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Caregivers' Perceptions of the Imagination Library and Its Impact on Young Children

Emma Shorten '25

Community Partner – United Way Faculty Advisor — Professor Elise Castillo



Background

It is reported that 36% of children in CT are below the basic reading level with only 35% showing proficiency/advanced levels. I am researching the effects that the Imagination Library program has on the Hartford community. I will be focusing on the function of the Imagination Library program through United Way.

Imagination Library

Imagination Library is a children's literacy program founded by Dolly Parton. Originally starting in her hometown, Tennessee, Dolly made efforts to mail books to millions of children across the world in 1995. The program has made great strides in the past years by expanding to the United Kingdom (2007), Canada (2006), and all across the United States (2000) while still striving to increase the number of books donated along with more international efforts/expansion. Imagination Library was created to help children from ages zero to five have access to high-quality picture books to improve their literacy skills for elementary school readiness. There are many children who may not have access to such books at home and find this program incredibly resourceful. Furthermore, studies have shown that it is beneficial to a child's development toward the early stages to engage in home-based reading interactions, which is associated with better literacy growth by the ages of 5-6.

United Way

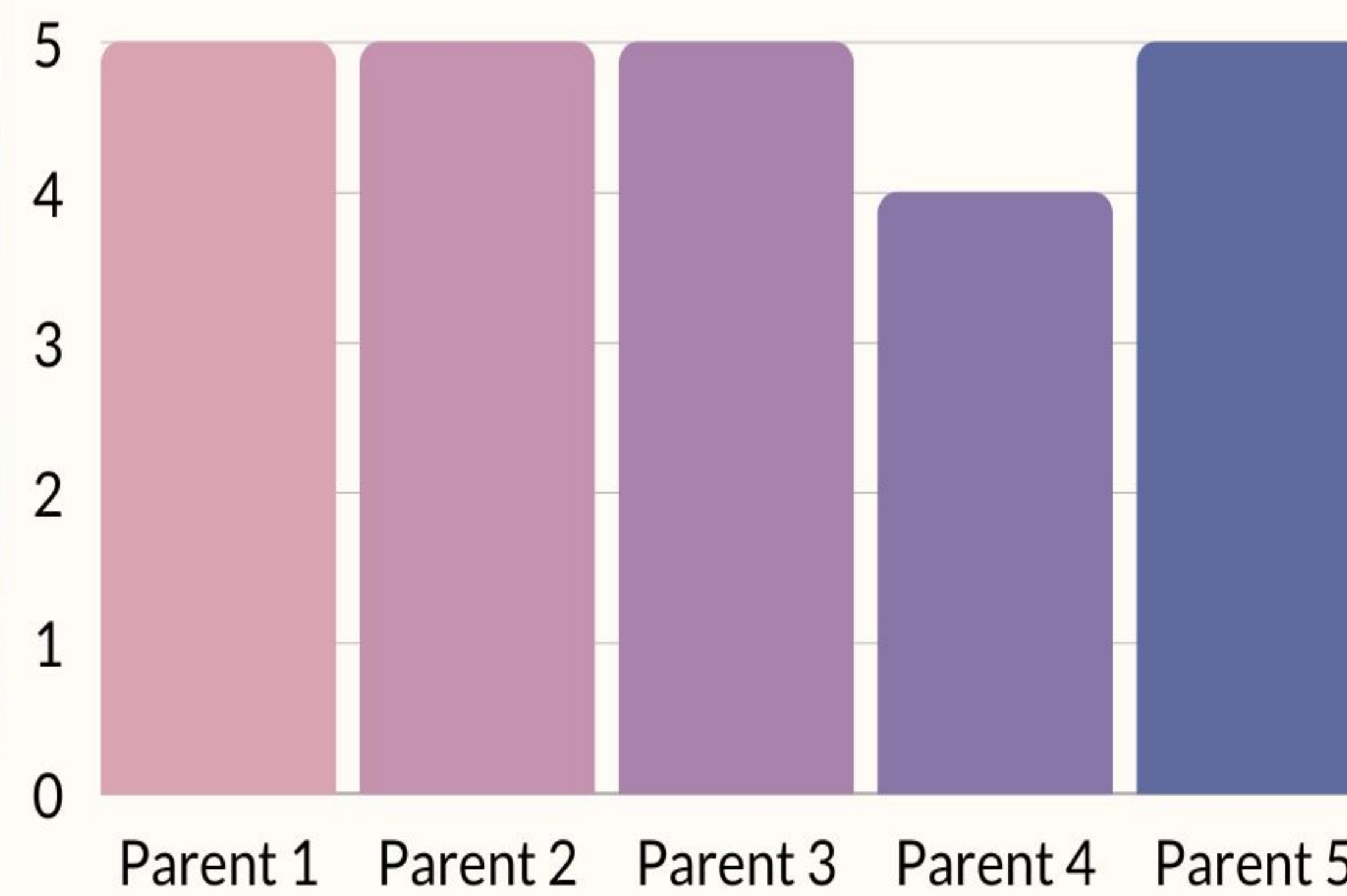
In Hartford alone, there are approximately 7,000 children receiving books through this program across all 10 Hartford zip codes. United way began distributing books in 2020 and is partnered with 50+ programs and schools, with over 50,000 books distributed to Hartford families. 64% of family participants are living in poverty and/or are asset-limited, income-constrained, employed (ALICE) families in which United Way help navigate these constraints and additionally introduces families to the Imagination Library program.

Research Questions

1. What are the parents' perceptions of how their participation in Imagination Library has enhanced their child's motivation and confidence toward reading?
2. Furthermore, In what way has participation in the Imagination Library program contributed towards the time caregivers and children spend reading together?
3. Do parents perceive that duration of program participation associated with better literacy outcomes?

Key Findings

HOW ENTHUSIASTIC DOES YOUR CHILD SEEM NOW COMPARED TO WHEN THEY STARTED READING WITH YOU?



Caregivers Favorite Memories

"He's just fallen to the level of obsessed with trucks now, but I think it's because learning about the mechanics has sparked this interest...we will be out and about and he will point to trucks and repeat lines from the book."

"We aren't a Spanish speaking family at all, but i'm trying to teach him...One book Imagination Library sent him had both English and Spanish... I am learning with him!"

How do you feel Imagination Library has impacted your child's reading?

"My son has speech delay where he doesn't pronounce certain letters...I think that reading has helped him because he is listening."

"My oldest starts reading the pictures. Just by seeing the illustration they are imagining and using it to create their own stories which was great for me."

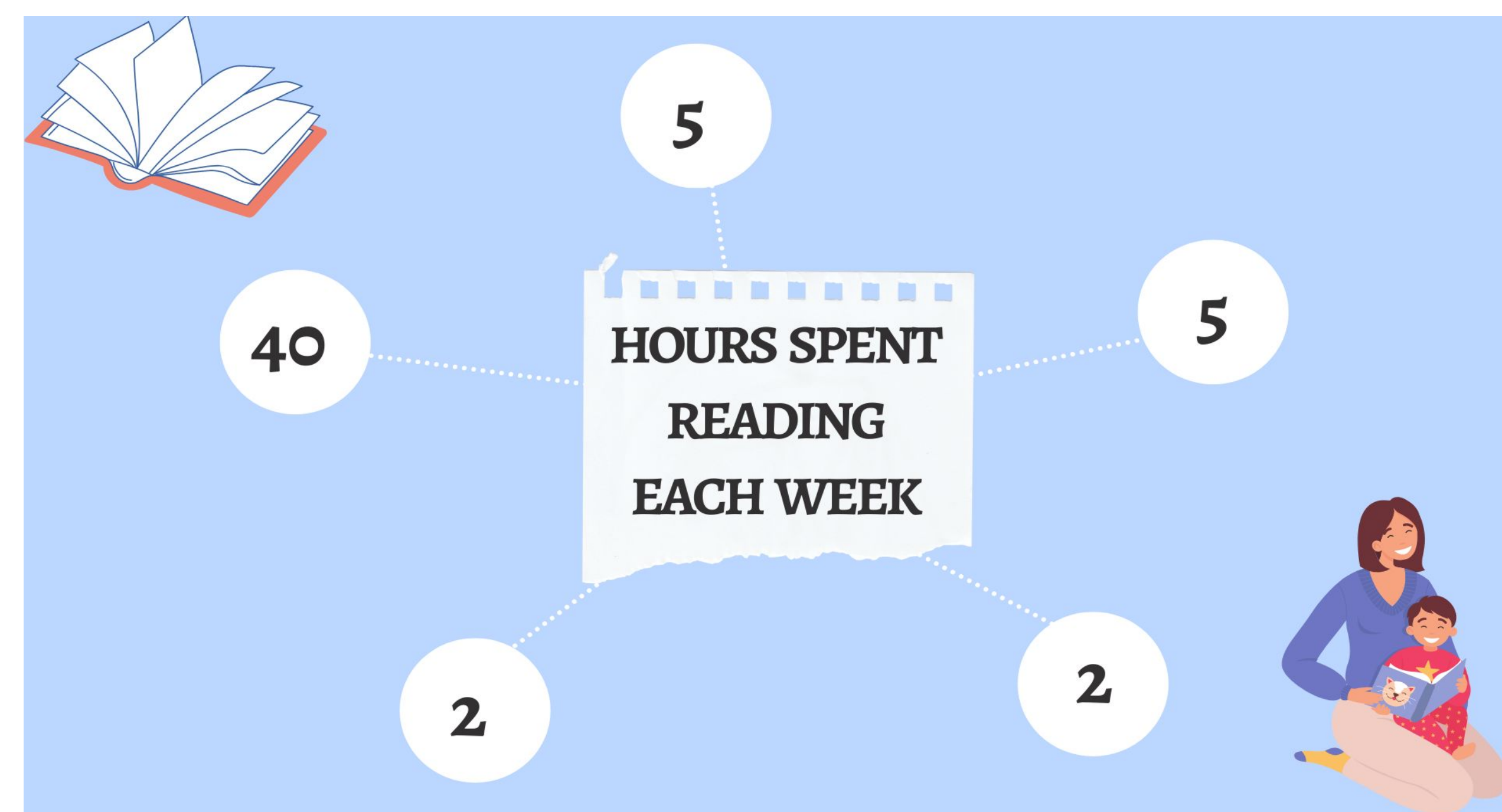
Does your child look forward to the arrival of a book?

"Oh, significantly... Getting the books and being able to read them is awesome. When mail comes he asks "mom do I have a book!" So he definitely looks forward to books coming in."

What three words you would use to describe the time reading with your child?

"Exciting, adventurous, and commitment..."

"Bonding, Illuminating, and joyful..."



Methodology

- Lead ~20-minute interviews collecting mainly qualitative data from the caregivers themselves
- Emailed list of families involved in program directly outlining my research questions,
- Compensated 25\$
- Interviewees represented the demographics of United Way's Imagination Library program
- Conducted 5 total interviews, most via Zoom
- Asked questions aimed for numerical data and testimonies
- Compiled enriching answers about how much caregivers perceptions
- Analyzed and transcribed audio files

Limitations

- Method of outreach → compressed time
- Timing of International Review Board (IRB) approval and holidays
- Meetings being canceled, rescheduled, and/or missed
- Duration of interviews varied
- Hearing from families across Hartford zip codes
- Conducted interviews in English therefore did not reach non-English speaking participants of program

Next Steps

- The most popular comment when asked "How can an imagination library make your experience even better?" **was a desire for more bilingual books.** Caregivers enjoyed receiving books in both Spanish and English and would like to see more of them!
- Findings will add to the United Way's broader research database on the Imagination Library and may **assist in securing future grant funding.**
- Interviewing/surveying bilingual families may **provide an important perspective** on the development of literacy skills in both English and Spanish.

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