

Baby TALK Lapsits: Empowering Librarians for Early Childhood Leadership

by Claudia Quigg

The author is Executive Director of Baby TALK in Decatur, Illinois.

*“The more we are together, together, together,
The more we are together, the happier we’ll be!”*

These words from the familiar closing “Lapsit song” reflect the joy and encouragement that children and their parents experience at library Lapsits. The camaraderie parents enjoy with other parents, the fun children have playing with other toddlers, and the support whole families feel from an engaged professional all result in libraries increasingly finding themselves at the center of young families’ lives.

Lapsits are booming in Illinois libraries as librarians use this vehicle to establish relationships with young families. Traditionally an underserved population, children ages 0-3 are being brought to libraries like never before. Library equipment such as strollers, infant seats and miniature tables and chairs speak the message that libraries are for babies, too. Families are welcomed whenever the library doors are opened, but scheduled Lapsits provide a focus for families’ early visits.

In response to this growing practice, Baby TALK provided “Lapsits, Libraries and Literacy” training sessions in four locations throughout the state of Illinois during March, 2004. These trainings, funded by a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant, were geared toward empowering librarians for early childhood leadership in their communities. Participants received curriculum for Lapsit programming as well as background information on child development and strategies for supporting parents.

Many participants revealed that they were already holding programs for infants and toddlers in their libraries. Many of them were calling their programs “Lapsits,” but others were using program names such as “Book Buddies,” “Baby Book Times” and “Mother Goose Times.” Many of these librarians spoke passionately about their programming efforts and families they had served.

Baby TALK staff has been holding Lapsits at Decatur Public Library since soon after the program began in 1986. A follow-up to first meeting families in the hospitals after their babies were born, Baby TALK sees Lapsits as one way to follow families through the toddler years and to provide programming designed to meet families’ needs. Baby TALK has also been training professionals about how to deliver programs for families of infants and toddlers since 1989, now having trained professionals from 31 states and Canada.

Parents are looking for professionals who are interested in their children and willing to share information and expertise that can help their children develop. Parents come to their libraries hoping to find good books and other resources as well as programs to enjoy with their children. But mostly they come looking for the answers to two questions: How am I doing as a parent, and how is my child doing?

This need in parents results in satisfaction with libraries that are accessible to them most days—not just when they have scheduled appointments—and usually staffed by professionals who are truly interested in serving young families. Corrie Honnold brings daughters Emily and Natalie to Lapsits at Decatur Public Library on a regular basis. Corrie enjoys the looks on her children’s faces when they run up to greet “Miss Mary.” She says they enjoy the predictability of the Lapsit routine and that it is

really geared to their age group. It is her “time out” with her daughters. She feels it is an excellent program and loves that it is free.

Corrie has appreciated the opportunity for social interaction, for both children and parents. “There is one other mom, in particular, who I watch for each time. It is so comforting to talk to her and to hear that her children are presenting her with the same challenges as mine.” Corrie has watched her children blossom socially as they venture out with this early social experience.

Corrie believes in reading to her children, and the earlier the better. As they leave the library, they check out books and CDs each time, listening to the CDs in the car on the way home and reading the books the minute they get there.

Libraries serve everyone. There is no stigma attached to receiving services from the library. Parents can feel free to visit when they need support and affirmation, not just books. Because of this wide availability, libraries who choose to can become the “early childhood anchors” for their communities. And yet serving this population has its challenges—especially when it comes to offering structured programming.

The Challenges

“How do you know they’re even listening when they’re cruising all over the room?”

Toddlers explore the room or peer out from under mom’s arms, checking out the social scene. Few toddlers sit quietly or give full facial attention to the leader. Librarians who are accustomed to working with older children may struggle with how to manage the activity levels of toddlers who are learning to walk and are compelled to practice their walking skills throughout Lapsit sessions. These librarians insist the word “Lapsit” is a misnomer; little actual sitting really takes place at all!

“How do you keep parents from talking to each other instead of playing with their kids?”

Far removed from structured story times, Lapsits teem with the life concerns of parents raising very young children. Between verses of “The Wheels on the Bus,” parents confide about struggles with sleeping, feeding, and discipline. Parents look forward to seeing familiar faces of friends they have met at the library. These social relationships grow as parents become invested in each other with every shared Lapsit experience. These parents, some who refer to each other as “co-workers” in the task of raising children, depend on these regular sessions for their own social needs and affirmation of their parenting skills.

So imagine the conflict: Librarians have spent hours preparing an interactive activity for children and parents to participate in together. Parents have been looking forward to seeing friends they have met previously to bring them up-to-date on their child rearing issues and other details of their lives. The Lapsit begins and the librarian finds herself singing solo to a bunch of toddlers while moms seem oblivious to the program plan.

What’s a librarian to do? Should we give up on parent-child interaction in favor of providing a coffee klatsch for parents? This question was raised at the LSTA-funded Baby TALK trainings. Seasoned Lapsit providers made several excellent suggestions for dealing with this phenomenon:

- Provide an intentional time for parents and children to play and visit prior to or following the program. Honor their need for social contact, and then be very direct about saying, “Now is the time in the Lapsit when we want parents to give their undivided attention to their own little ones.”
- Have children sit on their parents’ laps facing the parent rather than facing out. The librarian can demonstrate with a doll on his or her lap. When children and parents are face to face, they are more likely to engage.

- Finally, value the important contribution the library is making to families' lives in providing such meaningful social contact. Families will return if their needs are being met, and through those repeated visits, they will surely gain from the resources of the library.

“You don't think they're paying attention, and then one week the child will come in and know the songs and fingerplays and participate fully!” Librarian Jane Kauzlaric is a “believer” after giving Lapsits a try. Jane went through Baby TALK training in 1999 and then began working with families of toddlers. Before that she had been offering preschool story times. She went back to school to earn her Masters in Library Science at the University of Illinois, and decided to stress emergent literacy in her work there. “I'm so enthusiastic now! I'm amazed how moms bring their babies and attend religiously. The children advance so quickly—they develop before my eyes.”

Jane believes that the structured setting enhances what parents do at home. She attended Baby TALK's “Lapsit, Library and Literacy Program” training in 2004. In addition to participating in the training, she reported on all that she had learned in her practice and extended her thanks for the encouragement to try to go a little deeper with young families. Jane and other children's staff at the Black Road Branch of the Joliet Public Library are now offering eleven Lapsits every week, and large numbers of families are attending.

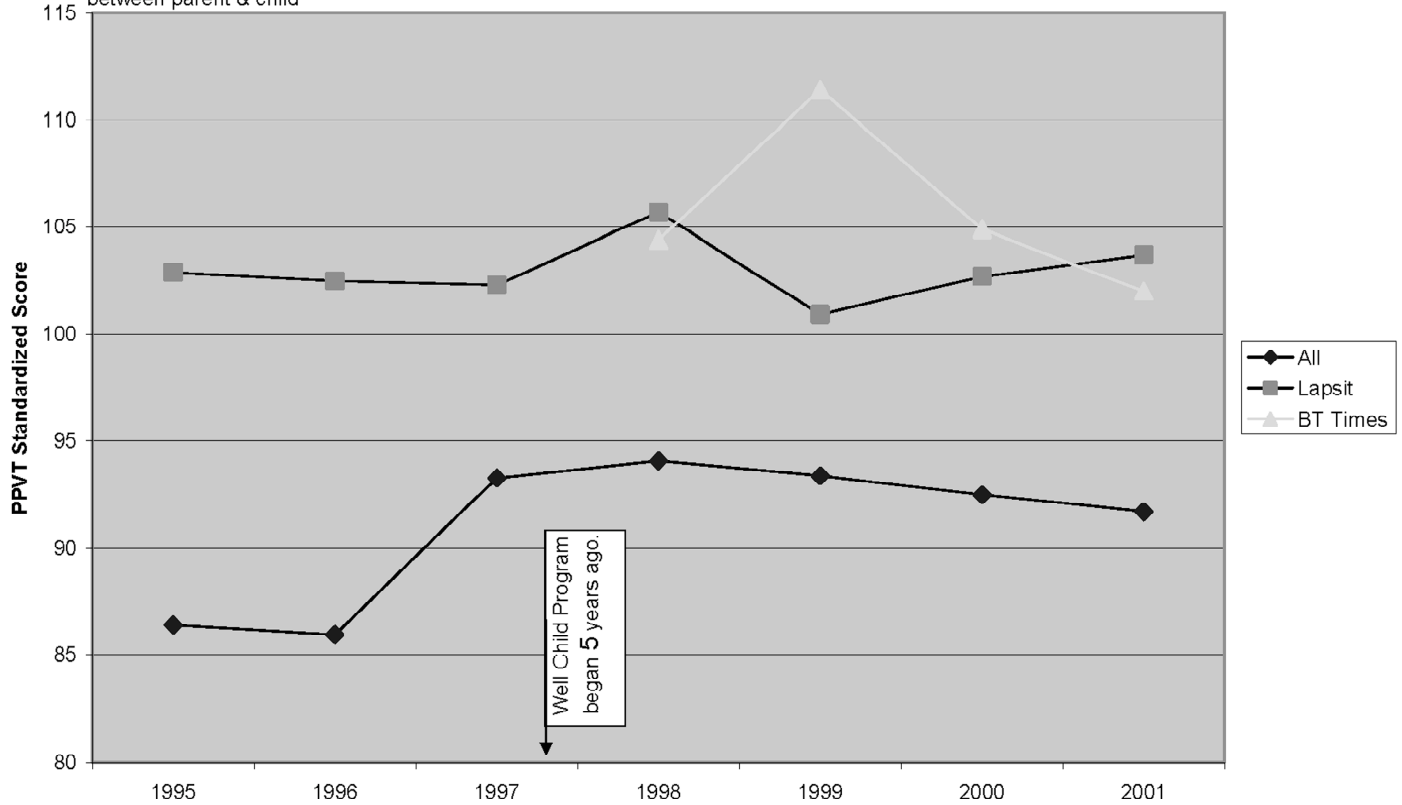
The Benefits

What difference does it make to serve families of infants and toddlers in the library? Prior to Lapsits being held at Decatur Public Library, a survey of citizens in Decatur included the question, “Does your library offer materials for children under age three?” An overwhelming 95 percent of responders answered “no.” While the library has always welcomed young families, Lapsits have helped to “get the word out” about services the library offers for toddlers. Lapsit programs are included on the library calendar. Families begin to hear that the library intends to serve even the youngest members of the community. Many libraries have found that Lapsit programs increase circulation and the numbers of young families visiting libraries.

An annual review of kindergarten test scores in Decatur has revealed yet another benefit. All children who have received Baby TALK services show a statistical advantage on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—a test of receptive language given to all children entering kindergarten. But children who have participated in Lapsits (or Baby TALK Times with a similar format) show the highest average scores (see chart below.) This subgroup scores a full stanine above the rest. Was the twice-monthly half hour program responsible? Probably not. But results are likely related to the support parents receive when they come to the library and the resources they take away with them when they leave.

Kindergarten Receptive Language Baby TALK Programs

All=All Kindergartners in Decatur Public Schools **Lapsit**=encourages reading to infants & toddlers **BT Times**=encourages interaction between parent & child



(Chart from a study by Janice B. Mandernach, Ph.D., 2002)

Baby TALK Lapsit Training

As a result of requests from librarians who were unable to attend a three-day Baby TALK Professional development seminar, Baby TALK now offers a one-day training program designed for librarians and other literacy professionals. “Lapsits, Libraries and Literacy Programs” covers the background information that guides Baby TALK’s approach and philosophy, and then focuses on programs that promote literacy. Curricula for Lapsits, Family Literacy Programs, Family Fun Times, developmental newsletters, and topical parenting issue handouts are all included in the training materials. The first four of these training sessions were funded by the LSTA grants described above, but they are now offered several times each year to other interested professionals. For more information about Baby TALK training, visit the Baby Talk web site at www.babytalk.org or contact Marcy at 217.475.2234.