

# Learning Guide to Early Literacy Storytime Programs

Mary Fellows, Upper Hudson Library System

This is a bare-bones guide to delivering early literacy storytime programs. Early literacy means what children know about reading and writing before they can actually read or write. Our goal is to build that knowledge, a first step in creating strong readers and learners.

In any library, the key to providing strong early literacy services are the people doing this work. Essential to early literacy work are people who:

- Like, respect, and understand young children and their parents/caregivers
- Understand the goals of the library's early literacy program and commit to them
- Work on their skills, taking guidance and direction without ego
- Are committed to continual learning and seek out opportunities

UHLS facilitates multiple opportunities for skill building and observation of skilled early literacy specialists. To find out about current and upcoming opportunities, contact Mary Fellows at UHLS at [mary.fellows@uhls.org](mailto:mary.fellows@uhls.org) or 518-437-9880 ext. 228.

A successful storytime program has many facets. There's a multitude of resources available on every aspect on the Internet and in books. Please consider the websites and books referenced here to be only a sampling of resources. The eager searcher will find much help from the generous community of storytime gurus!

In this guide, the term "parents" will sometimes be used for simplicity, but should be understood to mean parents or any caregivers, including other relatives.

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## Fundamentals: What is a 21<sup>st</sup> century early literacy storytime?

A modern, effective storytime program incorporates principles and practices learned from research on early literacy. Essential elements:

- A literacy-based experience for children and their adult caregivers. Parents/caregivers are an integral part of the program.
- The main content is for children, yet there is always content (called "early literacy asides") delivered to parents/caregivers

While sharing stories is a key focus, music, movement, and play are also incorporated. Presenters always use books, and may also use musical instruments, a tablet and projector, apps, felt boards, puppets, or any number of other objects to heighten the literacy experience.

A note on terminology: “storytime” is a library term, and has certain undesirable old-fashioned associations in the wider world. A preferable alternative to consider keeps the library brand yet expands understanding of what we do: “Storytime Play and Learn.”

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## Essential pieces of your early literacy storytime program

- Books to share
  - Songs or rhymes with movement
  - Early literacy asides
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## Putting the pieces together

### Determining number of books and activities to include

The number of books and activities included depends on the age of the audience, length of the books and activities, and length of the program. Here are some general guidelines:

- Preschoolers, 30 minutes:
  - Opening song
  - 2-3 books
  - 1-2 early literacy asides
  - 1 story (flannel, no-book, tell-and-draw, etc.)
  - 3-4 songs or rhymes
  - 1 “get the wiggles out” activity
  - Closing song
- Preschoolers, 45 minutes:
  - Opening song
  - 3-4 books
  - 2-3 early literacy asides
  - 1 story (flannel, no-book, tell-and-draw, etc.)
  - 3-4 songs or rhymes
  - 2 “get the wiggles out” activities
  - Closing song

- Multi-age, 30 minutes:
  - Opening song
  - 2-3 books
  - 1-2 early literacy asides
  - 1 story (flannel, no-book, tell-and-draw, etc.)
  - 3-4 songs or rhymes
  - 1 “get the wiggles out” activity
  - Closing song
- Multi-age, 45 minutes:
  - Opening song
  - 3-4 books
  - 2-3 early literacy asides
  - 1 story (flannel, no-book, tell-and-draw, etc.)
  - 2-3 songs or rhymes
  - 1 “get the wiggles out” activity
  - Closing song

Sample agendas:

- Preschool - Dinosaurs: <https://www.literacious.com/2016/02/07/storytime-theme-dinosaurs/>
- Preschool – Catching: [http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/NI14Handouts/sample\\_storytimesciasides.pdf](http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/NI14Handouts/sample_storytimesciasides.pdf)
- Multi-Age – Animals: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/531bd3f2e4b0a09d95833bfc/t/5b1b2bd588251b5f8f80234b/1528507349570/5mixedagestdemohnd.pdf>

Sample planning sheets:

- <https://jbrary.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toddler-Storytime-Planning-Sheet.docx-1.pdf>
- <https://jbrary.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Family-Storytime-Planning-Sheet.pdf>
- <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/531bd3f2e4b0a09d95833bfc/t/5a66adbef9619a21f77a88cb/1516678591049/4stitemworksheet.pdf>

## Themes

It's more important that you share books you're excited about than that every book fits a theme. That said, themes scaffold learning, provide presenters with an organizing principle, and offer parents an easy path to extension activities.

When using a theme, if you want to include an off-theme book, create a bridge. For example, "This book isn't about apples, but apples grow on trees and birds live in trees, don't they?" The apple theme has been bridged so that a bird book seems natural.

- More on using – or not using – themes:

<https://jbrary.com/category/storytime-resources/planning-resources/>

<http://www.earlylit.net/storytime-resources>

## Finding books that work

There are so many great books for sharing with a group of children and adults, and more come out every week! Picture books have evolved tremendously and many now reflect the highest standards of art and design. It's tempting to use old favorites, but reread them first and consider whether they still reflect the best we have to offer children. Sentimentality should never be a factor in choosing books for programs.

Always have more books ready than you expect to use. Having options at hand is crucial when you need to switch gears because something just isn't working.

- More on choosing books:

<https://jbrary.com/new-to-storytime-choosing-storytime-books/>

<https://jbrary.com/category/storytime-resources/>

<https://jbrary.com/category/storytime-resources/storytime-booklists/>

## Reading aloud

Sharing books aloud in an engaging way is a specific and learned skill. Here is a terrific tutorial: <https://jbrary.com/new-to-storytime-how-to-read-books-to-a-group/>

## Finding music and movement activities

Every program should include music. If you're self-conscious about your singing voice, remember that the children won't mind. Also, if you don't have a choir-worthy voice, you're

modeling to parents that the important thing is singing to their child, not how well they sing. You can even make that point in your Early literacy aside!

If you prefer not to sing solo, use recorded music. Songs with actions help with motor skill development and get children moving to allay restlessness.

Using a musical instrument or handing out instruments to children to accompany a song are excellent ways to incorporate music.

Always opening the program with the same song or rhyme provides a cue that the program is starting and a sense of familiarity to children, which calms them. Many presenters use the same closing song or activity each week for similar reasons.

- More on opening songs and activities:  
<https://jbrary.com/favourite-hello-songs-storytime/>

Most programs should also include a rhyme or fingerplay. Rhymes help children hear the smaller parts of words. Fingerplays with help fine motor skills.

- More on music/rhymes/movement ideas

<https://kcls.org/content/>

[https://kcls.org/content-category/finger\\_plays/](https://kcls.org/content-category/finger_plays/)

<https://singwithourkids.com/info.htm>

<https://storytimekatie.com/songs-rhymes/master-list/>

<https://klmpeace.wordpress.com/2015/10/15/my-favorite-storytime-jams/>

<https://jbrary.com/youtube-playlists/>

<https://jbrary.com/youtube-playlists/>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnjsY7TmClktuQLNCXXra6Q>

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeQ12HBJmWnBKdwNhgB4EVrvvgVYQRot0>

<https://singwithourkids.com/song-library.htm>

<https://www.smart-central.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5F8FE281D43966F6>

## Early Literacy Asides

Essential to modern storytimes is the goal of teaching parents/caregivers what they can do to foster their child's literacy. We do this by modeling, but also through specific messages to parents.

These messages, called "early literacy asides," or sometimes "early literacy messages," each take less than one minute to deliver. They explain how the techniques we're using help children learn literacy skills, and encourage parents to use them at home. Early literacy asides focus on five skills that contribute to literacy: talking, writing, reading, playing, and singing. (TWRPS! 😊)

In each program, you should deliver at least two early literacy asides. Why? This is how we amplify the impact of our work. We see this child perhaps once a week for an hour; the parent spends many more hours with the child. When the parent remembers what we've shared – for example, that singing slows down language so children can hear parts of words and notice how they are alike and different – they will be more likely to sing, talk, read, play, and write with their child.

Your library has a pack of early literacy aside cards for you to select from and use in each storytime.

- More on early literacy asides:

<http://storytimeunderground.org/2014/02/11/ask-a-storytime-ninja-early-literacy-discussions/index.html>

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## **Beyond the basics**

### Planning

Planning takes time. You'll want to plan your storytime programs several weeks to several months in advance. That will give you time to reserve the books and music you're considering using, choose among the options, and rehearse your choices.

- More on planning and evaluating

<https://jbrary.com/planning-a-storytime-session/>

<https://jbrary.com/evaluating-storytime/>

## Takeaways

A takeaway also amplifies our impact. It may be a paper that includes words to a song used, a rhyme on the theme, a short booklist, and/or other activities that parents may share or children may do at home. Always include an early literacy aside!

## Nametags

Nametags help you learn children's names and fosters community among attending families. Sticky nametags work best. Consider having nametags for the adults as well.

## Using puppets

Puppets are an optional means of introducing or telling a story, leading a rhyme, or otherwise adding interest to the program. Puppetry is a skill, and sometimes puppets can frighten children if not carefully introduced, so they're a higher-level program addition.

- More on using puppets:

<https://jbrary.com/category/storytime-resources/new-to-storytime/>

## Using flannel/felt boards

Flannel or felt boards with felt or Velcro-backed pieces are another means of sharing a story or rhyme. In a small group, presenters may want to allow children to put on or take off the pieces.

- More on using flannel/felt boards

<http://flannelfridaystorytime.blogspot.com/>

## Other options for extending a story or song

Tablets, apps, storytelling without props, and tell-and-draw stories are other options to explore when you're ready.

- More on various extenders:

<https://littleelit.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/new-media-in-storytime-christner-hicks-koester.pdf>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iQpoOBfSUK>

<http://meusenotes.blogspot.com/p/draw-and-tell-stories.html>

### Art activities

While art activities can extend the learning and be fun for children, they're an option rather than an essential part of an early literacy storytime. If included, art activities should meet the goal of extending literacy. Foster conversation about the project. Relate it to books shared earlier. Slip in a few early literacy asides to parents.

When planning art activities, be sure that the activity is age-appropriate. Consider giving eager parents their own supplies so that the child can be creative without excessive interference. Try open-ended art projects (process oriented) as well as projects with a goal (product oriented).

Ideas for art projects abound on Pinterest and other Internet sources.

### Timing/scheduling

Factors involved in scheduling your storytime program include staffing and when other community events that draw the same audience take place. Polling the parents of young children who use the library can be helpful in finding convenient times.

- More on scheduling here:

<https://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2013/12/on-scheduling-storytime/>

### Audience: one age group or multi-age

Holding a program for one age group (example: 3-5-year-olds) or for multiple ages (example: ages 8 and under) both work, and each has its benefits and challenges.

- More on one age group vs. multi-age:

<http://storytimeunderground.org/2013/07/30/ask-a-storytime-ninja-older-siblings-in-storytime/index.html>

<http://storytimeunderground.org/2014/02/18/ask-a-storytime-ninja-so-many-ages-so-few-storytimes/index.html>

<https://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2011/06/criss-cross-applesauce-multi-age-story-time/>

## **Preparations that make everything go more smoothly**

### Give yourself enough time

Planning takes time. Setup the day of the storytime program takes time. Clean up and evaluation take time. Feeling rushed or unprepared impacts our interactions with families in a negative way. Our anxiety or scatteredness reduces the effectiveness of a child's literacy experience.

### Materials

Gather in advance the books, music, and rhymes you want to include. Remember to have on hand more books than you think you will use. Enlarge and print any "cheat sheets" (agenda, words to songs or rhymes) so that you can quickly read them. Prepare takeaways, if you're using them. Create nametags.

Your library has a pack of early literacy aside cards. Decide which of the five skills you want to highlight, and choose 1-3 cards with messages relating to the skill(s). Keep these cards with your books and other props to easily share.

### Plan transitions

Transitioning smoothly from one activity to another is a skill to acquire. When planning, consider how you will introduce the book, bridging from the previous activity. Also consider what you will say at the conclusion of the book to "tie a bow" on that book or activity and bridge to the next one.

- More on transitions:

<https://jbrary.com/transitions/>

### Rehearse

Practice! Read through your stories aloud. Use post-its or paper clips to mark sections you want to skip or pages you want to ask questions on. Practice your early literacy asides.

### Backup plan for if you're sick

Put in a place a backup plan for days when the presenter is unexpectedly unavailable. The best plan may be to open the space, put out toys, and let the families enjoy play time together.

### Setting up the room

Set up the room early. Consider whether adults will need chairs. Position your space where there are few distractions visible to the children. If the room you're using has toys, consider moving or covering them so that they don't become a distraction. Gather your materials, books and materials for display (if using), nametags, and any takeaways. Gather and test any media, including speakers.

### Greeting families as they enter the library/space

Manage a family's experience from the minute they enter the children's space. Make sure that they are greeted with a smile and by name if possible. Friendly conversation with parent and child can help allay any fears they might have.

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## **Common challenges**

### What to do when something isn't working

Always have more books and activities ready than you think you will need. This allows you to quickly switch gears when something isn't working with a group. By planning ahead, you can move smoothly into something that engages a restless or talkative group.

### Group management

A few scenarios can offer challenges for the presenter but are usually easily resolved. If the group is losing interest, switch gears to another activity. If a child has a meltdown, let the parent work to resolve it. If it's going on and is too much of a disruption, say something like, "Perhaps Colin needs a little break. Feel free to take him out and come back in when he's calmer."

- More on managing children in storytime:

<https://storytimeunderground.org/resources-2/ask-a-storytime-ninja-archives/index.html>

<https://www.journals.ala.org/index.php/cal/article/download/46/21> (pp. 8-9)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzr-uUNqBwo&list=PL8riLQL7j5vz2ihxY-iJSN08H2nw\\_Q-9O&index=5&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzr-uUNqBwo&list=PL8riLQL7j5vz2ihxY-iJSN08H2nw_Q-9O&index=5&t=0s)

### Engaging and managing adults

New-to-storytime parents need information and experienced parents need reminders about their participation. Parents often get distracted by their cell phones and forget to participate. You can offer a box where parents can “park” their cell phones to eliminate temptation. Also, near the beginning, say something like, “Storytime today is for children and their adults. Adults, you help model to your child what to do, and make this learning experience for fun for your child by participating!”

- More on managing adult behavior:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPtyf6ZUPBA&list=PL8riLQL7j5vz2ihxY-iJSN08H2nw\\_Q-9O&index=4&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPtyf6ZUPBA&list=PL8riLQL7j5vz2ihxY-iJSN08H2nw_Q-9O&index=4&t=0s)

<https://jbrary.com/engaging-caregivers/>

<http://storytimeunderground.org/resources-2/ask-a-storytime-ninja-archives/index.html>

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## **Developing your skills**

### Visit other libraries’ storytime programs

Seeing other presenters in action offers a tremendously valuable learning experience. Some libraries/staff are more experienced and make especially useful models. Please contact Mary Fellows at UHLS for suggestions for visits!

When you’ve identified programs to visit, be sure to call the library before your visit to ask if you might observe.

### Participate in training

UHLS offers a variety of training opportunities, including in-person and digital. Please check with Mary Fellows for current opportunities.

### Read and view widely:

Techniques and strategies for successful early literacy storytimes is an immersive topic. Enjoy learning! Explore:

<https://jbrary.com>

<https://storytimeunderground.org/resources-2/resources/index.html> (resources and list of blogs to check out)

<https://missmaryliberry.com/> (see sidebar for a list of additional storytime-related websites)

<http://www.earlylit.net/storytime-resources>

<https://www.deschuteslibrary.org/kids/literacy>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j74qEmiBoJE&list=PL8riLQL7j5vz2ihxY-iJSN08H2nw\\_Q-90](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j74qEmiBoJE&list=PL8riLQL7j5vz2ihxY-iJSN08H2nw_Q-90)

Read (all books are available for loan through the catalog):

<https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=what-makes-a-good-storytime>

Briggs, Diane. Preschool Favorites: 35 Storytimes Kids Love. American Library Association, 2007.

Diamant-Cohen, Betsy. Mother Goose on the Loose. Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2006.

Diamant-Cohen, Betsy and Melanie A. Hetrick. Transforming Preschool Storytime: A Modern Vision and a Year of Programs. ALA Editions, 2013.

Freeman, Judy, and Caroline Feller Bauer. The Handbook for Storytime Programs. ALA Editions, 2015.

Ghoting, Saroj Nadkarni. Early Literacy Storytimes @ Your Library. American Library Association, 2006.

Ghoting, Saroj Nadkarni, and Kathy Fling Klatt. STEP into Storytime. ALA Editions, 2014.

Ghoting, Saroj Nadkarni. Storytimes for Everyone! ALA Editions, 2013.

Jewell, Alyssa. Move, Play, Learn: Interactive Storytimes with Music, Movement, and More. ALA Editions, to come.

McNeil, Heather. Read, Rhyme and Romp: Early Literacy Skills and Activities for Librarians, Teachers and Parents. Libraries Unlimited, 2012.

Reid, Rob. 200+ Original and Adapted Story Program Activities. ALA Editions, 2018.

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## And finally

Welcome to the creative and fun world of early literacy programming! Within UHLS, you have great colleagues, wonderful role models, and a variety of learning opportunities. Enjoy the learning experience, and if you need guidance, contact Mary Fellows, UHLS Manager, Youth and Family Services, at [mary.fellows@uhls.org](mailto:mary.fellows@uhls.org) or 518-437-9880 ext. 228.

