

# The Effects of Integrating Early Literacy Signage in Playgrounds in Los Angeles



# Background

*Too Small to Fail*, the early childhood initiative of the Clinton Foundation, surrounds families with early language and learning opportunities, and supports parents and caregivers in low-income communities with resources to help prepare young children for success in kindergarten and beyond. *Too Small to Fail* meets parents where they are by transforming everyday “spaces,” such as laundromats, parks, and pediatric clinics—into language-rich environments for children. Key to this approach is building partnerships with a wide range of national and community organizations, as well as media companies that are aligned with this mission and have widespread reach among parents with young children.

Beginning in 2015, *Too Small to Fail* (TSTF) partnered with Landscape Structures (LSI), a leading playground manufacturer and distributor, as well as Inclusion Matters by Shane’s Inspiration, to integrate “Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing” signage into what has grown to be more than 900 playgrounds across the U.S. These messages are featured on fun, colorful panels and plaques showing bright visuals and open-ended caregiver-child conversation prompts in both English and Spanish. The goal of these panels is to help spark language-rich interactions between children and their caregivers while spending time on the playground.





# About the Evaluation

Through the generous support of the Valhalla Foundation, *Too Small to Fail* commissioned a study led by Dr. Susan Neuman, Professor of Literacy and Childhood Education at New York University, to evaluate the impact of the “Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing” signage on family interactions on playgrounds located in several communities across Los Angeles, California.

This evaluation was designed to examine the impact of integrating signage on promoting language and literacy activities for families of young children. The signs were designed to spark child-caregiver interactions in play environments that are inclusive of children of all abilities and diverse backgrounds.

The goals of the evaluation were to examine the effects of the “Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing” signage on the frequency of child-caregiver interactions at the playground and assess the effects of signage on parents’ perceptions of the playground as a learning environment that supports language and literacy development. These interactions include activities like talking, reading, and singing - which research shows build children’s early brain and language development and helps to prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond.

## Methodology

The evaluation examined the impact of signage in six playgrounds in under-resourced neighborhoods using a mixed methods design throughout the period of 2019-2021. Baseline **observations** of three already established inclusive playgrounds already established with signage were compared with three playgrounds that had yet to be transformed. Additional observations were conducted in the latter playgrounds once signage was in place, and playgrounds were re-opened in 2021 following the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 769 child-caregiver dyads were observed, approximately equally distributed across all sites over 46 observation sessions.



The evaluators also conducted **interviews** with 66 families to examine how caregivers interpreted the signs. The interviews included questions such as:

- “Is talking a way of teaching?”
- “How does the brain affect children’s learning?”
- “How does play and learning relate to school readiness?”

Finally, during this baseline period, researchers surveyed 32 parents in playgrounds with signage to determine the extent of the families’ “talking, singing, and reading” activities in the home.

In addition, **surveys** were conducted with 101 parents and caregivers at playgrounds with signage to assess how the signage might support them and their children.

## Key Findings

### Playgrounds with signage supported significantly greater child-caregiver interactions compared to those without signage.

Parents and caregivers were more likely to engage in language interactions in playgrounds with *Too Small to Fail* signage compared to those that did not yet have signs. In addition, these playgrounds with existing signage continued to support more parent-child conversations even after the newly installed signage was in place in the other playgrounds.



Nook playground structure for toddlers.

Evaluators also examined whether certain types of play areas in the newly transformed playgrounds supported greater parent-children talk than others. The Nook (shown at the right) was specifically designed to attract younger children aged 18-36 months and features a variety of open-ended conversation prompts around the structure. Results of the observations indicated the Nook supported greater parent-child interaction than the signage on the play structures and the swings. Parents were more actively engaged with their child in the Nook, providing both functional guidance (e.g., “This is how you do it...”), as well as imaginative talk (e.g., “Let’s pretend that we’re visiting Grandma!”). Parents engaging with their children in the Nook exemplified the most parent-child talk, followed by parents engaging with their children on the swings.

## Parents were more likely to indicate that the playgrounds with signage were “play and learning” environments compared to those playgrounds without signage.

The *Too Small to Fail* signage facilitated a shift in parents’ perspectives on the playgrounds. Parents regarded the playgrounds as more than a physical play space but instead a “play *and* learning environment.” For example, one parent indicated that she appreciated that the playground “now integrates both reading and thinking while children play in the structure.” In an interview, a father suggested that the signs “inadvertently teach children basic reading and comprehension skills,” which is why he enjoys taking his son to that particular playground. Another parent stated that “it’s a useful way for children to learn as they play.” Still another parent enjoyed the thematic signs along the train structure, since she believed it helped her child practice his numbers and shapes, and the pictures made it fun to look at, saying “They don’t even realize they’re learning - to them it’s just play.”

When the evaluators asked caregivers why they chose to visit this playground in particular, parents who visited sites with signage were more likely to say because it is a “learning space” (64% of comments), compared to parents who visited sites without signage (45% of comments). These results represented a fundamental shift in the way parents viewed the playgrounds. More than a play space devoted to physical development, the signs contributed to perceptions of the playground that integrated play, talking, and teaching. One caregiver, for example, suggested that the signs helped to teach basic reading and comprehension skills, cementing his loyalty to that particular playground.





## Playground signage encouraged parents to consider their pivotal role in children's literacy development.



The bilingual sign shown above reads: “When you talk, read, and sing with your children from birth, you fill their brains with words and thoughts that make all the difference to their happiness in future. You can find lots of fun ideas for talking with your children all over this playground. For more ideas visit [talkingisteaching.org](http://talkingisteaching.org)” in English and Spanish.

most commonly reported that the signage encouraged them to talk with their children, which then stimulated children to think. Many parents also mentioned that they bond with their children and teach them about their culture through language and stories.

Parents believed that the addition of signs in the playground had a “positive effect on the neighborhood,” providing an indication that the playground was safe, well-maintained, and supportive of families and their values.

“It’s useful for playgrounds to have signs like these because it inadvertently teaches children basic reading and comprehension skills. I enjoy taking my son to this playground for that reason.

Caregiver

“The signs are a useful way for children to learn as they play. The signs are attractive to smaller children in particular due to the colorful pictures.

- Caregiver

## Parents greatly valued that the playground signs were both in English and Spanish.

The majority of families visiting these playgrounds were Latinx, with Spanish as their primary language. Many of these parents were enthusiastic about their children having access to Spanish along with English signage. Consequently, the bilingual features of the signs were especially appreciated, and often described as an important aspect of their overall appeal.

Several respondents noted having the signs in both English and Spanish enabled them to better assist in their children's learning:

“ Sometimes it's hard for me to help in school because everything is English. This way, I can help.

- Caregiver

“ [The signs in Spanish] teach the children to be proud of our language.

Caregiver

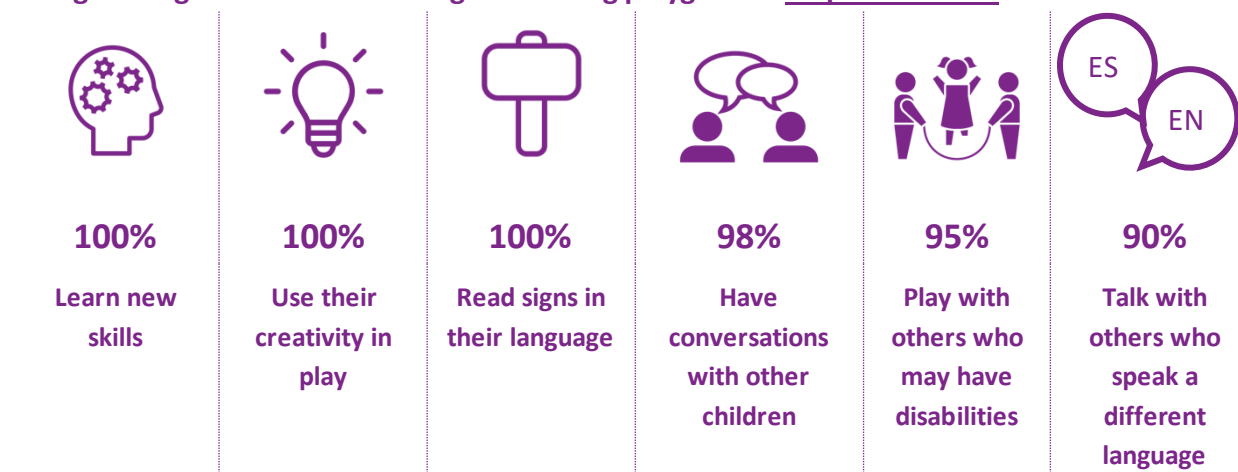
The bilingual signage supported parents in their efforts to help children maintain their first language while learning a second language. These signs also conveyed an important message that parents can promote children's learning in their own language of communication.



## Parents felt that the playground signage supported their child to learn new skills, play with others, and be creative.

Signs provided an important reminder for the parents that ‘talking is teaching,’ and the importance of talking as a means to convey their history and culture, social norms, and knowledge about the world. Parents also recognized their role in promoting reading and learning activities, acknowledging how important they are to children’s brain development in the early years. The *Too Small to Fail* signage appeared to play a role in caregivers’ decision to visit the playground over other playgrounds, even though some others were closer to home.

### Caregivers agreed that the Talking is Teaching playground helps their child:



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Source: Survey given to caregivers at the playgrounds with signage, (N=101).



# Conclusion

This evaluation found that *Too Small to Fail* signage was a positive addition to playgrounds. The signs appeared to strongly promote conversations between caregivers and children, as well as between groups of children. In playgrounds with already established signage, parents engaged in more conversations with their children compared to those playgrounds without signage. There was a sharp increase in child-to-child talk following the new signage installations in playgrounds that had not included signage before.

The signs also served as an effective tool to encourage caregivers to talk, read, and sing with their young children. Caregivers who visited the playgrounds with signage viewed these additions to the playground as a positive development for the neighborhood, making the already existing attractions of the playground even more inviting for children and their families.

The data reported in this evaluation provides strong support for enhancing playground environments with signage and messaging designed to spark creativity in play, language, and learning. The enhancements to these playgrounds encouraged parents and children to talk more and to consider a playground as a “play *and* learning environment.” The signage within the structures themselves played a key role in child-to-child talk. They sparked children’s creativity, and language, transforming the actual structures into imaginative objects, creating scenarios that stretched their thinking and new ideas. Developers should not only consider extending their work to other playgrounds throughout the country; they should also consider signs in contextualized settings such as bus stops, waiting rooms, and other places where children and their families might gather to spark conversations, stories, and songs.