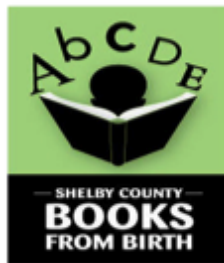




**An Evaluation of the Shelby County *Books from Birth* Program**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



## **An Evaluation of the Shelby County *Books from Birth* Program**

### ***Effective early childhood interventions promote academic success & improved well-being.***

- Improving the educational experiences of our children, beginning at birth, will lead to a healthier community. Healthier communities have lower healthcare costs and more productive workforces.
- Early childhood experiences influence early brain development and contribute to later academic success and lifetime well-being.
  - Enriching early experiences lead to early language development, school readiness, grade progression, on-time graduation, and college attendance.<sup>1-4</sup>
  - Children less prepared for school at kindergarten are more likely to be held back in school, need special education, and fail to graduate from high school.<sup>5</sup>
- High-quality early childhood educational investments are cost effective strategies for improving academic success and promoting lifetime health.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Early childhood risk factors undermine education and well-being in Shelby County.***

- Tennessee ranks 41<sup>st</sup> out of the 50 states on indicators of children’s well-being, and Shelby County performs among the worst counties in Tennessee. <sup>7,8</sup>
  - Children in the City of Memphis have higher-risk profiles, including poverty, low social support, and high levels of parental stress, than children in suburban Shelby County. <sup>8</sup>
  - Evaluations of high-quality, early-education programs demonstrate that these programs help to prepare young children for kindergarten, but there are not enough high-quality programs available for all the children in our community.<sup>7-9</sup>

### ***Participation in Books from Birth may support educational success and improved well-being.***

- Existing evaluations of *Imagination Library (IL)/Books from Birth (BfB) Programs* suggest that participation in the program is associated with changes in family early literacy practices, including increased:
  - Time parents spent reading with children,
  - Levels of children’s interest in books,
  - Levels of parents’ comfort reading to children, and
  - Parental awareness of children’s reading levels.<sup>10-12</sup>
- Teachers in Tennessee rated *BfB* participants as slightly more prepared for pre-K and kindergarten than nonparticipants.<sup>13,14</sup>
- However, weaknesses in the previous research designs limit the strength and generalizability of these findings.

### ***The current evaluation.***

The Urban Child Institute and Memphis City Schools evaluation of *BfB* was designed to ask if participation in the program is positively associated with school readiness. Using a quasi-

experimental design, we compared *BfB* participants with a matched cohort of non-participants. Specific research questions were:

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

To answer these questions, information collected on 389 children entering kindergarten this fall in five MCS elementary schools that reflect the district.

- School readiness was measured by teachers with the Kindergarten Readiness Indicator.<sup>15</sup>
- Parents provided the following information at kindergarten registration: early home reading practices, *BfB* participation, children's pre-K experiences, and family income.

### ***Study findings.***

1. ***BfB families have stronger early childhood reading habits.*** They are more likely to:
  - a. Read with children, go to the library, talk about books, sing the ABCs.
  - b. Enjoy reading with children and their children are more likely to enjoy reading.
  - c. The more books a family receives from *BfB*, the more likely they are to report better family reading habits and greater comfort reading to children.
2. ***Children who receive BfB have stronger reading readiness scores.***
  - a. While nonparticipants are equally likely to fall in the top and bottom quartiles of reading readiness scores, participants are 4 times as likely to be in the highest quartile of reading readiness scores.
  - b. Both low-income and middle-income students have higher reading readiness scores if they participate in *BfB*.
  - c. Among children with fewer books in the home, *BfB* participants score 11 points higher on reading readiness (on an 86 point scale) than non-participants.
3. ***BfB supports Pre-school education.***
  - a. Among children in center-based care (including Pre-K and Head Start), *BfB* participants are 8 points higher on reading readiness.
  - b. Among children not in center-based care, *BfB* kids are 14 points higher on reading readiness.
4. After accounting for family reading habits, child's age in months at kindergarten entry, pre-school experience, and family income, ***BfB kids have reading readiness scores 8 points higher than non-participants.***
  - a. *BfB* also has a positive effect on math readiness scores, but the results are not statistically significant after accounting for the other factors.

In sum: ***the Books from Birth program supports school readiness.***

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