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## Libraries reach out

By William Hageman, Tribune Newspapers

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A child is never too young to visit the library.

To hear Thom Barthelmess and Marisa Conner tell it, you should stop off on the way home from the maternity ward.

"I believe that library visits can begin right away. And by right away I mean as soon as the child has arrived in the world," said Barthelmess, president of the Association for Library Service to Children, a 4,000-member division of the American Library Association. "One of the biggest areas of public library development is programming for babies."

Conner, youth services coordinator for the Baltimore County Public Library, is all over that. She's organizing a conference called "Active Learning Environments for Children" at the Public Library Association's annual meeting this month in Portland, Ore. She also has launched Storyville ([bcplstoryville.org/storyville\\_home](http://bcplstoryville.org/storyville_home)), an interactive early-literacy learning center for kids 5 and younger.

"Reading is a bonding experience between parent and child and early literacy behaviors (such as vocabulary, comprehension, etc.) are developed from a very early age," Conner wrote in an e-mail.

A study in School Library Journal in 2008 suggested the promotion of early literacy resulted in higher reading scores in elementary school. The study ([schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6590044.html](http://schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6590044.html)) found that of states in the top half of reading scores, 82 percent also ranked in the top half on circulation of children's library materials.

Conner pointed out other ways libraries are targeting young visitors: children's arts and cultural programs, enhanced children's spaces, children's computers with age-appropriate games "and, of course, lots and lots of books."

These programs aim to be a baby's introduction not only to the library but to books and literacy, Barthelmess said, helping kids "with what we call early literacy, which is everything a child needs to know about reading before she learns to read, things like understanding that letters exist, and that words exist, and that words are built up on the page with letters."

"We know that for kids to take the next step and become avid and fluid readers they need to know all this stuff," he said. "And a library is a great place for all that knowledge to happen."



Because most kids don't start school until age 5, there are few free resources for them and their parents, Conner says.

"Today's public libraries see serving young children and their caregivers as one of our primary goals," she said, "promoting early literacy and a lifelong love of reading and learning, providing parents with the resources they need."

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***Check this out***

*Circulation of children's materials in libraries has accounted for 32.9 to 35 percent of total circulation between 2002 and 2007 (the last year statistics are available), notes the American Library Association. In 2007 children's circulation was slightly more than 34 percent.*

— *W.H.*

*Did you know?*

*A bumblebee has four wings; its two pairs of wings are very close together and appear to look like one set. Source:*

*bumblebee.org*

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