



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Immersing children in pleasurable language experiences on a regular basis has been shown to result in increased brain capacity that will prepare them for reading and writing at a later stage.”

-From “Mother Goose on the Loose: Applying Brain Research to Early Childhood Programs in the Public Library” by Betsy Diament-Cohen, *Public Libraries* Jan/Feb 2004

I recently attended a workshop sponsored by BALIS (Bay Area Library and Information System). Titled “Mother Goose on the Loose” (MGOL), this all day workshop included presentations, as well as the opportunity for hands-on experience. The presenters were Betsy Diament-Cohen, the creator of this nursery rhyme based early learning program, and Regina Wade, an early childhood consultant and retired librarian.

I am not sure if I have ever been in the room with so many children’s librarians – there were about 85 of us, predominantly women (I think I saw 3 men). We are people who spend our days working with families and Betsy pointed out that our jobs include educating – although, as she commented, “the educational and teaching aspect of our jobs is not always acknowledged.” In particular, we educate through our programs, especially the story times. The rhymes, books and stories we use expose children and their caregivers to the range of

materials available. In addition, we model and teach a range of activities that can be used at home in an ongoing way. This is where MGOL comes in.

Betsy began by giving us some background on this program, which she created in the late 1980’s. The format is based on Barbara Cass-Beggs’ “Listen, Like, Learn” approach to working with children. The idea is that children learn best by being introduced to a concept and then being actively involved in doing activities that support it. Each MGOL session is 30 minutes long and includes “music, movement, ritual, repetition, positive reinforcement, developmental tips, nursery rhymes, illustrations, puppets, musical instruments, colored scarves, and book reading” (www.mgol.org).

The actual program follows a specific structure. There is always a flannel board/easel, which is used for presenting the various nursery rhymes. There are ten segments and they include a welcome and a closing,

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as well as a range of activities, such as body rhymes like “Tom Tinker, Nose Smeller, Mouth Eater, Chin Chopper, Guzzle Whopper.”

Repetition is a critical component of MGOL, so each week most of the elements are repeated, with two or three new items added. According to an article called “Make Way for Dendrites” (Diament-Cohen, Riordan and Wade, *Children and Libraries*, Spring 2004), “repetition increases children’s enjoyment, helps them feel safe, and enables them to better retain information absorbed.” But, the article goes on to say, the element of surprise is equally important, and changing the program slightly each week provides this.

Regina Wade talked about brain research, beginning with a quote from Albert Einstein: “Learning is experience. Everything else is just information.” She gave us an overview of the development of the brain,

including the interesting fact that at birth there are 50 trillion connections in the brain, from ages 3 to 10 there are 1,000 trillion, and by age 20 there are 500 trillion. These connections are strengthened by experiences that are frequent, regular and predictable; occur in the context of a warm and supportive relationship; are associated with positive emotion; involve several senses; and are responsive to the child’s interests or initiative.

We heard about the cortical, limbic and brainstem parts of the brain, and the role they play in brain development. Her presentation was equally impressive and by the end of the day I definitely understood that, however I incorporate these ideas and suggestions into my children’s programming, I am participating in the ongoing development of young minds – and all with the simple aids of books, rhymes, and a willing audience.