



Meeting Families Where They Are: Transforming Laundromats into Early Learning Environments

A Study of Chicago Laundromats • Executive Summary

Overview

In 2015, *Too Small to Fail* and the LaundryCares Foundation forged an innovative partnership to promote children’s literacy development through laundromats nationwide. In 2018, *Too Small to Fail* and the LaundryCares Foundation expanded their partnership by creating a “Family Read, Play & Learn” space for laundromats across the country. These playful, family-friendly environments include a comfortable sofa, child-sized table and chairs, a bookshelf, a white board with letter and number magnets, puppets, and blocks. A 2018 pilot evaluation conducted in New York City found that children engaged in 30 times more literacy activities in laundromats with these spaces compared to laundromats without. Yet, the study also found only a few instances of parent-child interactions; the majority of parents were observed doing their laundry while children engaged in the literacy area. These findings demonstrated a need to explore and test additional strategies focused specifically on engaging parents and caregivers.

Through the generous support of the Valhalla Charitable Foundation, *Too Small to Fail* and the LaundryCares Foundation embarked upon a robust and rigorous evaluation to build the evidence base and test new strategies to help parents engage in more literacy-rich activities with their children while in the laundromat.



Control



Treatment

Methodology

Using a quasi-experimental design, NYU researchers examined the impact of the “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces through observational data collection, as well as interviews and conversations with more than 500 parents and caregivers in 20 laundromats throughout a seven-month period.

This research represents the most comprehensive analysis to date of laundromats as a context for early learning and their potential contribution to young children’s language and literacy development.

Researchers studied 20 laundromats: 10 randomly selected for the treatment group and 10 for the control group. Prior to the addition of the “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces, research assistants conducted frozen time checks, a momentary time sampling strategy to measure typical activity in the laundromats. In the first phase of the evaluation, following the installation of the play spaces in the treatment sites, research assistants conducted two-hour observations at each laundromat, two times a week. They measured both children’s activities and parent-child engagement in the area, documenting the types and the frequency of literacy-related activity, and parents’ reactions to the spaces and their importance to the community.

In the second phase of the evaluation, research assistants examined the added benefits of pairing the “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces with trained librarians who served as trusted messengers to model talking, reading, and singing activities for children and their caregivers. During this phase, research assistants observed activities and collected photographic evidence of child-to-child and parent-child engagement. They also conducted parent interviews and had ongoing conversations with librarians. In the final weeks, research assistants measured children’s context-specific vocabulary in both treatment and control sites. Altogether, researchers observed, interviewed, and assessed activities in the 20 laundromats for a total of 576 hours in treatment sites (288 visits) and 196 hours in control sites (98 visits).

Key Findings

The results of the evaluation included the following key findings:

- **Placing “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces in laundromats had an overwhelmingly positive effect on children’s literacy-related activity during their visit.** In total, throughout the course of the evaluation, researchers observed 1,378 instances of literacy-related activities in treatment sites compared to 7 instances in the control sites (0 in Phase 1; 7 in Phase 2).
- **There was a strong and significant difference in parent-child interactions between the treatment and control sites.** During phase 1 of the evaluation, the research team recorded 219 instances of parent-child activity in the treatment sites compared to no instances in the control sites. In most instances, parents were observed briefly “dipping in” to check in and engage with their children, then “dipping out” to get back to their laundry. Out of the 219 instances of parent-child activities observed, 134 of these instances involved parents staying a bit longer to orient their child to the setting (such as choosing a book and starting to read together or beginning a block activity).
- **Yet, when looking at the total instances of literacy-related activities observed throughout the seven-month period (1,378), about 20% were parent-child interactions. The majority of interactions represented children’s engagement with literacy activities without their caregiver.** This finding isn’t surprising given that parents are in an environment where they are busy doing laundry. Parent-child interactions, however, did increase when librarians were incorporated as trusted messengers in the laundromats.
- **When there is a strong, intentional focus on parent and family engagement in the librarian trainings, there are likely to be increases in parent-child interactions in the laundromat environment.** Compared to the New York City laundromat initiative, *Too Small to Fail* placed a much strong emphasis in Chicago on encouraging librarians to engage the whole family in literacy activities and created new resources to help prompt parent-child interactions throughout the laundromat environment. Thus, librarians in Chicago promoted parent and family engagement and this intentional effort increased parent involvement compared to when children were on their own.
- **Librarians played a powerful role in both children and parents’ engagement in literacy-related activity.** The average amount of time spent by children in the literacy space during librarian visits was 47 minutes, significantly more than the 29 minutes on average that children spent alone in the space.
- **More parents became involved in their children’s literacy-related activities during the librarians’ visits.** One fifth of parents (20%) joined in for at least a portion of the librarian’s story hours with their children. This is a marked increase from the 8% of parents who engaged in the literacy spaces in the first phase of the study before librarian involvement.
- **When parents were involved, the amount of time children participated in literacy-related activities with the librarian increased.** When a parent was present, or even briefly visited, the amount of time that children spent with the librarian increased from an average of 47 minutes to an average of 53 minutes.

- **Children remained engaged in the literacy-related spaces throughout the study period.** The evaluation showed no signs of ‘treatment fatigue.’ In fact, children’s literacy-related activity increased over the course of the seven-month period. Children’s time spent on reading books grew throughout the period, increasing from over 16 minutes to 21 minutes, indicating that these activities were self-sustaining.
- **The majority of customers (of all ages) reported praise and appreciation for the addition of the literacy spaces in their laundromats.** As one parent commented, “It makes it feel like a family place. It’s good to see places caring for kids.”

Figure 1: How Child Spent Time in the Literacy Corner (Phase 1)

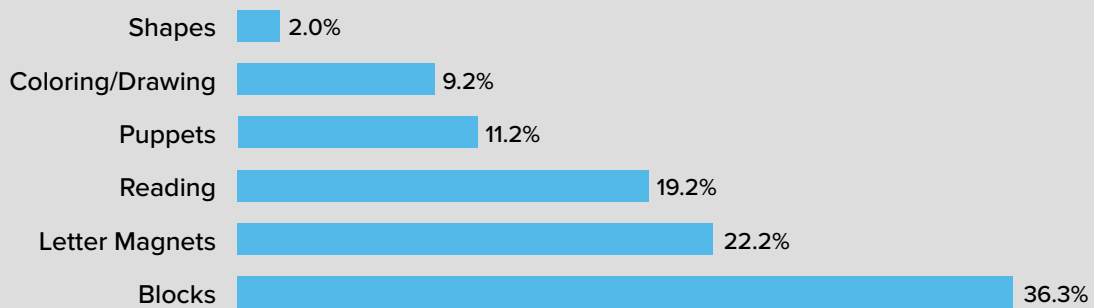


Figure 2: Average Time Children Plays in Literacy Space During Librarian Visits (Phase 2)

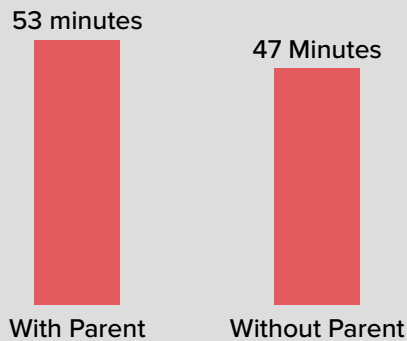
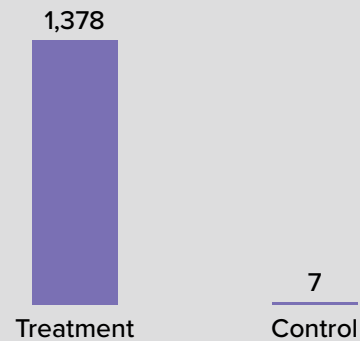


Figure 3: Total Instances of Literacy Activities in Phases 1 & 2





Before

After

Conclusion

The findings from this evaluation demonstrate that creating “Family, Read, Play & Learn” spaces in laundromats can serve as an innovative approach to supporting the critical educational needs of children across the United States. This study further confirms that laundromats can play an important role in promoting greater equity by increasing access to high-quality learning environments and resources in neighborhoods affected by poverty.

More specifically, placing “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces in laundromats has an overwhelmingly positive effect on children’s literacy-related activity during their visit, with children spending, on average, 29 minutes engaging in these spaces when they were alone.

This evaluation also tested new strategies to promote greater parent-child interaction in the laundromat environment. The study revealed that there was a strong and significant difference in parent-child interactions between the treatment and control sites. Yet, when parents did engage, the interactions consisted of mainly “brief bursts” with parents dipping in and out of the literacy space.

Trained librarians, paired with the “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces, significantly increased children’s engagement in literacy-related activities. The average amount of time spent by children in the literacy space during librarian visits was 47 minutes, significantly more than the 29 minutes on average that children spent alone in the space. Importantly, more parents became involved in their children’s literacy-related activities during the librarians’ visits.

Testimonials:

“The kids aren’t running around anymore. They used to be running everywhere, behind the machines, everywhere. It’s calmer and quieter now.” – Parent

“It makes it feel like a family place. It’s good to see places caring for kids.” – Parent

“My daughter just loves the space. She loves to read and spell with the magnets. Before this was here, the kids would all just run all over the place, or just wander around, running to people who were trying to just get the laundry done and get out. Now they have something to do. This literacy corner gives them some focus, and development, which is important. Kids need constant development.” – Parent

Implications and Next Steps

Too Small to Fail and the LaundryCares Foundation plan to continue their partnership and coalition building to lead a movement to transform laundromats into high-quality learning environments in under-resourced neighborhoods. The findings from this evaluation strongly validate and support efforts to scale the “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces in laundromats throughout the country. *Too Small to Fail* and the Laundry Cares Foundation will share these research findings with a growing network of partners in the non-profit sector, the laundry industry, corporations, schools, libraries, civic organizations, and others to inform and expand future work. This research also contributes to the limited yet growing body of knowledge related to the role that informal learning environments can play to support children and families in underserved communities.

Too Small to Fail and the LaundryCares Foundation will use the data from this research to further refine their family engagement model to promote meaningful parent-child interactions in everyday spaces like laundromats. The finding that parent-child interactions were strong and significant in the treatment sites compared to the control sites is significant. Yet, given that these instances happened in “brief bursts” and that the majority of literacy activities observed were by children, *Too Small to Fail* is interested in continuing to refine and test new strategies and parental supports that that may result in more frequent and sustained parent-child interactions in the laundromat and other informal environments.

Finally, this laundromat initiative has inspired *Too Small to Fail* and its partners to create “Family Read, Play & Learn” spaces in other neighborhood places where families and children spend time, including family courts, as well as waiting areas in WIC clinics and social service agency offices. *Too Small to Fail* will examine how these spaces can also serve as innovative solutions to support the unmet needs of families and create more equitable neighborhoods.

