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ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Evaluation of the Family Literacy Initiative of UJA-Federation of New York Final Report

Liat Vazan-Sikron ♦ Brachi Ben Simon ♦ Miriam Cohen-Navot

The study was funded by UJA-Federation of New York



RESEARCH REPORT



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Jerusalem

December 2012

Editor: Naomi Halsted

Layout and print production: Leslie Klineman

Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute

Engelberg Center for Children and Youth

P.O.B. 3886

Jerusalem 91037, Israel

Tel: (02) 655-7400

Fax: (02) 561-2391

Website: www.jdc.org.il/brookdale

Executive Summary

1. Background

In September 2008, UJA-Federation of New York initiated the Family Literacy Initiative (FLI) in Israel to develop and implement family literacy groups for families of children from birth to 3 years old in Jewish and Arab disadvantaged neighborhoods. The main goals of the initiative were to improve the language and literacy skills of parents and children, and to improve children's school readiness and achievement in school, as a key to future success.

Six organizations received grants to implement family literacy programs: JDC-Ashalim, Keren Karev, the NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education, the Ramla Community Center, the Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development (AJEED), and the Benjamin Children's Library.

To achieve the FLI goals, the organizations set a number of specific objectives:

- ◆ Developing awareness among parents about the importance of promoting language and literacy among young children and a broader understanding of what this entailed
- ◆ Providing tools to promote language and literacy at home
- ◆ Enriching parent-child interaction, especially in the context of literacy
- ◆ Empowering the parents as key players in the education of their children
- ◆ Strengthening knowledge and tools for literacy development among daycare staff and preschool teachers¹ (hereinafter: early childhood workers).

2. Goals and Methodology of the Evaluation

The Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute was asked to undertake an evaluation of the 3-year FLI pilot. The goals of the evaluation were to assist in the development and implementation of the project and to provide the basis for decisions about its expansion and further dissemination.

Specifically, the objectives of the evaluation were:

- ◆ To examine the implementation and development of the programs in the FLI
- ◆ To examine the perceived impacts on the participants: parents, children and early childhood workers.

Clearly, the FLI's long-term goal of achieving better integration into first grade for the children can only be examined well after the programs have ended. Therefore, the evaluation focused on more immediate, shorter-term objectives.

¹ Some of the programs also included early childhood workers in the target population.

The evaluation was conducted in two stages over a three-year period from 2008-2011:

- ◆ Stage 1 – November 2008 through November 2009: The evaluation started as the provider organizations began implementing their family literacy programs. Data were collected about implementation during the first year and participants were interviewed after they had completed the programs. The Interim Report on the First Year of the Initiative² was submitted in November 2009.
- ◆ Stage 2 – October 2010 through November 2011: The second stage of the evaluation was postponed to the third year of implementation in order to examine the programs as they reached the final stage of development over the course of the 3-year pilot.

Both stages of the evaluation used qualitative and quantitative research methods, including:

- ◆ In-depth interviews with the directors of the provider organizations and group facilitators
- ◆ Self-administrated questionnaires to group facilitators during the first year of the pilot
- ◆ Session report forms that were completed following a sample of sessions with the families
- ◆ Parent telephone survey among a sample of parents during the first year of the pilot, and a self-administered questionnaire for all participants during the third year
- ◆ Focus groups with parents and early childhood workers who participated in the program
- ◆ Telephone interviews with parents who left the program before it ended.

3. Program Implementation

The examination of the implementation was based on the following data sources: Session report forms, which the facilitators were asked to complete with regard to 4 randomly chosen meetings,³ interviews with program directors and facilitators, and focus groups with participants.

Although the pilot lasted three years, each year was independent, with the programs opening to new participants annually. Between the first and third years of implementation, the number of families participating increased considerably – from 180 to 310. In addition, some 100 early childhood workers participated in the third year. The duration of participation varied from 3-9 months across the different programs.

Three main types of programs were implemented:

- ◆ **Joint programs for parents and children**, which emphasized hands-on, experiential activity. These programs were implemented throughout the school year, in the form of one-hour

² Stern, A.; Girsh, Y. and Cohen-Navot, M. 2009. *Interim Report on the First Year of the Initiative*. Jerusalem: Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute.

³ An average was calculated for each program and then the total of all the programs was calculated by taking an average of the separate program results. In this way, each program was equally represented in the total.

weekly meetings (Playing Together, implemented by JDC-Ashalim; Success Begins at Home, implemented by the Benjamin Library; and the Karev program).

- ◆ ***Parent-only programs***, which focused on imparting knowledge to enable parents and early childhood workers to promote literacy among the children. These were short-term programs (about 3 months), comprising about 10 longer meetings, each of about 2 hours (Always a Story, implemented by NCJW and the Ramla Community Center, and Family Literacy Program of AJEEC).
- ◆ ***Programs for early childhood workers***, which trained early childhood workers to work better with the children in the daycare/preschool frameworks and to provide guidance to the families with regard to literacy. These programs were conducted in conjunction with other programs (Always a Story, implemented by NCJW and the Ramla Community Center, and Success Begins at Home, implemented by the Benjamin Library and the Family Literacy Program of AJEEC).

Recruitment methods: The families were recruited through three main channels: outreach to families in the community, referral by local services, and word of mouth. Recruitment by publicizing the programs was used chiefly by programs for parents and children at community centers.

Early childhood workers were recruited by the director of early childhood services in the municipality (the NCJW program) and the inspector of the local daycare centers association (the Benjamin Library). The program was provided as a compulsory in-service training course for early childhood workers and was implemented in conjunction with their employers.

Attendance: Parent-child groups averaged 25 participants (10 parents, 10 children up to age three and 5 older children). Parent-only groups averaged 10 participants. As in the first year of the pilot, most of the mothers (approximately 80%) reported that they came to all or most of the meetings.

Range of Activities: Both the parent-child programs and the parent-only programs shared similar activities, including:

- ◆ *Book reading*, including the discussion on the importance of books and ways of reading that support language development
- ◆ *Play*, whether in groups or between parents and children
- ◆ *Talking with the children*, either through actual conversations with the children or explanations about how to conduct conversations.

Main topics: A number of topics were found to be common to most of the programs:

- ◆ Using tools to develop language
 - Introduction to literacy activities such as reading to the child, singing and playing hand games, using rhymes, naming objects and classifying objects in groups

- Acquaintance with age-appropriate reading material and games
- Using common household items in working with the child
- ◆ Using daily activities to develop literacy
- ◆ Child and language development – theories and approaches
- ◆ Parenting and parent-child relations.

In addition, there were differences among the programs in the extent to which they emphasized the importance of promoting parent-child relations.

Both the parent-child programs and the parent-only programs worked in groups with the parents or with the parents and children together. In addition, the parent-child programs also provided opportunities to work with the parents and their child on a one-on-one basis.

Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the program format, number and duration of meetings, and with the accessibility of the meeting place. Almost all parents noted that the atmosphere was pleasant and that they enjoyed the meetings. The parents also reported high satisfaction with the professionalism of the staff and their caring attitude toward group members.

The groups for early childhood workers were similar to the parents-only groups, with a focus on lectures regarding literacy and child development and recommended activities, books, and games. These groups also allocated time for group discussion and advice from the facilitators about difficulties experienced at the day care and preschools, such as setting boundaries, creating structured daily activities schedule, and children's behavioral problems. The early childhood workers were also very satisfied with the program and its facilitators.

4. Key Developments over the Course of the Pilot

The evaluation identified a number of changes that had been introduced in the programs between the first and third years. The first evaluation report highlighted that each organization had developed an approach based on its own interpretation of family literacy, as set out in UJA-Federation of New York's initial Request for Proposal. These findings contributed to recognition of the need to establish a clearer, more precise articulation of the concept of "*family literacy*," so as to plan the strategy for implementing the activities.

As a result, a *learning collaborative* was established, to enable program directors to work together to formulate a model of family literacy that included shared core principles and practices.⁴ This group met over the course of the second year, and produced important results for the program. Participants in the learning collaborative felt the experience was significant, as it

⁴ The learning collaborative was led by Dr. Anat Stavans of NCJW and Prof. Liliana Tolchinsky an external consultant. A report was published and presented to UJA-Federation of New York: Tolchinsky, L. and Stavans, A. 2010. *Family Literacy – Collaborative Learning Group*. Final Report. Jerusalem: The NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

gave them deeper insight into issues of family literacy. The directors reported that their concept of home literacy became much more developed, and shaped their strategy for implementing their programs. The collaborative also contributed to developing a common approach for promoting literacy. Some of the changes that resulted from this collaborative were:

- ♦ ***Standardized work practices:*** The programs began to implement their programs in a more uniform format. For example, all programs began to hold weekly meetings, and all of the programs with parent-child groups allocated time to work with parents separately.
- ♦ ***Modifications*** were made to the programs to focus more directly on family literacy and be more effective. For example, the programs introduced work with early childhood workers in some of the programs, made personnel changes (recruitment of facilitators with background in the field of early childhood and group-work rather than diagnosis and therapy), and provided more-focused training on literacy for the facilitators.

Another modification was the greater focus on promoting the language skills of the children. In contrast to the first year, when the emphasis was on encouraging any form of parent-child interaction, during the third year the programs emphasized interactions that specifically focused on literacy. This was achieved by increasing the parents' awareness of ways to work and developing interaction with their children in a way that would enrich their language as well as by demonstrating and discussing literacy experience at the meetings

- ♦ ***A better match was achieved between participants and the target population:*** All of the programs in the FLI were for children from birth to 3 and their caregivers (parents or early childhood workers). Nevertheless, during the first year of the pilot some of the programs had extended the age limit to 5. In the third year, the target population was much clearer, and most of the mothers came to the meetings with at least one child age 3 and under.

In addition, the program was designed to focus on groups in localities with low socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, findings from the first year revealed that program participants were often employed, had often continued their education beyond high school, and had good command of their mother tongue. In the third year, the participants were characterized by noticeably lower levels in all these regards. For example, only a third of the mothers were wage earners. About half of the mothers had a limited educational background: 30% of the mothers reported that they had no schooling or only an elementary education and 18% completed vocational high school with no further education. Among Arab participants, education and employment levels were especially low.

In sum, the findings from the third year of program implementation indicate that the similarities across the programs increased, as they shared common goals, topics and activities for delivering the contents, and target populations.

5. Program Strengths

The evaluation of the Family Literacy Initiative identified a number of positive characteristics of the way in which the programs were implemented.

- ◆ ***Economic considerations:*** The cost per participant was modest, thus making the programs an effective model for reaching relatively large numbers of mothers and children.
- ◆ ***Cultural sensitivity:*** The programs were successful in adapting to the specific background of the participants (for example, Bedouin families in the Negev).
- ◆ ***Utilization of community facilities:*** Many of the programs used existing community facilities such as play centers, public libraries, and community centers. Doing so encouraged awareness of the programs among residents and avoided the stigma that might be attached to a treatment agency.
- ◆ ***Effective use of organizational resources:*** Having the programs embedded within existing multi-service organizations allowed them to draw on organizational resources, without having to create entirely new structures. It also provided a pool of referrals to the program, because families were already familiar with the larger organizations.
- ◆ ***Use of home visits:*** The Karev program was conducted primarily in the homes of the participants to create an intimate learning environment, encourage parent-child interactions in a familiar environment, and enable participants to use available books toys, games, and other household objects.

6. Difficulties in Implementing the Program

The evaluation identified a number of difficulties in how the programs were implemented:

- ◆ ***Difficulties in marketing the program:*** The directors reported that the subject of the program made it difficult to market, because parents perceived the term "literacy" to mean preparation for reading and writing in school only, whereas they were often more concerned about other aspects of parenting. This created some tensions between the programs' actual focus and the parents' desire to focus on more general parenting issues.
- ◆ ***Difficulties in retaining participants:*** During the third year of the pilot, an average of 15% of all participants dropped out. Parents who left the program reported that they did so because of lack of time, the need to find a babysitter when the parents came alone, and dissatisfaction with aspects of the program (size of the groups, and how the meetings were facilitated).
- ◆ ***Difficulties in targeting the "right" ages:*** Despite the program being intended for children from birth to age 3, mothers and early childhood workers reported that the program was typically oriented more toward children 18 months and older and less towards younger infants. This mismatch was magnified by the participation of older children in activities, despite the program's original parameters. The participation of the older children was allowed to enable mothers to attend without having to arrange a babysitter. The unintended consequence of this, as reported by participating mothers, was overcrowding in the groups and domination by the older children during activities. (By the third year, this problem was somewhat reduced, but still remained an issue for some programs.)
- ◆ ***Difficulty in creating a distinct program within a larger service framework:*** Though the benefits of having programs be part of a broader multi-service were noted earlier, there were

also challenges with this arrangement. In particular, some programs found it difficult to differentiate themselves from other programs in terms of main goals and contents. At these programs, attention should be paid to presenting the program to participants in a clear way and in making the program distinctive from other programs and services that are part of the larger organization. Such clarity and structure can contribute to more effective learning.

- ♦ ***Difficulties in adequate ways to encourage implementation of program material at home:*** Despite the development of a clearer approach regarding literacy promotion, and the standardization of many aspects of the activities, program staff at all levels still reported the need for additional training. Program directors noted that they were still in the process of learning about how best to convey the topic of literacy and reported a need for additional expert advice. In particular, they were concerned with finding better ways to ensure that parents were able to apply the lessons from the program at home.

7. Assessment of Program Impact by the Participants

The participating parents and early childhood workers reported that the program had a positive impact on their understanding of literacy. The following are some of the highlights of their responses as reflected in the survey of parents and the focus groups with parents and early childhood workers.

- ♦ ***Understanding/awareness of the importance of literacy and language enrichment:*** Parents and early childhood workers reported that they had become more keenly aware of the importance of interaction with the children as a way of enriching their language.
- ♦ ***Acquiring new information and skills:*** About 90% of the mothers in all of the programs noted that they had learned ways to enrich their children's language, to tell them a story, to have a conversation and to play with them, read together and sing together. Early childhood workers also reported they acquired new information about ways of enriching language and literacy promotion in daycare frameworks. Both parents and early childhood workers explained that they were more thoughtful and deliberate in the way they read stories to children.
- ♦ ***Applying the knowledge acquired at home and in early childhood frameworks:*** The parents were given a list of literacy activities and asked to indicate whether there had been a change in the extent to which they performed them with the children since joining the program. The list included activities such as reading, singing and playing together as well as activities related to interaction and conversation with the children, such as making an effort to answer their questions and providing explanations. Between 75% and 85% of the participants, depending on the program, reported change (doing much more than before or a little more than before). Importantly, a much higher percentage of mothers in the third year than in the first year, reported that they were now conducting activities "much more" since joining the program.

The early childhood workers also reported that they performed more literacy activities in the daycare frameworks.

- ♦ ***The groups as a source of support and advice:*** Mothers appreciated the opportunity to get together with other mothers and share similar concerns about parenting and literacy. The early childhood workers appreciated the opportunity to learn from their colleagues, to exchange ideas and share with them common difficulties and dilemmas that arose in their daily work. They also cited the benefits of having the opportunity to receive expert advice.

In both years of implementation, Arab Israeli participants reported higher levels of positive impact. This might have been because Arab families typically began the program at a lower starting point with regard to the quality and quantity of literacy interaction with their children.

8. Long-term Sustainability and Dissemination

Following the 3-year pilot, the six programs funded by New York UJA-Federation's Family Literacy Initiative are now considering long-term sustainability and dissemination. The challenge of promoting early childhood development and literacy and school readiness in particular are issues of growing concern to Israeli policy makers and professionals. On the basis of the pilot, a number of key factors indicate the program's capacity for further development and dissemination:

Factors relating to the program itself: Over the course of the pilot, a common approach to family literacy has evolved. In addition, the organizations have been successful in implementing the programs and involving significant numbers of participants.

Factors relating to the nature of the implementing organization: The organizational mechanisms to promote sustainability for the programs were already created in the planning stages.

- ♦ The program has significantly contributed to developing the organizational capacity of organizations that are major players in the field of early childhood development and that can share widely what they have learned.
- ♦ Moreover, all programs were implemented by organizations that provide additional programs.
- ♦ The fact that some of the programs are implemented under the umbrella of multi-service comprehensive initiatives (Ashalim, in the context of Better Together and New Beginnings and Karev in the context of New Beginnings) increases the likelihood of their continuation and dissemination.
- ♦ The other participating organizations are also considering ways to become part of these broader comprehensive initiatives.

Further Steps Planned by the Organizations

To leverage the program and create support in the community, some of the organizations reported that they were planning to undertake various steps to disseminate knowledge and stimulate awareness of the importance of family literacy programs among professionals. These steps include: in-service courses and training for coordinators of services and other organizations

working in early childhood; the production of educational materials about ways of promoting parents-child literacy.

Thus, the organizations have expressed a high interest in continuing and have a number of strengths on which to build. At the same time, they express the view that they have not yet reached the stage of developing alternative sources of funding and therefore the continuation of the program remains an open issue.

9. Directions for Strengthening the Program

Between the first and third years of the program, the learning collaborative was set up to establish shared principles and practices for the FLI. In the third year, the Initiative reached over 300 families and some 100 early childhood workers in underprivileged communities in Israel. The programs succeeded in raising the participants' awareness of the importance of promoting literacy and language for very young children and knowledge about how to enhance literacy activities at home and in daycare centers and preschools. They also made an important contribution to the development of methods for implementing early childhood literacy programs in Israel that can be widely used by other organizations.

In conclusion, the following are among the implications of the findings for ways of strengthening the program as the organizations pursue efforts to sustain the program and to disseminate it more broadly.

- ◆ ***Continued consolidation of the intervention approach:*** The program directors noted the need to continue to work together to further consolidate the intervention approach and their expertise in this area. Further meetings of the group could contribute to this process. For example, the possibility of creating a more unified curriculum with mandatory topics to be included in all family literacy programs was raised. Still, alongside the endeavor to create a core-shared approach, it is also important that the organizations continue to adapt their specific programs to their particular organizational context, participants' needs, and so forth.
- ◆ ***Providing program staff with additional training:*** The directors noted the need for further training of facilitators in the area of family literacy. This is particularly essential for the programs whose staff members have a background mainly in early childhood and not necessarily in literacy development. As noted by some of the directors, thought should be given to setting up a training program led by a professional or an organization specializing in this area.
- ◆ ***Finding ways to increase participation:*** Program staff reported difficulties in recruiting participants and ensuring participation throughout the program. In further program development, it is important to continue address these challenges. Some possible strategies include better "marketing" about the importance of family literacy, closer ties with other community services for the purpose of referrals, and finding ways to make it easier for mothers to attend without their other children.

♦ ***Focus on the defined target population of the program:***

- Over the three years of the pilot, there was an increase in the number of participating families from a lower socioeconomic background. The importance of actually reaching the population for which the programs have been designed must be emphasized. The study findings, which reveal that the perceived contributions were greater among parents with lower education and employment characteristics (e.g., Bedouin mothers), underline the importance of focusing on this population.
- Similarly, during the pilot, there was increasing focus on children from birth to 3. It is important for this trend, which is in keeping with the Initiative goals, to continue.

♦ ***Addressing the needs of children 18 months and younger:*** Parents and early childhood workers reported that greater emphasis was put on activities and content suitable for children aged 2-3, and less for infants up to eighteen months. There is a need to strengthen the content for the younger children.

♦ ***Emphasizing the unique character of the program:*** Some of the programs had difficulty distinguishing the Initiative from other similar programs. It is important to make the unique objectives and goals clear to participants in these programs. Clarifying this distinction and structuring the programs could contribute to a more effective learning process.

♦ ***Continuity and dissemination of the program:*** The program is now at the stage where it is ripe for discussion about broader dissemination, taking advantage of the knowledge that has accumulated and the strong points of the implementing organizations, which have enabled them to promote the subject significantly. The program directors brought up different ideas, such as incorporating the program within comprehensive initiatives, creating additional training programs, and disseminating knowledge about early childhood literacy among professionals in the community.

It is important to develop a strategy for obtaining the funding and organizational support required to ensure continuation and expansion of the activities. Continued efforts to formulate the program goals and operating principles could help place them on the public agenda and gain support from professionals working in the community services. These efforts to ensure long-term funding and implementation could be done both in the context of the programs currently implemented and in the context of the Initiative in general.

In conclusion, UJA-Federation provided support to six major organizations in the field of early childhood development to enable them to introduce family literacy programs targeting ages birth to three, a critical age in language development that was underdeveloped for this age group. By piloting programs and then developing the "Learning Collaborative," which brought together key professionals, UJA and the implementing organizations have made a contribution to the field in Israel, which now has great potential to grow, particularly in light of the great interest in early childhood development in Israel, as evidenced, inter alia, by two government decisions made last year that could constitute a platform for further dissemination of the Initiative. The first decision concerns the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk, which, at the time of writing, has

been allocated significant additional state funding for further expansion and implementation. The second decision concerns the recommendations of the Trachtenberg Committee for socioeconomic change, which was set up following the social protest that erupted in Israel in the summer of 2011. The committee has recommended that the government increase its commitment and responsibility for activities for children aged 3-4, gradually widening the age-bracket to include birth to 3. These steps indicate the current trend in Israeli society of placing greater emphasis on early childhood, which constitutes a foundation on which to continue to utilize and disseminate the knowledge of family literacy in early childhood.



Update

At the conclusion of the four years of funding made available to the six organizations, UJA is currently supporting two training initiatives with the intention of disseminating the acquired knowledge and skill sets to a wide range of professionals leading the field of early education throughout Israel.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our many colleagues and associates who helped us during the various stages of the study.

Firstly, we are grateful to UJA-Federation of New York for its support of the evaluation study: to the lay leadership and staff of the Caring Commission. Special thanks to Rachel Epstein, Chair of the Children, Youth and Families Task Force, and to Elisheva Flamm-Oren, Planning Director at UJA-Federation of New York's Israel office, for their ongoing support.

We would also like to thank the programs directors and coordinators from the six organizations participating in the Initiative: Sharon Porat, Director of the FLI at Ashalim; Ariela Federman and Yosra Suliman, Directors of the FLI at the Keren Karev Program; Emad Molhime, Director of the Early Childhood Department in AJEEC; Dr. Anat Stavans, Director of the FLI at the NCJW at the Hebrew University; Vered Elimelech, Coordinator of the FLI at the Benjamin Library in Beit Shemesh and Michael Fanus, Director of the Ramla Community Center.

We also want to thank the local program coordinators and facilitators in all the localities, the parents and early childhood workers who took part in the study and shared with us their experiences.

Finally, we thank our colleagues at the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute: the fieldwork team, for their help in distributing the questionnaires to the parents; Abe Sterne and Yaron Girsh, for their involvement in the early stages of the study; Dori Rivkin, who wrote the research proposal, and Etan Diamond, who helped formulate the final paper and associated documents; Anat Berberian and Naomi Halsted for editing the report; and Leslie Klineman, who prepared it for publication.

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1. Background

In September 2008, UJA-Federation of New York initiated funding and support for six organizations to develop and implement family literacy groups in Israel, a field not widely developed in this country. This initiative was based on family literacy programs that are widely used in the United States. These programs encourage parents to increase daily language interactions with their young preschool children, to instill a love for reading and books, and to improve their own literacy skills and self-confidence with regard to literacy.

Literacy is a lifelong, intellectual process of gaining meaning from the written language and its associated culture (Olson, 1994). Children born into a culture of literacy are, from their very first moments, exposed not only to the spoken language, but also to different aspects of written culture. Parents are the first source of vocabulary development for their children and, typically, the central source of social and linguistic interaction. Children who are exposed to parental modeling of literacy and actions that support literacy development at home usually have an easier school literacy experience (Jordan et al., 2000; Blum-Kulka, 2006). Studies show that children who have acquired literacy skills at preschool age have achieved greater success in learning to read and write at school (Koret et al., 2003; Bentin and Leshem, 1993; Chaney, 1998; all in Schleifer et al., 2005). Acquiring a wealth of literacy skills at preschool age is essential, particularly for children growing up in families with low socioeconomic status, which are generally characterized as providing poor literacy environments.

The Caring Commission of UJA-Federation of New York circulated a Request for Proposals (RFP) aimed at introducing the Family Literacy Initiative (FLI) in Israel. The target population of the FLI was families with children from birth to 3 years old, living in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout Israel. The RFP suggested that such programs should include reading activities for parents and children in order to encourage reading at home; playing and bonding activities to foster positive parent-child social interaction; and the development of lending libraries of books and toys. According to the RFP, the expected final outcomes of the FLI are:

- ◆ Improved language and literacy skills of parents and children
- ◆ Improved school readiness and success.

Six organizations received grants to implement family literacy programs:

- ◆ JDC-Ashalim, for the Family Literacy Program being implemented as part of the Better Together comprehensive community initiative
- ◆ Karev, for its Program for Community Involvement in Education
- ◆ The NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education, for the Always a Story Program
- ◆ The Ramla Community Center, for the Always a Story Program
- ◆ The Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development (AJEEC), for its Parents Promoting Literacy Program
- ◆ Benjamin Children's Library and Learning Center in Beit-Shemesh, for its Success Begins at Home Program.

To achieve the primary goals of the FLI, the programs set a number of intermediate objectives:

- ◆ Developing knowledge and awareness among parents about the promotion of language and literacy among young children
- ◆ Providing tools to promote language and literacy at home
- ◆ Enriching parent-child interaction, especially in the context of literacy
- ◆ Empowering the parents as key players in the education of their children
- ◆ Strengthening knowledge and tools for literacy development among daycare staff and preschool teachers⁵ (hereinafter: early childhood workers).

The Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB) was asked to undertake an evaluation to examine the 3-year FLI pilot. The first report focused on the first year of implementation. In the current report, we present findings from the entire 3-year pilot, with the emphasis on the third and final year, when the programs reached full development.

Report Structure

The following section describes the study methodology. Section 3 presents a description of the program through information about each of the provider organizations and their programs, the methods of implementation and key developments that have taken place over the course of the three-year pilot. Section 4 provides the background of the professionals who facilitated the programs and Section 5 describes the background of the participants in the family literacy groups. Section 6 discusses the participants' satisfaction and strengths and weaknesses of the programs and the Family Literacy Initiative as a whole. Section 7 describes the impacts of the program as perceived by the participants and the group facilitators. Section 8 discusses aspects of the implementation that may promote program sustainability. The concluding section discusses issues regarding further development of the Initiative that emerged from the evaluation.

2. The Evaluation Study

2.1 Goals

The main goal of the evaluation was to provide knowledge to enhance and expand the FLI. For this reason, the evaluation focused on the overall implementation of the programs in the Initiative rather than on the way that each was implemented.⁶

Specifically, the objectives of the evaluation process were:

- ◆ To study the implementation and development of the programs in the FLI
- ◆ To examine the perceived impact on the participants: parents, children, early childhood workers, and preschool staff.

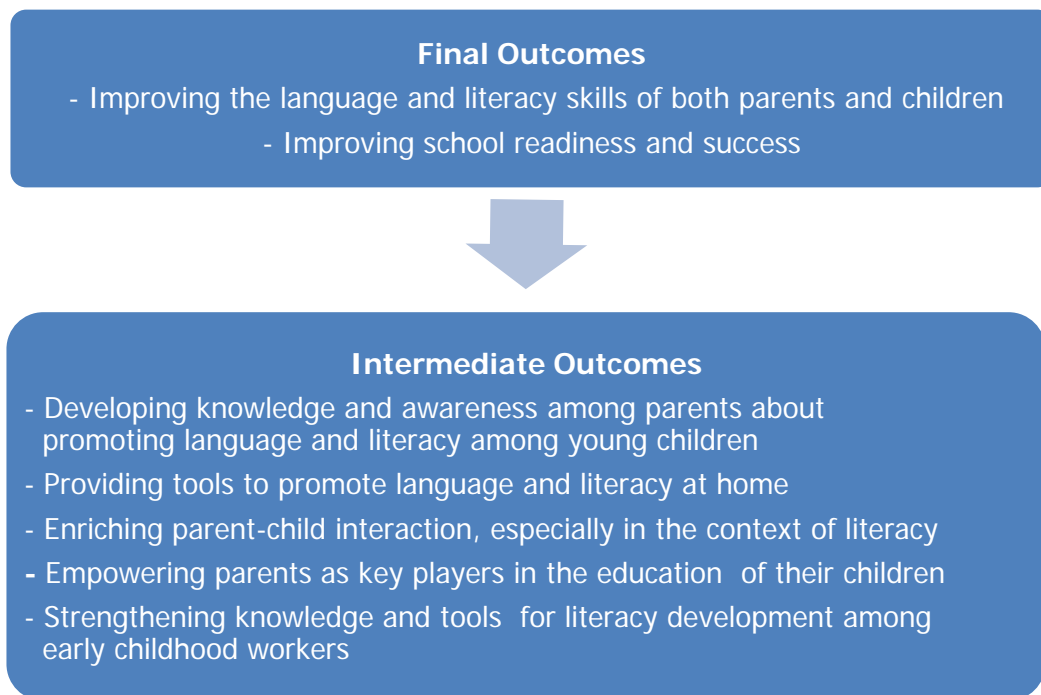
⁵ Some of the programs also included early childhood workers in the target population.

⁶ Each of the programs conducted its own evaluation, either by the implementers or by an external agency.

2.2 Methodology

The FLI's long-term goal of achieving better integration into first grade for the children will only be realized well after the programs have ended. Therefore, the evaluation focused on more immediate, shorter-term objectives/outcomes that the programs aspire to achieve (based on the assumption that these are the objectives necessary to achieve the final outcomes). The following figure shows both the final outcomes that the FLI aspires to achieve and the intermediate outcomes examined in the study.

Figure 1: Final and Intermediate Outcomes of the Family Literacy Program



The evaluation was conducted in two stages over a three-year period:

- ◆ **Stage 1** – November 2008 through November 2009: The evaluation started as the provider organizations began implementing their family literacy programs. Data were collected about implementation during the first year and participants were interviewed after they had completed the programs. The Interim Report on the First Year of the Initiative (Stern, A., Girsh, Y. and Cohen-Navot, M.) was submitted in November 2009.
- ◆ **Stage 2** – October 2010 through November 2011: The second stage of the evaluation was postponed to the third year of implementation in order to examine the programs as they reached the final stage of development over the course of the 3-year pilot.

Study Tools⁷

1. In-depth interviews with the directors of the provider organizations and program staff regarding the goals of the program, methods of program implementation, training, ongoing support and supervision of facilitators, perceived benefits of the program for participants, and challenges and difficulties in program implementation. Altogether 52 in-depth interviews were conducted with all the program directors and most of the facilitators, 30 during the first stage and 22 in the second stage.

2. A summary session form was completed by the facilitators to collect detailed information about each session regarding the number of participants present, length of the session, session content (e.g., activities, skills learned and topic discussed), equipment and general feedback.

In the first stage of the evaluation, most forms were completed through a telephone interview with MJB staff, who contacted the facilitator following the family literacy session (a total of 72 forms were collected from 8 different groups – at least one group from each of the programs). In the second stage of the evaluation, the forms were completed online (50 forms, around 4 from each group). The facilitators were asked to complete the questionnaire at 3 random times and once at the end of the pilot. The form for the last meeting included questions about difficulties in implementation and perceived impacts for the participants. One or more groups from each program were selected to complete the forms, depending on the number of groups implemented, on the assumption that these groups were representative of the way the program was implemented.⁸ The number of forms received from each program differed in accordance with the number of groups implemented in each (see Table 1). The data were analyzed by calculating the average data for each program. Table 1 shows the number of forms received from each group.

Table 1: Number of Forms Collected in the Third Year of the Evaluation (2011), by Provider Organization

	Number of Groups that Completed Forms	Number of Forms Collected
Total	12	50
Ashalim	4	18
Karev [^]	1	4
Benjamin Library	2	8
Ramla Community Center	1	4
AJEEC	4	16

[^] Sakhnin only.

⁷ Some of the study tools were modified between the first and the second stages.

⁸ The Research Institute for Innovation in Education did not submit forms; instead, it provided written summaries of the meetings. Karev Ma'alot did not submit summary forms of meetings either, because the program was usually conducted in the homes of participants.

3. A participant questionnaire gathered information about the characteristics and attendance of families taking part in the initiative and learned about their perception of the program, their overall satisfaction and their view of its benefits to them. The tool was administrated in Hebrew and Arabic in both stages, at one of the meetings towards the end of the program. During the first stage of the evaluation, the questionnaire was administered by telephone and in face-to-face interviews with a sample of participants (from a sample of 81 participants, 69 interviews were completed, representing an 85% response rate). In the second stage, information was collected through self-administered questionnaires to **all** the participants at the end of the program.⁹ The tool in both stages was based on questionnaires that have been used in studies examining the relationship between home literacy and child language and literacy skills (Bennett et al., 2002; Giordano, 1997; Johnson, 2005; Jordan et al., 2000; Umek et al., 2005; Weigel et al., 2006; Yamamoto et al., 2006).

The use of a self-administered questionnaire enabled the study team to collect information from a larger number of parents. However, the change in the study method limited our ability to conduct a combined analysis of the data from both stages. For example, it is known that respondents tend to express greater satisfaction in interviews when their identity is known (e.g., on the telephone or face-to-face) than when it is not (e.g., self-administered questionnaires).¹⁰ Nevertheless, the main differences in trends between the years are noted.

Table 2: Questionnaires Completed in the Third Year of the Evaluation (2011), including Response Rates, by Provider Organization

	No. Parents Completing the Program	No. Questionnaires Completed	Response Rate among Participants Completing the Program	Response Rate among Participants who Received Questionnaires
Total	300	223	74%	88%
Ashalim	63	52	83%	83%
Keren Karev (Sakhnin only)	33	18	55%	82%
Benjamin Library	19	16	84%	84%
NCJW	30	18	60%	90%
Ramla Community Center	10	7	70%	70%
AJEEC	145	112	77%	95%

⁹ The change in strategy was based on information from the first stage of the study, in which we learned that most, if not all, participants had the literacy skills required to complete the questionnaires. The questionnaire was not distributed at 7 groups in the Initiative for various reasons: the program ended before the evaluation began, data collection ended before the program ended, or there were logistical difficulties in reaching all of the Bedouin villages.

¹⁰ Christian et al., 2005.

Altogether, 223 questionnaires were collected in the second stage – an exceptionally high, 88% response rate from all the participants in the groups that received questionnaires. Since the questionnaire was not administered to all of the groups, this represents 74% of all participants in the program. Table 2 shows the distribution of questionnaires completed and the response rate in each of the programs.

4. Focus groups were conducted in the second stage of the study with the participating parents in each of the programs (6 groups) and with early childhood workers (4 groups). The groups discussed satisfaction with the program and whether there had been changes in knowledge, attitudes and behavior regarding the way to promote literacy for their young children.

5. Telephone interviews with parents who ceased participation (2-4 from each program, 13 altogether) to learn about their reasons for leaving the program, their satisfaction (if at all) with the program and ways to improve it to better meet their needs.

6. Facilitators' questionnaire: In the first year of implementation, a self-administered questionnaire was completed by the group facilitators regarding their professional background. Because only a small number of changes were reported in staffing and methods of training and support, this questionnaire was waived in the second stage.

7. Documentation about the program: Existing documents about the program (e.g., annual reports submitted by the providers to UJA-Federation of New York) were also reviewed in order to achieve more insight into the program goals and implementation.

8. Participation in the Family Literacy Collaborative Learning Group: the research staff also participated in the collaborative learning meetings.

3. The Family Literacy Programs: Description and Implementation

This section describes the program developed by each of the six provider organizations, and the different approaches taken by each to designing and implementing the program. Since this is the final report on a pilot that was conducted over 3 years, the findings focus on the third year of implementation. It also covers changes and developments that occurred during all 3 years of implementation.

The information for this section was collected from the in-depth interviews with the directors and the facilitators, the renewal forms submitted to UJA-Federation of New York, and the "Family Literacy – Collaborative Learning Group Report" (Tolchinsky and Stavans, 2010).

3.1 The Six Provider Organizations and their Family Literacy Programs

All of the programs in the FLI are for children aged 0-3 and/or their parents or early childhood workers. Furthermore, the initiative is for disadvantaged populations, Jewish and Arab. Most of the programs work in localities with low socioeconomic status. When the programs are implemented in cities with mixed populations, such as Tel Aviv, the program is conducted in neighborhoods with disadvantaged populations.

Between the first and third years of implementation, there was a considerable increase in the number of families participating – from 180 families to 310. In addition, about 100 early childhood workers participated in the program in the third year.¹¹ Some of the programs opened more groups in the third year and others added a new element, such as working with early childhood workers or directly with children. This expansion increased the number of participants (full details are included in the descriptions of each program).

The Initiative was implemented with three different types of groups:

- ◆ **Joint groups for parents and children**, which emphasized the hands-on, family experience. These programs were implemented throughout the school year and consisted of a one-hour weekly meeting (Playing Together, implemented by Ashalim; Success Begins at Home, implemented by the Benjamin Library, and the Karev programs).
- ◆ **Parents-only groups**, which focused on imparting knowledge to enable the parents to advance their children (Always a Story, implemented by NCJW and the Ramla Community Center, and AJEEC). These were short-term programs (about 3 months) and comprised about 10 meetings altogether, each of about 2 hours.
- ◆ **Early childhood workers groups**, which train early childhood workers to better work with the children in their care as well as to guide families in literacy: These groups were only conducted in conjunction with other groups for parents and/or children (Always a Story, implemented by NCJW and the Ramla Community Center, Success Begins at Home, implemented by the Benjamin Library, and the Family Literacy Program implemented by AJEEC).

Although the pilot lasted 3 years, it was not a 3-year program, and each year the program was offered to new participants, who remained in their group for 3 to 9 months, depending on the program.

Table 3 sums up the characteristics with regard to the inputs (staffing) and outputs (geographic spread, frequency, duration of implementation, and number of participants).

¹¹ An increase from the first year: During the first year, early childhood workers participated in the NCJW program only, in the third year, the Benjamin Library program included a group for early childhood workers.

Table 3: Summary Table of the Family Literacy Programs (2011)

Program Name	Programs Inputs	Program Outputs			
	Staff	Location and Number of Groups	Type of Groups and Population Group	Number of Participants*	Duration and Frequency of Meetings
Programs for parents and children					
Ashalim – Playing Together	- Program director - Local coordinators (4) - Implementers (6) - Parent facilitators (2)	- Jerusalem (2 groups) - Tel Aviv (2 groups) - Rosh HaAyin (4 groups) - Haifa (2 groups)	Parents & children Jewish	Appx. 180 participants (children and their parents)	- 9 months, once a week, about an hour - In addition, some of the groups had separate groups for the parents
Benjamin Library – Success Begins at Home	- Program director - Implementer - Parents' facilitator	Beit Shemesh, 3 groups	- Parents & children - Early childhood workers Orthodox & Ultra-Orthodox Jews	- Appx. 60 participants (children and their parents) - Appx. 20 early childhood workers	- 9 months, once a week, about an hour - Meetings for parents alone appx. once a month - Early childhood workers - six 1.5-hour meetings
Karev Educational Program	- Program directors - Coordinator (Sakhnin only) - Facilitator (3 in Sakhnin, 3 in Ma'alot)	- Ma'alot - Sakhnin	Parents & children (home visits) - Jewish - Arab	Appx. 30 families	- 6-10 months, weekly, about an hour - Parents & children meetings held once a month in Sakhnin, irregularly in Ma'alot
Programs for parents and early childhood workers					
NCJW – Always a Story	- Program director - Facilitators (5)	- Yavne (2 groups) - Holon (4 groups)	- Parents - Early childhood workers - Jewish	- Appx. 30 parents - Appx. 70 early childhood workers	- 3 months, weekly or bi-weekly, 2 hours (10 meetings)
Ramla Community Center – Always a Story	- Community Center director - Program coordinator - Facilitators (3) - Implementer (3)	Ramla (3 groups)	- Parents - Early childhood workers - Children Arab Bedouin	- 14 parents - 14 early childhood workers - Appx. 20 children	- 3 months, weekly, appx. 2 hours (13 meetings)
Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace & Development (AJEEC)	- Program director - Workers of the Early Childhood Department of AJEEC (3) - Implementer (15)	Localities in the Abu-Basma Regional Council (15 groups)	Mothers and grandmothers Bedouin	Appx. 150 mothers	- 3 months, weekly, 2 hours (12 meetings)

*The numbers were taken from the participant lists provided at the start of each program.

a. Joint Programs for Parents and Children

Ashalim – Playing Together (through the Better Together initiative): Better Together is a complex community initiative (CCI) that seeks to create child-friendly neighborhoods in which professionals and parents work together to develop services as needed and to create a continuum of care. It is implemented in particularly disadvantaged neighborhoods. The FLI was implemented in four Better Together cities: Rosh Ha'ayin, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa.¹² The Playing Together family literacy groups have been incorporated as an additional component of these programs. They were implemented in community centers that run daycare services for children.

Playing Together included joint activities for parents and children, that emphasize modeling and shared hands-on experience of literacy activities (e.g., reading and playing), and parent-only groups, that imparted knowledge of language, literacy and parenting. A games lending library was also added in some of the groups in the third year.

Karev Program for Community Involvement in Education: Karev developed the family literacy program in two locations in the north: the Arab city of Sakhnin and the Jewish town of Ma'alot. The program was being implemented within the context of the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk (the Schmid Program). The National Program for Children and Youth at Risk is a collaboration of 6 government ministries. Its goal is to expand and strengthen services for children and youth at risk. The program is being implemented in 70 localities, which are home to about half of the children at risk (from birth to 18) in Israel.¹³ In Sakhnin, the program is implemented in the Bra'am parent-child center.

The Karev Program differed from the other programs in that it was home based and the meetings were one-on-one with each family. Most of the activities occurred at weekly meetings attended by a parent, child and facilitator. Periodically there were visits to the library and group meetings of all the parents and children in the program.

Between the first and second years of implementation, there was a change in the program staff. The original facilitators were paramedical professionals (a speech therapist and an occupational therapist), as they were believed to be suited to individual language and literacy work with families. In the second year, it was decided to move away from a clinical emphasis and the program hired three facilitators with backgrounds in early childhood education and sociology.

Benjamin Children's Library and Learning Center – Success Begins at Home: The Benjamin Children's Library is located in the Meyerhoff Community Center in Beit Shemesh, and lends books in Hebrew and English. It primarily serves the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox populations.

¹² The group in Haifa was not included in the evaluation because the program was implemented differently. There was no organic group; rather, it offered uninterrupted activity throughout the year and participants came whenever they chose.

¹³ For more information, see Szabo-Lael R. and Hasin T. 2011 *At Risk Children and Youth: Result of Identification and Mapping Conducted by the National Program For Children And Youth* at [http:// Brookdale.jdc.org.il](http://Brookdale.jdc.org.il).

Its goal is to build strong and positive relationships between parent and child. The library works closely with the local Ministry of Health child development center (Mercaz Rakefet), which provides diagnostic assessments of children with language and other developmental problems.

The program worked with parents and children from the ultra-Orthodox population. In the third year, the program started working with early childhood workers. The Benjamin Library recognized the potential of the early childhood workers to disseminate the program's messages, and it was decided to set up a group for early childhood workers who care for children in their homes under the supervision of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor.

The Benjamin Library combined joint activities for parents and children with parenting guidance given in parents-only groups. At first, the parenting guidance was provided during the joint meetings, but because this was disruptive to the general group, it was decided to hold parents meetings separately in the evenings.

b. Separate Programs for Parents/Early Childhood Workers

NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education – Always a Story: The Research Institute for Innovation in Education is part of the School of Education at the Hebrew University. Its goal is to address the educational problems, needs, and challenges of children and youth in Israel. The Institute both develops and evaluates innovative programs to meet the needs of local communities.

The FLI was implemented at a local daycare center in two locations: Yavne and Holon.¹⁴ The program was offered to parents whose children attend the centers, to early childhood workers and preschool teachers from the centers, as well as from other facilities in the community. Thus, NCJW implemented family literacy on two levels – for parents and for early childhood workers, so that they complement one another in their work with the children.

Between the second and third years of implementation, the program format was changed because participants requested that the meetings be held more frequently. Instead of holding the meetings once a month over a 9-month period, the meetings were held once a week over a 3-month period.

Ramla Community Center – Always a Story: In 2005, UJA-Federation of New York began support of an early-childhood enrichment program, through which an early-childhood center was set up to implement a range of programs, including the literacy program evaluated in the current study. The program implemented at the community center was the NCJW program Always a Story with some modification and adjustments to fit the center and its needs.¹⁵

The Ramla community center is located in the Juarish neighborhood, populated by Arab and Bedouin families. As noted, it implemented the Always a Story program and as such, had two

¹⁴ In the first year, the program was implemented in Jerusalem and Petah Tikva.

¹⁵ During the first year, Always a Story was implemented in Ramla by NCJW. The program continued in the same format in the subsequent two years, but was under the auspices of the community center.

target populations – mothers, who came from the adjacent Bedouin neighborhood, and early childhood workers, who lived and worked in all the city's neighborhoods.

In the third year of implementation, a child component was added distinguishing it from the format of Always a Story elsewhere. Two groups were set up, one for children aged 6 months to 3 years and the second for 4–5-year-olds, which were implemented by early childhood workers trained by NCJW. The work with children was based on the rationale that interventions for children could strengthen the work with the mothers and thus improve their chances of applying what they have learned in the home. In addition, it provided care for children while mothers attended the sessions.

Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development (AJEEC) – Parents Promoting Literacy: The Negev Institute works to promote disadvantaged communities in the south of Israel. The Institute's work with the Bedouin community is implemented through the Arab-Jewish Center for Equality, Empowerment and Cooperation (AJEEC). AJEEC developed the Family Literacy Initiative in several Bedouin communities in the south of Israel. By the third year, it was decided to disseminate the program to other localities in the Abu-Basma Regional Council through 15 groups (a considerable increase over the first year).

Early childhood workers who provided childcare services in their own homes were trained to be facilitators for the mothers' groups. Their training included 12 meetings.

During the second year of the pilot, a kit was prepared with written materials for facilitating the groups and for the mothers to work with at home. It included explanations of program principles and activities about topics related to language development and parent-child relationships. It was developed by a professional who instructs early-childhood workers in partnership with the Early-Childhood Department at AJEEC.

3.2 Implementation of the Programs

In this section, we examine the ways the programs in the initiative were implemented:

- ◆ Participants' recruitment and attendance rates at meetings
- ◆ Activities at the meetings
- ◆ Main topics.

The information in this section was collected from the interviews with the directors and facilitators, the session report forms and the focus groups with the participants.

a. Recruitment and Attendance

Recruitment Methods

Families

The mothers and staff reported that the families were recruited through three main channels:

- ◆ ***Outreach to families in the community*** (i.e., approaching families directly): This strategy was used mainly by AJEEC (69%). The early childhood workers recruited mothers through

their home-based childcare services and other families considered suitable for the program. Ashalim allocated a special staff person, sometimes a social worker, to recruit families and NCJW outreach was done by the director of the daycare center where the program was implemented.

- ◆ **Referral by local services:** Program staff contacted services that work with suitable candidates for the program, such as daycare centers and preschools, social services, community centers and mother-and-child clinics and asked them to refer suitable families or suggest the program to them. Particularly Karev used this method.
- ◆ **Word of mouth:** 30% of the mothers reported that a neighbor or friend had introduced them to the program. The percentage was high at the Benjamin Library (63%), which serves the ultra-Orthodox population.
- ◆ **Publicizing the program:** this method was used chiefly by programs at community centers as a way of marketing the program to the local population (the Benjamin Library and Ashalim).

Early Childhood Workers

The early childhood workers were recruited by the director of early childhood services in the municipality (the NCJW program) and the inspector of the local daycare centers association (the Benjamin Library). The program was provided as a compulsory in-service training course. Although the program was actually designed for preschool teachers and early childhood workers, it was in fact sometimes attended by preschool teaching assistants.

Attendance and Regularity

Families

Parent-child groups averaged 25 participants (10 parents, 10 children up to age three and 5 older children). Parent-only groups averaged 10 participants (data from the session report form).¹⁶ Most of the mothers came with at least one child aged no more than 3. About half of mothers came to the meetings with one child, while the remainder brought 2-3 children.

Similar to the first year, most of the mothers reported that they came to all or most of the meetings, while about 20% did not come regularly.

Early Childhood Workers

The Benjamin Library reported that the early childhood workers attended regularly. NCJW reported mixed patterns of attendance at the different groups (see Section 6 regarding workers' satisfaction).

¹⁶ As noted, each program implemented a different number of groups and therefore the number of forms received from each differed. The analysis was conducted by calculating the average data for each program so that each would be represented equally in the total data.

b. Activities

Meetings were structured and included a range of strategies aimed at promoting language and literacy. As mentioned before, programs were based on group meetings led by facilitators. In the parents-only groups, the facilitator was the only staff member conducting the session, whereas the parent-child groups also included other staff members such as program directors and parent facilitators, who provided individual guidance for parents during the meetings.

Frequent activities in groups for parents only were group facilitation, lectures and, in some cases, individual guidance for the parents. As mentioned, parent-child groups had hands-on family experience in joint activities with the children.

The three most frequent work strategies to promote language and literacy in both types of groups were:

- ◆ ***Book reading:*** The facilitators noted the importance of books in general and specifically books for children, and ways of reading that support language development. Almost all programs gave books to participants to take home so as to encourage use of books
- ◆ ***Play:*** According to staff reports, play often included singing and finger games, which are tools for developing language in children from birth to 3 years, because of repetition and rhyme. Group play was also prevalent with the goal of familiarizing participants with games/toys and ways of playing and making an educated choice of games/toys that promote child's development.
- ◆ ***Talking with the children:*** This included conversation with the children (in the parent-child groups) or an explanation about ways to conduct a conversation (in the parents-only groups)

Main topics: In the interviews with the directors and facilitators, a number of topics were found to be common to most of the programs: Using tools to develop language; the importance of literacy activities (such as reading to the child, singing songs, hand games, rhymes, stressing the importance of naming objects, classifying objects in groups etc.); acquaintance with age-appropriate reading material and games; and using daily activity and common household items to promote literacy among children.

Concomitantly, on the session report form, facilitators indicated which items on a list of literacy-promoting skills had been discussed with the parents (Table 4). Findings show that language-development skills (e.g., rhymes, rhythms, naming objects) and the importance of responding to a child's actions and words were discussed in almost all of the meetings in programs for parents and children and in 80% of the programs for parents only.

It is clear that extensive information was provided about interaction with children in a literacy context and it was highly prevalent at the meetings (93% of parent-child programs and 80% of parents-only programs). At least 90% of the meetings gave guidance about activities that could be done with children in and out of the home. Also, language development was discussed at a large majority of parent-child meetings and at all the parents-only meetings. Other subjects included

cognitive development of language acquisition (about half of the programs for parents and children, vs. a third for parents only, respectively).

**Table 4: Topics Discussed in the Sessions with the Parents, by Types of Groups
(% of Sessions)**

	Programs for Parents and Children N=30	Programs for Parents Only N=20
Skills to promote literacy		
Language development skills	96	80
Importance of response to child's words/actions	100	80
Parent-child interaction in a literacy context	93	80
Guidance on activities to be done at home/out of home	100	90
Information on child development		
Language development	74	100
Cognitive development of language acquisition	55	35
Understanding the child's emotions	67	60
Socio-emotional development	89	50

Source: Summary session forms, data regarding the number of sessions (third year)

The directors and facilitators at all the programs also reported that the discussions with the parents dealt with parenting and parent-child relations: there were discussions regarding emotional and social development in some 90% of programs for parents and children and in half of the programs for parents only. Understanding the child's emotions was also discussed in both types of programs (67% and 60%, respectively).

3.3 Key Developments in the Program during the Pilot

In the first year of the FLI, each organization built a work model based on its own interpretation of family literacy, as understood from the RFP. The evaluation revealed many differences among the ways the different program operated.

One important outcome of the interim findings of the evaluation, therefore, was the establishment by UJA Federation of New York of the learning collaborative for the directors of the six programs.¹⁷ The purpose was to create a clearer, more precise formulation of the concept of family literacy, so as to plan its practical application in program activities. In addition, the experience accumulated by each of the programs over the course of the pilot contributed to its further consolidation. The directors reported that the learning collaborative indeed led to considerable progress in jointly developing a clear, well-formulated model. The following are key changes in program implementation that were reported by the programs directors:

¹⁷ Reports on the learning process have been published and presented to UJA-Federation of New York. Tolchinsky, L.; Stavans, A. 2010. Wertheimer, C.; Klibansky, H. 2010.

Consolidation of the concept of literacy: All of the programs directors reported that the learning collaborative created greater clarity of the concept of family literacy and ways of applying it. As one program director said:

"The collaborative was about formulating the essence of home literacy. Through the discussions...I was able to articulate for myself the goals of the program and what I wanted to achieve with the parents."

Another noted:

"The learning collaborative sharpened the theoretical concept of literacy and the whole concept of raising parent awareness to this topic. Before, it was in the background, but hadn't been articulated so clearly."

In addition, the programs directors agreed on their shared assumptions (Tolchinsky and Stavans, 2010). These assumptions include:

- ◆ The importance of the parents' level of literacy as a factor affecting the child's level of literacy
- ◆ Quality interaction between parents and children in the context of literacy events as an integral part of language and literacy development among children
- ◆ The importance of parents' emotional support of their children
- ◆ The significance of cultural sensitivity in adapting the programs to the participants' background.

Greater focus on language promotion: The program directors reported a change in the approach to promote language and literacy. All the programs emphasized the interaction between parents and children. In the early stages of the program, this was frequently seen a goal in itself, regardless of whether there was a connection to the literacy context. By the third year, in accordance with conclusions from the learning collaborative, the emphasis in parent-child activities was on the literacy context, e.g., developing meaningful interaction between the parents and children within the context of shared literacy activities.

Several methods were used to increase the knowledge and awareness of parents to the importance of early literacy promotion:

- ◆ **Imparting relevant theoretical knowledge:** Some program directors recognized that for parents to promote literacy at home, they needed more knowledge about child development. By acquiring knowledge about the various stages of child development, parents could then adapt their activities and tools to the age and developmental stage of their children.
- ◆ **Use of different tools to promote literacy:** Broadening the concept led to the understanding that a variety of tools, other than books, can be used to promote literacy and enrich language: games, creative activities and songs. Parent-child interactions are also a platform for language promotion through routine activities in the home, such as preparing supper or grocery shopping. Nevertheless, one of the main goals remained the importance of exposing children to books and encouraging a love for reading, especially for families with little culture of

reading or where the children were not in any educational framework during the day (Karev, Ramla Community Center).

Standardized work practices: Clarifying the concept of family literacy led to greater standardization of program activities. For example, by the third year, all the programs held weekly sessions lasting about 1.5 hours. In addition, programs for parents and children set aside time to work with parents separately since the directors felt that merely demonstrating "story time" or hands-on playing together was insufficient to ensure that the parents would be able to apply the tools and knowledge acquired at home. As a result, the Benjamin Library and Karev provided separate parent-only groups, in addition to the joint activities, which offered parent-only lectures on a range of subjects, while Ashalim had a separate facilitator for parents who was present at the joint meetings and could add support and advice to the parents during the activity.

Additional program modifications: Changes were made to focus more directly on family literacy and be more effective. For example:

- ◆ Introducing work with early childhood workers in some of the programs
- ◆ Making personnel changes (recruitment of facilitators with background in the field of early childhood and group-work rather than diagnosis and therapy)
- ◆ Providing more focused training on literacy for the facilitators.

Target population: A better match was also achieved between participants and the target population. At the start of the Initiative, some of the programs were for families with children up to age 5. By the third year, all the programs focused on children from birth to 3 years. However, there were still some children aged 4 or over at the meetings, and some of the programs including older siblings (for details, see section 3.2).

Despite the learning collaborative and the experience gained from program implementation at the close of the pilot, some directors still felt the need to continue developing the literacy approach for young children; also, they noted the need to receive expert advice and support regarding issues in running the program.

4. The Facilitators and their Training

In this part of the report, we focus on the staffing of the program, particularly the group facilitators. We review the criteria for choosing facilitators, as well as their professional backgrounds and the process of training and support that they received. In addition, we review their satisfaction with the training and support, and examine whether there are additional training needs.

4.1 Knowledge and Experience of Facilitators

All the programs cited the importance of choosing staff with knowledge of early childhood and training in that area. The programs can be classified by the facilitators who were professionals in

the fields of literacy and language, as at NCJW and the Benjamin Library, and programs that chose facilitators whose background and experience were in the field of early childhood and group-work (Karev, Ashalim, AJEEC). In some programs, as noted, changes were made in staffing to better match the needs of the participants and the program goals (see Section 3.1).

4.2 Training, Support and Supervision¹⁸

Prior training for the role: The different organizations provided varying levels of training for the facilitators before the program began and the programs of Karev and AJEEC were especially extensive. Forty-two percent of the facilitators in the first year of the program reported that they received advanced specialist training in family literacy from the provider organization. In addition, facilitators relied to a large extent on prior experience and knowledge from working with young children or working in the field of literacy.

Ongoing in-service training: In the first year, two-thirds of the respondents reported that they received some ongoing training and supervision from experts. In the third year, different types of training were provided by the various programs: from ongoing training (Karev, AJEEC and Ramla Community Center) to workshops and enrichment on specific issues (Benjamin Library, NCJW, Ashalim, where there was in-service training). Since the staff at the Benjamin Library was small, training was provided ad hoc as part of the ongoing support.

Ongoing support and supervision: The program coordinator or director provided support in all the programs. Most staff reported that the support was not formally structured but given ad hoc according to need; at Karev, support was ongoing and structured, including updates, feedback, and discussion of issues and dilemmas arising in the field.

In summary, no major change occurred over the years in terms of training and support. The differences in professional background dictated the nature of the training and support provided. Thus, programs relying on staff with a background in language and literacy did not, on the whole, earmark considerable resources for in-service training. The size of the program staff also impacted the nature of training and support. Programs with one facilitator waived structured training in favor of ongoing support and personal guidance.

Satisfaction with training and supervision, and additional training needs: The facilitators expressed satisfaction with the support provided. On the other hand, respondents from the all levels of program implementation spoke of the need for more focused and in-depth training about literacy and language development and about implementing literacy program for parents and young children. The importance of staff training was raised in the collaborative learning and was reported both in the NCJW research report (Tolchinsky and Stavans, 2010) and at a meeting of program directors held in March 2011.

¹⁸ The information comes from two sources of data: the facilitators' questionnaire in the first year (N=24) and the face-to-face interviews in the third year.

5. Background of the Participants

This section examines the characteristics of program participants based on the participants' questionnaires.

As shown, the characteristics of the participants attest to greater correspondence with the program's target populations as the pilot progressed. In the first year, despite the fact that the programs were slated for disadvantaged areas, participants were relatively strong in terms of employment characteristics and level of education and command of mother tongue. By the third year, participants typically belonged to population groups with a lower socioeconomic status, lower level of education and lower literacy skills.

5.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Population group: 39% of the mothers who filled out the questionnaire were Jewish and 61% Arabs.

Gender: As may be seen from Table 5, almost all the participants were women (99%); only two fathers participated in the program. In the RFP, the Federation presented the importance of outreach to fathers as a way of strengthening their parenting and involvement in the lives of their children. Program directors, however, spoke of the difficulty of recruiting men into the program because the topic of literacy is widely perceived as the responsibility of mothers. As one director explained:

"It is virtually impossible to recruit fathers... We learned unmistakably that literacy is perceived as women's work. It is part of mothering to tell a story... to play... to encourage talk at home, conduct a conversation – that's a mother's responsibility."

Practical difficulties also prevented fathers from participating in the program since the meetings sometimes took place at hours when they were still at work.

Age: Most of the participants (67%) were young mothers up to age 35: about half were in the 26-35 range, 19% were under 26 and the average age was 32. Statistically significant differences were found by sector: the average age of the Arab participants was younger than their Jewish counterparts (30.5 vs. 34, respectively).

Country of Origin: Seventeen percent of the mothers in the Jewish sector had immigrated to Israel (15), about half from Ethiopia. Most had been in Israel for at least 12 years.

Family Characteristics: Among both Jewish and Arab mothers, almost 90% were married. Two-thirds had up to three children. About a third (34%) of the families had at least four children, which is considered a common characteristic of families with low socioeconomic status. This is a high percentage compared to the proportion of these families in Israel (16.5%)¹⁹. There were four times as many large Arab families as large Jewish families (50% vs. 12%).

¹⁹ Central Bureau of Statistics, press release, 2.2.2011, data for 2009.

An examination of the number of children up to age 3 showed that 50% of the families had one child up to the age of 3 and an additional quarter had two children in this age range. Thus, the expectation that all the families would have at least one child in this age range was not borne out. Many of these families were part of the AJEEC program for the Bedouin community, which includes young women who do not yet have children as well as grandmothers. Forty percent of the children were not in daycare, but were looked after at home by their mothers or another family member. This percentage is higher among Arab than Jewish families (58% vs. 22%, respectively).

Table 5: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Mothers, by Sector[^] (%)

	Total (N=223)	Jews (N=86)	Arabs (N=137)
Gender - Female	99	98	100
Age**	100	100	100
17-25	19	8	26
26-35	48	48	48
36+	33	44	26
Average age**	32	34.2	30.5
Country of Origin – Israel**	93	83	99
Family Status – Married**	87	88	86
No. of Children in Family** ^^	100	100	100
0-3	66	88	50
4-5	18	8	25
6+	16	4	25
Average No. of Children*	3.5	2.5	4.25
Care for Children up to Age 3~	100	100	100
At home	40	22	58
Daycare facility	60	78	42

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

[^] The Jewish groups include Ashalim, Benjamin Library and NCJW; the Arab groups include Karev, AJEEC and Ramla Community Center.

* Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.05$.

** Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.01$.

^^ The range of number of children in Jewish families was 1-7; in Arab families – 1-15.

~ percentages are based on number of children in the family and not number of respondents

5.2 Occupation and Economic Status of Participants

Level of Education: Both Jewish and Arab mothers reported a relatively low level of education; the Jewish mothers were more educated than their Arab counterparts. Among the latter, 44% of the mothers reported that they had no schooling or only an elementary education (8 years) compared with 8% of Jewish mothers. Among Jewish mothers, a higher percentage held a vocational certificate or academic degree (42% vs. 11%, respectively).

Participants in the third year had lower levels of education than those in the first year. In the first year, 40% had completed high school in an academic track and about a third (34%) held a degree

from a college or university. In the third year, only 27% had completed high school in an academic track and only 23% had completed vocational studies or an academic degree.

Table 6: Mothers' Level of Education, by Sector (%)

	Total (N=223)	Jews (N=86)	Arabs (N=137)
Education level**	100	100	100
None	6	0	10
Completed elementary school	25	9	35
Completed vocational high school	19	24	15
Completed academic high school	27	25	29
Completed vocational studies^	12	17	9
Completed an academic degree	11	25	2

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

** Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.0$.

^ Non-academic degree at college or teachers college

Vocational characteristics: 72% of the Jewish participants were employed – generally full-time (70%) and some, part-time (30%). In half of the Jewish families participating in the program, both parents worked. In contrast, among the Arab participants, only 16% of the mothers reported paid employment – a few of them full-time (31%) and the rest part-time (69%). In only about a tenth of the Arab families both parents worked, while about a fifth of the Arab families reported that neither parent worked.

The questionnaire also asked about income sufficiency. Thirty-six percent of all respondents noted that their income was "not really sufficient" or "not sufficient at all" to meet their needs.

Table 7: Employment Characteristics of Families and Sufficiency of Income, by Sector (%)

	Total (N=223)	Jews (N=86)	Arabs (N=137)
Working mother**	38	72	16
Working spouse **	78	90	72
Both parents working**	26	52	9
Both parents not working**	13	0	21
Income "not really" or "not at all" sufficient	36	44	31

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

**Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.01$

5.3 Language Skills of Participants

We asked the participants to self-rate their speaking, reading and writing language abilities in Hebrew and, if relevant, in their mother tongue. As in the first year, almost all (97%) the native Hebrew-speakers rated themselves as having good or excellent language skills in all areas.

Table 8 presents the self-ratings of non-native Hebrew-speakers for both Hebrew and mother tongue. It is important to note that the group is primarily Arab (89%). About 60% of the non-native Hebrew speakers described themselves as having good or excellent skills in speaking, reading and writing Hebrew. As for mother tongue, 73% of the Arab mothers described themselves as having good or excellent reading skills while 71% reported good or excellent writing skills.

In the third year, lower percentages (of about 20 percentage points) reported a high level of language skill in Hebrew and their mother tongue. Given that this is a literacy program, this finding could indicate a greater match between the program inputs and the needs of the population of participants.

Table 8: Hebrew and Mother Tongue Language Skills among Non-Native Hebrew Speakers, by Sector (%)^

	Total (N=137)	Jewish (N=15)	Arabs (N=123)
Hebrew			
Speaking**	55	93	50
Reading	58	80	55
Writing	58	73	56
Mother tongue			
Reading	-	-	73
Writing	-	-	71

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

**Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.01$.

^ Responded "good" or "excellent."

6. Participants' Satisfaction, Program Strengths and Implementation Difficulties

6.1 Participants' Satisfaction with Implementation in Groups

In this section, we present findings from the parents' questionnaire and the focus groups.

Mothers' Satisfaction with the Program

Number of participants: Overall, parents were satisfied with the size of the groups. There were, however, small distinctions by sector. While 16% of the Jewish participants reported there were too few participants, a similar percentage of Arab participants (17%) reported that there were too many.

Number and duration of meetings: The mothers were happy with the number and duration of meetings, though here too there was an interesting difference between the Jewish and Arab sectors. While a quarter of the Jewish sector (23%) reported that there were too few sessions, 27% of the Arabs reported that there were too many. In addition, about a fifth of the mothers in

the Arab sector noted that the meetings were too long. Note that the majority of programs in the Arab sector were for parents only and each meeting lasted two hours.

Table 9: Satisfaction with the Program and the Number of Participants in the Group, by Sector (%)

	Total (N=223)	Jewish (N=86)^	Arab (N=137)
No. of parents in group**	100	100	100
Too few	8	16	4
Suitable	81	83	79
Too many	11	1	17
No. of meetings**	100	100	100
Too few	13	23	5
Suitable	71	76	68
Too many	16	1	27
Duration of meetings**	100	100	100
Too short	4	5	3
Suitable	85	95	78
Too long	11	0	19

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

** Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.01$.

^ The Arab mothers were from AJEEC, Ramla Community Center and Karev-Sakhnin; the Jewish mothers were from NCJW, the Benjamin Library and Ashalim.

Atmosphere at the meetings: The mothers found the atmosphere very pleasant (95%) and they felt comfortable taking part in the activities (96%). The focus groups of parents also expressed great satisfaction with the atmosphere at the meetings, which was reflected in a relaxed atmosphere in the focus groups themselves. Mothers reported good relations among the group members and a friendly, tolerant atmosphere.

Access to the meeting place: About 90% of the mothers in all programs reported that it was easy for them to get to the meeting place. The percentage was high in both the sectors, but there were differences: While in the Jewish sector, 95% expressed satisfaction with the location of the meeting place, the percentage was lower in the Arab sector (86%).

Suitability for the children: Mothers in parent-child programs reported that the activities were suitable for their children (95%). The mothers in these groups reported a feeling of freedom of expression in playing, acting and experiencing the activities. One of them noted:

"They have a different approach here, creative freedom for my child. It doesn't matter if he draws outside of the line; what matters is that he's done something."

Satisfaction with the program staff: Participants were very satisfied with the staff, and agreed that the information taught in the group was understood to a great or very great extent and that the facilitator's attitude to the group was positive to a great or very great extent (99%). Within the focus group, facilitators were praised for their pleasant, patient, and caring manner and were

referred to as "sister" and "family friend." Participants also praised staff for their knowledge and professionalism and their approachability about dilemmas that they encountered regarding various areas of child development, particularly language development, and difficulties in raising their children.

Table 10: Satisfaction with the Program (to a Great or Very Great Extent), by Sector (%)

	Total (N=223)	Jewish (N=86)	Arab (N=137)
To a great or very great extent			
The atmosphere was pleasant	95	99	93
I felt comfortable participating*	96	100	94
It was easy for me to get to the meeting place*	89	95	86
The activities were suitable for my children	-	95	-
I understood the information provided	98	100	97
There was a good relationship between the facilitators and the group	99	100	98
I enjoyed taking part in the meeting	99	100	98

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

*Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.05$.

Early Childhood Workers' Satisfaction with the Program

Like the mothers, the early childhood workers also reported satisfaction with the program and its content. For some of the early childhood workers at the Benjamin Library, the program was a main source of professional training. They also reported that the subject was adapted to the needs, difficulties, and constraints of their daycare centers and home-based childcare services. The workers appreciated the learning atmosphere and the group exchange of ideas and information. They also reported satisfaction with the staff professionalism, expertise, and willingness to respond and assist with the difficulties and dilemmas raised in the group. In the words of one of the early childhood workers: *"No one left the meetings until answers were provided."*

As for the format of the program, daycare staff reported difficulty with the hours of the activities. At NCJW, they claimed that the activities typically occurred immediately after work hours, which was tiring. The early childhood workers in one of the groups that met every two weeks reported that the relatively low frequency of meetings made it hard to maintain continuity between topics raised in the program and their application at the daycare center.

Satisfaction with the Home-Based Activities in the Karev Program

In the first stage of the evaluation, program directors indicated the difficulty in convincing mothers to work in a home framework. In the third year, when the home-based activities had been introduced, mothers still reported difficulties in bringing a facilitator into their home. Among the reactions were: Fear of the authorities (*"I thought they were from the Ministry of Social Affairs or*

the National Insurance Institute"), lack of understanding and criticism from neighbors ("Some women ask why you are participating in the program. They say you don't need someone to show you how to talk to your child") and stigma associated with home visits: ("People think that if someone comes to your home, it's a sign that there's a problem, something's not OK with you. There's stigma"). Participants suggested that having broader dissemination and wider publicity could dispel the stigmas.

Still, once they were in the program, participants expressed much satisfaction with home meetings, which eliminated the need to *"get everyone organized to leave the house."* The questionnaire revealed that almost all the participants found it convenient, to a great or very great extent, for the facilitator to come to their home and reported that the meetings at home made it possible *"to adapt the activities to what we have at home."* The mothers praised the home-based facilitators for the pleasant, relaxed and professional atmosphere they created at the meetings. Almost all the mothers reported that the attitude of the facilitators was good to a great or very great extent, that they felt comfortable consulting with them and that they understood the information. They trusted the facilitator and her discretion. In the words of one of the mothers:

"It's a confidential program for mothers. Every family has its secrets. The facilitator knows how to respect the mother's privacy, the family's privacy. We feel open enough to talk – she's like a psychologist. There's confidentiality."

6.2 Program Strengths

The program directors and facilitators and the participating mothers reported that the program had many strengths and distinctive strategies.

Cultural sensitivity: One of the assumptions formulated in the collaborative learning was the importance of adapting the program to the background of the participants and their efforts were highlighted by the directors and facilitators. For example, the Benjamin Library, whose population is ultra-Orthodox, selected books that were familiar and acceptable to the ultra-Orthodox community and made adaptations to popular children's books, using ultra-Orthodox terminology. Similarly, because Arabic is a diglossic language (i.e., with considerable differences between the spoken and written language), the programs for Arab participants took this into consideration and gave instructions to the parents regarding ways to read stories to children and cope with the gap between the written and spoken languages (for example, by advising parents to read the written language aloud and explain the meaning only if the child asked about a certain word). In addition, due to the lack of books in Arabic and the reading and writing difficulties of many of the mothers, books in other languages were also used – instead of reading them, the participants were asked to look at the pictures and make up stories. The AJEEC community used the local Bedouin vernacular, and materials based on recognizable scenes from Bedouin daily life, including festivals and seasonal events.

Effective use of organizational resources: As noted, some of the programs were implemented as part of a large multi-service initiative (Ashalim and Karev). Having the programs embedded

within existing multi-service organizations allowed them to draw on organizational resources, without having to create entirely new structures. It also provided a pool of referrals to the program, because the larger organizations and families were already known to each other.

Utilization of community facilities: Ashalim, the Benjamin Library and the Ramla Community Center located the program in a community facility (play center, public library or community center) thereby taking advantage of an existing infrastructure, reducing expenses and avoiding any stigma that might have been attached to location at a therapeutic setting. Being in a library (Benjamin Library) helped to develop a culture of reading, while a community center location (Ramla Community Center) helped with program marketing and dissemination. NCJW reported that conducting activities in daycare centers and preschools, alongside the work with the parents and early childhood workers at the same facilities, strengthened the natural connection between them, and made it possible to instill knowledge among those responsible for childcare at home and at the daycare facility.

Economic considerations: Some program directors claimed that by using a small number of staff members and an existing community facility, the cost per participant was modest. This made the programs an effective model for reaching relatively large numbers of mothers and children.

Use of home visits: The Karev program held meetings in the homes of the participants. Beyond implementing a strategy of one-on-one work with participants, this strategy enabled activities in a familiar environment. The Karev director also noted that a home environment is the natural setting for a child, making it easier to establish an intimate relationship with the caregiving parent.

6.3 Program Implementation Difficulties

This section presents the implementation difficulties cited by program directors and facilitators in the field.

Difficulties in marketing the program: The directors reported that parents wondered at the necessity of promoting literacy so early in a child's development. It was sometimes difficult to change this perception and explain the relevance of the topic for very young children. One director said:

"I don't like to use the term 'literacy'... it flows over into reading, writing, written language and parents do not connect with it to these ages."

Another noted:

"One has to keep explaining that literacy begins the day a child is born. The term itself is problematic as it hints at preparation for first grade, and less to language-promoting interaction."

The issue of program marketing was also brought up by some of the mothers, who reported that it was "sold" to them as a general parenting program. The fact that the program did not always

match the expectations of the participants sometimes caused tension, as parents wanted more general information, rather than the formal program material. One focus group described the difficulty experienced by the facilitator in concentrating on literacy, due to the demand of mothers to help with problems they had in child rearing. One mother said:

"She [the facilitator] always tries to come with something... with books that she would like to recommend, but we tell her our problems and she advises... we don't manage to get to what she planned because we really all have a lot of problems."

The mothers' reports reveal that, despite their great satisfaction with the program and their appreciation of its contribution to them, some of them felt that there were other early childhood topics for which they required more urgent discussion. Thus, when asked how they would improve the program, some raised the topic of greater emphasis on general parenting skills, not only those related to literacy.

Difficulties of recruiting and retaining participants: Despite the increase in the number of participants between the first and third year of the pilot, there still remained difficulties in recruiting participants. The difficulty was particularly severe in the parent-only programs. Some of the parents reported that other commitments and the need to find a babysitter made it hard for them to attend every time.

These difficulties also impacted program retention (9% of all participants dropped out). An average of 15% across the different programs. In some programs, dropout was connected to external factors such as holidays and vacation. Thus, the Benjamin Library reported a steep decrease in attendance around Passover; in one of the Ashalim groups and the Ramla Community Center, lack of attendance was more prevalent in July. Ramla Community Center also reported that the first group established was dismantled after a few meetings due to very low attendance. AJEEC and Karev programs reported very low dropout rates (though at AJEEC, this might have been due to problem with the data since the lists of participants who remained in the program was not compiled methodically).

The facilitators reported strategies to promote full attendance, such as telephone reminders and arranging transportation to the meeting place, as well as incentives in the form of books or games for parents persevering in the program.

Table 11: Distribution of Families/Parents Completing or Dropping Out of Programs*

	Total	Ashalim	Benjamin Library	Karev	NCJW	AJEEC	Ramla Community Center
Completing (N)	300	63	19	33	30	145	10
Dropout (%)	9	16	30	3	17	1	23

* Based on lists supplied at the start of group meeting and towards the end of the meetings (third year)

Lack of adequate training on ways to encourage implementation of program substance at home: As seen in Section 4 (training of the facilitators), the program directors and facilitators

sometimes found it difficult to fully address the issue of how to apply literacy at home. This difficulty was especially cited in programs where the facilitators did not have a strong background in language and literacy and the different staff members therefore varied greatly in their conception of literacy for early childhood (for more information see Section 4 about training needs).

Difficulties in targeting the "right" ages: Mothers and early childhood workers reported that they had not received adequate tools to work with young infants up to 18 months old; that the material was more oriented toward the older ages and its relevance to young infants was limited. One early childhood workers said:

"Those of us who work with infants could not use [the material] because our children cannot tell a story, they don't talk... we tell [stories] but it's a little hard... we show them pictures... in fact I did not receive a really satisfactory response about what to do with the little ones."

Early childhood workers also reported that the program did not take into account the nature of infant care, which made it difficult to focus on imparting knowledge because of the constant concern about meeting their basic physical needs.

According to mothers in the parent-child groups, this mismatch was magnified by the participation of older children in activities. As noted above, despite the program's age restriction, in some groups children over 3 were allowed to take part in activities in order to enable mothers to attend without having to arrange a babysitter. The inadvertent consequence of this, as reported by participating mothers, was overcrowding in the groups and domination by the older children during activities.

As a suggestion for improvement, parents and early childhood workers raised the possibility of creating groups addressing the needs of children of different ages.

Difficulty in creating a distinct program within a larger service framework: As noted, programs offered at a community facility used the existing infrastructure, which reinforced the ability to market the program. At the same time, as an additional component at an existing service, these programs sometimes found it difficult to differentiate themselves from other programs in terms of main goals and contents. Similarly, when parents attended more than one program, they were sometimes unaware of the specific goals of the family literacy program and found it difficult to distinguish between it and other programs. Another difficulty that arose was that in some centers, no organic groups were formed with a structured, weekly work plan as was intended by the other FLI programs; rather, every parent could arrive at her convenience and fit in with the activities. This hampered group consolidation and the progression along a structured learning process. Moreover, this issue impacted efforts to ascertain the exact number of participants of every program.

7. Participants' Assessment of the Impacts of the Program

In this section, we present the benefits of the program from the point of view of the participants. The information was gathered from the parents' questionnaires and the focus groups with the parents and early childhood workers. All the benefits reported by the mothers and early childhood workers are consistent with those noted by the program directors and facilitators.

Understanding/awareness of the importance of literacy and language enrichment: In the focus groups, the mothers reported that they had become more keenly aware of the importance of interaction and conversation with their children as a way of enriching their language. Some mothers reported that, prior to the program, they had read stories and sung songs with their children, but they did so naturally, without understanding how it would help the development of their child. Some mothers at AJEEC reported that the program enhanced their appreciation of the importance of interaction with their child, whereas previously they had been doubtful about the importance of talking to children of preschool age because they did not think they would understand.

The emphasis on literacy and its effect on the child's development and future convinced mothers of the importance of the subject matter:

"The bottom line is that without proper language and a rich vocabulary no one succeeds. This is the basis for success. Enriching our children is the key to success."

The early childhood workers also reported that the program had increased their awareness and their appreciation of the importance of literacy and language enrichment even when they had already conducted literacy activities in the past. In the words of one of the early childhood workers:

"I always spoke to the children and it was sometimes a bit frustrating to speak to children when they didn't answer me. But now, when I understand what it's doing for language development, talking to them is easier for me, because I understand the short-term and long-term benefits."

Acquiring information: About 90% of the mothers in all programs reported that they had learned ways to enrich their children's language, tell them a story, have a conversation, and play with them (Table 12). The mothers and early childhood workers in the focus groups also frequently noted they had learned how to speak to their child and how to choose literacy activities appropriate to his or her stage of development. This knowledge also helped the mothers cope with other parental issues.

Parents and early childhood workers also benefited from tips about what they should or should not do to promote literacy among young children, such as stressing important words, repeating

stories to children, asking children to tell the story in their own words and *not* asking them too many questions while reading a book.

Table 12: Mothers' Reports of Acquiring Knowledge about Ways to Promote the Child's Language Development (to a Great or Very Great Extent), by Sector (%)

	Total (N=223)	Jewish (N=86)	Arab (N=137)
Learned how to:			
Enrich the child's language**	89	83	93
Tell a story	93	93	93
Play with the child*	91	85	95
Talk to the child**	95	90	98
Choose a book to read*	88	83	92
Choose a game to play**	90	79	97
Cope with 2 languages^	-	89	-
Cope with spoken and written Arabic	-	-	76

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

* Significant difference according to χ^2 , $p < 0.05$

** Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.01$

^ Only parents whose main language at home is not Hebrew were asked (N=9).

Interestingly, parents also appreciated the fact that promoting literacy did not demand special time-consuming tasks or expensive books and toys, but rather could be encouraged through everyday activities and interaction with the child. One of the mothers said:

"This neighborhood... [and] our financial status are not good... and this affects education and afternoon activities. But the program facilitator made it clear for us that you don't need money in order to enrich the child – to provide him with the right thing. To sit together, talk or read a book to your child – you don't need money."

Mothers and early childhood workers also acquired knowledge about choosing the right book or game, through concrete recommendations about particular books and through learning about child development. Approximately 90% of the mothers reported the program taught them how to choose a book or game (Table 12). As one of the mothers noted,

"A 5-year-old is not like a 3-year-old. Every child belongs to his own age group and this is reflected in what you find in the books and the way you tell a child a story."

Applying the knowledge acquired in the program at home/preschool/daycare: The mothers were given a list of literacy activities and asked to indicate whether *since joining the program* they were doing "much more," "a little more," or "the same or less" of each. The list included structured literacy activities such as reading, reciting, and playing as well as activities that involve interaction and talking with the child, such as having a conversation. Between about 75% and 85% of the participants reported some change (doing a little or much more than before) in all 9 of the items (Table 13).

Structured literacy activities: About half of the participants reported that since joining the program, they were doing "much more" structured activities such as reading (49%), reciting poems and rhymes, and playing hand games (51%) and playing with toys or games (46%). A further third reported doing "a little more" than they were doing before starting the program.

Table 13: Parents' Reports on Changes in the Extent of Parent-Child Literacy Activities since Joining the Program (%)

	Same as Prior to Program	Little More	Much More
Structured activities:			
Reading/telling stories	17	34	48
Reading/showing written information	22	37	41
Reciting poems/rhymes	14	35	49
Playing with toys/games	16	39	46
Interaction with child:			
Explaining things in a way he can understand	16	32	52
Making sure to answer all his questions	22	29	50
Discussing TV programs he has seen	26	36	39
Going with him to the library	41	27	32
Discussing all kinds of things with him	20	33	48

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

Parents in the focus groups also appreciated learning about the importance of the quality of literacy activities. This was especially noted by parents who were already accustomed to singing with their children and telling stories. For these parents, the program helped to upgrade these activities and make them more meaningful for the children. One mother noted:

"We were used to getting up in the morning and singing songs. Today, we also tell the story behind the songs – [it gives] extra, broader meaning. We are aware of the lyrics, what they're saying. It's something else. We become conscious of the things they're talking about; it does something."

Interaction with the child: 94 percent of parents said that the program contributed to better communication with the child (Table 15). About half of the mothers reported that they discussed all kinds of things with their children "much more" and a third reported that they did so "a little more." With regard to the quality of the interaction (e.g., "explaining things in a way the child can understand", "making sure to answer all his questions"), about half of them reported that they did so "much more" and 32% and 29% reported "a little more," respectively (Table 14).

In the first year, most of the participants (about two-thirds) reported a change in the frequency that they conducted literacy activities with their children; however, in contrast to the third year, most reported "a little" change. In the third year, there was a considerable increase in the

percentage of mothers who reported that they had been conducting the activities "much more" since joining the program

Table 14: Parents' Reports of Changes in the Extent of Parent-Child Literacy Activities with their Children since Joining the Program, by Sector (%)

	Total (N=223)	Jewish (N=86)	Arab (N=137)
Do much more than before the program~			
Structured activities:			
Reading/telling stories**	48	32	58
Reading/showing written information**	41	23	52
Reciting poems/rhymes**	49	38	56
Playing with toys and games**	46	31	55
Interaction with child:			
Explaining things in a way he can understand**	52	38	61
Making sure to answer all his questions**	50	38	56
Discussing TV programs he has seen**	39	27	46
Going with him to the library**	32	26	34
Discussing all kinds of things with him**	48	39	53

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

~ Other categories included: same as prior to program and little more than before the program (See table 13).

**Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.01$.

As in the first year of the program evaluation, Arab Israeli participants indicated more positive responses about all of the potential benefits examined. This could be because they were at a lower starting point when they joined the program, with regard to the quality and quantity of literacy activities for their children.

Our findings also seem to support the premise that the program is more suitable for families with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, about 20 percent of mothers reported no change in their behavior as a result of the program. An examination of their characteristics revealed that these respondents came from a stronger background where participant mothers were employed (54% compared to 38% of the total participants), and were educated (44% had a college degree, compared with only 11% of the total participants).

Early childhood workers also reported that their work had become more oriented toward literacy activities because of the program. They noted increased activities that were based on books reading to the children, such as creative work, dramatization of the story, and allowing the children to narrate the story in their own words. One of the early childhood workers noted:

"This is an innovation for us, because we always read stories to the children and suddenly we're having them tell the story. A child sits on his chair and tells the story and the other children want to do the same ... It was a big change for us."

Some of the early childhood workers reported that they made changes in the preschool physical environment. They had learned ways to make books more accessible and to create attractive reading corners. They also started referring to the posters and announcements on the preschool/childcare walls:

"We tell the children 'this says happy Purim.' We didn't do so in the past. We used to think they couldn't read. Now we know they look and they picture the letters. That's something we didn't think about before the program."

The group as a source of support and advice: About 90% of the mothers reported that the chance to meet with other mothers was helpful to a great or very great extent (93% of the Arab women, 83% of the Jewish women). Eighty-two percent reported that the program had helped them to make new friends to a great or very great extent (particularly the Arab women – 91% vs. 69% of the Jewish women). The program staff also noted that the other parents in the groups had become a source of information and support.

Table 15: Perceived Benefits of the Program to Parent Competence (to a Great or Very Great Extent), by Sector (%)

	Total (N=223)	Jewish (N=86)	Arab (N=137)
Increased confidence as a parent**	93	82	99
Better communication with the child**	94	89	98
Provided options for afternoon activities	83	86	81
Provided information about child raising**	91	82	97
Provided assistance in coping with child raising**	90	82	95
Helpful to meet with other parents*	89	83	93
New friends**	82	69	91

Source: Parents' questionnaire (third year)

*Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.05$.

**Significant differences according to χ^2 , $p < 0.01$.

Opportunity to receive expert advice: About 90% of the mothers (see Table 15) received information and assistance in coping with raising their children.

Greater sense of competence as parents: 93% of the mothers reported that the program had contributed to their confidence as parents to a great or very great extent (99% of the Arabs vs. 82% of the Jewish women). This benefit was also noted in the focus groups, where the mothers reported that the help, support and knowledge they received about raising their children had enhanced their parenting.

Impact of the Program for Early Childhood Workers

As with the mothers, early childhood workers also found the group to be a source of support and advice and appreciated the opportunity to learn from their professional colleagues. They also noted that the program contributed to coping with difficulties and dilemmas that came up in their

daily work. They also appreciated the fact that the program provided opportunities to receive advice and counseling from a professional about difficulties experienced at preschool, as well as advice about identifying and working with children with developmental delays.

Developing observation skills: Learning about literacy and child development increased the observation skills of the early childhood workers and their attentiveness to the children. Early childhood workers noted that they began to observe the children and their behavior within a context of literacy, such as looking at how children told themselves stories when they sat looking at books.

Better communication with the parents: Some early childhood workers noted that they acquired tools for effective communication with parents, by means of regular updates on the bulletin board about activities at the preschool/daycare center, by reporting to the parents about their children's performance, etc. They also learned about ways to explain to parents if they felt there was a problem in their child's performance or development. One of them reported that

"the facilitator told us to be sensitive to the parents, not to scare them ... not to attack them....It was a great help when we understood that you need to approach the parents as equals, with reciprocity, not to be condescending. We both want what's best for the child."

Professional empowerment perceived by the early childhood workers: One of the added benefits of the acquisition of knowledge and of having a professional available to consult was that these inputs strengthened the workers and improved their interaction with the parents. One of the early childhood workers described how the program had helped her cope with a child who spent most of the day sucking his pacifier and consequently did not speak well.

"I'd already told the mother several times that the pacifier wasn't good, but I didn't know (what to do) more than that. Thanks to the program and the facilitator, I learned how to tell her what the pacifier was doing, that it was harmful to the jaw, that there was no space for the tongue, which was why the child couldn't talk properly. With this information, I was able to convince the mother. I had more confidence and more tools, and I was able to explain."

8. Long-Term Sustainability and Dissemination

The life cycle of a program comprises three stages: planning, implementation and sustainability. Several authors have emphasized that programs are more likely to be sustainable when the previous stages have been completed successfully (Barab et al., 1998). The sustainability of social programs may be viewed as a continuum from cessation to continuation of the model within the same organization, to expansion of the program to additional populations and locations (see especially Savaya et al., 2008; also Harvey and Hurworth, 2006; Sulimani, 2002; Renihan and Renihan, 1989; Cohen-Navot and Lavenda, 2003; Bowman et al., 2008; Kaufman and Gidron, 2006; Kalafat and Ryerson, 1999).

Currently, at the close of the 3-year pilot, the six programs funded by the New York Federation's Family Literacy Initiative are now considering long-term sustainability and dissemination. The challenge of promoting early childhood development, and literacy and school readiness in particular, are issues of growing concern to Israeli policy makers and professionals. We can examine this issue in terms of three main sets of factors (Savaya et al., 2008):

1. Factors relating to the program itself: The process of consolidating the work model has made considerable progress, including standardization of the concept of home literacy and ways of implementing and applying the principles of home literacy. Over the course of the pilot, the programs have reached an advanced stage of implementation in the field. The activities are implemented methodically, there has been an increase in the number of participants, and those who participate usually match the target population. The programs have been modified to match the activities more closely with the principles formulated at the learning collaborative. This is indicative of the flexibility of the programs and the implementing organizations.

2. Factors relating to the implementing organization: The organizational mechanisms to promote sustainability for the programs were already created in the planning stages.

- ◆ All programs are implemented by organizations that provide additional programs.
- ◆ The fact that some of the programs are implemented under the umbrella of multi-service comprehensive initiatives (Ashalim, in the context of Better Together and New Beginnings – the National Program for Children and Youth At-Risk – and Karev in the context of New Beginnings) increases the likelihood of their continuation and dissemination.
- ◆ The other participating organizations are also considering ways to become part of these broader comprehensive initiatives. In the proposals submitted to UJA-Federation of New York, AJEEC and NCJW reported their intention to include their programs in the directory of programs of the National Program for Children and Youth At-Risk, while Ashalim reported that they planned to include their program in the directory of Better Together.

In sum, we see that the initiative has significantly contributed to developing the organizational capacity of organizations that are major players in the field of early childhood development and that can share widely what they have learned.

3. Further steps planned by the organizations: To leverage the programs and create support in the community some of the organizations reported that they were planning to undertake various steps to disseminate knowledge and stimulate awareness of the importance of the family literacy programs among professionals. These steps include:

- ◆ *In-service courses and training:*
 - Ashalim has devised a structured literacy-training program for the local coordinators of Better Together and the preschool coordinators who are tasked with passing on the information.

- Karev Sakhnin is planning a seminar on literacy for professionals working in the community.
- ♦ ***Production of education materials about the subject:*** According to the program coordinator, the kit developed by AJEEC can be used as a "compendium" of information that can be distributed to professionals working in programs implemented through the organization. In addition, Karev Sakhnin reported that they had written a "Family Literacy" booklet in Hebrew and Arabic to be distributed to professionals.

It is important to note that other than planning to continue training professionals in the community, some of the programs were planned from the start in a way that would ensure that professionals would continue to disseminate the knowledge in the community. By training the early childhood workers, the programs implemented by NCJW, the Benjamin Library and AJEEC have created a channel through which they can continue to disseminate knowledge to parents and children.

Alongside the steps that have already been taken to ensure the continuation of the programs, we identified two key measures that are crucial to the survival of programs but have not yet been fully implemented.

Multiple, long-term funding sources: One of the most essential factors for a program to be sustainable is funding sources to support the project in the long-term. Note that the securing of alternative funding can be one of the by-products of effective marketing (see above).

Providing training for staff members in program-related topics to attain high levels of expertise: One of the factors proven to help programs survive is the development of expertise among the staff and directors, through in-service training and instruction. As noted, the staff received training and guidance, but it was found to be insufficient and some staff members reported of the need for more knowledge of the material taught in the Initiative. The need for such training is particularly salient following the consolidation of the core approach. Since not all of the program facilitators and directors have a background in literacy, devising a training program and intensifying their expertise would be a further step toward correct implementation of the guidelines formulated in the collaborative learning.

9. The Family Literacy Initiative: Issues and Challenges

Between the first and third years of the program, the learning collaborative was set up to establish shared principles and practices for the FLI. In the third year, the Initiative reached over 300 families and some 100 early childhood workers in underprivileged communities in Israel. The programs succeeded in raising the participants' awareness of the importance of promoting literacy and language for very young children and knowledge about how to enhance literacy activities at home and in daycare centers and preschools. They also made an important contribution to the development of methods for implementing early childhood literacy programs in Israel that can be widely used by other organizations.

In conclusion, the following are among the implications of the findings for ways of strengthening the program as the organizations pursue efforts to sustain the program and to disseminate it more broadly.

- ◆ ***Continued consolidation of the intervention approach:*** The program directors noted the need to continue to work together to further consolidate the intervention approach and their expertise in this area. Further meetings of the group could contribute to this process. For example, the possibility of creating a more unified curriculum with mandatory topics to be included in all family literacy programs was raised. Still, alongside the endeavor to create a core-shared approach, it is also important that the organizations continue to adapt their specific programs to their particular organizational context, participants' needs, and so forth.
- ◆ ***Providing program staff with additional training:*** The directors noted the need for further training of facilitators regarding the family literacy approach. This is particularly essential for the programs whose staff members have a background mainly in early childhood and not necessarily in literacy development. As noted by some of the directors, thought should be given to setting up a training program led by a professional or an organization specializing in this area.
- ◆ ***Finding ways to increase participation:*** Program staff reported difficulties in recruiting participants and ensuring participation throughout the program. In further program development, it is important to continue to deal with these challenges. Some possible strategies include better "marketing" about the importance of family literacy, closer ties with other community services for the purpose of referrals, and finding ways to make it easier for mothers to attend without their other children.
- ◆ ***Focus on the defined target population of the program:***
 - Over the three years of the pilot, there was an increase in the number of participating families from a lower socioeconomic background. The importance of actually reaching the population for which the programs have been designed must be emphasized. The study findings, which reveal that the perceived contributions were greater among parents with lower education and employment characteristics (e.g., Bedouin mothers), underline the importance of focusing on this population.
 - Similarly, during the pilot, there was increasing focus on children from birth to 3. It is important for this trend, which is in keeping with the Initiative goals, to continue.
- ◆ ***Addressing the needs of children 18 months and younger:*** Parents and early childhood workers reported that greater emphasis was put on activities and content suitable for children aged 2-3, and less for infants up to eighteen months. There is a need to strengthen the content for the younger children.
- ◆ ***Emphasizing the unique character of the program:*** Some of the programs had difficulty distinguishing the Initiative from other similar programs. It is important to make the unique objectives and goals clear to participants in these programs. Clarifying this distinction and structuring the programs could contribute to a more effective learning process.
- ◆ ***Continuity and dissemination of the program:*** The program is now at the stage where it is ripe for discussion about broader dissemination, taking advantage of the knowledge that has

accumulated and the strong points of the implementing organizations, which have enabled them to promote the subject significantly. The program directors brought up different ideas, such as incorporating the program within comprehensive initiatives, creating additional training programs, and disseminating knowledge about early childhood literacy among professionals in the community

It is important to develop a strategy for obtaining the funding and organizational support required to ensure continuation and expansion of the activities. Continued efforts to formulate the program goals and operating principles could help place them on the public agenda and gain support from professionals working in the community services. These efforts to ensure long-term funding and implementation could be done both in the context of the programs currently implemented and in the context of the Initiative in general.

In conclusion, UJA-Federation provided support to six major organizations in the field of early childhood development to enable them to introduce family literacy programs targeting ages birth to three, a critical age in language development that was underdeveloped for this age group. By piloting programs and then developing the "Learning Collaborative," which brought together key professionals, UJA and the implementing organizations have made a contribution to the field in Israel, which now has great potential to grow, particularly in light of the great interest in early childhood development in Israel, as evidenced, inter alia, by two government decisions made last year that could constitute a platform for further dissemination of the Initiative. The first decision concerns the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk, which, at the time of writing, has been allocated significant additional state funding for further expansion and implementation. The second decision concerns the recommendations of the Trachtenberg Committee for socioeconomic change, which was set up following the social protest that erupted in Israel in the summer of 2011. The committee has recommended that the government increase its commitment and responsibility for activities for children aged 3-4, gradually widening the age-bracket to include birth to 3. These steps indicate the current trend in Israeli society of placing greater emphasis on early childhood, which constitutes a foundation on which to continue to utilize and disseminate the knowledge of family literacy in early childhood.

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