

FAMILY

Two Decades Strong—Family Place Libraries Celebrate A Milestone

NewsUSA

(NU) - Libraries are no longer just spaces filled with books and movies to borrow. They are places of wonder and imagination and, if they happen to be affiliated with Family Place Libraries (FPL), they are fun, interactive early learning and family support destinations for families with very young children. And they are celebrating their 20th anniversary.

The Family Place Libraries initiative began when the former library advocacy organization, Libraries for the Future, was searching the nation for a model parent program that could be replicated in public libraries. A visit to Middle Country Public Library and its Parent/Child Workshop sparked this collaborative project.

Family Place Libraries is a nationwide network of children's librarians who embrace the fact that literacy begins at birth, and that libraries can help build healthy communities by nourishing healthy families. The organization transforms libraries into community centers for early literacy and learning, parent education and engagement, family support and community connectivity, helping to ensure that all children have the foundation they need to succeed.

Over the last 20 years, FPL has grown from five to more than 500 sites in 30 states and it keeps growing.

The organization has worked hard to build relationships among the librarians and parents, children and community early childhood, health and human services agencies.

These libraries offer parents, caregivers and community agencies access to a variety of services and materials: books, toys, DVDs, programs, information and referrals to library and community services (i.e., early intervention, parenting support groups, ESL, citizenship), and guest speakers on a variety of topics. All of these offerings strengthen the bonds between the libraries and the communities they serve.

"Family Place brings together the critical elements for families ... reading and learning, a relationship with knowledgeable staff equipped with tools to support families, an opportunity to learn in



a new way, a place to meet others in the community, and form strong cohort relationships," says one library director.

Evaluation findings from the three-year Institute of Museum and Library Services National Leadership Grant corroborate this.

- Partner library directors and librarians became critical communicators and advocates for both the importance of the early childhood years and the role of the library in those years within their local community and library profession;

- Active membership in early childhood and family support coalitions increased from 59 percent to 79 percent;

- Presentations at local, state and national professional conferences increased from 68 percent to 100 percent.

- Seventy percent of community agencies surveyed believed that their agencies have an increased understanding of the needs of families with young children because of the library.

- Ninety-five percent of community agencies surveyed see the library as a vital link in supporting families and the early learning of their young children

"I have always loved the library, but adding Family Place toys, encouragement for interaction – this has improved my perception," says one community agency. "It makes it easier to refer families."

Family Place Libraries have become an integral part of communities throughout the country – starting young and looking at the whole child and family to encourage and support learning and identify and address needs to help build and strengthen healthy families.

And they look forward to 20 more years.