4>), intently placing the triangular slices in the right direction. I thought she might like to serve her creation, so I stopped and asked if I could have a slice. She looked up at me, visibly startled, and with wide eyes said very seriously, "I'll have to ask my mother." There was no question in her mind that her pizza was *real* and she wasn't going to give it to just anyone!

When we began Act One, Scene Two, we did a lot of behind-the-scenes research, visiting children's museums and other early learning spaces. The advice they gave us was invaluable, so here's what we've learned to help you toward your Opening Act:

1. Train staff! Before the early learning space is completed, talk with all staff, especially those who will be shelving in close proximity, about why these belong in libraries. There are several excellent articles you can refer to for the high points, such as "Design to Learn By" (<http://tinyurl.com/oczucgy>) by Sarah Bayliss, and the "Growing Young



Minds” (http://www.ims.gov/about/early_learning.aspx) report from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Saroj Ghoting’s website, “Early Literacy in the Library Environment” (<http://www.earlylit.net/environments/>) is an invaluable resource about libraries who have added early learning components.

2. Train staff on expectations for the space. For instance, we don’t allow parents to leave the area, but we don’t intervene if Mom is texting while Susie is playing. We might wish for a different scenario, but we let that one go. However, we do get involved, and ask for the parent’s help, if a child is doing anything that is unsafe, such as throwing toys or jumping off furniture.
3. Make sure there are plenty of books close to the early learning space, so there’s a clear connection between literacy and learning.
4. Figure out how you’re going to clean the toys. We use volunteers who spray them with a mild cleaning solution (<http://www.kdl.org/kids/go/PLA2012>) that we learned about from the Kent District Library.
5. Determine a schedule for picking up toys. We tell staff that once during their desk shift (one hour or two hours) they should visit the space and put toys away into their baskets. However, we do not constantly patrol the area, making sure that everything is always in its place. Exploration and discovery is what it’s all about, so if a letter box ends up in the doll house, it’s OK!
6. I can’t say this enough. Be prepared for more noise, and consider that when you purchase the toys. Do they squeak, clatter, play a tune? Our large plastic construction blocks are very, very popular, but also very, very loud, as mentioned earlier. I’d recommend foam blocks (<http://tinyurl.com/oq33dln>). Make sure staff understands there will be additional commotion and noise because playing, sometimes with great energy, is how children learn.
7. We do make occasional announcements at storytime reminding parents to be sure that “big kids” allow “little kids” to join in the fun. There’s a difference between a 5-year-old and a toddler, and sometimes the older ones are a bit possessive or careless. But then, I think you’d see that at any playground.
8. It seems to work best if you’re able to have spaces divided according to the age of use. Our East Bend Library has a great layout, where the kitchenette, doll house, magnet board and market are in one section for the older kids, and the toddlers’ and infants’ area has more open space with a mat and panels to crawl through, or sort shape blocks. (By the way, the mats get dirty quickly, so order one that is a dark color.)



We placed a notebook close to the early learning spaces, and asked customers to tell us what they think about Mango's House. Here are some of the comments, which I think say all that needs to be said.

"We love coming here! Thanks for serving our community's kids! Their minds are growing!"

"Thanks for letting my son and I read and play together. We love it here. It's a safe fun invironment [sic] to hang out and wait for my other son to get out of school."

"This is perfect for kids to learn how to play quietly in a library. It really is a wonderful addition and my kids enjoy comming [sic] to play and read and learn. It's fun to see what store is posted next. A fun way to teach my little guy healthy foods."

"Marques loves to come to library! Great place to meet friends, play and learn! Play area is awesome!"

"Love love love your awesome play area. Kids using imagination nothing better."

