



Play and Grow

Pennsylvania Libraries

Pennsylvania Office of Commonwealth Libraries

2022-2023 Report

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Introduction

The Play & Grow project was designed to support libraries and librarians in better serving the families in their communities through the integration of the Play and Grow Approach into their current programming. This project was funded in part by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) as administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education through the Pennsylvania Office of Commonwealth Libraries.

The Play & Grow approach builds on the knowledge that good health, early learning, family engagement, and supportive communities play a critical role in a young child's growth and development. Resources and professional development are provided to participating libraries to assist staff in strengthening their understanding of these areas.

With the advent of COVID in 2020, the Play & Grow program was put on hold. In 2022, the initiative was reinstated and revised.

Play and Grow

The 2022-2023 Play and Grow project focused on library programming beyond storytimes, which included:

- Infant and toddler activities that develops the whole child,
- Library collection development for children birth to five, as well as the adults in their lives,
- Family Engagement, which included developing an understanding of strengthening families,
- Understanding the importance of play, and
- Developing a Play and Grow space for families in the participating library space.

To ensure the success of participating libraries in integrating the above Play and Grow approach into their programming, participating libraries were provided professional development, program support, and financial resources.

Professional Development

To increase accessibility to participating libraries throughout the state, professional development sessions were conducted virtually. Four virtual professional development sessions were led by Rose Gioia-Fine, Manager of Innovation and Special Projects at the Tuscarora Intermediate Unit, and Nina White, Youth Services Consultant. Professional development sessions centered on the following themes:

- Foundational knowledge of early childhood brain development and the developmental stages of play, and designing station-based learning opportunities through story lab planning,
- Trauma and trauma informed approaches,
- Social emotional learning and mindfulness, and
- Supporting families through connections, information, and resources.

In addition to virtual professional development, participants were also to have access to two asynchronous modules:

- Library collection development with a focus early childhood education and family engagement) and,
- Creating a welcoming space for young children and their families.

These asynchronous modules could be conducted at the participants' time and pace. The first module was readily available to all participants. Unfortunately, the second module was not completed in time for this cohort of Play and Grow participants. Participants were provided with the *The Power of Play, Designing Early Learning Spaces* by Stoltz, Conner and Bradberry as a reference book in place of the second module.

Support and Financial Resources

Support. In addition to formal professional development, participating libraries were supported through virtual and/or in person consultations with Gioia-Fine and White. A group listserv allowed participants to ask questions of the group as well as share new thoughts and ideas that came up during their professional development sessions.

Resources. Participating libraries had a budget of \$2000 to create their Play and Grow space, a space in which they could integrate the Play and Grow approach into new or current programming. During professional development sessions, libraries were provided a list of early childhood tools, examples of Play and Grow spaces, and demonstrations of how those spaces are used to integrate the Play and Grow approach into new or current programming.

In addition to a supply budget, participating libraries were given the opportunity to select from one of these three items: (1) a dramatic play kitchen, (2) fold and roll cubby unit and light table, or (3) changing color light center. An addition of one of these items enhanced the learning space or provided storage cabinets to make access to early childhood infant and toddler manipulatives and tools easily accessible to families.

Scope and Demographics

The Play and Grow program served 18 libraries throughout Pennsylvania (see Figure 1).

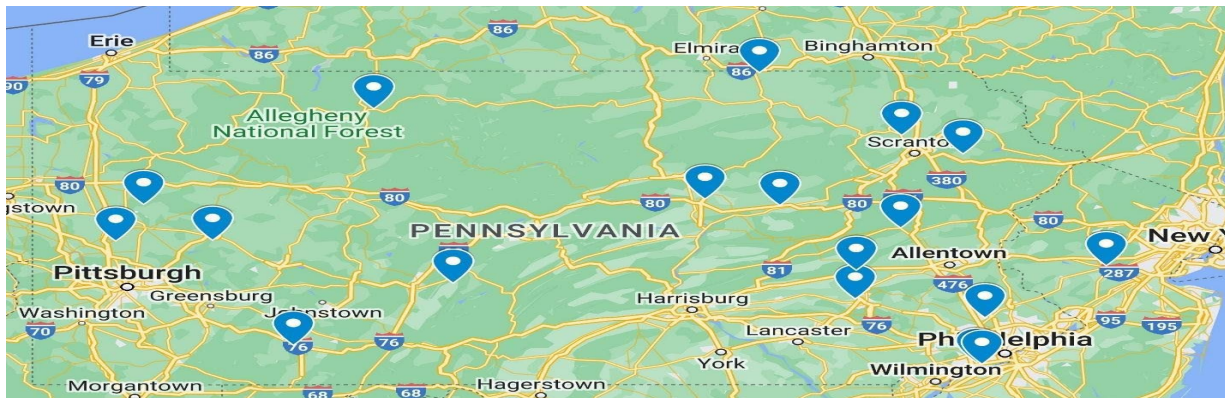


Figure 1 Play and Grow Library Participant Locations. Eighteen libraries across Pennsylvania. Blue markers show locations of participating libraries.

The eighteen libraries cover ten different library districts and together serve a total population of 220,553. The smallest population served by Dalton Community Library (1,760) and the largest served by Somerset County Library (37,498). Thirteen libraries (72%) serve rural communities while five (28%) serve suburban communities. (See Table 1).

Table 1

Play and Grow Program 2022-2023 Demographics

Library Name	Library District	Community Type	Population Served
Dimmick Memorial Library	Allentown	Rural	19,700
Williamsburg Public Library, Inc.	Altoona	Rural	6,607
Tinicum Memorial Public Library	Delaware	Suburban	4,096
Ridley Park Public Library	Delaware	Suburban	7,186
Mary S. Biesecker Public Library	Johnstown	Rural	6,048
Somerset County Library	Johnstown	Rural	37,498
North Wales Area Library	Montgomery County	Suburban	20,498
Ford City Public Library	New Castle	Rural	2,900
North Trails Public Library-Branch of Butler Federated Library System	New Castle	Rural	10,000
Evans City Public Library Association	New Castle	Suburban	5,265
The Sayre Public Library, Inc.	North Central	Rural	5,500
Montgomery House Library	North Central	Rural	9,713
Columbia County Traveling Library Authority	North Central	Rural	29,688
Dalton Community Library	Northeast Library	Rural	1,760
Hamlin Community Library	Northeast Library	Rural	9,000
Hamburg Public Library	Reading	Rural	16,233
Spring Township Library Association	Reading	Suburban	27,000
Mount Jewett Memorial Library	Seneca	Rural	1,861

In order to ensure an equitable approach and eligibility, a rubric was created and used when reviewing applications. To grow and build capacity around early childhood and family engagement in libraries, the Play and Grow project sought small libraries:

- Without a full-time children’s librarian or have professionals new to the field or libraries with new professionals to the field, and/or
- Without foundation in early childhood development and/or family engagement.

100% of the participating libraries do not employ a full-time youth services staff member – 39% do not employ a youth services staff member, 44% have a youth services staff member that works less than 25 hours and the remaining 17% have a youth services staff member that works between 25 and 32 hours.

61% of the youth services staff of the participating libraries have less than three years of experience (28% less than three years of experience, 33% less than one year of experience).

IMLS Evaluation Data Summary

Feedback was sought to assess the impact of the Play and Grow approach to provide guidance for future development. One hundred percent of participants completed the program survey.

Participants were asked to answer questions based on the following scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, or Disagree. Table 2 below shows the results based on program related questions. 100% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed to each statement which is in alignment to the narrative results as well as the intended outcomes that participants reported.

Table 2

IMLS Evaluation Data Summary

Statement based on experience ...	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I learned something by participating in this library activity.	72%	28%	0%	0%
I feel more confident about what I just learned.	72%	28%	0%	0%
I intend to apply what I just learned.	83%	17%	0%	0%
Applying what I learned will help improve library services to the public.	83%	17%	0%	0%

Results and Impact

In addition to the IMLS Evaluation Data, a final survey was taken to evaluate the Play and Grow project’s impact on its participants. The results and impact of this Play and Grow project is multifaceted. Transformations happened in library spaces and in library staff mindsets, and eventually, the effect of these on their patrons – young children and their families.

Transformations in Library Spaces

Participating libraries were required to create a Play and Grow space that goes beyond programming for storytime. *“Our space has really changed!”* is one sentence that embodies the transformations that participants wrote about their library when asked, “How did you enhance your space to be more welcoming for young children and their families?” Three large themes emerged – enhancing the space the libraries already had, redesigning a space, and creation of a new space (even if they already had a space).

Enhancing Space. Participants enhanced a library space with new materials bought with grant money as well as integrated new ideas they learned in their professional development sessions (SEL, trauma informed approaches, developmental stages, play, etc.).

“We enhanced our children's space by putting out more sensory toys for the kids to play with. The children have a section where they can sit and just relax and feel safe. And the parents also have an area where they can watch their children and relax also. The area is bright and colorful with books and toys and signs with activities for children to take part of.”

“We enhanced our space by adding bins of toys and tools that families are welcome to use at any time. We also added a calm-down basket with sensory and mindfulness tools and resources for families.”

“We also created a quiet space that will allow children that need a place to calm down using the techniques that were learned during the webinars we attended. We were also able to create a baby/toddler area that allows families with younger children to participate in activities.”

“Our library’s physical space is without a doubt more welcoming for young children and their families ... Our Play and Grow purchases have vastly expanded our collection and have thus provided developmentally appropriate activities for little learners and their families to use in our space.”

“We have developed a new STEAM location in our library in our children's section. This area is set-up for our patrons and children to use our new STEAM activities.”

“We made a comfort basket (that's available all the time, not just during class) to accommodate behavioral breaks among students (and perhaps younger siblings). The basket contains some play and sensory items.”

“Now babies and toddlers have a new place to learn early literacy skills inside our small but cozy Children's Room filled with attractive, safe, and calming sensory toys.”

Redesign of Space. Some participants took this grant opportunity not only to enhance their current space, but to redesign it to ensure that they were, as one participant put it, *“to better suit the new materials,”* and new ideas that they learned during professional development sessions.

“In addition to purchasing the educational tools, we opted to redesign our interior space to better suit the new materials, giving families a larger space to play together. This required reshelving all of the books in our Central Branch Library, opening up the area

where our large conference table used to live. This space now houses our play area and is surrounded by the children's collections including board books, picture books, early reader nonfiction, and parenting books. Families are now greeted with a large open play area when entering our walk-in library."

"The children's area now has a quiet corner with a canopy, a comfort basket, and calming sensory toys, in addition to flexible seating."

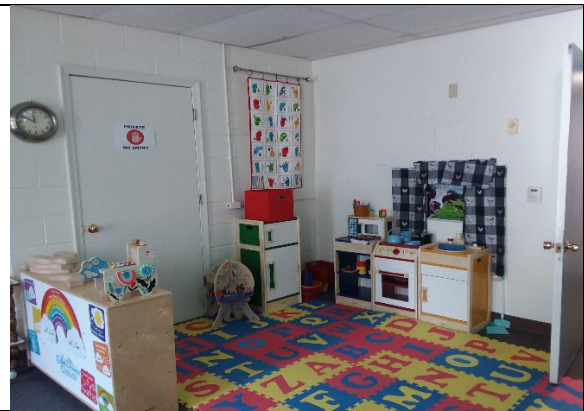
"We have more open space for children to make use of and have added some interactive items for them to use."

Creation of a New Space. Some libraries did not have a space and had to create a new space for young children and their families with the funds and resources that they received through Play and Grow.

"Before this, we didn't have a specified space for our babies. With this grant, we were able to plan an area just for the very young."

"We transformed an old office space into a whole room filled with books, art supplies, puzzles, blocks, puppets, a light table and shelves full of a variety of new activities."

Photos of Play and Grow Spaces



Transformations in Staff Mindsets

Professional development that centered on (a) foundational knowledge of early childhood brain development and the developmental stages of play, (b) trauma and trauma-informed approaches, (c) social emotional learning and mindfulness, and (d) supporting families had a great impact on library staff participants. Library staff referred to new mindsets when speaking of their new library space and programming and their hopes for their children and families.

A New Way of Programming. Participants speak about programming that includes how they've integrated what they've learned, how that changes their space, and the effect on their young children and their parents.

"...planning my programs included brain development, communication, and the effect of trauma in young children and how to nurture positive outcomes in these areas"

"We sing songs and do movements and I've integrated many of the great tips I've picked up in our trainings."

"We are also making it a point to include time for mindfulness, deep breathing, calming and yoga techniques into our children's programming."

"We were able to make our early childhood programming more interactive. In talking to caregivers, being able to stress to families the importance of play in learning and the development of the child as a whole. The quiet space ideas and mindfulness techniques gave us new tools to introduce to our young families."

"Learning the main focus of our programming for our youngest patrons helped us gain knowledge on what to offer and how to structure our programs."

Intended Outcomes. Two participants summed up what most library participants hope as their intended outcome, first, "We are hoping to be a space of choice for parents and small children" and second, "I see our programs as more of a learning experience. They are becoming more than just stories and crafts."

"What we are hoping is the families and particularly the early learners can come to the library and feel safe and learn and grow."

"Parents and children will spend more time in the library and have a more positive experience here."

"Since completing the redesign and implementing the educational tools, we have seen an increase in not only families visiting the library, but an increase in their time spent in the library."

"We are hoping to be a space of choice for parents and small children. We want our library and the Children's Section to be an inviting and exciting place where people want to come. We want parents to be able to practice their contribution to their children's skill development."

"Our goal is to get more families involved and to produce highly interactive caregiver/child play and learn time that will be used after they leave the classroom so that we can, in the end, produce adjusted, literate kids."

“We are hoping to get more families with younger children to be able to stay longer in the library and come to more programs.”

Summary

By creating a Play and Grow space and learning the Play and Grow approach, the 18 participating libraries are transforming their library spaces and programming which in turn transforms the staff and the library patrons (children and their families).

One participant summarizes the overall affect of the Play and Grow project:

“By offering a welcoming and accessible environment, the play space has transcended socio-economic boundaries, providing all children with the opportunity to explore, learn, and grow together. Through carefully curated books, interactive activities, and diverse programming, children from various backgrounds can see themselves represented and celebrated, fostering a sense of belonging and validating their identities. This inclusive approach not only empowers children with essential literacy skills but also nurtures a deeper understanding and respect for each other's differences. As a result, the Play and Grow space and programming stands as a shining example of how intentional design and thoughtful programming can break down barriers, promote equity, and create a sense of community where everyone feels valued and included.”

Finally, the transformation that is shared by many of the participating libraries is a desire for the library to be “seen in a new light” – a library that is not quiet but is exciting and fun.



“I would love for people to see that a library as more than just a house for books and that you can visit more than once in a while. We have the potential to offer so much more and do so much for and with the community. With the Play and Grow grant we are closing one of the doors to that stereotype. We have been able to widen the variety of resources without taking away from the quality of what we had been offering previously. The children are able to have their own space to explore, create, and play with others or just by themselves with a sensory bin (that we are now able to offer). I am hoping that in the long run this will be seen and thought of as a place where adults and children can not only stay awhile and play but also bond with them and each other. Another aspect of what we do is being a filler between the school and home. These are just pieces of the overall puzzle that make up an individual's ties to a community. Again, it would be great if a parent/guardian thought of us in that way as an extension of a school and used us as a tool to teach lessons.”

“We are not a quiet library. We are often laughing and having fun. We often have the whole library dancing to the "Wiggy Wiggles" song! Even patrons waiting for passport appointments have joined in the fun. Everyone is made to feel welcome.”

“With the addition of the infant play station, we now have families that will bring their babies to story time. If the babies are not interested in the stories, they have the whole station that they can play with. In between stories, caregivers will help the babies engage with songs, fingerplays, and the bubbles.”

“As we share with them the importance of skill development, and show them what materials we have, the kids and the parents work together to experiment with the materials. They get excited and share with other kids and grownups, even if they do not know them.”

“This Children's Section has become magnetic for almost everyone in the library, as the kids are exclaiming about what they are able to do--like balance in and walk across Bilibo toys. Also, because there are so many options, and we are not directing the kids to just sit and listen, some of the kids who are less patient and less able to sit still are no longer disruptive or considered a problem. Those kids are able to find something they like that they can work on, and thoroughly engage with that and use their extra energy in a skill development area.”



