MULTI-AGE PROGRAMMING IN STORY HOUR
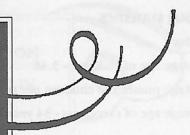
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and

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The Virginia M. Tutt Branch of the St. Joseph County Public Library, IN offers story hours for children. Until recently, the story hours were offered four times per week (excluding additional programming). They were divided into specific-age groups: two sessions of two to three year-olds, and two sessions of three to five year-olds. The groups met on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. To balance the sessions, one of each specific age group met on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Although the story hours were successful, there were also negative consequences:

- Additional desk coverage required for circulation and reference
- Additional preparation time needed for story hours
- Additional time spent in story hours
- Limited time for outreach
- Tendency to experience burnout

EXPERIMENT

Scott Sinnett, Branch Manager at the Tutt Branch, attended a seminar on multi-age programming. He was impressed with the seminar and so approached Lori Caskey Sigety and Roanna Hooton at the next staff meeting to see if they would try a new approach to the library's story hour. Although both Sigety and Hooton were apprehensive about it from the start, they agreed. Two story hours were eliminated and the remaining two were lumped into multi-age groups, covering ages 0 to five. The story hours would meet on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 10:00 a.m. to 10:45 a.m. for eight weeks. Since this was an experiment, all of the children and the caregivers would be surveyed.

Sigety and Hooton divided the workload: one prepared four story hours, and the other prepared the remaining four. Identical themes were used for both days. They also used large books, props such as silly shakers, puppets, music, and occasional crafts.

SURVEY

Halfway during the sessions, the children's caregivers were invited to fill out a survey. The survey contained the following questions:

1. How many children do you bring to story hour? What are their ages?

2. We have been trying the multi-age approach for this story hour session. Do you find this approach helpful or not? Why or why not?

3. What do you like most about story hour? If applicable, what changes would you like to see?

Nineteen caregivers filled out the survey. These are the responses:

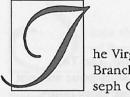*1. How many children do you bring to story hour? What are their ages?*

Of the nineteen caregivers, ten brought one child, five brought two children, and three brought three children. None of the respondents brought more than three children.

2. We have been trying the multi-age approach for this story hour session. Do you find this approach helpful or not? Why or why not?

Eighteen caregivers liked the multi-age approach. One respondent felt the attendance was too large. Two caregivers noted that they liked both approaches (the former age-specific and the new multi-age). Thirteen mentioned that they liked seeing the interaction between the younger and older children. Six caregivers said that it was easier for them to bring both (or all) of the children to story hour at the same time.

3. What do you like most about story hour? If applicable, what changes would you like to see?

All responses were constructive. They appreciated the use of props, music, puppetry, and crafts. Suggestions for improvement included more age-appropriate literature, longer story hours, and smaller sessions.

STORY HOUR STATISTICS

1. Tuesday
   - Average age of children - 3.46
   - Average number of children per session - 9.875
   - Average age of caregivers - 34 years *

2. Wednesday
   - Average age of children - 3.08
   - Average number of children per session - 20
   - Total average of attendance (including caregivers) - 15*

3. Combined Averages
   - Average age of children - 3.27
   - Average number of children per session - 15

*Statistics for caregivers were documented differently.

DISCUSSION

Sinnett, Sigety and Hooton conferred to talk about the results. They categorized the results into three segments: advantages, disadvantages, and solutions.

ADVANTAGES

- Caregivers can bring more than one child to story hour. They can save time this way
- Children of different ages can interact
- Discipline problems are eliminated with caregivers in the room (Caregivers are required to be in the room with children age three and under)
- Story hour attendance does not have to be limited (within reason)
- Story hour attendance tends to flow into other library programming
- Decreasing story hours conserves preparation time and staff time

DISADVANTAGES

- Story hour sessions can become unbalanced if one group is significantly larger than the other group
- Literature and crafts are limited because of the necessity of age-appropriate materials
- Finding literature that appeals to both older and younger children can be challenging

SOLUTIONS

- Collect age-appropriate books to use
- Keep track of sign-ups in order to balance both days
- Reduce time from forty-five minutes to one half-hour to help with restlessness in the younger children

CONCLUSION

The results were a pleasant surprise. The Tutt Branch staff found that the multi-age story hour was not only feasible, but also successful. Future story hours will be presented in the multi-age method.