

Effective Programs for Children in the Public Library

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To develop children into readers is to nourish their growing minds. Library services for children and students encourage them to become more literate and to develop a greater appreciation for books and other sources of information. If access to information is accepted as one of the keys to learning, young people need to learn early to unlock that warehouse of information—the public library; and one of their keys to the public library is programming designed for children.

Toddlers and Preschoolers

Story Hour for preschoolers has been the most popular children's program in public libraries. In an informal survey of children's librarians, the response was clear—the public wants and utilizes programs for three, four and five year olds. For some it is an initial educational and socialization opportunity, and for others it is a free replacement for nursery school. Many libraries have added Toddler Times to reach two year old children.

Library programs for preschoolers introduce quality books to children and help instill the library habit before children are inundated with

other activities. Many times this association can start a child on a lifetime habit of reading for fun and knowledge. Story Hour and Toddler Time often include finger rhymes, songs, filmstrips, puppet plays, crafts as well as stories read aloud. These provide a pleasurable library experience as quality books are introduced to children. Research has shown that language skills are positively affected by reading aloud to preschoolers in the story hour setting.¹

Programs for School Age Children

Programs for preschoolers are super successful, so what can be done for older children? There continues to be a need for programs designed especially for students. The public library is an ideal setting due to its location, its extended hours, its materials and staff for after school activities.² Nearly fifty-five percent of all mothers with children under 18 work outside the home.³ Thus, the library has an opportunity to provide programs at times when parents cannot give quality time to their children. As part of its commitment to children, the public library can provide an informal learning environment suitable to the needs of students.

Programming for school age children has several basic goals: to encourage young people to come to the library, to help them realize the limitless resources available to them in the public library and through interlibrary loan, to teach them how to access these resources, and to instill in them the belief that the library serves recreational as well as educational purposes.

Middlebury Public Library has chosen to accomplish these goals with a variety of programs: tours for classes, bibliographic instruction, book talks, After-School Specials, Board Games Saturdays and craft activities.

Tours for school classes are an excellent way to inform a large group of children about free public library service; tours can also be given to home-schooled children or for small groups who pre-register. During fall tours librarians can provide bibliographic instruction and emphasize materials available for school projects and research papers. Students learn to feel comfortable asking the librarian for help in these settings. Spring tours are an excellent time to advertise summer reading programs at the public library. Tours and bibliographic instruction can be valuable tools in providing library services to students.

Book talks are an excellent way to familiarize students with library materials. Many children need just a little incentive to become interested in reading for pleasure. A good book talk is a good advertisement for the library.

After-School Specials have become successful at Middlebury Public Library. They are held twice monthly with a large variety of topics planned so that each young person will find something of personal interest. Registration is taken for each session

separately.

One of the programs was "Tossing in Dough," a presentation provided by a local pizza restaurant. What delicious aromas wafted out from the community room! "Granny Stories" were told so children could learn about life in Indiana during the Civil War era, with artifacts from the county historical museum displayed. The high school football coach talked about football and teamwork on "Super Bowl Wednesday," bringing with him some players and equipment. This was inspirational as well as informational, and the girls came, too! (As you see in the photo, page 12, the boys claimed front row seats!)

"Middlebury—Our Town" included interesting tales and anecdotes told by the Town Board President, who also serves as a tour guide during the summer months. "The Heart Treasure Chest" was presented during February, the heart month, by the County Health Department nurse. Children learned how their hearts work, how to care for one's heart, and were able to see a real calf heart.

Our local veterinarian shared information about pet care "For All Animals Lovers!" The County Extension Agent provided safety tips for all children with emphasis on suggestions for latchkey children in "Keep Yourself Safe." A presentation about the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder and mementos of the locations where she lived was a exciting event for the elementary children because many of them were reading her books. Another favorite was a cake decorating demonstration by the cake creator of the largest restaurant in Indiana. All children then had an opportunity to decorate their own Christmas cookies. It was fun and exciting—a real holiday treat! To highlight the many juvenile mystery books, a city police detective was invited to the library to

share information about his work and responsibilities, and was willing to show some equipment and his car. This was followed two weeks later by a polygraph testing demonstration performed by a professor from a nearby college. Raggedy Ann lovers thoroughly enjoyed stories told by a children's librarian disguised as Raggedy Ann! "Nutritious Snacks" gave the children a valuable lesson about good food, and lots of ideas for snacking. Sampling was great fun, too!

To promote library materials and to teach students what is available, a book display in the community room is provided for each session, featuring books on the program's theme. These have included cook books, health books, history books and biographies, sports stories, animal and pet books, etc. A book talk is given in conjunction with the display at every program.

Another successful student program is Board Game Saturday. A large variety of games are provided (Friends of the Library may be a good source) and students choose which they prefer to play. The activity ends with all children playing Bingo for library prizes such as bookmarks, pencils, etc.

Craft activities are also fun events for students. These can center around story book characters or holiday themes. If the library needs decorations, such as Christmas tree ornaments, children can make two crafts—one to take home and one to be displayed on the tree.

Planning

When beginning a new program series for children, several things need

to be considered: programming to support the mission of the library, ways students can be exposed to library materials, choosing events and themes that will appeal to most children, choosing a day and time that does not conflict with established meetings (like Scouts or 4-H), and providing good publicity. The librarian must also take into consideration the needs of handicapped children, various cultural groups, and different learning styles.

Providing services to young people will insure the future of public libraries. Programs for preschoolers are a great beginning, but there must be something beyond that. When children learn to use and enjoy the public library, they will develop reading habits that will last a lifetime. They will learn to explore new media and technologies that can enhance their knowledge and skills.

Program services for young people are challenging and rewarding, and successful programs teach children that the public library is a special place to visit again and again!

References

¹Smardo and J. F. Curry, "What Research Tells Us about Storyhours and Receptive Language." (Dallas: Dallas Public Library, 1982).

²H. Willett, "Current Issues in Public Library Services for Children," *Public Libraries*, Winter, 1985, pp. 137-138.

³Gloria Norris and JoAnn Miller, "The New Mother: Juggling Her Job, Her Family, Her Career." *Family Weekly*, May 11, 1980, p. 4.