

One Children's Librarian: A Philosophy of Library Service to Children

by

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"You must love working with kids!" is the standard response I get from people when I tell them I am a children's librarian, right after the "Oh," and that nodding, smiling, quizzical look that says, "Is she an intellectual or a nerd?" If I did not think I would be ostracized for taboo honesty, I would always tell them "No, I do not love working with kids, I love my job." My job just happens to involve working with kids sometimes, but that is not what I do all the time. In fact, I only work with kids the percentage of hours that I work the reference desk and during programming time. The remainder of the time is spent in hours on other tasks and responsibilities such as program planning, department or library planning, publicity, collection development (which includes more long hours over selection aids and weeding), networking, evaluation, scheduling, outreach, etc. Children's librarianship revolves *around* kids: their parents, their caregivers, their social workers, and their teachers. All the materials we buy, all the programs we execute, and all the planning we do is a means to an end, and that is to serve this specific "brand" of library user. Serving this brand of user can be extremely difficult, because it engages, as demonstrated, a variety of people that have extremely different needs and desires.

I have established that library service to children includes serving not only the children themselves, but all of those involved in their care, education, rearing, health, and well-being. Part of my philosophy is that these are all library customers. As library customers, they should be treated equally, with as much attention and time devoted to the children as to adults. All of these customers should have equal access to library materials of all kinds regardless of situation or condition. As librarians serving these customers then, we must have objectives for service to insure that their many needs are met. In order to know these needs, we need to know the users (and non-users) and the community in which we exist as a library.

While the goals of the Children's Services Department may be to offer reference service and reader's advisory, informational and recreational reading, and programming for this brand of library customer, these are basic *services*. They are not methods by which we will accomplish offering these services. Community and customer needs change all the time, and that is why our objectives cannot remain static. People and communities are dynamic and we need to view our objectives as such. We cannot set these guides for ourselves and then forget that they exist or expect that we will never need to assess them again.

Creating a set of objectives for library service to children without knowing the library or its customers would be ludicrous. Suffice it to say that some hypothetical objectives for service in my utopian library would be (assuming that we have unlimited funds, staff, hours, and space):

- To provide constant reference service with all possible reference sources so that a customer looking for information or materials would never have to go any further than their first stop, the library. (Of course even more ideal would be for the customer to have access to all of these resources right from their own home.)
- To provide a program for children of every age level at least once a day, which they may attend with any caregiver, so that they may have exposure to the library and literature at any given moment which would in turn facilitate family and individual literacy.
- To evaluate these programs on a continual basis using statistics and customer evaluations, to change as needed, to add to or make them more frequent, or eliminate those that are unnecessary or unwanted.
- To purchase any and all available informational and recreational reading material our customers (*all* of them) might want based on their evaluations.
- To replace or eliminate damaged and unused materials based on circulation and customer evaluations.
- To provide outreach services to all schools, daycares, and playgroups — fitting into their regular curriculum at least once a week.

Of course these objectives only cover a few bases, and of course they are unrealistic. We cannot expose everybody to everything even though they may have a right to it. It might be more realistic to say that we should set a goal to be aware of our customers' needs and wants, and that our main objective would be to insure that we are in touch with our customers directly, through interaction and discussion in our daily activities. Those who do not voice an opinion are not heard. Really, how can we know what they want if

they do not say so? That's why we are trained in collection development, management, reference, etc. Sometimes we have to give customers what we *think* they want.

The variety of programs and services offered by a children's services department depends largely on the clientele. Keep in mind that we are offering service to those aged anywhere from birth to adult, but that the majority of our materials revolve around children and their lives. We may offer lapsit or story programs for young children, parenting and teacher collections of materials for adults, help teaching young children, board book collections for babies and toddlers, easy readers for those just learning or those having trouble, literature-based programs for school-age children, etc. Always considering the age group to be served, their stage of development, levels of coordination and understanding, and their needs, are crucial to programming and services.

Services can range anywhere from collection development and reference, to outreach and literacy. Programming can range anywhere from our popular "Chalk on the Walk" for all ages, to a symposium on story extensions for college students studying education and children's literature.

How do you determine what you choose to offer from the broad spectrum of choices? It's the same way you determine your objectives—by listening and asking what people want, what they think their children want, and what their students want. As demonstrated in the utopian library example above, it is unrealistic to expect to be able to provide everything to everyone, even though by rights they may deserve it. By continuous observation and evaluation we try to come as close as possible.