

Based on the results reviewed in this report, it is apparent that Dolly Parton's Imagination Library's first 18 months in Middletown have proven a stunning success and that the program has the potential to evolve into one of the most vital assets in our community. Whether these successes continue as the project increases its enrollment to more and more families over coming years will be the true test of its worth.

MIDDLETOWN (OH) COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Children must be ready to succeed when they get to school (cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically) before they can learn there... And they need to have high quality learning opportunities, beginning at birth and continuing in school, and during out of school time, including summers, in order to sustain learning gains and not lose ground.

**EARLY WARNING!  
WHY READING BY THE END OF  
THE THIRD GRADE MATTERS  
A KIDS COUNT SPECIAL REPORT  
FROM THE ANNIE E.  
CASEY FOUNDATION**

**"If I can help just one child realize his or her dreams, then all of my dreams will have come true."**

A white, cursive signature of the name 'Dolly' is written over a light blue background.





## DOLLY'S IMAGINATION LIBRARY - RESEARCH

When Dolly first launched the Imagination Library in her hometown, no one really gave much thought to researching the programs impact on children and families. The reason was quite simple – the incredible number of stories shared by parents was more than enough evidence to affirm the impact of the program. Moreover, Dolly was paying for it so if she believed, then so be it!

However over the last 10 years, as the program grew from one small county in east Tennessee to being supported locally in almost 2,000 communities in three countries, the need for additional research grew as well. The challenge has been and will always be how to assess impact without overreaching or falling short of a realistic research objective.

### THE CURRENT APPROACH ▶

Back in 2003, just two short years after the Imagination Library began to spread its wings across the country, High Scope Research Educational Foundation released the first multi-community study on the impact of the Imagination Library. In conjunction with the study, High Scope also compiled a comprehensive literature review of a history of studies which all came to the same conclusion –the single most important activity to prepare a child for a life of learning was to read frequently with the child, preferably every single day.

In addition, studies such as the M.D.R. Evans et al point to the dramatic correlation between the number of books in the home and future academic achievement. In a study of 27 nations, the researchers concluded that “Children growing up in homes with many books get 3 years more schooling than children from bookless homes, independent of their parents’ education, occupation, and class.”

The literature affirming the impact of the number of books in the home and the benefits of reading frequently to preschool children has guided The Dollywood Foundation through a major phase of research. The objective is simple: since the benefits of reading frequently to your child are well researched, then the research objective for the Imagination Library is to ask, “Does the program inspire families to read more frequently to their children?”

### READ MORE ▶

Although more easily discounted than other approaches, simply asking parents how behaviors have changed in their home remains a valuable source of information.

The aforementioned High Scope Study was a parent survey conducted in three communities across the USA. The study yielded three important conclusions: between 66% and 75% of the families read more to their children after receiving the Imagination Library; the lower the families income, the greater the impact on frequency, and for 34% of the families, the Imagination Library was the primary source of books in the home.

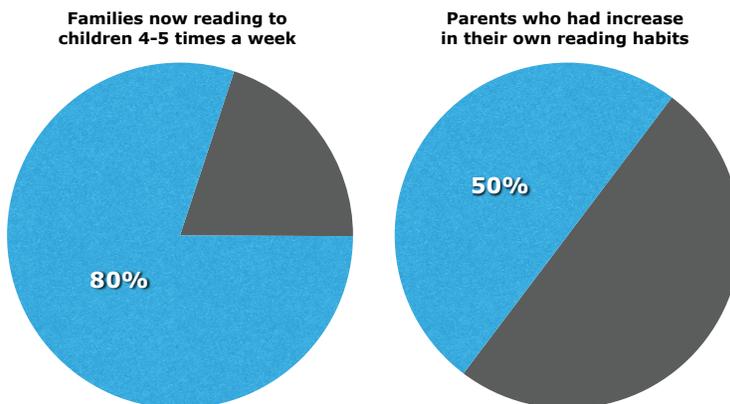
Many local research surveys have followed the High Scope lead over the years. The Cleveland County Partnership for Children (NC) reported that the number of families reading to their child every day jumped 23% after the introduction of the Imagination Library. Allegan County, MI reported that 46% of their families now read more frequently to their children.

In a 2008 study, the United Way in Wichita Falls, TX reported that 82.9% of those surveyed said they now read more frequently to their children. In May of 2011, a unique survey of 500 families in the United Kingdom revealed that 80% of the families receiving the Imagination Library now read to their children at least 4-5 times per week (Figure A). Moreover 50% of the parents reported an increase in their own reading habits! (Figure A).

Figure A

### United Kingdom, May 2011

Report of 500 families who took survey

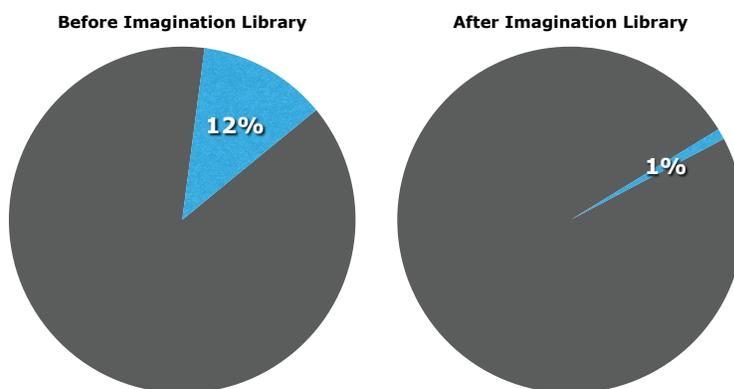


The impact can also be examined from the opposite perspective. In 2011, The Willard Public Library in Battle Creek, MI revealed that the percentage of families who never read to their child dropped from 12% to 1% (Figure B).

Figure B

### Battle Creek, MI 2011

Percentage of Families that Never Read to Their Children



So the next question is "how much more reading occurs in the families?"

In 2008, the United Way of Southwest Minnesota reported 10% of area families read to their children only 1-2 times per week. After the introduction of the Imagination Library, the same families were surveyed again and every family showed an increase in how often they read together. The survey also revealed that families previously reading together 5-6 times each week increased by 3% while daily readers jumped by 15%. After involvement with the Imagination Library, every family involved has shown an increase in reading with their children!

In 2007, The Learning to Grow Project based at the University of Hawaii released a document which revealed a 30% increase in the number of families reading daily to the child.

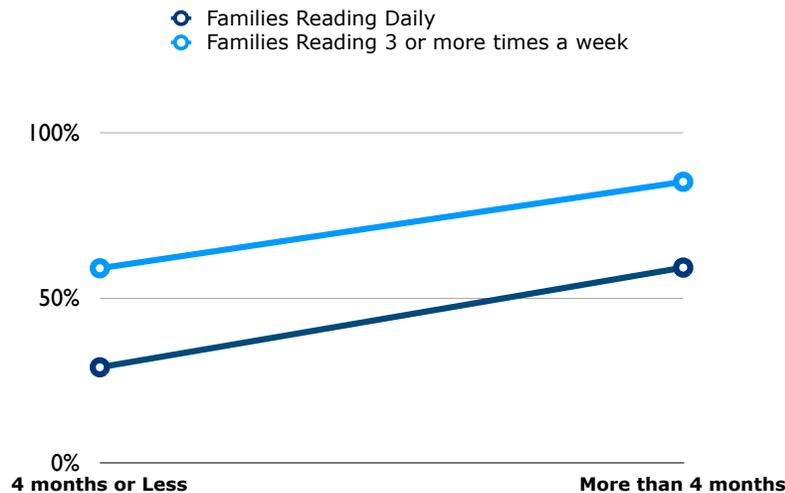
Perhaps one of the most interesting local research projects was conducted by the Le Moyne College Center for Urban and Regional Applied Research. They concluded that the longer a child is enrolled in the Imagination Library the more likely there will be an increase in the frequency of reading with the child.

Comparing those enrolled for four months or less to those enrolled for longer than four months, the researchers found that the percentage of those families reading daily leapt from 29% to 59.2% (Figure C). Furthermore those families reading three or more times per week increased from 59% to 85.2% (Figure C).

Figure C

**Le Moyne Center for Urban and Regional Applied Research**

The longer a child is enrolled in the program, the more likely an increase in the frequency of reading.



Another fascinating dimension to this study was the examination of children not born in the United States. These children are less likely to be read to on a daily basis. However this research revealed that after a few months the native and non-native experiences were nearly identical – in other words the non-native children were being read to as often as those children born in the United States.

**BEYOND PARENTS** ▶

Many are interested in additional ways to assess impact. From school readiness scores to third party assessments of children’s learning attributes, these endeavors represent new opportunities to affirm the impact of Dolly’s Imagination Library.

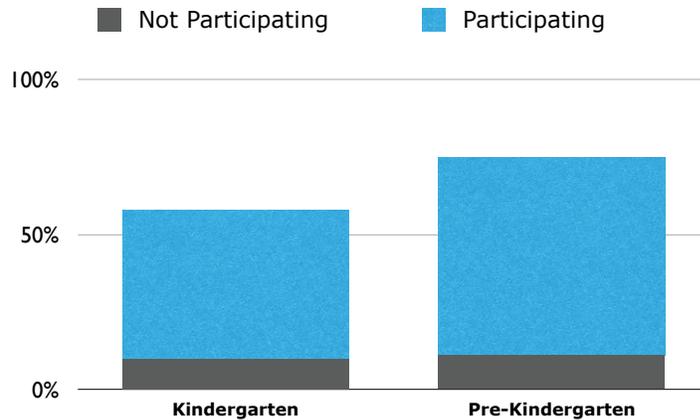
The first study to approach research in this way was the 2007 study conducted by the Tennessee Board of Regents (Figure D). This study focused on the assessments of 350 kindergarten and 150 pre-kindergarten teachers. The key finding here is the difference between children participating in the program and those who did not. Of those participating in the Imagination Library 48% of the kindergarten and 64% of the Pre-K teachers said these students performed better than expected or much better than

expected. For those not participating in the Imagination Library, these numbers were 10% and 11% respectively.

Figure D

### Tennessee Board of Regents 2007

The difference in performance between Pre-K and Kindergarten Children who participated in the Imagination Library and children who did not participate



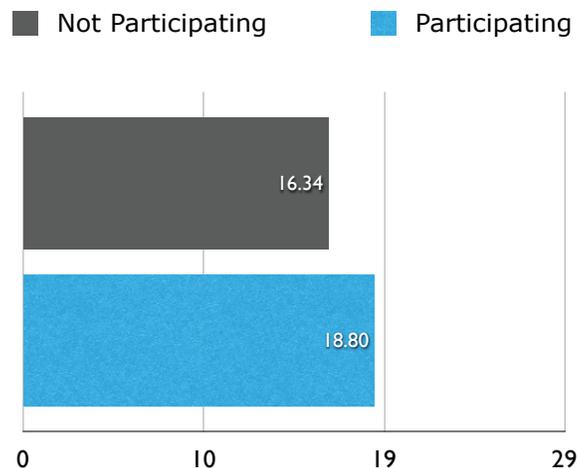
In a newly released study by the Middletown Community Foundation (OH) test score data came to the forefront:

The local school district released results on the kindergarten literacy scores for fall 2011. Those children participating in the Imagination Library continued their march to better scores. (Figure E) They scored on average 18.8 on the 29-point test (19.0 is considered adequately prepared for kindergarten). This is 15 percent higher than the average score by students who were not in the Imagination Library (16.34 points).

Figure E

### Middletown Community Foundation (OH)

Kindergarten literacy test score results for children participating in the Imagination Library compared to children who are not participating in the program.



## THE FUTURE ▶

The studies referenced in this document are just a fraction of many research projects conducted at the local level. All of them point to the same general conclusions –more families read more often to their children and, in turn, this leads to children who are better prepared to learn in school.

Clearly, more assessment is in order, particularly those studies which examine test scores, vocabulary and learning attributes. More local projects addressing these objectives are already underway and The Dollywood Foundation is embarking on a multi-country research design over the next couple of years.

However it is still vitally important that the parents' perspectives continue to be surveyed. While such an approach may be deemed less rigorous, it is not less important. Dolly's homegrown effort is now a part of thousands of communities' early childhood strategies and is increasingly a vital part of educational policy for states, provinces and territories. Research will continue to evolve in a more complex and sophisticated direction. However for all of us, there is no better affirmation than the letters, emails, social network posts and phone calls which all evoke a similar impression:

*"In the beginning, I was EXCITED on book days. I looked forward to the end of that day no matter what therapies, doctors' appointments, surgeries and uncertainties we were facing, to be able to share a new book with my baby. As she got older, this excitement transferred to her and SHE checked the mailbox for her book at the beginning of each month. Fast forward to this month, Jade's (not her real name) is now a healthy, growing, THRIVING almost 5 year old. She has overcome all medical obstacles and had her feeding tube and trach removed all within the past 2 years. Looking at her, you could never tell (aside from her physical scars) that she went through so much in her life.*

*This past Monday, we received Jade's last book from the program. It was very happy and bittersweet. That night as she was getting ready for bed, we opened the book to read it and I noticed the letter from Ms. Parton. Again, I was brought to tears as I turned each page.*

*I seldom write letters to corporations or organizations but I want you to know just HOW MUCH the Imagination Library means to families like us. "*

### ***Mother's email to the Imagination Library, January 2012***

All of the studies referenced in this document are available from The Dollywood Foundation by visiting [imaginationlibrary.com](http://imaginationlibrary.com). Simply **choose your country**, click on **Our Team** and then click on **Contact Your Regional Director**. The Regional Directors will provide you the research you seek.