

Jump into Reading

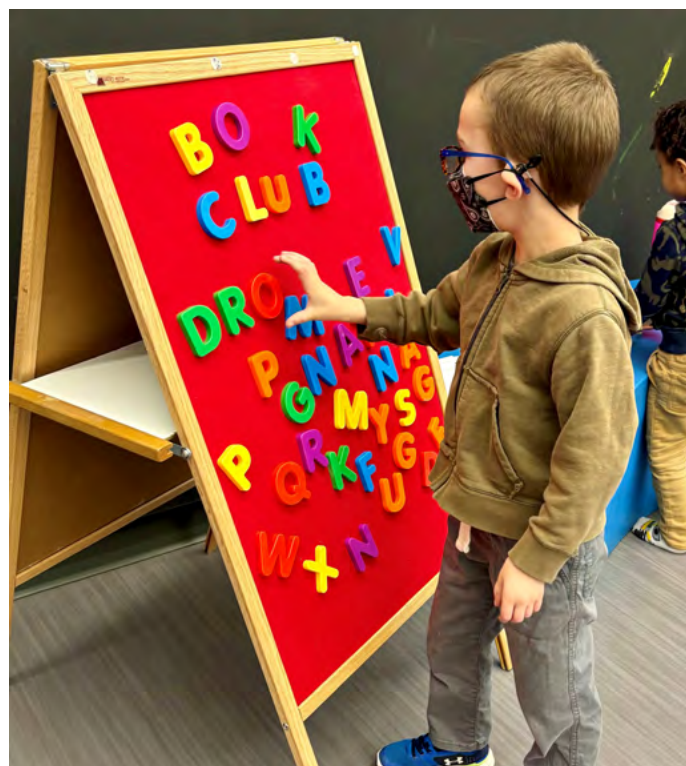
An Initiative Supporting Children Learning to Read

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If you've spent any time providing reference at a public library, you've probably experienced a parent asking, "My child is learning to read; what do you recommend?" There are so many factors to consider when helping new or struggling readers!

Public libraries are great at helping young children before they start learning to read and then engaging school-aged children after they can read. But what about supporting them in between, when they are learning to read?

Being able to read is a fundamental right. According to the World Literacy Foundation, when children are empowered to read, they are able to think critically and actively participate in their communities, supporting a more equitable society (worldliteracyfoundation.org). In 2021, Chicago Public Library (CPL) began more deeply exploring the public library's role in supporting children who are learning to read. We asked ourselves, "Even though librarians are not reading teachers, what can public libraries do to better serve emerging readers?" It's a timely question as educators, community leaders, and parents across America are increasingly interested in literacy advocacy. This issue affects all children, but disproportionately impacts marginalized communities.

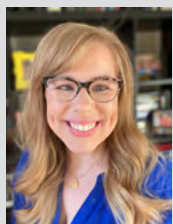


CPL launched Jump into Reading in the fall of 2023 at nine branches. This multifaceted initiative fills a gap in library services and promotes equity in literacy for youth across Chicago. It focuses on four key areas to help new and struggling readers and their caregivers as they become more fluent readers:

- Staff knowledge
- Curated collection materials
- Specialized resources
- Intentional programming

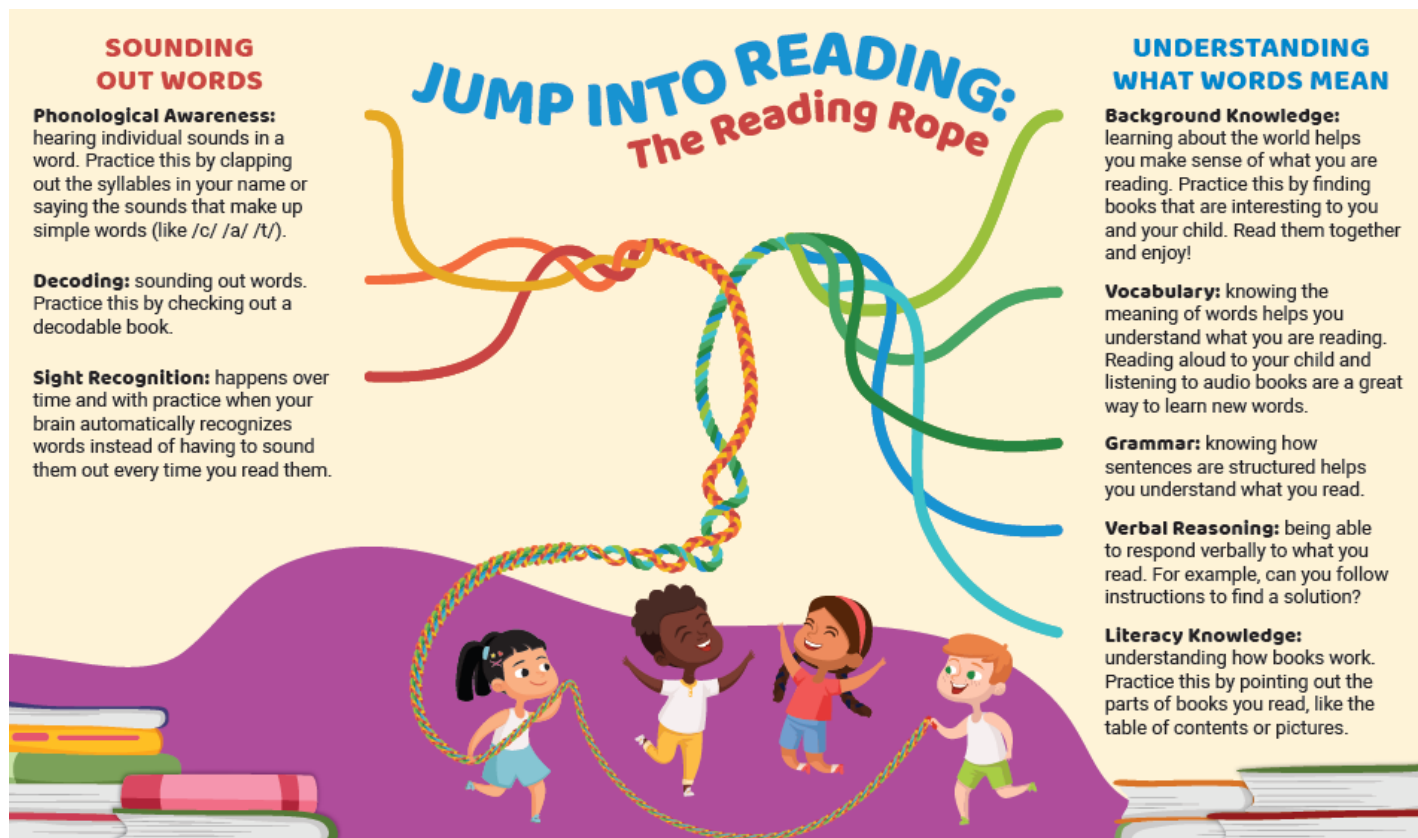
Staff Knowledge

First, we wanted to know more about how children learn to read. Our research led us to Scarborough's Reading Rope. The



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CPL worked with local literacy organization Redwood Literacy to adapt Hollis Scarborough's reading rope concept into an informational pamphlet for families. Hollis Scarborough, review of *Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (Dis)Abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice*. In *Handbook for Research in Early Literacy*, edited by S. Neuman and D. Dickinson (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).

infographic made by Dr. Hollis Scarborough shows two main skill sets, each one made up of individual skills that are interconnected and interdependent. Over time and with practice, the two main strands (and the smaller strands they include) work together to lead to skilled reading.

We thought about the two strands in the context of a public library setting:

- **Language Comprehension** (or understanding what words mean) covers skills public libraries already excel at nurturing. Libraries strive to offer high quality programming and books that build vocabulary, background knowledge, and other important language comprehension skills.
- **Word Recognition** (sounding out words) is an area of growth for public libraries. How could we more deeply support children's phonological awareness and decoding skills as they learn to read?

We focused our efforts on learning more about decoding and phonological awareness through training at the Institute of Multisensory Education and partnering with local literacy organizations. One organization, Redwood Literacy, helped us create a simplified version of the reading rope to share with library staff and families as a tool to better explain how children learn to read. It even inspired the name of our initiative because it reminded us of a jump rope! Our staff participated in additional trainings from literacy experts to expand their knowledge of learning to read.

Curated Collections

Based on our better understanding of how children learn to read, we examined our collection. Like most public libraries, CPL's children's collection contains many books that support language comprehension. What we didn't have were books focused on helping children with word recognition. Lots of books can support word recognition, but specially designed books called "decodable books" are perfect for this. They only (or mostly) use specific letter patterns and go in a specific order, from simple to more complex, to help children practice their knowledge of letters and corresponding sounds. Decodable books encourage children to practice sounding out words instead of using pictures or context clues to read words they don't know. The literacy organization Reading Rockets also points out how decodable books help build confidence because they allow children to experience success reading on their own using the skills they are learning (readingrockets.org).

Working with our collection development team, we created a boutique collection of decodable books for all Jump into Reading locations. We reviewed sample decodable books from several publishers to consider durability, content, and diversity, and carefully selected series including Little Blossom, Dandelion Readers/Launchers, The Decodables, Meg and Greg, and My Decodable Readers.

Because decodable books serve such a specific purpose, they may lack dynamic vocabulary, syntax, characters, and narrative. From

the start, we made sure to emphasize when and how to use decodable books. Decodables support word recognition, one strand of the reading rope, but we can't forget to continue to support language comprehension, too. Because listening to high quality books read aloud builds language comprehension, we continued to encourage caregivers to read engaging and interest-driven books aloud with their child. We also highlighted our growing collection of Wonderbooks, VOX Books, and audiobooks as another way for children to engage with stories.

Our collection of decodable books is labeled and shelved in its own area with an informational sign. Additionally, we created a book selection tool to help select appropriate decodable titles. It gives information on how to use a decodable book. It includes an optional activity guiding children to read sets of words in different skill categories that follow the progression of acquiring decoding skills. This simple activity helps caregivers know which decodable book would be a good starting point.

Specialized Resources

To support and educate parents of children learning to read, we created new educational resources. Our Jump into Reading pamphlet is a parent-friendly informational brochure featuring our version of the reading rope. It breaks down complex ideas into simple language with concrete examples. This tool is also useful for library staff as they share information about the initiative.

We also developed website content for parents and caregivers that features expert content from our partners, suggested booklists, and further resources. As a trusted source of information, we found it particularly useful to share local and national resources that can be used to support new or struggling readers.

Programming

It has been a fun challenge to think about ways to incorporate word recognition skills into programming for children learning to read. Modeled after a traditional storytime, our Jump into Reading storytime is perfect for kids beginning to learn to read. We invite caregivers to join us as we pair a read-aloud with activities that play with sounds and words. Our focus is on phonological awareness, which is the understanding that language is made up of words and words are made up of individual units of sound. Phonological awareness is easy to implement in storytime because it is an oral language skill that focuses on sounds. We want children and caregivers to understand that letters represent sounds and that exploring those sounds will eventually help children learn to read. Plus, playing with sounds and words is fun!

When selecting books, we've had the most success with picture books that play with rhyme and sounds, like *Bathe the Cat* by Alice B. McGinty, *I Ain't Gonna Paint No More* by Karen Beaumont, and *Sheep in a Jeep* by Nancy Shaw.

We created Grab and Go Kits to practice skills outside of library programs, too. We worked with a local literacy organization called Big City Readers to develop simple activities using household items. Our Pop-It kit was great for a wide range of ages; kids could practice different skills by popping a bubble on a toy pop-it for each word they heard in a sentence or each syllable or sound they heard in a word. Another popular kit was the word race activity, which included a toy car and instructions to practice blending sounds.

Lessons Learned and Looking Forward

We learned a lot in our first year of Jump into Reading. Some of our biggest takeaways include:

- **Partnerships.** Jump into Reading was new terrain for CPL. We could not have developed this initiative on our own. From understanding the complex process of learning to read to evaluating the quality of decodable books, working with experts in our community like Redwood Literacy and Big City Readers was imperative to the success of this initiative.
- **Reference.** Because decodable books are very specific tools, it's important for staff to understand what they are and how they factor into the process of learning to read. Developing our reading rope pamphlet for parents also provided talking points for staff. We spent more time than expected on training for this initiative to ensure that librarians felt confident helping families support their new readers.
- **Community Outreach.** Parents, educators, and community leaders are strongly invested in supporting literacy initiatives, and many communities have exciting opportunities for program partnerships. We found a great partner who shared our goals in the Black Boy Literacy Campaign, a church-based literacy program that helps boys on the south side of Chicago grow their literacy skills. CPL provided special programming and materials to support their work, resulting in a deeper connection between the participants and their neighborhood libraries. Working with local groups helped us respond to specific community need and allowed this initiative to effectively support families outside of the library.
- **Decodables/Publishing.** Quality, diversity, and accuracy vary widely in currently available decodable series, and we anticipate even more series released in the near future. We learned how important it is to evaluate decodable books just like you would any other books for your library's collection.

We plan on expanding our Jump into Reading initiative to seventeen more CPL branches in the next year. We also plan to offer informational programs for parents of new and struggling readers. Long term, we hope to strengthen our focus on equity in literacy by more deeply supporting diverse learners, English-language learners, and older struggling readers. We're excited to keep building upon the success of our first year! &