

Transforming California Human Service Agency Waiting Rooms into Playful, Language-Rich Environments for Children

July 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

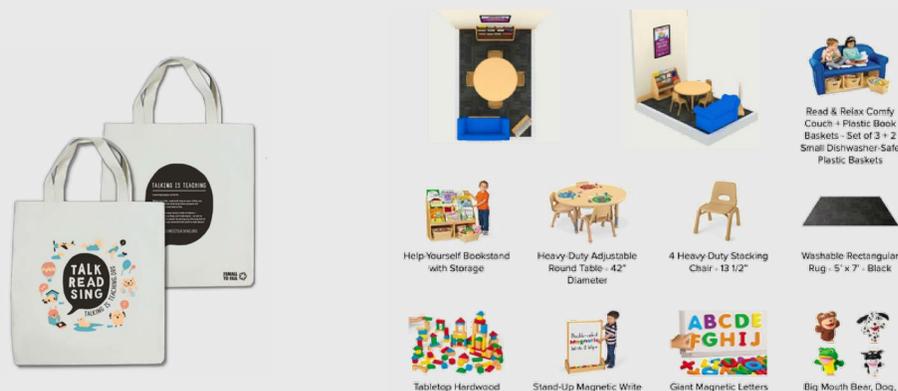


Overview

Launched in 2013, *Too Small to Fail* (TSTF) promotes early brain and language development by supporting parents and caregivers with tools to talk, read, and sing with their young children starting at birth. One of TSTF's key strategies is to meet parents and caregivers where they are by transforming everyday "spaces" into playful, language-rich environments for children.

In 2019, TSTF partnered with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to engage California families participating in California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs). The CalWORKs program is operated locally by county human service agency departments which have hundreds of public waiting rooms where families go for appointments when accessing social safety-net services and other benefits, supports, and/or case management.

***Too Small to Fail* and California Department of Social Services provided a multitude of items to support language-rich activities through the tote bag materials and the "Family Read, Play & Learn" space.**



Three California counties, Riverside County, San Joaquin County, and Napa County, participated in this pilot. Its design included an installation of a "Family Read, Play & Learn" space in the waiting room: the space includes a standing bookstand stocked with bilingual children's books, a stand-up magnet letter board, child-sized chairs and table, a small couch for caregivers and children to sit together, a block set, and a small rug. In addition, office visitors with young children received a TSTF tote bag with high-quality, language-rich materials, including children's books, an at-home activity kit, and tip sheets about the importance of talking, reading, and singing with young children. Public Profit, an evaluation firm, used a pre-post design to examine the impact of these strategies. The study included observational data collection, surveys of office visitors who care for young children, and interviews with representatives from the county human service agency office staff.

The transformation in Napa County.

Before



After



The transformation in Riverside County.

Before



After



The transformation in San Joaquin County.

Before



After



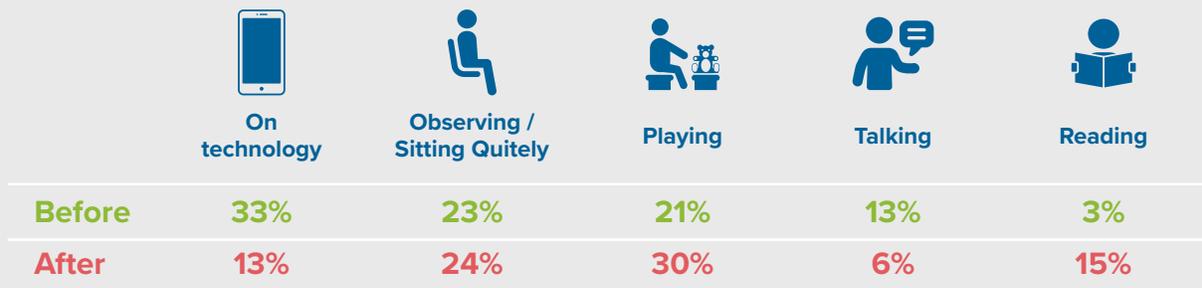
Highlighted Evaluation Findings

Children read and played significantly more after the space transformation.

Public Profit found that the implementation of the “Family Read, Play & Learn” space and the tote bag distribution differed between offices depending on available space, visitor flow, and population characteristics. The atmosphere and flow of clients in the waiting room had an impact on the level of literacy-rich interactions that the “Family Read, Play & Learn” space installation and the tote bags enabled. There were positive effects of the space transformation and tote bag distribution across all three offices; however, because of contextual factors, sites had varying levels of outcomes.

Before the space transformation, children were observed mostly on technology (33%), observing/sitting quietly (23%), and playing (21%, see figure below). After the transformation, there was a significant increase in the instances of playing (from 21% pre-transformation to 30% post-transformation) and reading (from 3% pre-transformation to 15% post-transformation).

After the space transformation, observations of waiting room activity showed that children read and played instead of using technology.



Source: Waiting Room Activity Pre- and Post-Transformation Observations at all offices conducted in July 2022 and October 2022.

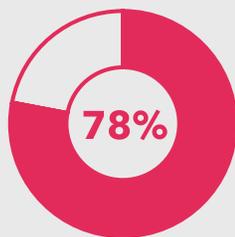
In order to triangulate our data on children’s waiting room activities, caregivers were asked to report their child’s primary activity while in the waiting room during both the pre- and post-transformation visits. According to caregiver feedback across all three sites, there was a significant increase in reading: 8% of caregivers reported that their child was primarily reading pre-transformation, which increased to 25% post-transformation. There were variations in the amount of change in reading behavior between counties. Riverside County saw a particularly strong increase in reading: 4% of caregivers reported that their child was primarily reading pre-transformation, which increased to 64% post-transformation. San Joaquin County also

had an increase in reported reading, though it was less dramatic: 8% reported reading pre-transformation, which increased to 17% post-transformation. Meanwhile, Napa County did not have a significant change in reported reading, but instead had a strong increase in caregivers reporting playing: 33% reported playing pre-transformation, compared to 67% post-transformation.

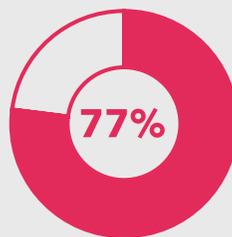
Children frequently used the materials in the waiting room.

After the transformation, about 75% of caregivers at the offices in Napa and Riverside Counties reported that their children used the educational toys (blocks/magnetic letters) or books in the waiting room. In San Joaquin County, slightly more than half (55%) of caregivers reported their children using the materials. Based on the research team’s observations of the waiting rooms, this discrepancy is likely due to challenges associated with maintaining fully stocked bookshelves in such high-traffic locations, resulting in some children without an opportunity to interact with waiting room materials.

Most caregivers reported that their children used the educational toys or books provided in the waiting room.



Napa County



Riverside County



San Joaquin County

Source: TSTF Caregiver Surveys Post-Transformation (October 2022, N=156). Percentage of caregivers that responded “Yes” to the question “Did your child use the toys or books that were in the waiting room?”

Visitors perceived the waiting room as more comfortable and welcoming after the space transformation.

We asked caregivers their perception of their waiting room experience. After the transformation, over two-thirds of caregivers at all offices said they were very comfortable (67%) and found the waiting room very welcoming (69%, see figure below). Furthermore, seven out of 10 caregivers across all counties said “I loved it” or “It was nice” when describing their time in the waiting room.

Across all sites, caregivers reported an increase in the perception that the waiting room was more welcoming and comfortable after the space transformation.



Source: TSTF Caregiver Surveys Pre-Transformation (July 2022, N=167) and Post-Transformation (October 2022, N=156). Above reports the percentage of respondents who indicated the waiting room was “Very welcoming/comfortable”. Other response options included “Somewhat welcoming/comfortable”, “Not at all welcoming/comfortable”.

Staff witnessed positive impacts from the transformed spaces and tote bags.

All office staff representatives who were interviewed noted that they observed caregivers and children engage in more language-rich activities while in the waiting areas compared to before the transformed space was installed. The representatives from both Riverside and Napa Counties strongly agreed that the transformed space helps make visitors more comfortable. San Joaquin County staff also said they witnessed a positive benefit from the transformed space and tote bag distribution, but due to the difference in lobby configuration, this effect was more difficult to discern. One representative noted that having a children’s play area creates more upbeat energy in the waiting area. Another noted that the transformed space helps communicate to visitors that families’ and children’s well-being is important to the office staff, which pleases the visitors with young children.

“Moms will sit down on the rug with the alphabet magnets and spell the words and letters. They sometimes write messages for the receptionist and families love the carpet areas. The book bags are passed out as well and they take them into visitation or home if given after.” – San Joaquin County staff representative

“Before [the transformed space], kids would scream coming in; they didn’t want to be here - it was boring and there’s nothing to do. Now it is the opposite – I think we get kids screaming because they don’t want to leave. They want to play with the books and magnets. It’s kind of the opposite! And then kids remember that when they come back to the office, there is something here for them to do!” – Riverside County staff representative

Recommendation for Expansion

The initial findings of the installation of the “Family Read, Play & Learn” space and the distribution of the tote bags at CDSS waiting rooms were extremely promising in transforming County Human Service Agency waiting rooms into more engaging, playful, language-rich environments for families. The three pilot counties all saw significant increases in children playing and reading in the waiting rooms and decreases in technology use. Significantly more clients reported that the waiting room was very welcoming and comfortable after the space transformation. Furthermore, there was tremendously positive feedback from both County Human Service Agency staff and clients about the impact of the tote bag distribution and transformed space.

Based on the research outlined in this report, Public Profit strongly recommends continuing to expand this intervention to additional counties and offices throughout California. The lessons learned from piloting this initiative in three county offices will help support the successful execution of this work at additional offices.

Implementation Best Practices

The ideal place for the “Family Read, Play & Learn” space is where everyone can access it.

It is best to have a clearly delineated area where children can engage with their caregiver while they wait for their appointment. Even for the offices that had a previously existing play area, many more children entered the office and went straight to the children’s area post-transformation.

The context and layout of the office affects the ways the TSTF intervention may be most impactful.

The “Family Read, Play & Learn” space had a positive impact on all participating offices. However, installing the full “Family Read, Play & Learn” space requires a significant amount of physical space in a waiting room and needs to align with the office culture. For offices that experience high amounts of traffic, have multiple waiting areas, or serve a population that may not use the materials as intended, focusing on implementing the tote bag strategy may be more effective.

The process for tote bag distribution should be clear and sustainable.

It is important to have a clear process for distributing the tote bags that ensures all eligible visitors receive one. Tote bag distribution should take place at the beginning of the visitor's time so that the children have the tote bag materials during their time at the office.

A staffing plan for maintaining the materials should be implemented.

While the installed child's space and tote bag distribution brings tremendous benefit to the office workers and visiting families, it also requires staff upkeep. It is important to have a designated process for maintaining the materials (e.g., cleaning the materials, restocking the books, resetting the space).

Conclusion And Future Directions

There is promising evidence of the effectiveness of the TSTF "Family Read, Play & Learn" spaces and tote bag distribution at the three County Human Service Agency's waiting rooms. *Too Small to Fail* and the California Department of Social Services are eager to continue to build our knowledge about supporting literacy-rich experiences for young children through these intervention methods, and to develop rigorous studies to evaluate their effectiveness.

Moving forward, the current research will be built upon by expanding this transformation project to additional County Human Service Agency waiting rooms throughout California. In the next iteration of implementation and research, TSTF and CDSS also plan to collaborate with tribal communities to institute this transformation at yet-to-be-determined locations in tribal areas in California. While there are multiple ways to apply these resources and assess their effectiveness, TSTF and CDSS plan to collaborate with tribal community leaders to understand how these materials and messaging may best reach office visitors. The priority is to co-create initiatives that build on communities' assets and meet caregivers where they are.