

Public media: Connecting family learning across settings

As public media stations with outreach departments, you play a powerful part in connecting families with resources, local activities, and events that cultivate children's learning about the topics that excite them most.

The Families Learning Across Boundaries (FamLAB) Project surveyed 1,550 parents and 600 pre-K through grade 8 teachers in the United States about how they support 3–12-year-old children's learning in their communities. We've taken select findings from this research to come up with suggestions that build on the important work you're doing to support this learning.

30 local public media stations across the U.S. have received funding from the CPB-PBS Ready to Learn (RTL) initiative, a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education. RTL expands families' access to content and programs that promote early learning and school readiness with topics like science and literacy.

What we found

Kids ages 3–12 are already using media to deepen their interests and master skills. 74% of them search the Internet for information related to their interests, and 73% consult online learning tutorials to get better at a skill or activity. However, how kids use media sometimes differs: those from lower-income families are more likely to search the Internet with parents, siblings, or peers (as opposed to alone) and those from higher-income families are more likely to use media to create things.

What to do

Facilitate family learning around media.

Resources like RTL's PBS KIDS Family & Community Learning (FCL) offer materials and guidelines for local stations to host STEM-focused workshops that combine kids' interest in media with hands-on intergenerational learning. The workshops are designed to empower parents as partners in STEM learning and encourage intergenerational explorations at home. Want more information? See this article about WGBH's success implementing ScratchJr FCL parent-child coding workshops in Boston, MA on *Medium*.

What we found

While children from higher-income families are more likely than their peers to visit a greater variety of spaces designated for learning—including museums, sports facilities, and libraries—children of all backgrounds spend about equal time in malls, stores, restaurants, cafes, parks, churches, and in transit. Children from lower-income families are more likely to spend time in laundromats.

What to do

Create learning opportunities in the places where kids you are trying to reach already spend time.

Turn settings like laundromats and stores into learning spaces by setting up a reading corner or a mobile science lab or by offering free screenings of PBS KIDS content with related hands-on activities. Looking for inspiration? Check out WQED's Wash & Learn program in Pittsburgh, PA, and WCVE's partnership with the Market@25th in Richmond, VA.

What we found

More than half of parents of 3–12-year-olds believe there aren't enough affordable, convenient activities for children in their communities.



What to do

Team up to offer more programs in your community.

Partner with public libraries, school districts, and afterschool programs (e.g., YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs of America) to offer enrichment activities. RTL's [PBS KIDS Out-of-School Resources](#) include curricular program packages about science, math, and more in both English and Spanish. These programs can be easily set up in various settings. Curious about what this looks like? Check out [WFSU's](#) partnerships with local schools to run RTL camps all year in northern Florida.

What we found

When it comes to finding and choosing out-of-school activities for their kids, parents are more likely to ask teachers and school staff for suggestions, compared to consulting search engines and social media. Parents are even less likely to consult local news/events websites, parenting websites or blogs, print materials (like newspapers), and email listservs.

What to do

Work with trusted resources to reach parents.

If you want to promote workshops or other resources your station has to offer, reach out to local school districts or teachers to help you promote them with families. If you are up for trying something more innovative, explore a service like [Bright by Text](#) to send information about local resources right to parents' phones. See how [WFYI](#) is using it to connect with caregivers of young children in and around Indianapolis, IN.

Understand the communities you serve

The FamLAB findings speak to broader national trends about children's learning opportunities, but only you can determine the particular needs of your community, as well as how effective your programs are at reaching and affecting local families. If your station isn't already doing so, invest a little effort into conducting research, which doesn't have to be fancy, lengthy, or expensive. Research can take the form of online or paper surveys, interviews, focus groups, and program observations. Any data about the families you serve is better than no data.

To get started, review exemplars of RTL recipient stations' research initiatives at [PBS Learning Media's research page](#). Reach out to faculty and research staff at local universities and colleges for help evaluating your existing programs, identifying needs in your community, or partnering on a research project with your station. Professional researchers, particularly in education, psychology, and media/communication fields, are often eager to help public media professionals who directly serve local children and families.

Since your community's needs can change over time, it's important to check in periodically. Seek feedback from parents, kids, and community partners whenever you can, and do so at various points of your projects.

For more about the FamLAB project and findings, visit:

joanganzcooneycenter.org/famlab.

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