

“Establishing an Atmosphere for Success”

Susan Dailey
Children's Young Adult Librarian
Bluffton-Wells County Public Library
Bluffton, IN

“Atmosphere and ambience”—these words conjure up an image of expensive, intimate restaurants. They seldom bring to mind the children's department of a library. However, the success of youth services in our libraries is determined by the atmosphere and ambience we, as children's librarians, establish.

Merriam-Webster defines atmosphere and ambience synonymously as surrounding influence or environment. The environment includes such easily identified physical factors as graphics, equipment and color. But more significant are the intangible social conditions found in a children's department.

The most important factor in establishing a desirable environment is the attitude of the personnel. A library can have a marvelous collection, interesting programs and beautiful furniture, but if the personnel are haughty or unhelpful, it will not be a successful library. Although it is unlikely that a child would state “I like the library because I like the librarian,” it is none the less true that friendly, accommodating staff make a children's department an enjoyable place to visit.

A major problem encountered by children's librarians in creating a welcoming environment stems from stereotypical expectations from the public and some librarians. Gone are the days of the old maid librarian who glares over the top of her glasses at any sound above a whisper, but many people still believe the noise level in a library should equal that in a sanctuary. Though most libraries now allow quiet conversation, even this noise level is hard to achieve in a children's department.

In the facility where I work, noise from the children's department has not been a problem because we are located in the lower level of a Carnegie building. However, we are currently planning a new library. In an effort to design a functional children's department I sent out surveys to several children's librarians who work in new buildings. Part of the survey dealt with noise because sound levels seems to be a problem in many libraries.

Of the eighteen surveys that were returned, nine of the libraries stated that the children's department was separate from the rest of the facility. Five of these were located in a lower level, two were in a separate wing, and

two were divided from the rest of the facility by glass or solid walls. "Our separateness is often a blessing, especially during programming times," stated a librarian whose children's department is on a lower level. Another librarian in a similar building wrote, "Being away from (the) adult area means we don't have to 'Shhh' all the time!" Only two of the librarians in facilities where the children's department is separate said that noise was sometimes a problem for them.

Nine of the libraries indicated that the children's department was not separated from the rest of the facility. Seven of these librarians commented that noise was a problem for them. A library in Iowa used only book shelves to define the children's department. Their co-director felt that this was not an appropriate method and that the children's department should be completely separate. She went on to state, "We are very open and we have problems with adults not liking the noise of the children's department."

Many new libraries can aptly be described using the term "open." This trend in library buildings seems to be a reaction to the many roomed Carnegie libraries where most walls were load bearing and therefore, limited the usefulness of space. The popular word in recent library building literature is "flexibility." However, "flexibility" and "openness" are not synonymous terms. While a totally open library will certainly be flexible, a flexible library does not have to be completely open.

The open concept theory was popular in school construction during the late 60's and early 70's. Three area schools were built with this theory in mind and they have all abandoned the concept and added partitions. Although a school and library have different needs, noise levels are a problem for both.

Without advocating a library with many small rooms, separating areas that will be noisy from those that need absolute quiet does seem logical. A children's department needs to allow conversation, laughter, computer clacking, and crying babies to make the atmosphere comfortable for its young patrons. Although children need to be taught that running and screaming are not appropriate in a library, it is unrealistic to expect the sound level from a children's department to be consistent with that desired in a reference area.

The "flexibility fallacy" as discussed by Nolan Lushington and Willis N. Mills creates another problem in establishing a welcoming ambience in a children's department. This problem relates to the physical environment found in youth service areas. Lushington and Mills state that new libraries have featured open, modular designs so that the librarian can do whatever she wanted.¹ They continue by saying, "A visit to such a library reveals a banal desert of space—lifeless, mindless, bland—without apparent understanding of the varied requirements of different library service areas."² While Lushington and Mills believe universal space is a beginning, it must be followed by selection of furnishings, equipment, lighting and graphics to give life to specific library activities that will take place there.³

I concur with these assessments of Lushington and Mills after having visited a library where public areas were not allowed to be specifically designed for a particular purpose. The furnishings and color scheme in the children's department were identical to those in adult services. The library did not have a children's programming area. They used one of the meeting rooms for storyhour. Although this was consistent with their desire for

flexibility, the children's librarian was not allowed to decorate this room or give it an appropriate ambience because it was being used by adult groups in the evenings. The ultimate insult to young patrons occurred at the circulation desk, which was so high that a young child could not even be seen when he stood at it. Whether intentional or not, the atmosphere created in this library was totally uninviting to children.

Fortunately this library is an extreme example of an undesirable physical environment for a children's department. Establishing an attractive physical environment, however, is not easy. Several years ago I visited a school media center that was visually exciting and attractive. After comparing its physical atmosphere with ours, the facility where I worked could best be described by a four letter word, "D-U-L-L." It looked like adult services with lower shelving units and brighter carpeting.

With the blessings of our director, who had previously been a children's librarian, we hired a local artist and embarked on a redecoration project. The outside entrance to the children's department was turned into a tree with velcro strips on the branches so the leaves and animals could be changed seasonally. Several animals decorate one wall underneath the tree with their ears being used as coat hangers. Our book return has a bear on the front of it, while a kangaroo with numerous pockets holds puppets to be played with in the children's department. Because we hold storyhours in the children's department, the artist designed a curtain with Mother Goose and some goslings that can be pulled during programming to reduce interruptions. Our redecoration was completed with the addition of several large dolls, puppets and a flying Mother Goose.

A pitfall we encountered, and hopefully avoided, in redecoration was the creation of a physical environment that would be appealing to children without being childish. Because children's departments serve a wide interest range, they often have to provide more than one type of graphics and furnishings.

Todd Strasser, the author of several young adults novels, wrote an interesting column in *School Library Journal* entitled "Lending Ambiance to Libraries." In this brief article Strasser outlined what factors he felt created an inviting atmosphere in a junior high or senior high school library. Strasser's first recommendation was that libraries provide couches where students can read comfortably. He goes on to say that he looks for round tables because when both rectangular and round tables are available, students always head for the round ones. Strasser comments that one of the most unappealing libraries he ever saw was lined with carrels, which he described as "those individual study, cubby-type desks, the kind with partitions on three sides . . . they might help students to concentrate, but so many in a room somehow suggests a penal colony."⁴

Strasser's article illustrates how comfortable furniture contributes to the atmosphere in a children's department by making it an enjoyable place to spend time. Play areas and equipment also serve this function. When I was young, the children's room was viewed basically as a storage space for books. Now, however, most children's departments are a place to do more than just check out books.

In an effort to discover what other libraries are providing for their young patrons to use in-house, questions about play areas, listening centers and computer areas were included in the survey. One library has an extensive

play area called Kara's Korner, which is a memorial to a young child who was killed just before the library was occupied. This impressive, exciting preschool area contains a doll house, a large aquarium, a game carpet, a toy box, wooden puzzles, along with a small table and chairs and bulletin boards.

No other children's departments represented in the survey have such well equipped play areas, however, several do have toys that can be used in house. Nine libraries indicated that they have puzzle-working tables. One library had a puppet stage, which children seemed to like. Two children's departments had tables where children are allowed to color. The most unique play area idea was found in a Wisconsin library that had a boat in to which children could climb.

Although one librarian commented that lost and jumbled puzzle and toy pieces were a problem for them, she stated that it was an extremely popular service. Two other librarians wished that their play areas were better defined; however, the overwhelming consensus was that play areas were well-used by young patrons. In our own situation, we find that our puzzles and educational toys provide wonderful entertainment, especially for those children whose parents are browsing for books and video tapes.

While play areas appeal basically to young children, computers and listening centers provide activity for a wide age and interest range. Eleven libraries that responded to the survey had public access computers. In many cases, though, the computers were shared with adult services and located in their own rooms.

In our library we are fortunate to have three computers. One is located

in the children's department and two are found in adult services. Because of a limited children's staff we load a program into the computer in the morning and allow young people to use that program all day. We do not reserve blocks of time or record a patron's usage. The programs for the children's department computer are appropriate for preschoolers and early elementary students. More sophisticated programs and a computer printer are available in adult services where a larger staff is available to monitor this type of usage. We have found this set-up to work satisfactorily.

Seven children's departments provide listening centers with record players and/or cassette players. Young patrons are allowed to view filmstrips on an individual basis in two libraries. None of the responding libraries currently has individual VCR units with headsets. We are allowing space for these at our new listening center on the recommendation of our building consultant. He feels they will be common in the future.

Another important factor in the physical environment of a children's department is the color scheme. This, though, is often beyond the control of the children's librarian unless a new building or renovation is planned. Questions about colors were included on the survey.

Only three children's departments used different color schemes than those found in the rest of their library. Fourteen used at least some of the same colors. Often the carpet or wall color was consistent throughout a building with accent and furnishing colors being unique to the children's department.

The most commonly used color among those libraries answering the survey was beige/off-white, which was

included in nine color schemes. This neutral shade was usually combined with more vivid ones. Other commonly used colors were orange, mentioned in the color scheme of seven libraries, blue in six buildings, red found in five, and green listed as a color in four libraries. Most children's departments listed three colors in their decor, although several used two or four colors, and one library listed six different colors.

One librarian whose color scheme included beige walls and blue chairs said that she wished the children's department had more color and a different "look" than the rest of the library. Another librarian whose color scheme was red, orange, and white stated emphatically that the colors were the "WRONG" ones. She felt that "red and orange excite, the white is very stark and the kids go beserk!"

This information about color schemes offers no definitive conclusions, but it does bring out some possibilities and pitfalls. There is no one right color scheme for a children's department. But, because the color scheme helps or hinders the establishment of a desirable atmosphere, it must be chosen carefully. The colors need to be bright and colorful without being gaudy. The color scheme in the children's department does not have to exactly duplicate the rest of the library. But the colors should be compatible, especially if the youth services area is not separated in some manner from the rest of the facility. The colors should encourage use, which means that they should not show dirt easily.

In summary, there are many factors which influence the atmosphere or ambience in a children's department. They include such things as library personnel who are friendly and helpful; acceptable noise levels which are child-oriented; visually exciting graphics and furnishings which are age appropriate; exciting equipment and play areas which are entertaining; and attractive color schemes which are interesting to children and young people. A successful children's department hinges upon the environment our patrons discover when they enter our sphere of influence.

It is our responsibility and mission as children's librarians to make the library a welcoming place for the youth whom we serve. If we can achieve this goal with our patrons, we pave the way for them to be life-long library users. I can think of few gifts we could give a child that would be as valuable.

References

¹Nolan Lushington and Willis N. Mills, Jr., *Libraries Designed for Users* (Syracuse, NY: Gaylord Professional Publications), p. 16.

²*Ibid.*, p. 17.

³*Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴Todd Strasser, "Lending Ambiance to Libraries," *School Library Journal*, June-July 1988, p. 59.