

A New Librarian's Take on ECRR

Best Practices for Evidence-Based Early Literacy Storytimes

KIRSTEN CALDWELL

After finishing graduate school, I was fortunate to begin my career in the youth services department of a public library in northwestern Wisconsin. Since then, I have made it a goal to work towards creating the best storytimes I could by becoming an early literacy specialist.

With this goal in mind, I continuously research early literacy, child development, and Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) practices and work to implement them in my storytimes.

Early literacy encompasses five major components of language readiness: background knowledge (world knowledge based on their experiences which helps with comprehension), phonological awareness (the ability to hear the smaller sounds in words), print awareness (understanding that print has meaning), letter knowledge, and vocabulary.¹

Public libraries and their youth librarians, in particular, have a unique opportunity to teach families about early literacy through programming like storytimes. ECRR was started by the Public Library Association (PLA) and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) to train librarians to educate parents and caregivers about early literacy, better preparing their children to learn the reading skills they need to succeed in school. The ECRR manual was created in 2004 and has since been updated with the five practices of talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing.²

Understanding and incorporating these practices into library storytimes can improve the early literacy skills of the children attending and can help educate the parents on how they can best support their child to become school ready.

Talking

While reading books to the children, it is helpful to ask them questions about what they see on the page, what they think will happen next, or to ask them any open-ended question that relates

to the story. This allows them to engage the multiple parts of the brain it takes to understand a question and develop a response. Answering questions will also help build their vocabularies and create greater interactivity in storytime.³ Responding may take them several seconds, so after asking a question, it is important to wait to continue reading.

Flannel board activities have also become a regular practice in my storytimes because they are great for interactivity, vocabulary building, early numeracy, and more.

In one of my flannel board activities during fall, I made a small squirrel and five leaves of different colors then told the children that the squirrel's acorn was hiding underneath one of the leaves and we needed to help him find it. They helped me describe the colors of the leaves and told me which leaf they thought the acorn was hiding under. After storytime, the kids took turns playing librarian and hiding the acorn and having the other kids guess which leaf the acorn was in.

Another example is a spring-themed storytime. I made six ladybugs that the children counted, followed by a rhyme that they helped recite. The ladybugs fly away one by one in the rhyme, and the kids counted how many were left, which is a great early numeracy skill. They also described the ladybugs by telling me what color each one was.



Kirsten Caldwell works in youth services at La Crosse County (WI) Library; she blogs for ALSC and has her own blog at earlyliteracylibrarian.com.



An example of a house that was made with a paper bag and construction paper for a STEAM storytime.

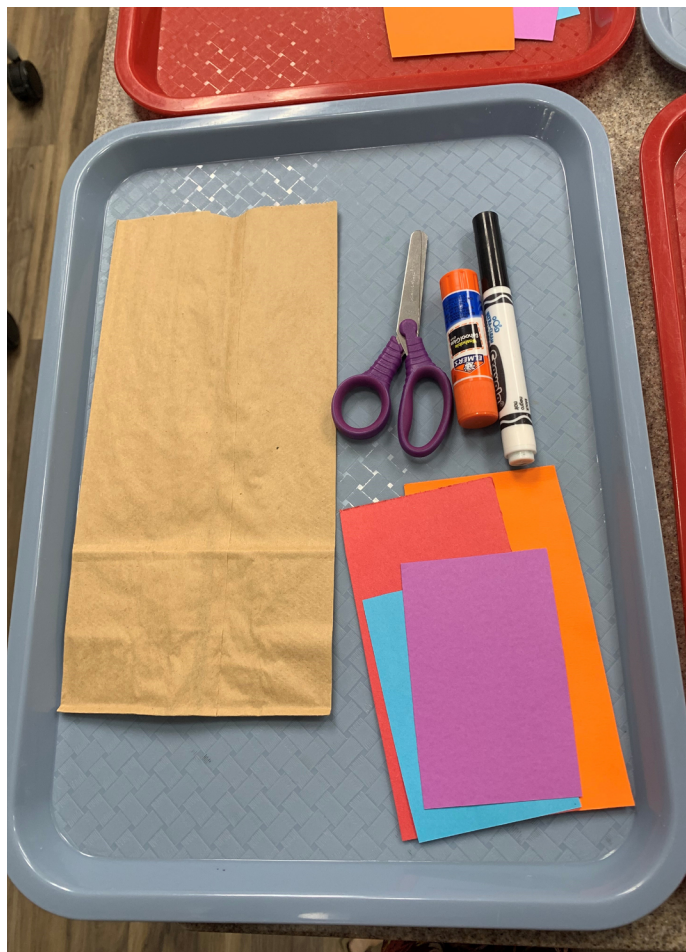
Many of the kids also wanted to chime in and tell me if they liked bugs or tell me what their favorite color was. These activities are fun and simple ways to improve the children's vocabulary, narrative skills, and early numeracy skills.

Singing

Songs are a great way to interact with the children and break up the storytime in a fun way with new vocabulary, rhythm, and rhyme. Choosing songs that are simple enough for them to join in, but also using words they may not normally use improves their vocabulary while helping them feel included. Simple songs are also a great opportunity to include some sign language, creating a partially bilingual storytime. Putting the words up somewhere for the parents to read also helps because they can sing along and encourage their children to join in. Rhythm and rhyme and using movements with songs are great ways to help a child's brain develop and improve their reading readiness.⁴

Reading

Reading is the simplest of the practices to include in storytime. Choosing books that have great and large illustrations, fun stories



The setup for the STEAM storytime craft, which was making a house from a paper bag.

that will keep the audience captivated, a variety of vocabulary usage, and repetitive or rhyming language are all great practices to have when planning storytimes. Asking the children who regularly attend storytime what topic they want to read about makes them excited to come and leads to greater interactivity. I also read books that I love because if I love a book, the children can tell and tend to enjoy those readings more.

Writing and Playing

In my opinion, these two practices are the most difficult to incorporate into storytimes. A great way to incorporate playing is to have a scheduled time after storytime where the families can interact and play with toys, bubbles, or a parachute. After storytimes, many of our families let their kids run around and play with one another or go out into the library and do whatever activities we have available to them.

During the last week of storytime, the kids made up something called floor angels, which are "snow angels without the snow and they're better because they aren't cold." I love seeing this creative energy and vocabulary use that comes about by letting them play in the space. Parents also use this time as an opportunity to teach their children new words by describing the toys with adjectives



Felt flannel board activities featured ladybugs, houses, and leaves.

like squishy, bumpy, and soft, and describing the objects by name and color.

At least once a month, I try to incorporate a craft at the end of storytime to practice writing. During my STEAM-themed week, we read the book *If I Built a House* by Chris Van Dusen. At the end of storytime, each child got a brown paper bag, some construction paper, scissors, markers, and a glue stick. They each made their own house; some of them wrote on them or drew some lines, which I think of as pre-writing, and all of the families were discussing what a house needs like windows and doors. Some kids got creative inspiration from the story and made a rocket room or a kitchen that cooked food for them. This improves their fine motor skills and prepares them for writing while also using words that they may not use often in their everyday language.

My Storytimes

I keep the five ECRR2 practices in mind when planning and structuring my storytimes. My goal is to have at least one early literacy tip each week that relates to an activity we are doing or a book we are reading.

For example, in the first storytime of the six-week session, we sang an imitation song called “Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear” that has kids

perform actions like touching their toes or finding their noses after I tell them what to do in rhyme form.⁵ My early literacy tip was that imitation is one of the earliest forms of interaction for children and it allows them to coordinate actions with another person. It teaches children language by building vocabulary and is good for brain development.⁶

I encouraged the families to play games like this at home and even incorporate language they wouldn't normally use to help develop their children's vocabularies.

Every storytime structure can be a little different and not every practice needs to be incorporated into each storytime. Incorporating all the practices into a storytime session, whether that is six weeks or more, is more easily achieved and helps to improve the early literacy skills of the children and teaches the parents how to improve their children's reading skills at home.

Storytimes are my favorite part of working in youth services because I get to share stories I love, interact with children and their adults, help families improve their awareness of early literacy skills, and assist them in preparing their children for reading and writing in school. Studying early literacy and child development has helped me implement these early literacy practices in my storytimes and with more knowledge and experience, they will continue to improve. &

References

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