



Special Topic: Shelby County *Books from Birth* Program

In Shelby County, many children start life at a disadvantage, making effective early intervention particularly important. Programs that set young children on a pathway to school readiness and academic success help to build an educated, productive future for our community.

Reading is a fundamental tool for learning, and acquiring an early love for reading increases the chances that children will become proficient readers later.^{1,2} Children whose parents read to them learn to take pleasure in books. They tend to develop richer vocabularies, arrive at kindergarten prepared to succeed, and read at grade level. They are also more likely to succeed in later grades, to graduate from high school on time, and to attend college.³⁻⁵

Research shows key differences in early home reading practices between low- and middle-income families. Low-income parents are less likely to read with children, and their children are less likely to enjoy reading.^{6,7} Poor children also have less access to children's books.^{8,9} Children's early access to books is a key factor in promoting kindergarten readiness and later academic success.¹⁰

Books from Birth: Spreading children’s books across Shelby County.

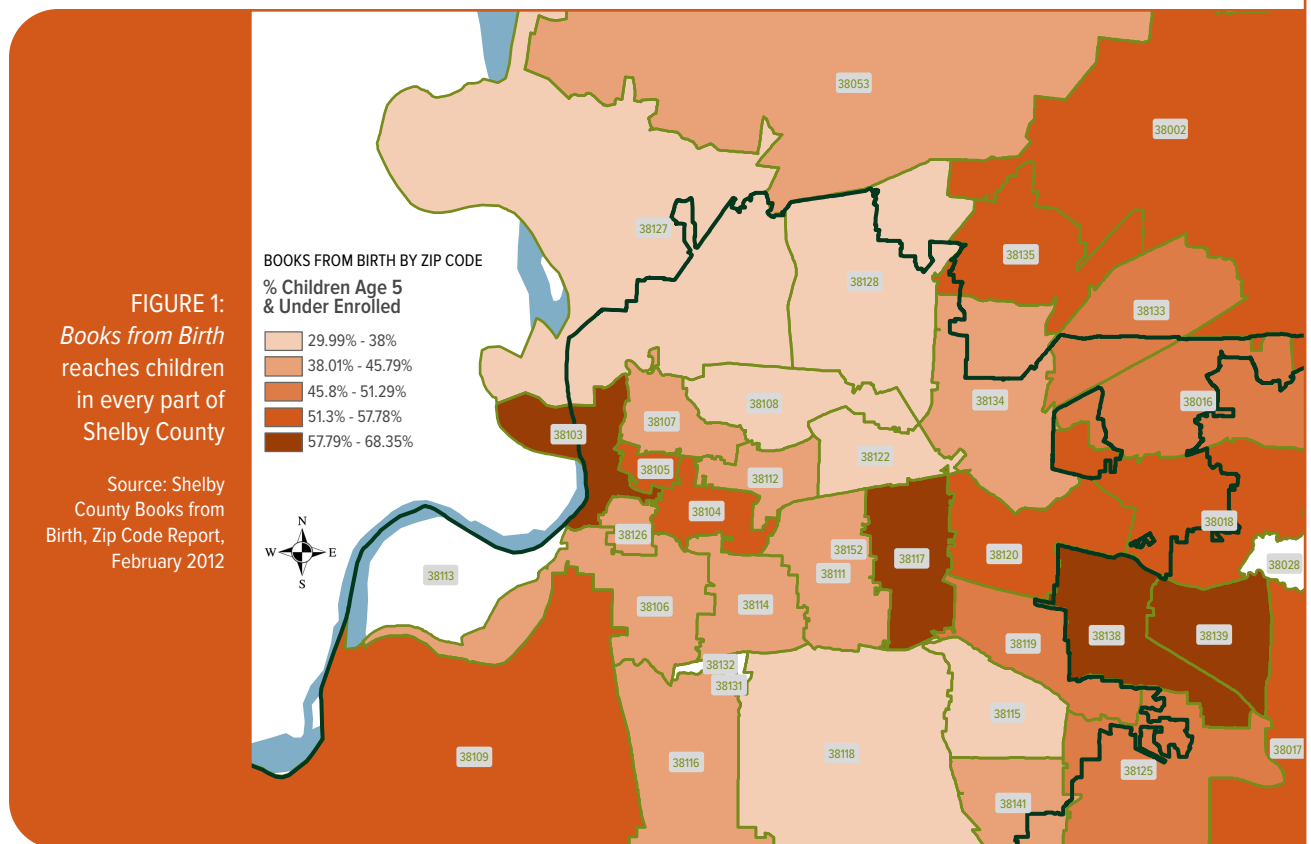
Increasing young children’s access to books is precisely the mission of the Shelby County *Books from Birth (BfB)* program, which delivers an age-appropriate book each month for the first five years of a child’s life. By increasing access to books, the *BfB* program aims to build a culture of early reading, promote stronger family connections, and help prepare all Shelby County children for kindergarten. The program is free, and all Shelby County children under age five are eligible.¹¹

Shelby County’s *BfB* program is the largest affiliate of Dolly Parton’s *Imagination Library (IL)*. The IL program was founded in 1995 in an effort to inspire an early love of reading and ensure all children have their own home libraries. Each year, a committee of early childhood education experts chooses developmentally

appropriate and high-quality books to be delivered by the program.¹²

Shelby County’s *BfB* program was started in 2005, with the help of the Governor’s *Books from Birth Foundation*, which matches funds raised by the Shelby County program.¹³ The result is an inexpensive early educational intervention targeting the needs of children in Shelby County.

Currently, the *BfB* program reaches almost half of all children from birth to age 5 in Shelby County,¹⁴ and another 34,000 children have graduated from the program. As FIGURE 1 shows, the program has reached children in every part of the county: every zip code has at least 30 percent of children under five enrolled in the program.



Is *Books from Birth* more than just a good idea?

A number of studies have asked parents in the program about the changes they see in their family's reading habits. Consistently, parents indicate that as a result of the program:

- They spent more time reading with children.
- Their comfort reading to children improved.
- Their children's interest in books increased.^{15,16}

These trends are particularly evident for low-income families and families enrolled in the program longer.^{17,18} Additionally, kindergarten teachers report that *BfB* children are better prepared when they reach school than non-participants.^{19,20}

Until recently, however, no evaluation had compared reading patterns in participating families to those of similar families who did not participate in the program. Also lacking was a rigorous assessment of the program's effect on kindergarten readiness, particularly for low-income children.

Over the past year, Memphis City Schools, The Urban Child Institute, and Shelby County

Books from Birth collaborated on a study designed to evaluate the effects of the *BfB* program. The evaluation addressed two main questions:

1. Do *BfB* families engage in better early reading habits than families who don't receive the books?
2. Do children in the *BfB* program have higher kindergarten readiness scores than other children after we take into account other factors like family income and pre-school experiences?

To answer these questions, information was collected on 389 children entering kindergarten in five Memphis City School (MCS) elementary schools at the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year. This information included

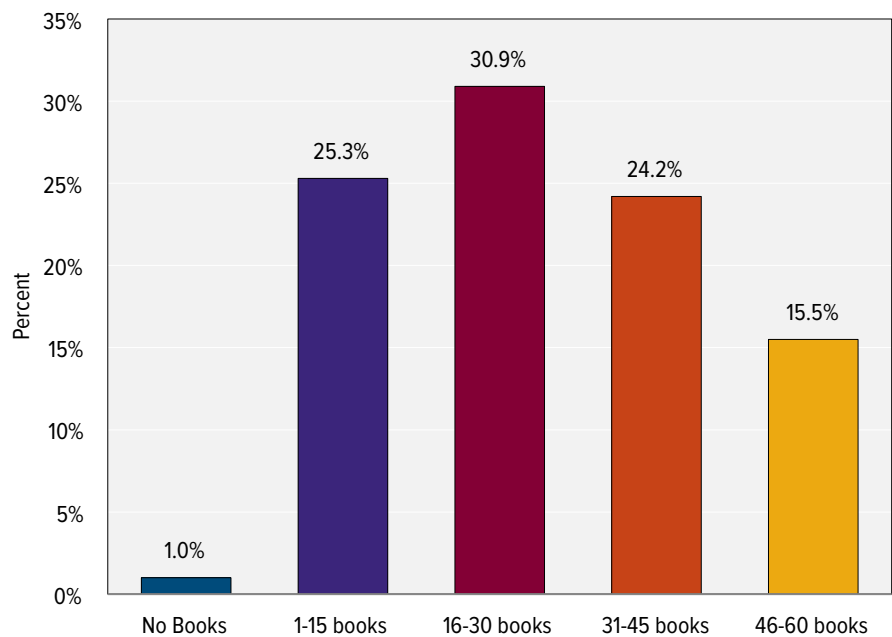
- Early home reading practices
- *Books from Birth* participation
- Children's preschool experiences
- Family income
- School readiness measures

Most *Books from Birth* participants received more than 15 *Imagination Library* Books.

Findings from the investigation show that the *BfB* program reached half of the new kindergartners in these schools. Both low-income and middle-income families took advantage of the program: 50 percent of low-income children and 60 percent of middle-income children were *BfB* participants. Most participating children received more than 15 *IL* books prior to entering kindergarten with as many as 15 percent of children receiving most of the 60 *IL* books (shown in FIGURE 2).

FIGURE 2:
How Many
Books Has Your
Child Received
from *Imagination
Library*?

Source:
Donahue S., Samiei,
SA, Sell, M, Imig, D, &
Bush, AJ. Books from
Birth Participation is
Associated with Better
Family Reading Habits
and Predicts School
Readiness. Unpublished
manuscript.



Books from Birth participants had more children’s books in their homes than non-participants.

The evaluation also indicates that *BfB* is a major source of children’s books in Shelby County. Participants had substantially more children’s books at home than non-participants. (See FIGURE 3.) This finding is important because studies show that children who have more books tend to have better academic outcomes.^{21,22} The current evaluation suggests that children with 26 or more books scored 15 points higher on the school readiness language scale than the district average.

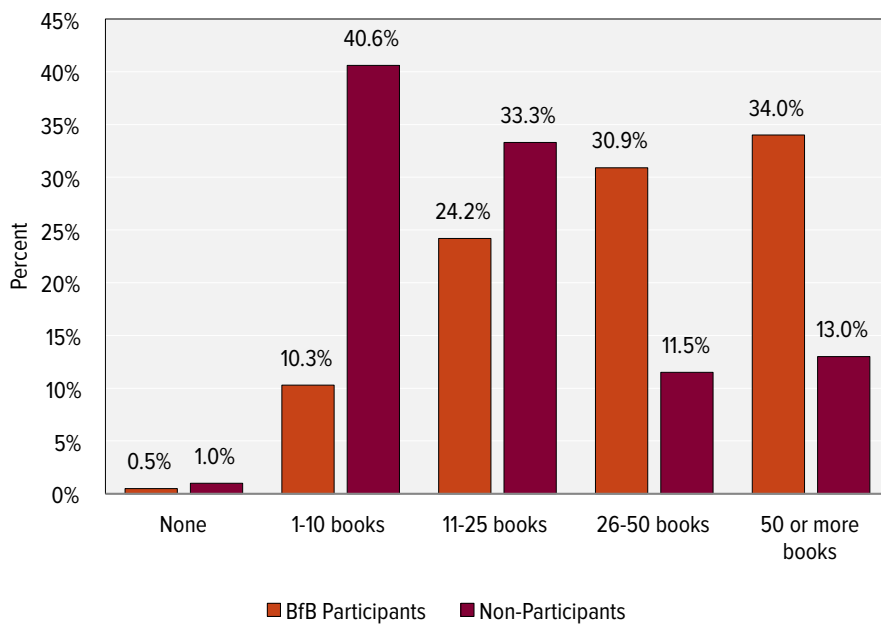


FIGURE 3:
How Many Young
Children’s Books
Do You Have in
Your Home?

Source:
Donahue S., Samiei,
SA, Sell, M, Imig, D, &
Bush, AJ. Books from
Birth Participation is
Associated with Better
Family Reading Habits
and Predicts School
Readiness. Unpublished
manuscript.

BfB families also reported stronger home reading habits than non-participating families. Parents were more likely to read with children, go to the library, talk about books, and sing the alphabet with their children. *BfB* parents were also more likely to be comfortable reading with their children and their children are more likely to enjoy shared reading.

Consistent with earlier findings, receipt of more *IL* books was associated with stronger program effects. Families that received 46-60 *IL* books had significantly higher family reading habit scores than families that received 1-15 *IL* books.

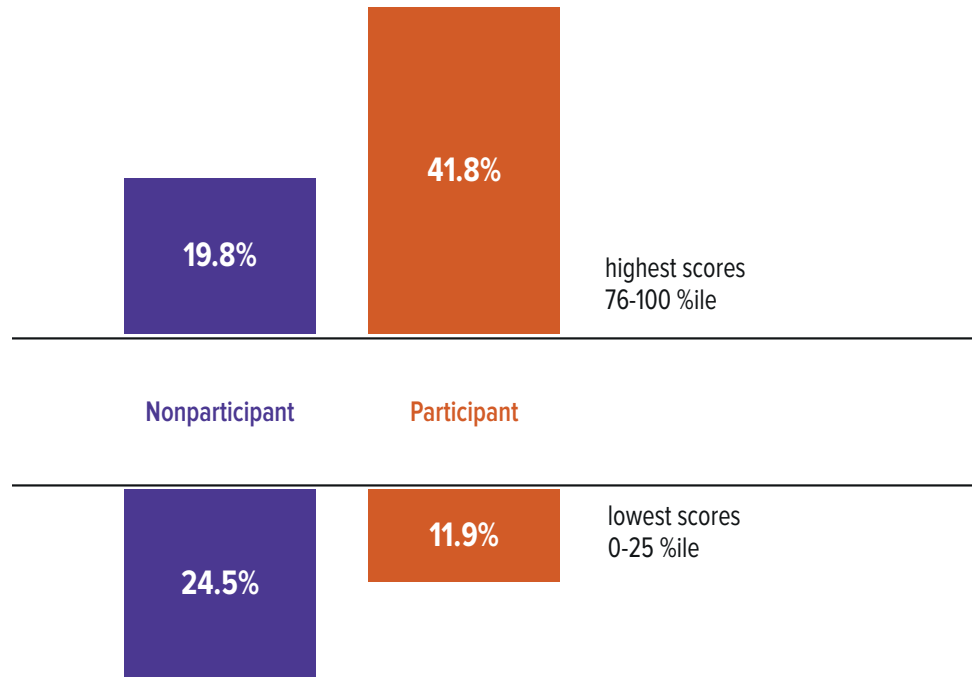
Books from Birth participants are better prepared for Kindergarten.

In addition to assessing family reading habits, this evaluation compared school readiness of children who participated in the program to children who did not. Previous research shows that kindergarten readiness predicts later academic success and well-being.

MCS teachers administer the Kindergarten Readiness Indicator (KRI) on the first day of school. The KRI was developed by the MCS to determine children's early math and language skills quickly and efficiently.²³ FIGURE 4 presents the distribution of KRI language readiness scores of *BfB* participants and non-participants. *BfB* participants were almost four times more likely to score in the highest quartile on the school readiness language scale than the lowest quartile, while non-participants were equally likely to fall into the highest and lowest quartile.

FIGURE 4:
Kindergarten
Readiness
Indicator Language
Scores by *Books
from Birth*
Participation

Source:
Donahue S., Samiei,
SA, Sell, M, Imig, D, &
Bush, AJ. *Books from
Birth Participation is
Associated with Better
Family Reading Habits
and Predicts School
Readiness.* Unpublished
manuscript



Regardless of family income, children benefit from *Books from Birth*.

The *BfB* program seems to be beneficial for children regardless of family income. Overall, children in middle-income families were less likely to have low school readiness scores. However, within each income group, *BfB* participants had stronger scores than non-participants. As FIGURE 5 indicates, both the average KRI language score, and the distribution of scores around the mean were stronger for the group of *BfB* children.

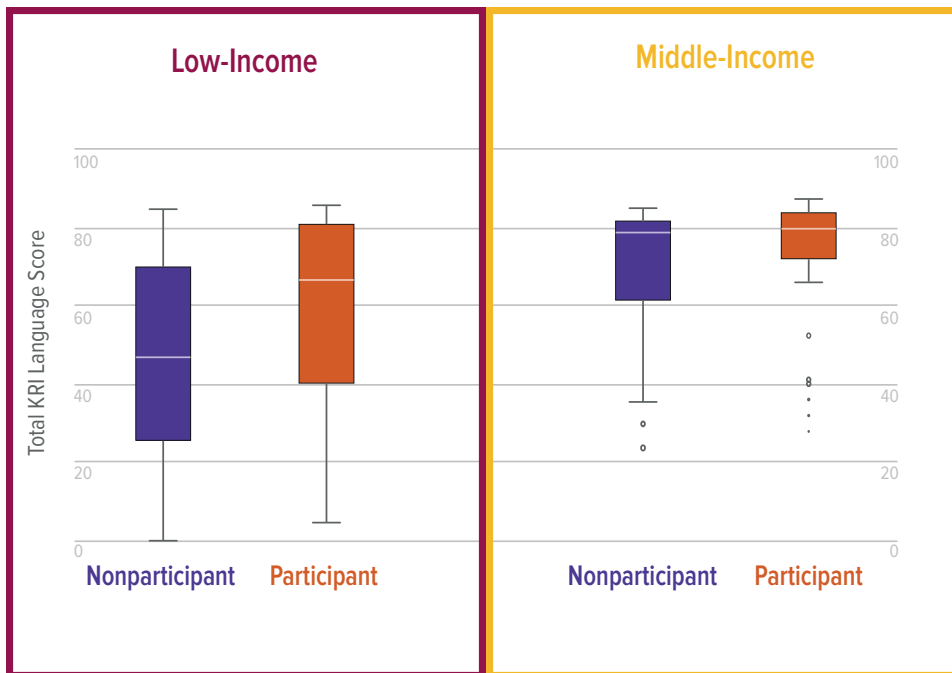


FIGURE 5: Kindergarten Readiness Indicator Language Scores by *Books from Birth* Participation and Income

Source: Donahue S., Samiei, SA, Sell, M, Imig, D, & Bush, AJ. *Books from Birth* Participation is Associated with Better Family Reading Habits and Predicts School Readiness. Unpublished manuscript.

Shelby County's *Books from Birth* program is associated with better family reading habits and higher school readiness scores.

In fact, participating in the *BfB* program statistically predicted better school readiness language scores, even after accounting for other factors, including families' reading habits, child's age at kindergarten entry, preschool experience, and family income. After accounting for each of these factors, a child in the program is likely to score 8 points higher on the KRI language measure. (*BfB* participation was also associated with stronger math readiness scores, but the results were not statistically significant after accounting for other factors.)

Numerous studies have followed large cohorts of children into adulthood. These studies indicate that maintaining a culture of reading at home is associated with improved school readiness and better educational outcomes. These home characteristics are even more crucial for fragile families.²⁴⁻²⁶

Armed with an understanding of how to strengthen their children's early reading skills, parents can build home literacy environments that promote school readiness and academic success.^{27,28} The *Books from Birth* program is an effective early intervention program that provides families with valuable reading materials, fostering a culture of early reading and making a difference in the lives of Shelby County's youngest children.

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