

## Creative Ideas for Latch-Key and Unattended Children in the Public Library

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Many children today are left on their own after school without any adult supervision while others are locked out of their homes entirely. In fact, many of these children are instructed to go to the public library after school and wait for three to four hours until someone can come for them. At other times, the children are completely forgotten.

Dubbed "latch-key" children, they consequently become the responsibility of librarians who for better or worse have now taken on the role of babysitters. Unfortunately, the parents of these children have the mistaken idea that during this waiting period their sons and daughters will study or read quietly. Instead, they become quite bored and restless, causing numerous distractions to other library patrons, and at times they present serious misbehavior problems. Librarians now face the challenge of dealing with these children. The goal is to keep them occupied with meaningful programs and activities which will give librarians and patrons peace of mind and the children a sense of purpose and respect.

As the children's librarian at

Greenfield Public Library I have had my share of unattended children, both latch-key and children whose parents are busy for hours in another part of the library. The library is centrally located among four elementary schools within a three to five block walking distance. And, with a new facility completed just four years ago, the library was and still is a huge attraction for neighborhood children.

Following are several ideas that I have developed or used that have been successful with latch-key children in Greenfield and can be expanded by other librarians for their own situations. The ideas are divided into nine categories: Toys, Filmstrip Stories, Student Volunteers, Junior Friends of the Library, After School Films, Regular Children's Programming, Monthly Children's Newsletter, Library Instruction and Activity Sheets, and After School Storytime.

### **Toys**

Younger children will enjoy toys to play with after school. I choose toys that are educational in nature such as puzzles (Lauri-type), pegged puzzles with varying themes that are alternated for the different holidays or

seasons, small wooden figures, simple card games such as Go Fish, Old Maid, Crazy Eight, and flash cards. The library also has parquetry blocks, puzzle tiles, large jigsaw puzzles that teach numbers or letters and a variety of stuffed toys. I purchase the toys from a school supply house and put most of them in plastic hang-up style bags that come in several sizes from Demco or others library supply companies. The toys are rotated on a regular basis and cleaned. They do not circulate and, to help with clean up time, a large poster is displayed cautioning children to pick up their toys or the library personnel will put them away permanently. For the most part, the children have responded to this rule very well.

I have also purchased older children's toys which are locked in a cabinet in the children's area. Toys for older children include brain teaser puzzles and mazes, board games, checkers, chess, Legos, and such. I established a rule that children may not have a toy from the locked cabinet until they have read for thirty minutes in the library. Each child must tell the librarian when he is going to start reading as well as sit in a designated reading area where the librarian will see him. This is one way to promote reading as opposed to playing, and on several occasions children have become engrossed in what they were reading and forgotten entirely about the games.

### **Filmstrip Stories**

Stock up on filmstrip/cassette combinations that have stories children will enjoy. A listing of what is available, including the titles of the filmstrips and a description of the stories can be typed, I also include the grade levels for each filmstrip. The library has two Dukane filmstrip projector/viewers which children can

be easily taught to use. Signs can be made for operational directions. Children can also use the Dukane viewers to listen to cassette/book combinations. This is a great way for children to enjoy stories and learn to operate a piece of machinery which may be new to them.

### **Student Volunteers**

I interview students who are at least 10 years old to be student volunteers in the children's department of the library. Students must have parental consent and must make good grades in school. The students are given job descriptions as well as a list of work rules and they and their parents sign a contract stating how often they will volunteer. I usually have students come to work one or two days a week for two to three hours. Students can do all the small chores that would normally take up precious time that a librarian needs. I have volunteer students read shelves, clean books, make photocopies, make posters and flyers for programs, decorate the children's area, make flannelboard figures, clean records, mend books and filmstrips, and assist other children with the Dukane viewers. Student volunteers have also assisted in programs. Student volunteers wear badges and receive certificates of achievement. As a rule, students volunteer for a certain period of time; then I give other students a chance.

There are also several signs posted in the children's department stating "If you need something to do, ask the Librarian." Occasionally, students will ask what they can do and that is the time to have them dust shelves, straighten books, and put magazines in order. There is always something to be done. Little perks can also be given to those who volunteer and do well at their assignments.

## Junior Friends of the Library

Start your own library club. I started the Junior Friends of the Greenfield Public Library with the monetary assistance of the Friends of the Library. Volunteers from the Friends worked with me to plan programs and activities. First, we established a purpose and goals and purchased membership cards and stationery. We decided that each child would pay annual dues of \$1.00. Our library club is for grades K-6 and we meet once a month after school for one to two hours. After the Junior Friends group was established, the children elected officers for the year. This gives children the opportunity to lead a group, plan activities, learn to take notes, type, and balance a checking account. Each officer is given a detailed job description and must attend regular officers' meetings.

Upon joining the Junior Friends, children receive laminated membership cards. Students who volunteer to help at activities and programs are given little perks such as special pencils, erasers, stickers, etc.

The library's Junior Friends group has attracted attention from area school teachers who have volunteered their time to help at the meetings. Since the group began in February 1987, we have grown to over 100 students. Activities have included a membership drive contest with prizes for the winners (prizes were educational toys and books); a carnival to begin the year; a badge sale with the library's name and logo on each badge; a letter writing workshop with letters sent to favorite authors, celebrities and sports figures; local author's appearances and autographing sessions; a readers' theatre performed by high school drama students; a paperback book exchange; and an ice cream social/film showing as the final school year event. We have also had service

projects for the library such as cleaning the children's department (dusting, sweeping, etc.) and cleaning books.

Future programs include an adopt-a-book campaign and a book sale with discount coupons for Junior Friends members.

## After School Films

Show full length 16mm films once a week; I usually show films on Wednesdays after school. Most of the films are borrowed from another area library that has a large film collection. I also rent films from Disney Productions for special times of the year. Admission is free and children are welcome to bring snacks. I also give away little perks to those children who have attended all the films for a given month.

## Regular Children's Programming

Not enough can be said about regular children's programming. It is probably the best way to involve the after school crowd in the library. If programs are held on a regular basis, children will look forward to the next activity. I usually have two or three programs per month during the school year aimed at different grade levels. A variety of activities are offered—crafts, puppet shows, parties, special authors or children's performers, zoo programs, and game competitions. I have children pre-register for these programs because they are so popular, and I try to accommodate each child even if I have to do the program twice. I also choose books that fit the program theme to encourage further reading on a topic. The library never charges for programs, although sometimes children are asked to bring an egg carton or a plastic butter tub from home to help with the necessary supplies.

Many of my ideas for programs come from *Cobblestone* children's magazine, *Steven Caney's Kids' America*, and *The Kids' Diary of 365 Amazing Days* by Randy Harelson. I also use local people to do a program with two of the most popular being the county home extension agent for cooking programs and the high school drama teacher for puppet plays and storytelling. Assistance can also be obtained for programs through the education department of the Indianapolis Children's Museum. Locate people in your community who have special talents and interests and ask them to do a program. I find that they are always eager to help and are delighted that they have been asked.

### Monthly Children's Newsletter

A monthly newsletter can be a welcome enhancement to the children's department. Give it a catchy name and center on a special theme for the month, for example, a holiday, a famous person, or various animals or historic events. Include puzzles, simple crafts or recipes, a book list, a schedule of upcoming children's events, jokes and riddles—anything imaginable. Decorate it with snappy banners, borders, and clip art and photocopy on colorful paper. If funds are available, this could also be sent to regular library patrons or school teachers as an attraction to the library.

### Library Instruction and Activity Sheets

Invest in reproducible library resource aids to teach children on their own how to use the card catalog, dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc. Photocopy on colorful paper, display in an easy-to-reach area, and have plenty of pens and pencils available. I have found the following books to be good resources: *Library Skills Activi-*

*ties Kit* by Jerry J. Mallett, *Elementary School Library Resource Kit* by Jerry J. Mallett and Marian R. Bartch, *The Reference Point* by Candy Edwards, and *Library Skills for Primary Grades* by Nancy Polette.

Along this same line, copy holiday, seasonal, and thematic coloring pages and puzzles for children to complete. These books can be found through school supply companies jobbers, bookstores, or local grocery or drug stores.

### After School Storytime

Storytimes are traditionally held for preschool age children, but I had so many requests for a school-age storytime that I responded with an after school storytime. This is held once a week for 45 minutes for ages 6 to 10. Registration is required, although any child may come. As with other storytimes, I pick a theme and locate books and other materials for this age group. Special activities with the same theme end each storytime. Books I found of great help in preparing for after school storytimes are *Storytelling: Art & Technique* by Augusta Baker and Ellin Greene and Caroline Feller Bauer's *This Way to Books*.

Of course, all of these ideas for unattended children require the support of library staff as well as of volunteers. The children's librarian will need a great deal of energy and stamina, but as the programs progress a routine will be established and activities will become more organized and less strenuous. Remember, everything does not need to be accomplished at once. Space programs and activities over a period of time; offer certain things one month and something different the next. Explore professional literature and keep a list of books with helpful ideas. Adapt these and other ideas for your own



particular library setting. Finally, set reasonable goals which recognize the needs of latch-key and unattended children in your community.

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Librarians Wava Furlong (left) and Kathie Myers demonstrate use of handpuppets. Photograph courtesy of the South Bend Tribune.