

Creating Literacy-Rich Spaces in Laundromats

Pilot Evaluation Findings
Executive Summary



Overview

In 2018, *Too Small to Fail*, the LaundryCares Foundation, and Libraries Without Borders joined forces to launch a new alliance called the Laundry Literacy Coalition. The coalition's goal is to create a national movement and action plan to promote early childhood literacy through laundromats. For the last several years, each organization has been focused on the role of the laundromat as an important venue for literacy promotion and has engaged in a range of initiatives, individually and collectively.

In March 2018, the Laundry Literacy Coalition hosted the first-ever LaundryCares Literacy Summit and brought together early childhood experts, representatives from foundations, national literacy organizations, and corporations from across the country. The outcome was a clear call-to-action to develop a scalable set of high-quality tools and resources to create literacy-rich spaces in laundromats, as well as conduct an evaluation to determine the impact on children's early literacy development and parent-child interactions.

Based on recommendations from the summit, the Laundry Literacy Coalition developed a robust "Laundry & Literacy Kit" consisting of high-quality materials designed to create playful, literacy-rich spaces for young children and families in the laundromat environment. These items include:

- a small comfortable sofa for parents and children to sit in together
- a colorful alphabet rug
- an open-facing bookshelf
- an assortment of children's books
- *Too Small to Fail's* "Wash Time is Talk Time" signage with photos, tips and messages prompting fun ways to talk and read together at the laundromat
- a set of four colorful animal puppets
- large crayons, paper, and "Wash Time is Talk Time" coloring/activity sheets
- a magnetic board with ABC magnets

The Laundry Literacy Coalition implemented these “Laundry & Literacy Kits” in three locations across New York City in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens. Dr. Susan Neuman, Professor of Childhood and Literacy Education at New York University, then conducted a two-phase pilot experimental study of these spaces. The study examined the three laundromats which served as the ‘treatment’ group and compared them to three ‘control’ laundromats which served comparable populations but were ‘business-as-usual’ (meaning without the “Laundry & Literacy Kits” and related signage in the laundromat environment).



Before



After



Treatment



Control

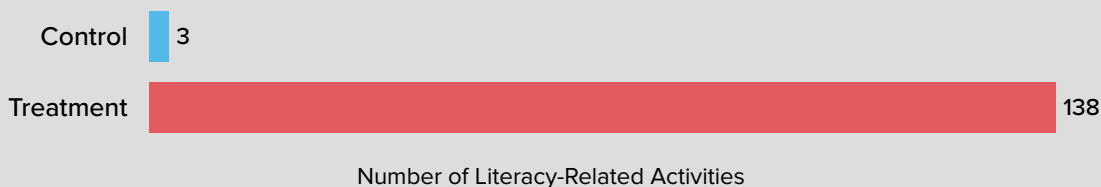
Evaluation Phase 1: Changing the Environment

Phase 1, conducted between July through September 2018, examined changes in the environment to assess whether these playful learning spaces increased parent/caregiver awareness about early brain and language development and prompted children to engage in more language-rich activities like talking, reading, singing, writing, and playing.¹ The laundromats were replenished every three weeks with new books, activity sheets, paper, crayons, and any materials that were missing from the sites. Laundromat employees were asked to keep the spaces neat and tidy between the refreshing visits.

Findings: Phase 1

- **The “Laundry & Literacy Kits” significantly enhance children’s access to print and time spent on activities that support school readiness such as talking, reading, singing, writing, and playing.** Children were observed engaging in 30 times more literacy activities in laundromats that include the “Laundry & Literacy” kits compared to laundromats that did not have these areas.
- **Collectively across sites, children were most likely to read books** (67 instances), followed by playing with magnetic letters (42 instances), and playing with blocks (37 instances). They were less likely to write/color (17 instances), play with the toy washing machine (14 instances) and play with puppets (11 instances).
- **Sixty percent of parents reported that there were fewer than 20 children’s books in their home.** Given these findings, the activities in the treatment sites may represent one of the few ways that children have access to books in these communities.
- **Customers reported high praise for the literacy spaces and felt greater loyalty to the laundromat.** Some families noted that they visited the treatment sites specifically because of the presence of the “Laundry & Literacy Kits.” Some customers even suggested that it showed them that laundry managers cared about their community.
- **The majority of the literacy-related activities observed were initiated by the children rather than the parent or caregiver.** For the most part, parents did their laundry while children engaged in the literacy area. This finding demonstrated the need to explore and test additional parent-focused strategies encouraging them to engage their child in literacy activities at the laundromat.
- **Laundry managers were enthused with the presence of these kits.** Several laundry staff reported that there were fewer instances of children running around or having nothing to do.

Figure 1: Frequency of Literacy-Related Events in Laundromats



Evaluation Phase 2: Supporting Engagement with Librarians

The purpose of Phase 2, conducted between December 2018 through February 2019, was to examine the potential added benefit of having librarians regularly visit laundromats to talk, read, sing and play with children and model these activities for parents during the laundromat's busiest hours of the week. Given the librarians' role as trusted messengers in their local community, they were recruited to engage children and their families in literacy-related activities in treatment sites for two hours per week throughout the intervention period. Researchers sought to understand how librarians' involvement might enhance parents' understanding of early literacy development, and their views of having these types of

activities available in the laundromat. Phase 2 also documented the range of literacy-related activities that took place, children's engagement, and parent-child activities during the time period.



Findings: Phase 2

- **Children engaged in substantial and sustained literacy activity.** Librarians spent an average of 85 minutes per visit each week in the laundromat. During these visits, children engaged in significantly more purposeful engagement in literacy activities compared to children in the control sites, as well as compared to the children's activities observed in the Phase 1 treatment sites.
- **The activities led by the librarians provided a rich context for learning through a range of activities,** including reading books, drawing/coloring, or playing with blocks or the letter magnets.
- **Librarians were observed engaging children in a rich array of one-to-one or small group activities,** reinforcing skills-related concepts such as the alphabet, vocabulary, mathematics, and social-emotional development.
- **The average stay per child was 47 minutes, representing a substantial amount of engaged time in early literacy activities.** On average, three children, between the ages of 2 and 6, participated during the librarian's time at the laundromat.
- **Parent engagement varied throughout the course of Phase 2.** Researchers recorded 54 instances of parent engagement throughout the course of Phase 2. Of those 54 instances of parent involvement, almost half (48%) involved parents *observing children's activity while doing laundry*; more than one fourth (28%) involved parents *observing children's activities while in the literacy area*; and about one fourth (24%) involved *parents managing their children's behavior*. In contrast, there was virtually no parent engagement observed in the control sites.

Figure 2: Parent-Child Activity in Laundromat



- **As noted above, parents were more likely to observe children’s activity rather than participate directly in it.** As parents observed, they most likely let the librarian lead the activity; however, at the same time, parents showed pride in their child, often taking photos of their children engaged in the literacy area.
- **Librarians read an average of four books per session to children.** During their time together, librarians modeled read-aloud practices, developmentally appropriate activities, active listening and responsive conversations. Compared to Phase 1, parents had more opportunities to observe ideal models of interactive reading and language-rich activities, and they seemed delighted with their children’s accomplishments.
- **Parents said they appreciated the literacy area and the librarian’s close attention to their children.** Anecdotally, they said it often eased their workload, knowing that their children were well-cared for and engaged in early learning activities.
- **Customers overwhelmingly expressed their enthusiasm for the literacy space** and the librarians’ visits to the laundromat. They said they chose to come to that specific laundromat and opted to bring their children instead of keeping them at home because of the literacy area.
- **Laundry owners and employees also expressed praise for the literacy areas** noting the parents’ appreciation and children’s excitement of the spaces.

Conclusion & Recommendations for Future Study

The findings from this pilot evaluation demonstrate that **the laundromat can serve as an important environment for early literacy development**. More specifically, the “Laundry & Literacy Kit” significantly enhances children’s access to print and time spent on activities that support school readiness such as talking, reading, singing, writing, and playing. Children were observed engaging in 30 times more literacy activities in laundromats that include the literacy areas compared to laundromats that did not have these areas.

The librarian’s presence in the laundromat also prompted children to engage in significantly more sustained literacy-related activities, compared to the control sites. Further, compared to Phase 1 (no librarian present), children’s play in Phase 2 was more purposeful and the children had more specific opportunities to engage in literacy-building activities.

Testimonials:

“We have a laundromat around the corner of our house, and we travel six blocks just to get to this particular one because of the space.” – Parent

“This is our fourth time coming to this laundromat. We started coming here because of the literacy corner. We like the laundromat a lot because instead of giving our kid the phone, we can read together. Compared to other laundromats in the area, this one is big and gives access of books to children.” – Parent

“I love the literacy area and really appreciate the librarians’ patience and love. I think there are few places like this in our community. I grew up here and I think the literacy corner is very important for this community. We come here every other week, and now he has something to do. He asks me, “Mommy, can we go play at the laundromat?” – Parent

“It’s awesome, especially for younger kids. I frequent this particular laundromat every Saturday and usually spend two hours with my grandson here. Before this, he would watch cartoons at home or be on his tablet, but this is so much nicer.” – Grandparent

“The kids love it. People are really impressed by it when they first come in. It already seems like the literacy corner is a permanent part of the laundromat.” – Laundromat Owner

It is also clear that **parents were more much likely to observe their children’s literacy activities than they were to engage in them.** The presence of the librarians did prompt further observation; parents had more opportunities to observe ideal models of interactive reading and language-rich activities and seemed delighted with their children’s accomplishments. In fact, one fourth of parents (24%) even observed their children’s literacy activities from within the literacy area.

Customers had high praise for the literacy spaces and felt greater loyalty to the laundromat.

Some families noted that they visited these laundromats because of the presence of the “Laundry & Literacy Kits.” Customers even suggested that these spaces showed them that laundromat owners cared about their community. Laundromat owners and employees were also very pleased with the “Laundry & Literacy” spaces. Many of them emphasized the parents’ appreciation and children’s excitement of the spaces—often noting that this is the first area children run to when they come to the laundromat.

Researchers observed that the literacy spaces in laundromats helped to create a culture of literacy in the laundromat, an informal community learning environment to engage children in ongoing literacy activities. The transformed laundromats created the opportunity for a new norm for customers where literacy rich activities can become part of their weekly routine.



What's Next

Phase 3 of the evaluation, led by *Too Small to Fail*, will begin in spring of 2019 in 20 laundromats across Chicago in partnership with LaundryCares Foundation, Libraries Without Borders, and the Chicago Public Library. While the six-month study will utilize a similar methodology to the New York City pilot evaluation, it will be refined based on learnings from Phase 1 and Phase 2. Specifically, Phase 3 will explore:

- What are new, unique strategies that might further engage parents/caregivers and encourage them to become more actively engaged in literacy activities with their children at the laundromat? What are some of the barriers to more active engagement?
- How might librarians further engage parents in literacy activities in the laundromat? For example, how might they use the unique environment of the laundromat to spark rich conversations about what they see in the environment? How might they use clothes or other laundry-related objects to play a game or count specific items? Would further trainings for librarians be helpful?

The findings from this pilot evaluation, as well as the upcoming research, will help inform future work and provide the Laundry Literacy Coalition with research to refine its model with the long-term goal of scaling efforts nationally. Ideally, this research also will help inform additional work to promote children's early literacy development in other informal, everyday spaces that families frequent.

Methodology

Phase 1

Dr. Neuman and her research assistants conducted a systematic analysis of activity in the laundromats by using a range of methodologies including:

- Frozen time checks every 30 minutes during two-hour periods, where researchers recorded the location of each person in the laundromat, including descriptive notes of activity on a digital rendering of the space;
- Observations of day-to-day activity of parent and child behaviors;
- Surveys of 39 parents with questions about the frequency of home literacy activities and conversations about literacy environments in the laundromat;
- Interviews with parent and laundromat staff members.

Prior to the installation of the “Laundry & Literacy Kits,” researchers spent 10 hours conducting baseline observations at each treatment and control site. After the baseline observations were complete, researchers visited the laundromat for one two-hour period, once a week. A total of 186 hours was spent at the treatment laundromats, and 170 hours at the control sites.

Phase 2

For Phase 2, Dr. Neuman and her researchers relied primarily on observations, interviews with parents and family members, and photographic ethnography (e.g. frequent photographic accounts of activities throughout the librarians’ sessions), and comparing and contrasting laundromats between phases 1 and 2 of the treatment as well as the control sites. Methodologies included:

- Weekly observations for a two-hour period timed to observe the librarians’ activities with families.
- Occasional visits to the control sites to compare the treatment laundromats with ‘business as usual’ laundromats.
- 58 brief interviews with parents and family members to examine their responses to the changes in the environment.
- Interviews with staff members at the treatment sites.
- Interviews with librarians regarding their experiences in literacy activities in the laundromats.
- Photographic ethnography; photographs of literacy-based activity throughout a typical session with the librarian.

A total of 125 hours was spent collecting data in both the treatment and control sites.

For more information about this evaluation, please reach out to info@toosmall.org.