

Home > News > Shows & Events



PW is seeking a [PUBLISHERS WEEKLY REVIEWER](#).

[NEXT JOB ▶](#)

All in the Family

A look at how the "Family Place" library program is transforming libraries

By Shannon Maughan | Jun 12, 2015

[Tweet](#)

[Comments](#)



As libraries around the country continue to change, one initiative that has been gaining traction is the network of libraries associated with Family Place, a national program that promotes the idea of the library as a community hub for early childhood and family development. But what is so different about libraries with the Family Place designation? Aren't most libraries already family-centered?

"Family Place gives the librarians a comprehensive framework," says Kathleen Deerr, national coordinator for Family Place libraries. "It's about connecting people with everything they need to build healthier, better families." She notes that there's a difference between acting as a teacher, and being an inspirational model or mentor. "We want librarians and families to feel empowered."

Roots

The Family Place program traces its roots back to the 1970s at the Middle Country Public Library, in Centereach, N.Y. At the time, Sandy Feinberg was a children's librarian there (she later became director at MCPL and retired in 2013). Feinberg says that upon returning to work from maternity leave—a period during which she says she felt isolated—she was compelled to do something at her library for parents of small children. Working with local community experts, she developed informal parent-child workshops and grew her library's collection of children's books, including parenting books. She honed the program, and eventually MCPL became a popular destination for kids and families.



The children's area at the Middle Country Public Library, in Centereach, N.Y.

In 1996, Libraries for the Future, a nonprofit organization devoted to library advocacy, teamed up with MCPL, adopting and refining Feinberg's ideas for a program that could be established nationwide. After rolling out the program in five communities in 1998, the Family Place Libraries program has now been adopted in a total of 442 libraries in 29 states, partly fueled by a National Leadership Grant of \$450,000 awarded to MCPL in 2012 by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS); the grant program has enabled MCPL to bring Family Place to a network of 28 libraries in eight states.

What does it take to be designated a Family Place library? Among the essential components are a specially designed space within the children's area; a collection of books, music, toys, multimedia materials for children, as well as parents and caregivers; offering a five-week parent-child workshop for families; conducting outreach to new library users; and having library staff trained in family support. Furthermore, at least one staff member and one administrator from any potential Family Place library must attend a three-day Family Place Training Institute session (in New York or California) and must complete additional online training.

It doesn't end there. Putting the Family Place program into practice involves not only following the initiative's guidelines, but also getting the entire library staff and the community to buy in. "It's getting a lot better," Deerr says of some initial attitudes toward Family Place Libraries. "We used to hear a lot more of 'Why are we turning our library into a day care center?' But when we can share the research about how the program can build stronger brains and that children learn through play, people begin to understand that we are creating a rich environment where children can explore and discover, and adults can meet friends and get support."

At the Tulsa City-County Library (TCCL), which has four of its 24 branch libraries participating in MCPL's IMLS-supported program, youth-services manager Marianne Stambaugh says she has witnessed a culture shift firsthand. "It's changed the tone of the library," she says. "Families are coming and staying and feeling that their young children are welcome in the library, which may not have been the case before. When people see all the educational materials and toys in the space, it opens up a conversation so we can tell them about Family Place and how playing is laying the groundwork for literacy."

A Sense of Belonging

Family Place Libraries was already a familiar concept to Gary Shaffer when he became CEO of TCCL, arriving from the Los Angeles County system, so he was pleased to accept Deerr's invitation to participate in the IMLS grant program. "They are thoughtful and methodical about rolling it out," he says. "In the library world, people typically launch an initiative and say, 'Yay! We're done!' But in the private sector, where I come from originally, the launch is where we're starting. And that is Kathleen's approach, so it doesn't get too big and can't be managed."

Beyond the positive results seen close to home, Shaffer looks at Family Place Libraries in a broader context. "It fits nicely with the Every Child Ready to Read initiative, and we see the two working very nicely together," he says. "If we [libraries] are finding it difficult to be in the book business the way we would like to be, what other businesses do we explore and get into? Introducing pre-literacy skills to children is a major way we have contributed and continue to contribute to the reading ecosphere. We are the go-to experts in this area nationwide, so it makes absolute sense for us to be in that business."

Susan Pannebaker, youth services advisor for the Bureau of Library Development at the State Library of Pennsylvania, has been a longtime supporter of Family Place libraries. Since 2002, Pannebaker says one of her top priorities has been making sure that grants earmarked for implementing Family Place in Pennsylvania were supported by the state's federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funding. "We are seeing it work in urban, suburban, and rural communities."

Pannebaker cites several examples of how families interacting with professionals at the library has resulted in successful early interventions for a number of issues including hearing and speech impairments, and other developmental delays. In rural counties that may not have many social services available, that's proven especially valuable. And, she says the professional development offered by Family Place training and implementation has created a powerful ripple effect that is benefiting libraries and communities.

Deerr agrees, and says that even if a library does not officially adopt the Family Place Libraries program, it can still benefit from the program's ideas. "Every librarian should have some of the attitudes of Family Place," she says. "It's just better customer service to make everyone feel welcome and to offer them a sense of belonging."

For more information on the Family Place Libraries movement, check out the ALA program "Put Change in Your Pocket: Using the Family Place Libraries Model as a Change Agent," Saturday, June 27, 10:30–11:30 a.m., MC 2014W. Deerr will moderate the panel and Shaffer and Pannebaker will speak.

[Click here to return to the ALA 2015 Spotlight.](#)