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## StoryMakers: Hopa Mountain's Early Literacy Program

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### Abstract

Hopa Mountain's StoryMakers program is an innovative, research-based program for donating high quality young children's books to parents. Hopa Mountain is a nonprofit organization based in Bozeman, Montana. Hopa Mountain works with groups of rural and tribal citizen leaders who form StoryMakers Community Teams to talk one-on-one with local parents about the importance of reading, singing, and talking with their children on a daily basis and to provide them with children's books and early learning resource materials. Hopa Mountain conducted a parent survey to assess parent needs and satisfaction with the StoryMakers program. Results indicate a clear trend that parents are taking advantage of the availability of books and the program support to sing, talk, tell stories, and read books with their children. Overall, the reading increases indicate more interaction between parents and their children toward the development of relationships and intergenerational closure.

### Introduction

It is widely accepted that the single most important thing parents can do to promote early cognitive, language, and social-emotional development is to talk with, sing with, tell stories to, and read books aloud to children from birth. Making parents feel at ease with books and stories and talking with them about the importance of language interaction at home are central to Hopa Mountain's StoryMakers program. Hopa Mountain is a nonprofit organization based in Bozeman, Montana, dedicated to developing citizen leaders by improving educational opportunities among youth in rural and Native American communities of Montana.

Hopa Mountain's StoryMakers is an initiative designed to support families of children 0-5 as they

create early learning environments at home. StoryMakers promotes early literacy by donating books to parents to read to their children. Specifically, StoryMakers partners with publishing companies, acquiring new books at discounted prices to donate to parents, grandparents, and other caretakers to read to their young children. The following describes the program; reviews relevant literature; reports data from its 2010 needs survey of satisfaction; and offers some conclusions based on the outcomes of that research. In addition, other pre-reading program models, various learning outcomes, and the methodology of this study are described.

It is the at-home early-learning program of Hopa Mountain. StoryMakers was initiated in 2006 and is one of seven Hopa programs. Enabling reading to children

aged 0-5, StoryMakers donates over 30,000 young children's books annually to parents of over 10,000 children in an area of the nation's highest child poverty rate. In its 53 Montana sites, StoryMakers offers parents of young children books, resources, and support to build stronger early learning home environments and to enhance their children's chances for success when they enter school.

StoryMakers' mission is to promote early literacy from birth. Its objective is to close long-term intergenerational cycles of inequality. Working through a network of Community Teams who distribute the books locally and maintain contact with parents, StoryMakers is investing in local leaders toward the goal of capacity building at the community level. The needs survey of parent participants reported here was conducted by StoryMakers' Community Teams, volunteers who manage field operations of this program focused on early learning. Because StoryMakers builds upon what works best in each distinct community that it serves, volunteers are from diverse backgrounds including doctors, nurses, Tribal college librarians, teachers, a postmistress, and Early Head Start and Head Start staff and administration. Thus, the StoryMakers initiative contributes not only to early learning, but also by deepening family relationships, it also contributes to prospects for intergenerational closure (Coleman 1954) among families in the Hopa Mountain program. The level of intergenerational closure is an indicator of interactions between children, parents, and community which are critical in the development of social cohesion and social capital that predict future success for children and their community. A StoryMakers' slogan says that when parents read, talk, sing, and tell stories to their young children, then they shape the stories of their children's lives. Parents are important story makers.

Many research findings support the notion that very young children's early relationships and language experiences have a greater impact on the child's future chances for success than do most learning experiences during the school years and beyond (Hart & Risley 2003). Building steady, loving family relationships with young children promotes healthy changes in the developing brain, thus increasing the prospects for learning.

Reading books to children contributes to development of vital brain capabilities and language skills. Strong cognitive, social, language, and communication skills developed early lead to greater success later with reading and writing. This objective drives Hopa Mountain's StoryMakers.



### Pre-Reading Program Models

Other early learning programs involving parents and community abound. One of the oldest, most established and widely emulated is the early learning centers program in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Its philosophy emphasizes community support for families in an environment where children are expected to have some control over the direction of their own learning (Cadwell, 1997). Parents, teachers, and members of the community are viewed as teachers, partners, collaborators, and advocates responsible for young children's learning.

The National Right to Read Foundation offers an early learning program dedicated to improving literacy through phonics and good literature. Yet another, Educare is a full-day year-round school program that serves at-risk children from birth to 5 years by promoting school readiness through ten Ounce of Prevention programs around the US. Its mission includes family involvement designed to strengthen parents' abilities to serve as champions for their child's learning from infancy forward. The far reaching Dolly Partin

Imagination Library sponsors its book distribution program in Tennessee, around the US, in Canada, and in the United Kingdom. Partin aimed to foster a love of reading among preschool children regardless of family income by mailing 60 books, a book per month, for every young child in Tennessee up to the age of 5.

Pediatricians and early childhood educators developed Reach Out and Read as a successful model of public-private partnership. It holds that without intervention children living in poverty are likely to remain poor readers and ultimately grow into adults with low literacy skills and poor economic potential. Its goal is to ensure that doctors and nurses give literacy-related advice and children's books at pediatric check-ups as routinely as immunizations. It prepares young children nationwide to succeed in school by partnering with doctors to prescribe books and encourage families to read to their children.



ConTextos is an American non-profit organization that helps provide high-quality books in Spanish to children in El Salvador. By partnering with publishers for discounted prices, ConTextos operates in a poverty environment where schools often are devoid of texts. It establishes school libraries and offers on-going training for parents and teachers on how to use books to promote literacy, critical thinking, and problem solving.

Hopa Mountain's StoryMakers model provides books purchased at a deeply discounted rate through First Book and organizations like it. In partnership with

Cheerios, Target, and Feeding America, First Book has distributed over 80 million books. Studies show interest in reading more than triples among children who receive books from First Book.

StoryMakers remains unique in its model of supplying new books for parents to read to their young children in rural and Native American areas of Montana. Its several components include (a) donating of young children's books and other materials to parents; (b) having community leaders and physicians who distribute the books and who play an active support role to families in the community in maintaining dialogue; and (c) providing ongoing training for leaders and parents. Their message is that parents and primary caregivers can do small things everyday that build steady, secure relationships, and cognitive and language skills which elaborate on everyday learning opportunities that include reading and storytelling, counting, talking, singing, wondering aloud and imaginative playing. Depending on what works best for Community Teams, the books are offered in various ways. Events like basketball tournaments, pow wows, doctor visits, and other local gatherings are often natural places for Community Teams to reach out and talk with parents one-on-one; this is a key to success that distinguishes StoryMakers from other book "distribution" programs.

### The Research

Coleman (1988) studied the structure of poverty and culture. In his landmark study, he found that the most effective force in young children's lives is intergenerational closure, which is defined as a social network of family and community relationships across generations. Intergenerational closure builds social cohesion to protect children; keeps them in line, which is to their benefit; teaches them boundaries; and stimulates children to do better. Coleman (1954) explored how family and community relationships achieve financial, human, and social capital, resulting in social networks that help develop norms that guide behavior. Coleman describes how family and community relationships build social capital, achieved through time and effort in the home on intellectual matters like talking, singing, and reading aloud. Reading books to young children is

a vehicle for advancing social capital and inter-generational closure that fosters social cohesion in the community.

Hunt's (1961) early studies showed that it was possible to influence intellectual development through intervention, representing a major shift in direction in psychology. Previously, some ideas generally assumed that intelligence was fixed at birth. Hunt examined the effects of child-rearing practices from a broad historical perspective and became impressed with evidence for plasticity in intellectual development. He found that children being reared in an early-impoverished environment resulted in intellectual deficit. In Hunt's terms, reading books aloud to young children at home is one key mode that contributes to an early-enriched environment.

A growing body of research confirmed that a strong early learning home environment leads to children's success in school. Success in school strongly predicts success in life. Central to cognitive, social/emotional, and language development in young children aged 0-5 is the stimulation afforded by parents reading aloud, singing, and talking with their children from birth forward at home (Bruner, 1960; Cazden, 1972; Coleman, 1954; Hunt 1961; White, 1975).

More recently, Hart and Risley (2003) found in a longitudinal study that the magnitude of children's accomplishments depends on the amount of experience children accumulate with parenting that provides language diversity, affirmative feedback, symbolic emphasis, gentle guidance, and responsiveness. They have shown that "by the time children are three years old, even intensive intervention cannot make up for deficits in the amount of such experiences children have received from their parents early, from birth."

Statistically speaking, children's language abilities at 36 months, particularly their receptive language skills, predict future success on a wide range of cognitive scales. By the time children are 3-years old, intensive intervention is often needed to make up for deficits in children's early language experiences from birth.

Such evidence underscores the need for developing early literacy, to which reading aloud, talking, singing and telling stories all contribute. StoryMakers focuses

on early intervention for ages 0-3 as well as ages 3-5 in order to extend opportunities for learning.



### **What Do Children Learn from Parents Talking with Them and Reading Aloud?**

Very early, children learn about spoken language when they hear family members talking, laughing, singing, and reading to them from birth (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn 2006; Bickart & Dodge 2009; Ghoting & Martin-Diaz 2006). They begin to understand written language when they hear adults read stories to them. This in turn lays the groundwork for becoming successful readers and writers. The following are some components of language that emerge early with cognitive and language stimulation:

**Vocabulary.** Children learn the names of things. Children who enter school knowing between 3,000 and 5,000 words will be better prepared to read than those with less.

**Print Awareness.** Familiarity with books, how they work, how words flow from left to right and top to bottom, the details in pictures, and the look of words help pre-readers.

**Narrative Skills.** Encouraging children to tell about things, to relate a sequence, and to tell and retell a story are language skills necessary for reading.

**Alphabetic Knowledge.** Knowing the shapes and names of letters, recognizing that configurations of letters are different from each other and that each has a



name and a specific sound, knowing how to repeat a sequence of letters in order, and learning to write one's own name and other familiar words are accepted reading readiness skills.

**Print Motivation.** A child with good print motivation enjoys being read to, likes and plays with books, pretends to read, and likes story time and trips to the library.



**Phonological Sensitivity.** The ability to hear and work with smaller sounds in words can be developed by playing word games, finding rhymes, pronouncing syllables slowly, playing with beginning sounds, singing songs, and other activities that constitute the initial stages of talking and reading.

Generally, in Western culture we know to hold books right side up, to turn the pages one at a time, and to read words from left to right and top to bottom. Knowing the alphabet and sounds in spoken language, parents impart to young children the knowledge that words they see in print and words they speak and hear are related. Familiarity with words and sounds comes with seeing print on signs, billboards, and labels and in magazines, newspapers, alphabet books, and story-books. Reading aloud to children is the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for success in reading, for this contributes to learning about the world, about the sounds in spoken language and written language, about new words, and about both spoken and written words. Reading skills are fun-

damental to the promise of rising above the poverty line.

### Objectives of the Storymakers Program

Hopa Mountain StoryMakers Community Teams support families of children 0-5 by offering current child development information, high quality early learning resources, and local encouragement to build home libraries. Community Teams demonstrate one-on-one conversation and exchange friendly tips about how families can create learning opportunities for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers as distinct from school and preschool programs. StoryMakers focuses on preschool home environments by introducing books early and encouraging informal conversation, singing, and story telling.

Community Teams implement StoryMakers. These local teams distribute materials and books in the field and coordinate efforts between participating parents and librarians, preschool leaders and teachers, and pediatricians. The Community Teams administered the following survey related to the program.

### Methodology

In the spring of 2010, Hopa Mountain conducted the StoryMakers Parent/Caregiver Survey to assess needs and satisfaction with the program. Community Teams administered the surveys, and 834 respondents completed the survey. Outcome measures appear in two formats. Answers to most questions are expressed as frequency counts. The data were analyzed using Zoomerang Online Services and Polls. Numeric data are displayed as percentages. If respondents chose "other," they elaborated with verbal responses that are summarized in list form.

Three open-ended questions called for verbal answers and are summarized in list format. As they administered the survey, the Community Teams often interviewed respondents using the questions and recorded the self-reported answers to these questions. A content analyses was conducted on over 2,400 verbal responses for 3 questions. Criteria for this analysis were (a) to identify mutually exclusive items; (b) to minimize

overlap and redundancy in content; (c) to maximize differences in meaning between items; and (d) to select items determined to be representative of the data.

## Survey Results

To what extent is this program working? How satisfied are the participants? What are the expressed needs? The survey sought to answer these questions.

The 824 respondents completing the survey included 580 StoryMakers' parents who received storybooks and 244 members of the StoryMakers' communities who had not received books. The latter completed only questions one through nine. The survey was designed to ask respondents:

- how, in their opinion, the program is working;
- to assess its impact;
- how StoryMakers is faring;
- its results;
- the importance of books, reading and sources of information;
- increases or decreases in reading frequency;
- what parents recommend to others; and
- suggestions for improving the program.

The survey began with several questions about sources the parents used most often to get information on how to help a child or children learn. The respondents used a variety of sources for information: 63%–family, 51%–books, 48%–friends, 37%–Head Start/Early Head Start, 31%–observing of one's own child, 31%–Internet, 29%–reported they rely on health care professionals, 29%–magazines, 21%–TV, 17%–the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, 15%–the library, 13%–parent training, 10%–brochures, 4%–radio. The 6% who named "Other" designated teachers, daycare, college courses, a counselor, research, Nkwsum Immersion School, church, and relatives. On an ongoing basis, StoryMakers Community Team members are aligned with most of these sources in the process of delivering books and resources to children and their families.

Respondents were asked to identify the number of children's picture and/or board books in their homes. The self-reported number of books or board books in the respondents' homes ranged from 0 to into the

hundreds with an average of 22.3 books. Over two-thirds (69%) of respondents reported having 20 books or fewer books in the home, and over half (59%) of respondents reported having 10 books or fewer. Ten respondents reported three books or fewer.



In some cases, StoryMakers titles were the only books reported to be in the household. Over half who reported receiving StoryMakers books in the past stated that they had received books on more than one occasion. In many communities, the numbers of books most frequently reported were in the single digits. Of the 759 who answered this question, 113 responses were not expressed in numerical terms and could not be quantified. These 113 responses included "lots," "maybe 50," "too many to count," "many," "more than I can count," "tons," "over 100," "80+," "at least 20," and some even numbers such as 100, and 500. Since these answers were verbal statements or estimates, they could not be included in the calculations. Thus, the average of 22.2 books and the percentages calculated can be viewed as approximations.

One question queried parents first about the importance of their children seeing in print or hearing a language other than English and second about learning to speak, recognize, or understand a few words in another language. 69% said it is important or very important for their children to see in print or hear a language other than English. 70% said it was important or very important for their children to speak a few

words and/or understand some conversations in a language other than English while 23% indicated hearing or speaking another language was of little importance and 8% said of no importance. Of those who declared learning to speak another language or understand some conversation in another language important or very important, 59% identified a Native American language including Apache, Arapaho, Assiniboine, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Chippewa, Cree, Crow, Dakota, Gros Ventre, Kootenai, Lakota, Nakota/Nakoda, Navajo, Patois, Pend d’Orielle, Pueblo, Salish, Shoshone, Sioux, and White Clay. 40% identified a non-Native language; of those, 31% preferred Spanish. In addition, 39 other languages were identified, including Arabic, French, German, Russian, and Vietnamese. Many of the concepts of early literacy can be transferred from one language to another (Ghoting & Martin-Diaz, 2006).



The preponderance of Native languages in these responses backs up the frequently expressed notion that parents would like more culturally relevant materials such as books by Native authors. Reflected or embedded in the responses are the ethnic and language diversity of the respondents as well as the apparent dichotomy between generating knowledge of a new language vs. renewing or saving Native American languages. The popularity of Native languages in these responses fits with the notion expressed in open questions that parents would like more culturally relevant

materials including translations of popular children’s books into Native languages and books by Native authors and illustrators. StoryMakers Community Teams have begun to create translations of storybooks in Native languages, printing translations on sticky labels affixed next to the English text in the pages of storybooks.

Parents were asked if they “believe the things I do every day with my child/children aged 0-5 will make a difference in my child’s later success in school.” Most (88%) responded that they felt the things they do every day with their young children make a lot of difference in children’s later success; 10% said some difference, while 2% said these activities make little difference. These answers seem to reflect parents’ affirmation of their general ability to influence their children’s development positively.

Parents were asked if they read or tell stories to their child/children aged 0-5. Of the respondents answering this question, 96% reported that they do read and/or tell stories to their children with 4% indicating they did not.

When parents were asked what stories they most often tell or read to their child/children, a list of over 800 titles resulted. The following specific titles were frequently named: Dr. Seuss, Cookie Monster, Disney books, Dora the Explorer, and Winnie the Pooh. Hopa Mountain books, nursery rhymes, fairy tales, books about farm animals, bible stories, and concept books were also identified. Regarding story telling, a number of respondents indicated that they tell stories about family or share traditional Native tales with their children. Typical answers were:

- Kootenai legends
- Animal stories, stories of him when he was born or when he was smaller
- Inktomi stories and my childhood
- Native tales
- Coyote stories
- Stories passed down to me
- Right now, ones with short sentence structure as he is learning to recognize simple words.

Two open-ended questions asked parents what they most enjoy about telling stories or reading to your child/children aged 0-5 and what they would say to



other parents and/or grandparents to encourage them to tell stories and read to their young children. The StoryMakers Community Teams recorded answers in interviews with the respondents by speaking the questions. These two questions gleaned 824 verbal answers each. In the content analysis of this data, it became apparent that the approximately 1,648 self-reported answers to the two questions had become confounded, redundant, and interchangeable. In many cases, the same or similar answers were found for both questions. Therefore, the 1,648 responses from the two questions were grouped together as data for the content analysis.

At the outset of the content analysis, the language and syntax as expressed by respondents were first maintained in the original format to preserve the integrity of the data. In successive reductions, using the criteria cited earlier, the number of items was reduced to 50, then to 35, then to 29, then to 15, and finally to 9 messages.



These nine messages were used to design posters representing StoryMakers. To make these posters, photographer Rab Cummings took photographs of parents and their children reading and talking to their children. The nine messages were edited for brevity and subsequently superimposed on close-up photographs of 12 individual parents reading to their young children. The photos were then printed in 18" by 24" poster format with each featuring one of the nine messages.

The posters were reproduced, framed, and distributed. The nine messages subsequently became the heart of the Hopa Mountain Together Campaign to promote early literacy in Native American communities.

For purposes of the content analysis, the criteria identified earlier were followed for reducing the 1,648 verbal responses. Applying these criteria, after successive reductions in the number of items, the following 15 unedited responses remained for what parents most enjoy about telling stories or reading to their child/children aged 0-5:

- Spending time talking with my child.
- Their imagination additions.
- How he retells the story in his own words.
- Snuggle time, sweet and quiet.
- The excitement and joy they get out of reading.
- Listening, paying attention, wanting to read more, and trying to read.
- The crazy questions she asks.
- Often finding them reenacting the stories at play.
- Reading to your children helps you bond with them.
- It's better than watching TV.
- It helps them learn letters and they learn to understand how to put words to action and pictures.
- It is how they learn language and learn about other people and places.
- Reading is a great bonding experience and helps further their education.
- Attention span, they are able to focus.
- She starts knowing the story before I even tell it.

The following 14 responses remained for what parents would say to other parents and/or grandparents to encourage them to tell stories and read to their young children:

- Tell them a story they will remember always.
- Read to kids: it gets them smarter.
- Do it because it lets them know you care.
- It opens up a whole new world to them and forms a great relationship with you and their love of reading.
- Children gain so much knowledge from stories.
- The more words they hear the better they'll be able to read and comprehend later.



- It's the best thing, a gift you can provide for your child to help with literature and attention skills.
- Let the children pick their own books; have a family gathering when telling stories.
- Essential to bond building and education.
- Story time is bonding time.
- It improves vocabulary and interest in books and school.
- Reading stories to children can be a lot more beneficial than watching cartoons or playing videogames.
- Just do it. Five minutes a day is a benefit to them and you.
- Shut off the TV and be quiet with them.

These 29 responses were then reduced to the following 9:

- Spend more time talking with your child
- Invite him to retell the story in his own words
- Listen to the crazy questions they ask.
- Learn together about other people and places.
- Tell a story they will remember always.
- Story time is bonding time.
- Pass history on, tell stories.
- Take time to unwind and read together.
- Encourage children to pick their own books.

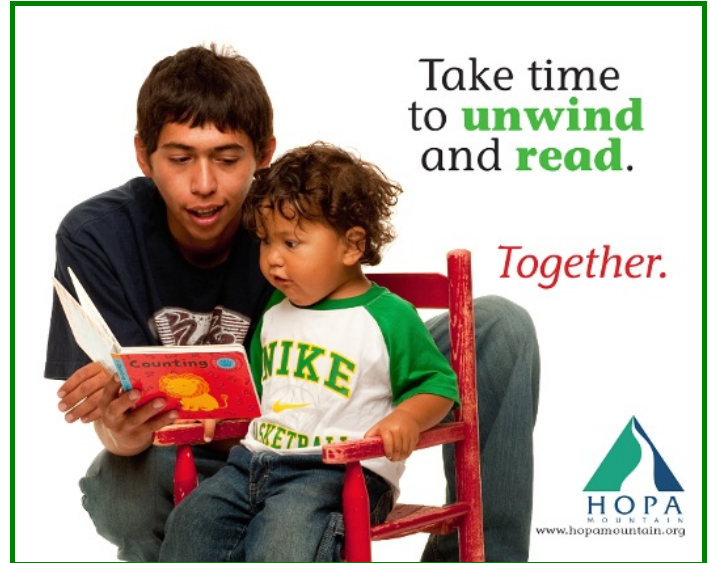
These 9 items were then edited into the following 10 statements that were used on the posters:

- Encourage them to **pick** their own **books**.
- Invite her to **retell the story** in her own words.
- Learn about **other people** and **places**.
- Listen to the **crazy questions** she asks.
- Make **reading fun**.
- Pass history on, **tell stories**.
- Spend time **talking**.
- Story time is **bonding time**.
- Take time to **unwind** and **read**.
- Tell him a story he will **remember always**.

The respondents were asked if they had received StoryMakers children's books and/or related materials. Over two-thirds (69%) reported that they had received the books while 16% reported that they had not received books and 15% said they were not sure.

This question was used to sort the respondents who had received books. From this point forward in the survey, only the 69% of parents receiving StoryMakers

books were asked to complete the items. Regarding the frequency of receiving books, respondents specified that the number of times ranged from 1 to 5: once (26%), twice (23%), three times (15%), 4 times (9%), and 5 times (9%); 17% stated they were not sure.



Respondents were asked to make judgments about StoryMakers books and/or related early learning materials. Overwhelmingly (97%) of parents who had received StoryMakers titles reported that they either agreed or strongly agreed that the books and materials are relevant, useful, of high quality, and culturally appropriate. Only 5% disagreed.

Parents were asked the frequency of four relevant family activities during a typical week *before* and *after* StoryMakers books were introduced. These activities are (a) telling stories, (b) singing, (c) talking, and (d) reading aloud with their children.

The answers reflect a notable difference in practices after the books were introduced. The 64% of respondents self-reporting that they told stories to their child 3-6 times a week or every day *before* receiving StoryMakers materials increased to 81% *after* books were introduced. The 63% of respondents reporting that *before* the program was introduced they sang with their children 3-6 times a week or every day increased to 74% *after* books and materials were in their homes. The 81% that reported talking with their children every day or at least 3-6 times a week *before* receiving StoryMakers materials increased to 87% *after* introduction of

the program. The 75% that read or looked at books with their children 3-6 times a week or everyday *before* receiving materials increased to 86% *after* the introduction of StoryMakers. In all categories, there is

a trend after receiving books of shifting from 1-2 times per week for the activity to 3-6 times per week and every day. Table 1 shows these activities during a typical week.

**Table 1: Family Activities with Children During a Typical Week of Telling Stories, Singing, Talking, and Reading Aloud**

Activity	Times Per Week				
	Not At All	1-2	3-6	Every Day	Don't Know
<b>Before</b>					
Told stories to my child/children	3%	32%	33%	31%	2%
Sang songs with my child/children	5%	31%	28%	35%	1%
Talked with my child/children as I went about daily activities	2%	17%	18%	63%	1%
Read or looked at books with my child/children	2%	23%	32%	42%	1%
<b>After</b>					
Told stories to my child/children	2%	16%	39%	42%	2%
Sang songs with my child/children	3%	21%	30%	44%	2%
Talked with my child/children as I went about daily activities	1%	9%	23%	66%	2%
Read or looked at books with my child/children	1%	12%	35%	50%	2%

This data indicates that there is a shift in emphasis from singing, talking, and telling stories to reading books. Parents seem to be reading books more while at the same time, singing, talking, and telling stories decreases. Talking with children goes up 3%; reading increases 8%; telling stories increases 11%; singing songs increases 9%. At the same time, activities in the Not At All column decrease somewhat: talking—before 12% and after 1%; reading—before 9% and after 1%; telling stories—before 3% and after 2%; singing songs—before 5% and after 3%. Judging by the slight increases in the Don't Know column after books were introduced, respondents may have been somewhat confused by the

complexity of the format of this question.

In addition to the shift in emphasis, the data also indicate a shift in frequency in all categories of activities; 1-2 times per week decreases in every case in all four categories; 3-6 times per week and every day categories increase, indicating a positive trend in the number of times per week parents interact with their children. The greatest percentage increase is in the 3-6 times per week and every day categories. This seems to indicate a clear trend that parents are taking advantage of the availability of books and the attendant encouragement from the Community Teams to sing, talk, tell stories, and read books but particularly to read

books. Parents appear to be reading more since receiving StoryMakers books and materials while singing, talking and telling stories decrease. Overall, the reading increases indicate more interaction between parent and child/children toward the development of relationships and intergenerational closure.



One explanation of changes in responses in the Not At All category is that some portion of mothers who answered Not At All had received books, but at the time of completing the survey, they were still awaiting the birth of their first child. One mother in that category said that she “reads to him every day even if he’s still in my belly.” Another said, “I haven’t read any of my books to her yet but will after she’s born.” Yet another said, “I would love to read once the baby is born.”

The respondents also were asked to identify the best thing about the StoryMakers program. As in all open questions, the respondents reported to the Community Teams who recorded these verbal responses. The majority of answers underscores free books, quality, variety, age appropriateness, educational value, and enhanced language development opportunities. The comments emphasize that parents have recognition of the developmental potential of reading to young children for language, cognitive, and social skills. Some typical responses were:

- Children learn more when you spend time with them.
- Not only does she get to enjoy the books, so does

the whole family.

- This really helps her identify objects and their proper names.
- The advancement my son is making talking.
- He likes someone to read to him. Never sat long enough before, now he does.
- That my children add parts to the story or the book.
- It helps child development. Time I spend with my child.
- Promoting literacy. You can’t go wrong!
- The pictures are big and bright, and catches their eyes for more information.
- Reaching out to the community, encouraging reading, storytelling

Respondents were asked for suggestions to improve the StoryMakers program to make it more helpful to parents and caregivers with children ages 0-5. The great preponderance of responses were positive and supportive of the program. Typical comments were:

- Keep it up
- The program is doing a good job
- They’re all good already
- Keep the program going
- It’s pretty good
- Great job
- Love this program
- Keep ‘em coming

In addition to the positive suggestions, the respondents identified several further needs for the program. These include the following:

- Get native storybooks, maybe Nakota books, just so they know about their tribes.
- Cultural stories of every kind, maybe some Native American ones.
- Let more adults know of this.
- Giving away books is a good way to grab kid’s attention and get them away from the TV.
- The books interest the kids even though they aren’t the “in” character; my five year old can read them to my three year old.
- Involve more family characters in the books or stories.
- There needs to be more of a selection.
- Just keep reaching out about the importance of

reading to children.

- Have guides on how to use the books.
- Bilingual books would be awesome.
- Possibly advertise it more.
- Free bookshelves would be great.
- Give more books about parenting to the parents.
- Have book fairs, book swaps, story reading events.
- Give them more often during the year.
- Increase the age limit.
- Have more books and activities to do with my child.
- More advertising to get the word out there, in pediatric offices, day care, dentists, etc.
- Continue to have funding for this program.
- Never quit trying to push the ones that aren't interacting with their children.

The survey results reflect the respondents' needs and positive response to the program. Respondents like the program. They have expressed a need for more books and support for reading. The data underscores the need for increasing awareness in communities so that more children can benefit from the program. Many respondents also indicated that they would like more Native-themed books and materials in Native languages. Other recommendations include offering more of a variety of titles, giving out bookshelves so children have a place to keep their home library, providing titles on parenting, asking parents to take part in the process of selecting books, and instructing parents on how to teach from the books with a tell, recall, tell again model.

### **Conclusions**

In rural and Native American communities, there is a high need to improve educational opportunities at all levels. StoryMakers is one attempt at meeting that need in early childhood development opportunities. This study highlights the importance of bringing families together around books. In an environment of poverty and inequality where parents and their children have limited resources, most parents have few options for encouraging children to pursue educational or economic paths in order to make their own way in the future.

Beyond the sheer number of books, the social interaction that accompanies StoryMakers books has the potential for educational and social impact beyond the simple act of parents reading to children.

Another message from this survey of needs concerns how to help teams of coordinators in the field have better and more productive and effective conversations with families. In the survey responses, parents repeatedly express their need for more activities to accompany the books and for more direction in using the books. The Community Teams are experienced coordinators who undergo ongoing training throughout the year. Finding new ways to direct more attention to extending their interactions with parents would benefit the coordinators, the parents, and the program.

A third message concerns the challenges of asking parents themselves to read more. It raises the question of how to acknowledge and appreciate the positive things parents are doing and how to take those efforts another step further through reading and strength-based approaches to community building. This strength-based approach helps distinguish Hopa Mountain's StoryMakers initiative. Parents are urged to continue their efforts on behalf of their young children and to do more together whether going fishing, cooking, sharing family stories, or reading books.

Raising a nation of readers is a primary goal of American education. StoryMakers is one model for setting its participants on a path toward that goal. Overall, it is apparent that providing storybooks to parents to read to their young children has had a positive ancillary effect in terms of building language and reading skills within families and communities. This not only enhances early learning, but it also increases the probability of greater learning success in the futures of both children and families. Further investment in early literacy is fundamental.

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