

**L535: Library Services  
for Children and Young Adults**  
Spring, 2003  
Sarah Wright, Instructor

**Observations: Preschool**

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**Program 1:** Lap Babies**Age-group:** 0-12 months**Place:** Monroe County Public Library Preschool Exploration Center**Date/Time:** Wed. 2/5/03, 11:00am-11:30am (regular series meeting once a month)

Mary Frasier runs the infant and toddler programs at MCPL, with assistance from Amanda Ashton, a SLIS student who also works at the Library (dividing her time between Circulation and her work in the Preschool Exploration Center). Mary has also become something of an authority on programming for infants and toddlers, with a website hosted by MCPL providing tips and resources for librarians and parents (<http://www.monroe.lib.in.us/childrens/babyprogs.html>).

Mary runs three regular series for infants and toddlers: Lap Babies, Cruisers & Walkers, and Tuneful Twos. These divisions recognize developmental processes, dividing both along age lines and in terms of physical ability—pre-walkers for Lap Babies, beginning walkers (early toddlers) for Cruisers & Walkers, and active toddlers (able to march and play instruments) for Tuneful Twos.

The infant and toddler programs are conducted in the baby corner of the Preschool Exploration Center (PEC), where a carpet softens the hard linoleum flooring, and low bolsters at the edge of the carpet provide a place for caregivers to sit with their babies either in their laps or on the floor in front of them. The blinds on the windows are kept closed, and only the track lighting in the room is turned on, keeping lights dim for the easily over-stimulated babies.

A total of 11 babies and 10 moms were present at the 11:00 session on Feb. 5 (one mom had twins); there were no dads or male caregivers that day. Since this program requires registration and is a regular series, Mary already had nametags for each mom and baby, made of laminated paper circles with the names written by hand and put on temporarily with tape. Amanda helped pass out the nametags. PEC volunteer Ronnie Moore was also there that day, but did not participate in the program.

Mary began the program by standing and greeting the moms and babies, welcoming them and giving a brief introduction to the program. Mary's welcome outlined the purpose of their time together: to spend time with baby; to meet other moms; to encourage their babies to socialize; and to learn a repertoire of language, rhythm and music to take home and practice there.

Mary then sat down on the carpet, at the center of the group, and began the program with a ball-rolling game and song: "I roll the ball to [baby's name], s/he rolls it back to me." [etc.] Each baby got to play, with a specific "invitation"

from Mary for each one. Mary gently engaged the baby's attention (calling him or her by name) and gauged his or her readiness for the game, explaining to both mom and baby that it's OK to not play or to be distracted. Mary also pointed out to the moms that infants may not be the most accurate ball-rollers, but they like watching the ball go back and forth. Often it was the mom rolling back the ball (or guiding the child's hands), which was fine. At the end of each repetition of the song, each baby got applause and praise from Mary and the moms.

Mary took a break to introduce Amanda, Ronnie, and the four SLIS students observing the program that morning (Adele, Lorena, Shannon, and myself—I hope we don't make your eyes glaze over with our reports of the same program). Mary described the Preschool Exploration Center to the moms, letting them know that it is open at various hours throughout the week with volunteer staff, to allow caregivers to engage with children in learning through play.

For the next step in the program, Mary asked for a "volunteer baby" so that she could demonstrate the activity of the next song, "Pop Goes the Weasel". Mary bounced the baby on her knees to the beat of the song, then lifted the baby up into the air on "Pop!" The group then sang and played the game together a few times.

The next activity was the song "Clap, Tap, Bend", where the moms made the babies' bodies perform the motions described in the song. "I take my little hands and go clap, clap, clap; (3x) Clap-clap all day long." In subsequent verses, feet go tap and knees go bend. This was followed by a chanted "Jack in the Box" rhyme, and then the sea shanty "When the Boat Comes In" (aka "Dance to Your Daddy").

Now it was time for the second phase of the program: toys and music. Amanda brought out the crate of toys as Mary explained that they had all been treated with a cleaning solution. Mary also described the Parent Resource Room next door, letting the moms know what was available there (books and videos about child development, parenting, and activities you can do with children). She handed out a sheet with the songs and rhymes they had covered during the session, put a quiet CD of baby songs into the PEC boom box, and the moms (used to the program by now) launched into a free-form time of playing with their babies and talking with each other.

Mary then graciously came over and talked with the SLIS students about the program. She noted that this was about as large as a group ever gets; the 10:00 session that day had featured only three mom-baby pairs. She noted that although people do register for a particular session, sometimes they "flip-flop" on which one they attend (10:00 or 11:00), and the library tries to accommodate that need for flexibility where young children are concerned. Each registrant

receives a reminder call the night before the program. Dads do come, but not today; and more moms than dads attend.

The cut-off for the Lap Babies program is when they start to walk; the Indiana state definition of “toddler” is the ability to take three unassisted steps (all the things one never knew had to be legislated). The intention is to provide one-on-one time between caregiver and child—as opposed to a daycare situation, or a family with older siblings. A local cooperative daycare (run by parents who take turns caring for each other’s children) sometimes comes in with a group of about four adults to six babies.

Mary gets to know the caregivers and babies fairly well, and they get to know each other (which is important—Mary noted that the play group she started in the library when her own son was small still meets once a month even though her son is now twelve years old). Mary pointed out that many of the parents who participate in these programs are grad students far from the support of extended family, with lower budgets, often-precarious transportation, and inconsistent schedules, and the library needs to understand and accommodate these realities. She also noted that while libraries try to target programs like this to those in most need of free services, those folks are not always the ones attracted to the library (foreshadowing our discussion in class three nights later about middle class barriers).

Mary started out doing programs like these years ago thinking that she (who didn’t have any children of her own at the time) would be teaching parents how to interact with their babies. Infant programs would be structured training sessions, with the focus on caregivers engaging infants. She found in practice, however, that caregivers have a range of experience with infants, and most of those who bring their babies to the library don’t need formal instruction in how to be with their children. She saw that often those of lower socioeconomic background (whom she thought she would be “helping”) had better rapport and comfort with their babies than middle-class moms (who perhaps hadn’t had so much exposure to babies while growing up).

Mary also discovered that babies brought into this not-home environment wanted to look around at each other and at her (the librarian), and that everything went better when they were allowed to do so (rather than trying to have moms keep babies on their laps looking only at mom). Finally, she learned that caregivers needed to interact with each other more than they needed “instruction” from the librarian. Mary has dropped almost every vestige of “training” from her infant-toddler programs, in favor of letting the activities speak for themselves, and letting the caregivers talk with each other to swap stories, questions, and tips about caring for their children.

Another of Mary’s purposes in planning these programs is to let caregivers know about other services and resources the library has to offer them—such as

the Preschool Exploration Center and the Parent Resource Room, which she mentioned to the moms in this session.

Mary briefly described to us the other two infant-toddler programs she performs at MCPL, “Cruisers & Walkers” and “Tuneful Twos”. The beginning toddlers start to learn fingerplays and play with streamers and the parachute, with shorter sessions for more active kids. Mary does not use a formal closing for either the Lap Babies or the Cruisers & Walkers. The Tuneful Twos sessions she described as “wild, nutty, and noisy,” often featuring marching around with instruments. Mary allows (and even encourages) caregivers to bring younger siblings in with the two-year-olds; the babies enjoy watching the “Tuneful Twos” have their fun, and do well behaviorally (i.e., it doesn’t cause problems to have babies in the room, too). I was very disappointed that my work schedule did not allow me to attend a “Tuneful Twos” program before this assignment was due.

Mary has clearly learned what works with her clientele at MCPL. The Lap Babies program went smoothly even with so many participating, and managed to be stimulating and soothing at the same time.

**Program 2:** Tuesday Tales

**Age-group:** 3-6 (with younger siblings)

**Place:** MCPL Preschool Exploration Center

**Date/Time:** 2/25/03, 10:00-10:30a.m. (regular program meeting every week at this time)

The Children’s Librarians at MCPL take turns running this half-hour storytime. Mary D’Eliso ran the program for this observation, assisted by Amanda Ashton. About 14 preschoolers attended, with caregivers (all female) and some younger siblings (down to infants). This is a new program series for MCPL (just begun this winter), an informal “drop-in” time with no registration required and no coterie of regular attendants (although many participants do come regularly).

The PEC was “redecorated” for the program, with familiar toys and activities stations put away, and the carpet from the Program Room brought in to one corner. The blinds were shut and the lights low, except for track lighting over the story area. Two of the tables farthest from the story carpet boasted displays of books related to the ones shared in the program. A row of kid-sized chairs circled the carpet, and children were encouraged to sit on the carpet as well. There was some coming and going during the program, with some people arriving late and others leaving early, or leaving temporarily with a fussy child.

Mary welcomed the group without much introduction, and began with a chanted fingerplay that many of the children already knew from more formal preschool programs: “Open them, shut them [fingers] (2x), give a little clap;

Open them, shut them (2x), put them in your lap. Crawl them, crawl them (2x), right up to your chin; then you open up your mouth, but do not let them in!”—etc., ending with a final repetition of the “Open them, shut them” chorus, concluding (wisely enough) with “put them in your lap”.

Then Mary introduced the “body” of the program, featuring picture books on a theme. She explained that she goes through her days picking out books that she might like to share in storytime, and looking through them she noticed that she had quite a few about a particular animal. She didn’t say what the animal was, but perusal of the books displayed on the rear tables (behind the children) made it a safe bet that the theme for the day would be pigs.

Mary then animatedly shared three picture books, demonstrating excellent dialogic technique as she went—pointing out particular details in the pictures and asking questions, engaging the children in speculation and expansion on the story. Mary was very good at keeping eye contact with the children and keeping the “reading” conversational, even while keeping up with the actual text in the books. She was clearly well-rehearsed with the books and knew them well, so that she was free to engage the children while she performed the stories and drew attention to details within them.

The first one was a nonfiction book called *Who Am I?*, with illustrations zooming in on just one part of a pig (like a snout or an ear) and giving pig facts to go with it (I think it was one of Dick King-Smith’s books, but I didn’t catch the author). The children had fun guessing what the animal was before its identity was revealed. After she finished the book Mary did some gentle quizzing on what they had learned from it (“Can you remember why his ears are big and floppy?”) and pointing out the new words they had learned (snout, trotters).

Books two and three featured fun wordplay and silly situations for the children to enjoy. *Can You Make A Piggy Giggle?* asked what it would take to make a particular grouchy pig smile (“...if you wiggle like a noodle?”). The kids picked up on the repeated line “but a pig won’t giggle”, joining in when Mary returned to it. At the end Mary elaborated on where the pictures took the story after the text ended: the long succession of creatures who tried to make the pig laugh give up and go home—and the pig is sitting there smiling to itself. In *The Piggy in the Puddle*, the children clearly loved the exuberant rhyming and alliterative wordplay (and the little pig who would not leave the mud puddle until her whole family jumped in after her). Mary’s reading drew attention to the numbers being counted off as more and more pigs ended up in the puddle; and the story reinforced the “categories” of family with mother, father, older brother, and “little piggy”.

The three books were followed by a flannel board story, one that is a mainstay at MCPL: “The Pig’s Picnic”, in which a pig suitor borrows the tail of a fox, the

mane of a lion, and the stripes of a zebra in hopes of impressing Miss Pig—but only ends up scaring her until he returns just as himself. Mary began by asking the children to close their eyes and imagine a beautiful summer’s day (since those days are rather far off) before launching into the story. The flannel board was set up on an easel; Mary had arranged her flannel pieces on the back of the easel, out of sight but readily accessible. Mary did a wonderful performance of this story, almost breaking into song as Mr. Pig marched happily along on his way to meet Miss Pig. While Mary didn’t have text to point to or elaborate on here, she did have the rhythm and sound of language to play with, and a gentle message about being oneself.

Mary took a break with a brief fingerplay rendition of “This Little Piggy Went to Market” before launching into one last picture book—which may have been a mistake this time. She was clearly starting to literally lose her audience, as some children began to leave a little early (and a pair of women who were apparently relatives of some of the children attending, but were sitting in the back, started talking somewhat disruptively amongst themselves). The book, *Piggies*, featured fanciful illustrations of whimsical pigs associated with each finger (“piggy”) of the hand, and Mary once again did a good job of presenting it dialogically in spite of the distractions in the room.

Mary closed with the song/fingerplay “If You’re Happy and You Know It,” encouraging the children to stomp their “trotters” (instead of their feet), and to shout “Oink-oink!” (instead of “Hurray!”). Mary then came over to talk with the two SLIS student observers (Susan and myself).

Mary told us how they had just begun the program this winter, in response to parent requests. They learned right away that they had to “take down” the PEC in preparation for this program, putting the puzzles and activities out of sight and removing the toys and soft climbable furniture from the baby area. Children who were familiar with the PEC as a play area were just too distracted by the activities they would normally pursue in the room. This temporary remodeling serves to make the space “new” and focus attention on a different activity.

This program is different from other preschool programming at MCPL in that 1) there is no registration—just drop in; 2) caregivers and younger siblings are welcome (other programs are target-age only). The new program is different, then, because any number of people can show up (they’ve had as many as 75, counting all adults and siblings); there is no set roster of participants; and although it’s a series there is no programmed theme or arc for the series to follow. The presence of caregivers also allows the librarians to model picture book reading techniques (like the dialogic engagement Mary practiced), adding an objective to this story time that is not available for the “target-age only” programs.

The new series has received a strongly positive response—so positive, that while it was originally scheduled through March, it has been extended indefinitely.