

Children Are Patrons Too: A Soft Touch in Children's Services

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The Goshen Public Library serves a community of approximately 25,000 citizens, including Goshen City and Elkhart Township. Approximately half of the residents have current library cards. A college town, Goshen has many well-educated users. A substantial number of Hispanics are residents as well, and the area has its share of families who may change addresses two or more times in any given calendar year. Largely a Mennonite and/or Christian community, Goshen is comprised of people who are conservative politically and have strong moral convictions. The crime rate is quite low. Goshen is considered to be a comfortable place to live and a nearly ideal area in which to raise children.

Three years ago I decided to try a new approach to the services and

programs offered to the children of the Goshen area. Since then, activity in the children's department has increased sharply, and circulation has risen at an equally satisfying rate (a 72 percent increase in circulation of print materials).

This article will outline the strategies that make up this new approach.

A Non-threatening Atmosphere

A major goal was to present a friendly, helpful, and, above all, nonthreatening atmosphere for adults and children of all ages. Staff were strongly encouraged to treat even the smallest of children with respect often reserved only for adults. This is not to say that young patrons were never reprimanded if they threatened harm to themselves or others or if the noise level became disturbing; but as long

PROGRAM STATISTICS

		1985	1988
Storytime	number	29	465
	attendance	83	3,519
Special programs	number	13	27
	attendance	458	2,415

as they demonstrated the very basics of acceptable social behavior their childlike antics were respected and their wishes were fulfilled to the best of our ability. A few months ago a classified advertisement was placed in our local paper to fill two positions in the children's room. Among a list of basic duties and requirements was a gentle admonishment that "the applicant must have a genuine love of children." One lovely lady responded to the phrase with some trepidation. On some days she could tolerate them quite well, but other days, . . . well . . . We both decided that this position was not the one best suited for her. Small children do not sense when adults are having a bad day.

Stringent rules were relaxed and/or eliminated whenever possible. Previously children under the age of six were not permitted to have a library card. We have since issued them to newborns whose proud parents have made the library one of the first places to visit after the blessed event. If the parents would rather that the child be older in order to accept such responsibility, we respect their wishes unequivocally. With the card the child receives a handout listing the very basic procedures and policies of the children's room such as length of checkout, fines, and resources. On the back is a form which can be completed and put into a scrapbook or framed as a reminder of the momentous occasion. The child's name is published in our monthly newsletter as well, to mark the event.

A rather basic marketing technique was employed to draw children into the library. *Chase's Annual Events* by William D. Chase was thought by some to be in danger of becoming permanently affixed to me. I was hardly ever seen without it for weeks at a time. The children's room celebrated nearly every author's birthday,

Pickle Day, Light Bulb Day (carrots and celery in a cooler for a lite snack), Bubble Gum Day, etc. For about a year and a half, nearly every day was a special one at the library. Little tokens were handed out in celebration of that particular occasion, contests such as bubble gum blowing were held, and children were encouraged to dress up for such little-known celebrations as Clash Day. We stocked up on film, snapped pictures with careless abandon of pint-sized patrons and began filling a photograph album which was displayed on top of the card catalog for all to see.

Changes in the Collection

The collection was carefully analyzed and weaknesses and needs, particularly for this community, were noted. Many more Bible stories and titles with moral themes were needed to satisfy Sunday School teachers and parents alike. Titles concerning divorce, child abuse, spouse abuse, alcoholism, stepfamilies, drug abuse, death of parents, friends, and pets were also acquired. With the ever growing popularity of the literature method of teaching reading, quality materials in the form of picture books, preprimers, primers, and easy readers were in increasing demand. Easy nonfiction titles were pulled from the J collection and arranged with the easy readers. Circulation of these materials increased dramatically.

One way in which we indirectly give better service to our little patrons is by doing our own cataloging and processing, in addition to having our circulation desk separate from adult services. Titles are checked in centrally, but children's staff prepare the books and other materials for circulation. Reserves and special requests are served promptly and quite easily. The two people involved in these technical services are also readily

available as back-up for the desk. Although unorthodox, this arrangement has pleased us.

In the attempt to create an inviting environment in which children are welcome, a collection of puppets, stuffed animals in the form of story-book characters, educational games and puzzles were acquired. We preferred displaying the stuffed toys and puppets in every available niche and cranny in the children's room, but after three turned up missing in a very short time we bowed to the inevitable and now display them on shelves behind our circulation desk. Children may ask for them one at a time. This policy creates a great deal of jumping up and down for staff members particularly when young patrons seem to enjoy seeing grown-ups leap to attention every two minutes even more than acquiring a favored toy. However, the collection is protected this way.

Story Hour Policies

We are very relaxed regarding our policies for attending story hours as well. After considerable trial and error, we feel we have established a schedule of programming which suits this community. We tried afternoon story hours and ones on alternate Saturday mornings. They were not well-attended. Patrick O'Brien, director of the Dallas Public Library, counsels that we must "Design children's programs that give the most bang for the buck!" Successful programming is much easier with large numbers of children than with three, we found. To attract this broad audience and meet the needs of our community, we presently offer a range of story hours for different audience levels: a four and five year old session, one for two through five year olds, and a two and three year old toddler time. These are scheduled on alternating

weekday mornings at 10:00. Heretofore, programs were only for four and five years olds not in school. Preregistration is encouraged but no child is ever turned away. Parents and other adults may attend or not as they choose, as may younger and older siblings. In the 1960's parents were not welcome during story hour. Today librarians see themselves in part, as role models for parents who have no experience in reading or storytelling to children.²

I was concerned about the children attending story hours. Patrick O'Brien notes that: "no other agency can help children learn as early as the library can, we aren't stepping on anyone else's turf, we can offer programs for preschool children and work with day-care centers."³ Charles Robinson, director of the Baltimore County Public Library says: "Preschoolers are the library's most important target audience."⁴ To reach this audience, day cares are invited to attend any and all story hour programs. These children are introduced to the library and become accustomed to regular visits. We are always amazed that after only two to three sessions each child develops and gains social skills. They learn to sit quietly, to listen, to participate in finger plays and songs.

Other Preschool Programs

Preschoolers are so often left out of activities enjoyed by their older siblings. Baltimore County Director Charles Robinson states: "No other public agency serves preschoolers."⁵ We do allow preschoolers to participate in our summer programs. We have special activities on Tuesdays for the school age patrons only, but preschoolers have story hours and may participate in craft activities and record books which are read to them. Parents sigh with relief when they

may tell their little ones that yes, you are indeed old enough to participate. In response to parental requests, we have instituted a simplified winter reading program for preschoolers which this year will run from January 25 to March 22. School age children may record books and earn trips to the treasure chest, but programming other than crafts takes place during school hours.

Our first year we scheduled a craft program for 2:00 on Monday afternoons during the summer. Two staff members were confronted with 105 eager children who apparently have yearned for a clothespin buzzard all their lives. Since then we have set up a craft cart on Mondays with all the supplies organized into kit form in a paper sack or small plastic bag and tape, scissors, crayons, markers, etc. are made available. The cart is kept stocked from 9:30 a.m. when we open until 9:00 p.m. or until we run out of projects. We begin with at least 100 projects. Crowds and long lines are avoided this way, staff members keep their sanity, and parents are able to schedule a visit to the library sometime during the 11 1/2 hour period.

Services to Schools

An editorial in *Library Journal* in 1895 stated that through the school "children may be reached most easily, most directly, and most effectively." Today children's librarians are continuing to make the traditional school visits and to invite classes to visit the public library.⁶ Classroom visits have always been encouraged and the number is increasing but slowly. Most of our elementary schools are located too far from the library to walk. With a bus available to them only one day a year, regular excursions to the library are impossible. To compensate as best we can, area teachers are permitted to borrow unlimited collections for six

week periods. Overdue fines are not charged, but reminder notices are sent. The children's librarian has for many years made annual trips to the elementary schools to visit classrooms in grades one through three, primarily for the purpose of promoting the summer reading program.

Only the format of such programs has been changed. Rather than bags of books and lists of rules, storytelling, puppets, poetry, groups activities, and an enthusiastic review of the summer reading program are crammed into twenty-minute presentations. One major concern was vocalized by the children during these visits. Many children were not only unaware of the public library's existence, but were actually afraid to come. Tickets or, as in last year's program, small red circles based upon *Nicholas Where Have You Been*, were given to each child to redeem at the library for a small token—a ring costing about one cent or a gummy bear, depending upon the time. The children were told that they didn't have to have a ticket to come to the library but if they did they would receive a present. A familiar face to look for and a task to complete did much to alleviate the fears of some children. Enrollment in the reading program has increased each year from 331 in 1985 to 937 in 1988.

Every opportunity has been welcomed to present workshops for teachers and caregivers, whether the subject is media, storytelling, or new titles in the collection. What a marvelous way to meet these hardworking professionals and establish a foundation of school-library cooperation.

Literacy Programs

A new program at the Goshen Public Library is being designed in an effort to reach more disadvantaged children. Ann Bridger, director of the

Goshen Adult Literacy Program has developed a project over the past four years, pairing functionally illiterate adults and volunteer tutors. At present, seventy students are actively involved. Now she and the children's librarian are planning an intergenerational approach to the problem of illiteracy in this area. We will make home visits to referred families and take packets of materials including the gift of a book for each of the children, simple activity pages, crayons, a balloon, a bookmark, a ticket to a special program and treat at the library, a card to be punched with promise of a reward after so many visits. We must gently entice them to come to the library before we can help them in other ways. We are very excited about being able to provide concentrated, personalized attention to the children who need it so desperately.

Our policies and programs will not work for everyone, of course. We have tried to tailor our resources and abilities to meet the needs of our particular community. We are constantly trying new approaches and revising them as warranted, always with the goal in mind of bringing books and children together and introducing the magical work of libraries.

References

¹Dorothy J. Anderson, "From Idealism to Realism," *Library Trends* 35 (Winter 1987): 407.

²Alice Naylor, "Reaching all Children," *Library Trends* 35 (Winter 1987): 383.

³Anderson, 398.

⁴*Ibid.*, 398.

⁵Naylor, 383.

⁶Naylor, 382.

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