

## **PLAYFUL LEARNING AT THE LAUNDROMAT:**

Engaging Community to Create Playful, Learning-Rich Spaces for Children and Families.

A Study of Philadelphia Laundromats - Executive Summary

### **BACKGROUND**

In 2015, The Clinton Foundation's early childhood initiative, *Too Small to Fail*, joined with the LaundryCares Foundation to form a unique partnership. The goal: to promote early childhood literacy through innovative learning opportunities in laundromats across the nation. In 2018, the partners created "Family Read, Play & Learn" spaces, stimulating and inviting sites designed to encourage families to talk, read, and sing together while at the laundromat.

"Family Read, Play & Learn" spaces expanded the role of the laundromat as an important venue for literacy promotion, utilizing a wide range of tools including family-friendly seating, educational toys, and high-quality books and posters in English and Spanish. Experts in the field of child literacy have assessed the impact that these spaces have had in encouraging young children to engage with print and play resources in the targeted laundromat settings when compared with those in business-as-usual laundromats. A study of six New York City laundromats conducted by Dr. Susan Neuman found that children in laundromats with "Family Read, Play & Learn" spaces engaged in 30 times more literacy activities compared to children in laundromats without these spaces.

### **OVERVIEW**

Beginning in 2020, building on *Too Small to Fail's* evaluations from previous studies of laundromats in New York City and Chicago, the research expanded into Philadelphia, broadening the program to intentionally bring community input into the program design. There were two objectives for the Philadelphia project: first, to transform the laundromat environment based on community feedback, and second, to activate the transformed laundromat spaces with trained community members to lead early learning programming.

**With valuable input from the community members at the laundromat, "Family Read, Play & Learn" spaces were redesigned.** Led by KABOOM!, a national nonprofit that works to end play-space inequity, the local neighborhood was engaged to identify activities and themes appealing to its children and families. Paper surveys, activity packets, and posters were used to encourage families to vote on what they wanted to see in the space, resulting in open-faced bookcases, decals with topical pictures and words, themes such as oceans or wild animals, and activities such as hopscotch and scavenger hunts.

**By serving as neighborhood literacy leaders, Philadelphia Reading Captains enhanced language and literacy activity in the play spaces by engaging with children and caregivers.** The individuals who participated were respected local community leaders who could educate, encourage, and coach caregivers in language-enriching activities and, when available, suggest neighborhood resources. Following training from *Too Small to Fail*, over eight weeks, one or two Reading Captains would visit the laundromat once a week, to read and play with the children

for a two-hour period. During these visits, observers would write field notes, recording their language interactions with children.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In 2021, Dr. Susan Neuman, Professor of Early Childhood and Literacy Education at New York University, was commissioned to conduct a study of the laundromats in Philadelphia. The evaluation was designed to **assess the impact of the space transformation**, and the extent to which:

1. parents engaged in talking, reading, and singing activities with their children as a result of the changed environments.
2. children engaged with print and play resources in the redesigned settings.

The evaluation would further **assess the impact of the Reading Captains** and how they might:

1. enhance children's involvement with print and encourage caregivers to engage in language and literacy experiences with their children.
2. engage with families in ways that were supportive of their language and culture, creating connections between home, school, and community.

The evaluation was conducted at laundromats in three Philadelphia neighborhoods, each representing a specific income demographic. The neighborhoods included Fairhill, Germantown, and South Philadelphia, with a fourth laundromat in East Falls recruited as a control site. Each laundromat served as an individual case, allowing examination of activities within and across laundromats. Additionally, all of the transformed laundromats were selected based on their store size (representing small, medium, and large laundromats) so that the interventions could be adapted based on the space available.

The research used an internal comparison design, phasing in the program in the first laundromat over a 16-week period, while the others remained business-as-usual. This was followed by transformations in the second laundromat over a similar time period, with the third serving as a control site. In the last phase, the third laundromat was transformed with the fourth laundromat serving as a control site.

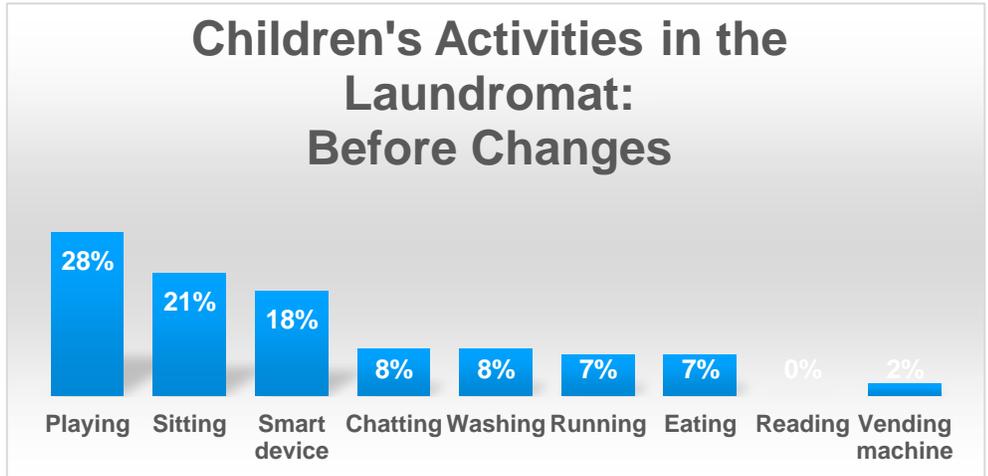
**Data collection in each of the laundromat sites followed a three-phase approach conducted over the course of one year.** During observations, researchers engaged in “frozen time checks.” Using momentary time-sampling, observers documented activity at the current moment for every ten-minutes for a two-hour period. An initial baseline of activity was established in the four laundromats to determine how children and families used their time while there. In total, 12 hours of observations per laundromat were conducted in this phase. Next, a “Family Read, Play & Learn” space, adapted through a community-led design process, was put in place at the three treatment laundromats. In this phase, observers recorded activity in 2-hour increments on a weekend day. After an 8-week period, the third phase of the evaluation observed the Reading Captains and their influence on children's activities and parents' involvement. **For each laundromat, the evaluation examined 32 hours of activity for a total of 96 hours of observation.**

A short survey was distributed to determine parents’ beliefs about the importance of talking with their children and reading books with them. Additionally, a brief focus group was conducted with Reading Captains.

**KEY FINDINGS**

Space Transformation

- Prior to intervention, frozen time checks indicated that, at laundromats, children “just sat,” used mobile devices, or played on their own with toys they had brought with them. There was no evidence of reading in any form.



- There were modest changes in children’s activity as a result of the space transformations (See Appendix A for space transformation photos at the three laundromats). After the community-led design changes in the laundromat play spaces, children’s independent reading activity rose 8%.

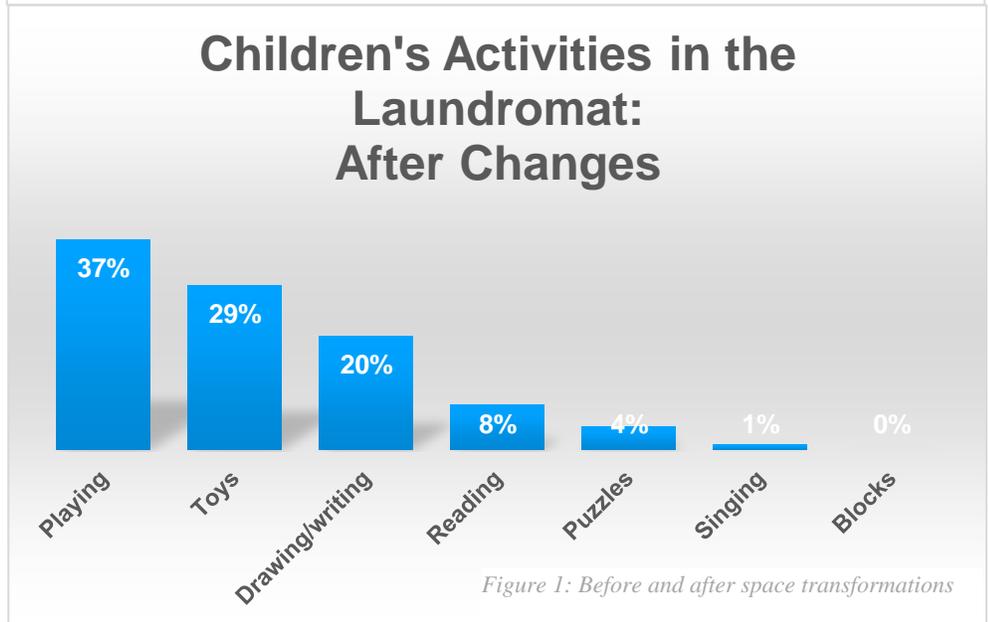


Figure 1: Before and after space transformations

- However, much of the reading activity (7%) involved book ‘flipping – ’picking up a book, quickly looking through the pages, and putting it down. There was little to no sustained reading activity.
- As a result of the changes, children were playing with toys and materials 9% more than they had before the transformations and a full 20% of their time drawing/writing (sometimes called ‘driting’), as well as reading, and engaging with other children.

- Parents largely checked on their children’s activity but did not engage in play or reading activities with them. Nevertheless, changes in the environment reduced running, eating, and use of the vending machine.
- Space transformations occurred throughout the laundromat environment, with interactive signage and decals placed in different areas of this store. However, this meant that some of the spaces lacked a cohesive, designated children’s area, which can be helpful in encouraging children and families to engage in early learning activities together.

These results indicate that the space transformations did have a minor effect on children’s activity and can provide an opportunity for children in under-resourced communities to engage in more language and literacy activities. At the same time, the changes were modest in comparison to previous evaluations that examined the standard “Family Read, Learn and Play” spaces.

### Reading Captains

- Reading time with children rose dramatically during Reading Captains’ visits. On average, Reading Captains read four books per session with children. Over eight weeks, one or two Reading Captains would visit the laundromat once per week to read and play with the children for a two-hour period.
- Reading Captains engaged children in labelling, open-ended questioning, and conversational turn-taking. Labelling and defining the meaning of words with children helps them to build bridges to their daily experiences. Open-ended questions are known to support children’s expressive language; turn-taking is an important skill to effectively participate in social communications.
- Parents reported learning about the importance of early talking and reading to their children as a result of their interactions with Reading Captains. A final survey of 22 caregivers to determine parents’ beliefs about talking to their children and book reading revealed that most parents believed it was important to talk and read with their child early on. When asked who shared the information with them, parents largely selected their friends, neighbors, and relatives. Yet a sizable number mentioned the Reading Captains, indicating their ability to connect well with parents.
- Reading Captains engaged in culturally and linguistically sensitive language and literacy interactions, which appeared to enhance their ability to communicate with children and families. Studies suggest that incorporating values, beliefs, practices, and materials relevant to a child’s cultural background supports the home language or dialect.

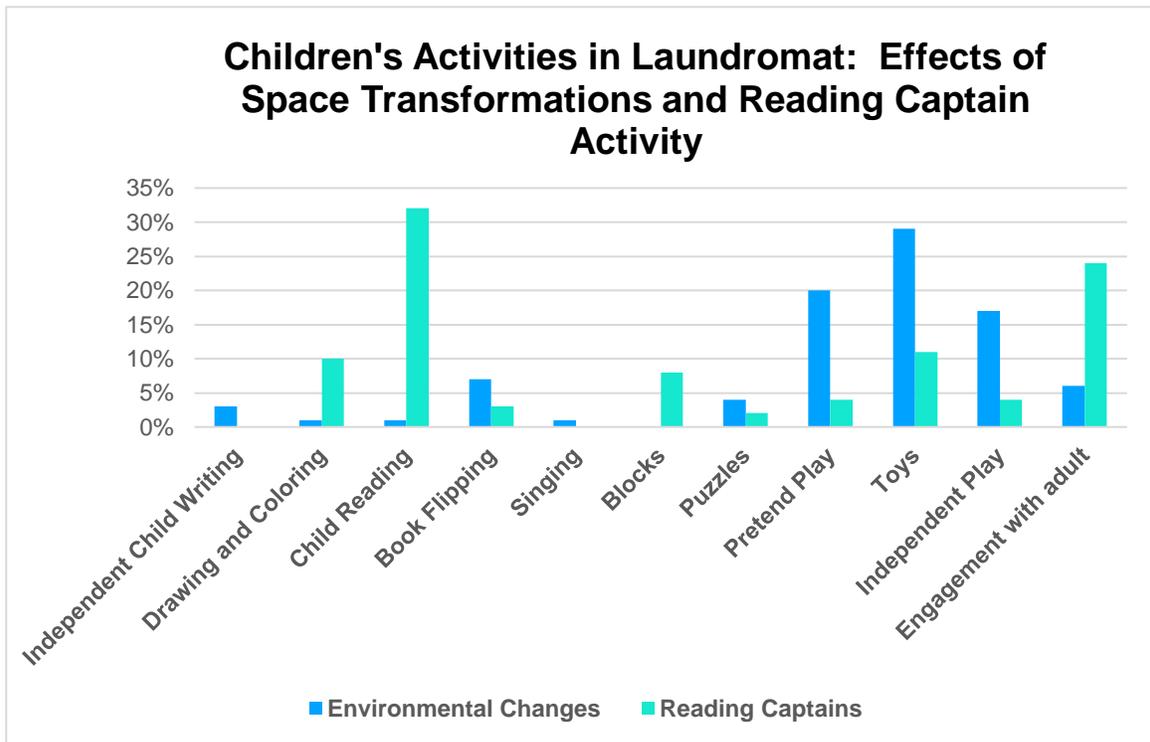


Figure 2: Differences in children's activity due to the space transformation alone and the space transformation combined with Reading Captain visits.

These results confirm that local volunteers from the community, serving as Reading Captains, can be of vital assistance in promoting literacy and providing informational resources to children and their families.

### CONCLUSIONS

- As a result of the space transformations, children spent more time playing with toys. Reading activity rose from zero to 8%. However, much of this activity (7%) involved book ‘flipping’ – picking up a book, quickly looking through the pages, and putting it down. There was little to no sustained reading activity.
- Activities such as running, and using mobile devices were reduced as a result of the transformation of play spaces.
- Overall, the design changes in this community-led adaptation of the “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces affected modest changes in children’s behavior, with little evidence of increases in language and literacy-related activities.
- Reading Captains played an important role in promoting language interactions among children. They engaged in significantly greater labelling, open-ended questioning, and

conversational turn-taking with children, all of which are critical for language development.

- Community involvement is an important tool for effective space transformation. However, if they are to successfully enhance and encourage literacy in early learners, these efforts need to be thoughtfully developed with specific recommendations. Open-ended community input will not support early learning outcomes. Community enhancements need to be grounded in evidence-based practices.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### Community Engagement

Future projects should consider using multiple methods of outreach in order to develop a more in-depth understanding of the community before the intervention is designed and takes place. Such techniques might include ‘forced-choice’ surveys that allow the participant to choose from two evidence-based practices, focus groups, interviews, and observations of activities in the neighborhoods. This allows assurance that community feedback can be grounded in best practices to promote literacy and learning.

### Space Transformations

The Philadelphia play spaces were adapted from *Too Small to Fail* and the LaundryCares Foundation’s original “Family Read Play & Learn” space model, seeking to create add-ons to the “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces that brought additional playful learning opportunities to families throughout the laundromat. These Philadelphia spaces were designed with a theme (with themes including animals and the ocean) which included materials within the children’s areas as well as throughout the laundromats. Yet, the more simple and straightforward “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces had greater impact. In the future, when seeking to create playful learning spaces in laundromats, it is necessary to root the transformation in evidence-based design principles. Important features to consider include:

- A small couch to ‘signal’ the opportunity for parent-child, or peer-to-peer reading, and a rug to ‘soften’ the play space.
- Materials that are more directly related to language and literacy: puppets; puppet stage; magnetic letters; alphabet puzzles, white board in addition to books. These types of materials support language interaction and reading.
- Themes related to the laundromat context. Children talk more when their play setting mirrors what they know. Future play enhancements in the laundromat should include opportunities for children to sort, differentiate colors and patterns; pretend play that engages them in measurement, time, etc.
- Book selections to reflect the local themes, home language, and culture of the community.

- Posters and decals can be used to identify the play space, yet they do not seem to be a valuable source for learning in and of themselves.

### Reading Captains

Previous studies in New York and Chicago evaluated the role of librarians as trusted messengers at the laundromat. In Philadelphia, Reading Captain volunteers served a unique role as trusted messengers in the community. They were ‘of’ and ‘for’ the community in which they served. Future evaluations should consider extending this model to other communities and other establishments. Trusted messengers who live in high-stress communities may have a distinct advantage in communicating information to children and families.

Settings such as laundromats can act as ‘organizational brokers’ reaching families in communities where trust in outside interventions and organizations has declined over time. Continuing this collaboration would enhance this vital role in the community.

## APPENDIX A

### The Laundry Café: Before and After Environmental Changes



**Big G Laundry: Before and After Environmental Changes**



10<sup>th</sup> Street Laundromat: Before and After Environmental Changes

