

Public Libraries as a Hub for Early Childhood Development

Submitted to:

Public Library Services Branch, Alberta Municipal Affairs

Submitted by:

PolicyWise for Children & Families



Policy Wise
for Children & Families

Introduction and Background

Libraries are an important community partner in supporting the development of young children and equipping them with skills and habits for lifelong learning. Early childhood development refers to skill development that occurs in the first five years of life (Dodge, 2007). Many families rely on libraries to support their child's learning. Through offering a range of activities, programs, services, and events to children and their families, libraries not only serve as a community hub, but a hub specific to ECD and early literacy.

More and more, libraries are viewed by the community as a place for ECD, early learning, and school readiness. Libraries add significant value to their community, not only through access to books and information, but to a range of resources, programs, and services, and are an exemplar of public space that is inclusive and welcoming to all. The presence that libraries have in their community offers opportunities for developing partnerships that library users and the wider community can benefit from. Exploring the influence of Alberta's libraries on children, families, and communities can help explain why, how, for whom, and under what conditions libraries can reach their desired goal of being a hub for ECD.

The purpose of this document is to:

- Introduce libraries as a community hub that contributes to ECD, and
- Develop a framework to support Alberta libraries to serve as community hubs for ECD.

Vision

Alberta public libraries will be a hub for early childhood development by contributing to what children learn in the first five years of life through programs and services to children, families, and the community.

[Libraries as Hubs for ECD](#)

There are five evidence-informed strategies where libraries can influence ECD. Evidence-informed refers to the use of research findings along with other types of evidence (i.e., experience) to inform decisions and actions (Lavis, Oxman, Lewin, & Fretheim, 2009). The five strategies, as illustrated in Figure 1, include:

- Engaging in community services and partnerships;
- Being a welcoming, inclusive, and culturally appropriate space;
- Encouraging caregiver participation;
- Offering evidence-informed programs and services to prepare children for school; and
- Promoting knowledge sharing within and between libraries and other organizations.

Many libraries across Alberta are already working in some or all five areas, creating a foundation upon which ECD programs and services can be built. A detailed list of example activities for each of the five strategies can be found in Appendix A.



Figure 1: Libraries influence on ECD

Achieving the Vision

Alberta libraries can achieve our vision by contributing to the five strategies defined above. Each of these strategies will be described in further detail in this section.

Community Services and Partnerships

There are many ways that libraries are developing connections to community partners to address the needs of their diverse library users. For some libraries this means connecting users to services offered outside the library, whereas other libraries may offer community services within the library. For example, some libraries in Alberta have started outreach programs to daycares and dayhomes. Another example of a library-based partnership is Middlesex County Library in Ontario (Kyle, 2015). The library houses municipal (i.e., museum and the Art Space), provincial, and federal (i.e., employment centre through Service Canada) services and information that anyone can access. The library also partners with the health unit to offer programs and services to families, such as the Infant Growth/Development and Breastfeeding Drop-In, where families with children between the ages of 0 and 4 years can meet with a public health nurse to discuss “child growth and development, nutrition, breastfeeding, child behaviour, safety, parenting and community support” (Middlesex County Public Library, 2017). Many libraries across Alberta are already working in partnership with local agencies to address the needs of their library users (i.e., Parent Link Centres, Alberta Health Services) and have been recognized for their contribution to meeting community needs. Making these connections at the library assists community members with accessing other resources, programs and services, and supports ECD.

A full list of activities can be found in Appendix A. Examples of actions include:

Who	Actions
Library Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a list of websites that would be helpful for parents or caregivers (i.e., community services, parenting websites, etc.) and offer assistance finding those websites using library computers • Post flyers for library or community events and workshops on bulletin boards or library websites
Library Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host programs, workshops, etc., in partnership with community agencies such as Parent Link Centres, literary agencies, nurses, firefighter/paramedics from which parents, families, children, and other community members would benefit • Partner with child care centres and dayhomes to offer programs and services to children, as well as training to child care staff
Library Boards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate for and facilitate community partnerships • Provide funding and resources for ECD related programs, services and participation in community events

Welcoming, Inclusive, and Culturally Appropriate Spaces

Welcoming, inclusive, and culturally appropriate library environments offer a physical or mobile space for all community members to learn and interact. This means giving consideration to the diverse communities libraries serve. Welcoming spaces offer a warm atmosphere where children, families, and other community members can interact, read, and participate in other activities. Other considerations include accessibility for library users with mobility or behavioural concerns. Depending on resource availability, this could include: placing collections on lower shelves, providing desks that can be raised and lowered, or offering training to staff on how to adapt programs and services for children with mental illness or behavioural concerns. Additionally, libraries have the opportunity to engage communities through culturally appropriate spaces that provide children the chance to learn about themselves, their cultures, and those of others.

Examples of actions include:

Who	Actions
Library Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read books and materials during programs and services that are representative of other backgrounds and cultures • Encourage library users to interact with one another by having discussions, presenting demonstrations, or sharing information about collections
Library Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite speakers and authors from diverse backgrounds (i.e., Indigenous, French speaking, etc.) • If resources permit, offer mobile library services and programs • Place collections on lower bookshelves for library users with mobility impairments

- Provide libraries with diverse collections
- Where possible, install wheelchair ramps, accessible doorways, and tables that can be lowered and raised as needed
- Provide training to library staff on how to modify programs and services for children with disabilities, mental illness, or behavioural concerns

Library Boards

Caregiver Participation

Everyday caregiver-child¹ interactions help children learn, develop literacy skills, and establish meaningful relationships with caregivers and other trusted adults (MacLean, 2008). Meaningful caregiver-child interactions increase caregiver confidence and teach caregivers about the positive influence they have on learning (MacLean, 2008; Graham & Gagnon, 2013). According to MacLean (2008), libraries and library staff have the opportunity to support caregivers by:

- Allowing caregivers to participate in children’s programming and services;
- Showing caregivers how to interact with children while reading (i.e., asking questions), select books, and encourage sharing of books when other children are present;
- Offering ideas for how to make literacy skills part of everyday routines, including the five Every Child Ready to Read activities of reading, writing, playing, singing, and talking (discussed in further detail in the following section); and,
- Providing song sheets, book lists, and other resources that caregivers may find helpful.

Caregiver inclusion and participation also helps build connections and networks among other caregivers that can reduce isolation, provide social support, and offer opportunities for sharing information (McKenzie & Stooke, 2007; Leach, 2010).

Who	Actions
Library Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give explanations about what skills are being developed during different programs such as Storytime • Provide examples of questions parents/caregivers can ask children while reading a book • Have children and parents/caregivers interact during programs and services • Assist parents/caregivers with finding and checking out books • Set aside time at the beginning or end of programs for parents/caregivers to talk amongst themselves • Hand out song or rhyme sheets that parents/caregivers can follow
Library Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer family-centred programs and services such as family Storytime

¹ The term “caregiver” is used to encompass all care situations, including parents, family members, care providers, etc.

- Offer programs for new parents, such as Baby’s Day Out or Mommy and Me
- Establish partnerships with dayhomes and daycares

Library Boards

- Ensure Plan of Service reflects ECD priorities
- Ensure funding facilitates programming (i.e., staffing, resources)
- Implement appropriate policies and procedures to equip staff

Program and Service Delivery to Prepare Children for School

Evidence-informed programs and services for children play an important role in developing skills for lifelong learning (Mustard, 2007). Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) is an evidence-informed program that can be used in libraries and is shown to help prepare children for school and lifelong learning. ECRR focuses on developing skills through five activities: reading, writing, playing, singing, and talking. According to the American Library Association (2015), each of the five ECRR activities can be supported by:

- *Reading*- adults reading to children and asking questions about the book, characters, and storyline;
- *Writing*- having children practice developmentally appropriate writing and drawing activities;
- *Playing*- encouraging children to participate in different structured and unstructured play (i.e., acting and storytelling);
- *Singing*- singing and rhyming to and with children;
- *Talking*- having conversations with children that can become part of specific activities and everyday routines.

Who	Actions
Library Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use props, flannel boards, puppets, or other objects while reading • Ask children to answer questions during Storytime • Have children practice writing or drawing pictures based on stories they’ve heard (age dependent) • Ask children to act out different scenarios such as repairing a car or going to the doctors • Teach children songs or rhymes and have them repeat them • Explain the steps in a process such as changing seasons or how plants grow
Library Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create space for unstructured play that includes Lego, puzzles, maker kits, blocks, or other toys • Provide resources that show how parents/caregivers can use ECRR at home • Offer interactive collections that encourage children’s participation
Library Boards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure Plan of Service reflects ECD priorities

- Ensure funding facilitates programming (i.e., staffing, resources)
- Ensure staff are supported with professional development opportunities

Knowledge Sharing Within and Between Libraries

Alberta public libraries have a series of formal networks that “link public libraries and enable sharing” (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2017). Libraries can use these networks to share materials, such as books and literacy kits, as well as ideas and skills. For example, libraries can share information and materials for ECD programs and services that work particularly well. Interlibrary loans are another excellent example, in which library materials are delivered between libraries to fill user requests when specific materials are not available at their local library. These networks can create opportunities for collaboration and partnerships in the community (I.e., Parent Link Centres). Libraries can draw on the relationships of other libraries to build connections within their own community through asking for ideas about whom to contact, or by having those introductions made.

Sharing knowledge and information is an important part of professional development and training. Various types of professional development and training are effective, including workshops, online resources, manuals and guides, or mentorship and coaching. Professional development and training can be used to different degrees and by those within the library network (i.e., staff), external to it (i.e., other agency staff), or in partnership with it (i.e., Parent Link Centres), further lending support to the importance of knowledge sharing. As part of the framework development, interviews were conducted with Alberta library staff. Those interviews showed that many staff relied on mentorship and coaching by other library staff to learn new approaches to ECD programs and services. Professional development and training contributes to the overall competency of staff, regardless of their educational background or previous experience.

Library boards also play an important role, particularly in the areas of governance, strategic planning, funding, and advocacy. Each library board within Alberta has relative autonomy to make decisions based on the needs and interests of the community (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2017).

Who	Actions
Library Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with the library Manager to identify other libraries, community agencies, etc. that could be used as a resource for information, programs, or services
Library Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide user friendly material and resources all staff can use as a guide for implementing ECD programs and services • Offer interlibrary loans and kits • Offer appropriate professional development and training sessions related to ECD • Pair new staff or staff needing extra support with a mentor or coach to build strong relationships and promote knowledge sharing • Participate in local Early Childhood Coalitions, which include a variety of community members working together to promote ECD
Library Boards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure professional development is available

- Communicate Plan of Service as a priority to Municipal Council
- Implement appropriate policies and procedures to equip staff with the resources necessary for effective work

The vision that Alberta public libraries will be a hub for ECD can be supported by working within the five strategies described above. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation, and implementation considerations further serve to support the vision and will be addressed in the following section.

Conclusion

Libraries are an important part of communities, not only for literacy and learning, but as a place for inclusion, civic engagement, connections to community resources and services, and as source of community vitality (Scott, 2011). They also make significant contributions to ECD both directly and indirectly.

Alberta public libraries have a vision of being a hub for early childhood development by contributing to what children learn in the first five years of life through programs and services to children, families, and the community. This vision can be achieved through community services and partnerships; being a welcome and inclusive, and culturally appropriate environment; program and service delivery to help prepare children for school; and knowledge sharing within and between libraries. As libraries are relatively autonomous, the vision represents the “what” libraries want to achieve related to ECD; however, the “how” is based on libraries responsiveness to their particular communities.

For further questions regarding how the five strategies can be implemented to support the vision, please contact Alberta Municipal Affairs, Public Library Services at: libraries@gov.ab.ca

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Appendix A- Table of Strategies and Activities

Provide access to community services and resources, and develop community partnerships related to ECD

- Offer brochures or business cards of community resources for children, families, and community members
- Post flyers on bulletin boards or library websites of library or community events and workshops
- Provide a list of websites that would be helpful for parents or caregivers and offer assistance accessing those websites using library computers
- Invite experts or community agency staff (i.e., nurses, early childhood professionals, firefighters/paramedics) into the library to offer workshops and classes to parents or caregivers
- Host ECD programs in partnership with community agencies like Parent Link Centres, literary agencies, or other community members that can offer learning opportunities to children and their families
- Provide space that can be rented out to for community programs, services, or events
- Partner with child care centres and dayhomes to offer programs and services to children, as well as training to child care staff
- Partner with public health services such as hospitals to provide materials and resources to parents and caregivers (i.e., library or book kits to new parents) that promote ECD, especially among vulnerable populations. For example, some health units refer new moms for a library membership and free book
- Participate in community events such as fairs (i.e., Early Years Expo) or parades, and have library staff or local authors read stories to children and families

Create a welcoming and culturally appropriate space for families and community members to engage in reading and other unstructured activities

- Offer seating areas for families and other library users to read, such as bean bag chairs, couches, or story rugs
- Use bright colours and displays, such as a Story Tree corner, picture book display, and artwork
- Provide opportunities for children, families, and community members to engage, socialize, and learn with one another
- Where possible, install wheelchair ramps, accessible doorways, and tables that can be lowered and raised as needed, and place collections on lower bookshelves
- Provide training to library staff on how to modify programs and services for children with disabilities, mental health, or behavioural problems, and offer techniques for managing behaviours by working with the children and their caregivers
- If resources permit, offer mobile library services and programs
- Offer a diverse collection of books and materials in different languages
- Offer programs and services in different languages
- Invite speakers and authors from diverse backgrounds (i.e., Indigenous, French speaking, etc.)

Encourage parent and caregiver participation through role modelling techniques and involvement in programs and services.

- Offer explanations about what literacy skills are being developed during different aspects of programs such as Storytime
- Provide examples of questions caregivers can ask the child while reading a book to encourage dialogue
- Have children sit and interact with their caregiver during programs and services
- Provide a list of books, songs, or rhymes caregivers can use at home
- Offer strategies for incorporating ECRR activities at home, such as singing songs while children wash their hands
- Demonstrate how caregivers can find and check out books if they are unsure
- Allocate time at the beginning or end of the program for caregivers to talk amongst themselves while children are participating in other activities or snack time
- Facilitate discussions among caregivers by asking questions or reflecting on the program or service
- Provide information and resources that caregivers may find useful (i.e., community events, other library programs, information about child care)
- Provide song or rhyme sheets that caregivers with English as a second language can follow to prevent caregiver isolation
- Offer family-centred programs and services such as family Storytime
- Offer programs for new parents. Examples from library documents include Baby's Day Out, Mom and Tots, and Mommy and Me

Offer evidence-informed programs and services starting in infancy to help prepare children for school

- Provide interactive picture books for younger children
- Use props, flannel boards, puppets, or other objects while reading
- Ask children to answer questions during Storytime
- Allow children to choose books they are interested in
- Have children practice writing their names or other simple words
- Have children write their own books or draw pictures of a story they have heard or made-up
- Host colouring contests or set up colouring tables
- Use words and drawings to illustrate concepts or objects
- Create a space for unstructured play that includes Lego, puzzles, maker kits, blocks, or other toys
- Provide props such as doll houses, puppet theatres, or kitchens
- Have children act out different scenarios such as going to the doctor or repairing a car
- Play matching and sorting games
- Use songbooks that children can follow along to
- Show children pictures that correspond with songs

- Teach children songs and have them repeat them
- Sing songs about concepts such as shapes or letters
- Explain the steps in a process such as changing seasons, or how plants grow
- When reading a book have children guess what is going to happen
- Talk to children about what can be seen or experienced in the space you are in
- Point out words and describe other words with similar sounds or letters

Promote knowledge sharing between libraries

- Offer interlibrary loans and kits
- Participate in local Early Childhood Coalitions, which include a variety of community members working together to promote ECD
- Continue hosting symposiums, and consider additional methods, such as websites, to showcase library programs and services
- Search for reviews of literacy resources (i.e., Horn Book or award lists) or seek consultation on the resources through local literacy agencies or coordinators
- Offer appropriate professional development and training sessions related to ECD (i.e., Storytime training, working with children with disabilities or mental health concerns, important components for effective ECD, etc.)
- Facilitating training sessions that are offered by other library staff with expertise in specific topic areas
- Pair new staff or staff needing extra support with a mentor or coach to build strong relationships and promote knowledge sharing
- Provide user friendly materials and resources all staff can use as a guide for implementing ECD programs and services
- Consider a variety of qualifications and skills within library staff, and ensure hiring practices are inclusive
- Continue offering orientation or training to library board members to ensure they understand their roles and responsibilities