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Family Place Libraries Recast the Librarian's Role in Early Learning

By [Lisa G. Kropp](#) on June 8, 2015 [Leave a Comment](#)



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Three toddlers stack plastic plates and cups onto a table while another pretends to wash some forks in a sink. Across the way, a grandmother and her 30-month-old grandson build with large cardboard blocks while his younger sister bangs together two stacking cups. Another 15-month-old toddles behind a mini shopping cart trying to navigate a turn as another—arms outstretched wide for balance—tries to snatch a soft doll out of the back of the cart. Kneeling down to give some literacy and child development tip sheets to parents as she chats informally with them is the librarian in her domain: the children's section of the public library. A snapshot of life in a [Family Place Library](#) space.

A national network of children's librarians, Family Place Libraries redesign the environment to be welcoming and appropriate for children beginning at birth; connect parents with resources, programs and services offered at the library and other family service agencies; and reach out to nontraditional library users. Based on a model of comprehensive family-centered services, libraries are re-envisioned as centers for early childhood information, parent education, early literacy, socialization, and family support. Expanding the traditional role of children's services, Family Place builds on the knowledge that good health, early learning, parental involvement, and supportive communities play a critical role in young children's growth and development. It also empowers the children's librarian to be seen as a change agent in early learning and libraries. It's ambitious, but staff at Middle Country Public Library (Centereach, NY), where Family Place Libraries began (and where I previously worked on the Family Place Project), think it is well worth the effort.

"A children's librarian is the perfect parent educator," explains Kathy Deerr, National Coordinator for Family Place Libraries, "because we know that education is not always formal—and public libraries provide that community space for anytime, anywhere learning where librarians can model early learning strategies and behaviors for parents."

The program has grown from its 1979 inception at Middle Country to a national network of over 400 libraries in 29 states. A library is designated as a Family Place Library when a staff member attends the three-day Family Place Training Institute, which prepares them to implement the program locally and connects them with other Family Place staff throughout the United States via a listserv dedicated to the project. Core components of a Family Place Library include:

- Collections of age appropriate books, music, and multimedia materials for babies and toddlers along with parents and caregivers
- A specially designed, welcoming space within the children's area for families with young children
- A five-week Parent-Child Workshop
- Coalition building with community agencies
- Outreach to new and nontraditional library users
- Developmentally appropriate programming for young children and caregivers
- Library staff trained in family support, child development, parent education, and best practices in early learning.

Now, its national impact is also becoming clear. In 2013, the Institute of Museum and Library Services awarded a \$450,000 [National Leadership Grant](#) to Middle Country to demonstrate the value of Family Place. Through it, 25 libraries in eight states established new Family Place sites. Middle Country aims to document and demonstrate a change in library staff attitudes and behavior relative to their work with young children, parents, caregivers, and early childhood and family support professionals.

Middle Country has previous evaluations of the network that show promising results, if not proof that the model works and affects change. According to a 2013 national survey of sites, 63 percent have renovated or expanded their children's space and another five percent have plans to do so, while 95 percent of libraries reported partnering with community agencies serving families with young children. In the meantime, the initiative has increased awareness and recognition of the public library as a key institution and partner in the promotion of healthy child and family development.

To learn more, visit www.familyplacelibraries.org, or if you are attending ALA Annual, check out the "Put Change in Your Pocket: Family Place Libraries" on Saturday, June 27 at 10:30 am.

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About Lisa G. Kropp

Lisa G. Kropp is the youth services coordinator at the Suffolk Cooperative Library System in Bellport, NY.

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