

The "Before" and "After" of a Children's Librarian

**Janice D. Coffeen
Children's Department Head
LaPorte County Public Library
LaPorte, IN**

While a person is a library science student, it is easy to develop theories about what constitutes the ideal Children's Department. In fact it is almost impossible to not develop a vision of ideal library service to young people after being exposed to the writings of others who work with children, the teachers of courses who attempt to prepare the student with a solid background in children's literature and services, and classmates, some of whom already have experience in the field.

While I was taking library science courses related to work with children, I developed my personal philosophy of children's services and expressed that philosophy in a paper I wrote nearly one year before becoming a Children's Librarian. Now, after 4 1/2 years of practical experience, I decided it was a good time to unearth the paper, reread it, and see if experience has made many changes in my theories. I am painfully aware of how my theories on child raising changed drastically after having children of my own. I hoped I had been a little more realistic and a little less grandiose about how "I would do it if I were the librarian."

Following is my philosophy on

children's services as of August 1, 1983.

Back to Basics — A Sign of the Times

As a student of library science, I am currently in the process of absorbing information, both in classes and from outside reading, on what the children's librarian should be like. May I describe this creature? She (he) must first of all like children and enjoy working with them. She must be able to plan programs that are creative and stimulating. She must not only plan these programs for the "average" child at each age level, from infancy to approximately age thirteen, but she must be careful to include the mentally and physically handicapped, those with learning disabilities, the gifted, and minorities. If any are not able to come to the library, she must attempt to go to them. She must be a storyteller, a booktalker, a puppeteer, and an equipment operator. She must keep children under control, handle any complaints, censorship or otherwise, without losing her cool. She must plan the budget for her department, set goals and objectives, and justify her department's existence. She must be concerned with publicity

and public relations, and with collection development, review reading and book ordering. She must do these things and whatever else is required for less pay than her colleagues in adult services¹ because her job is not as prestigious as theirs, and she must beware of mental collapse resulting from a severe case of burnout.²

Current literature indicates that the use of children's services has declined,³ while the pressure to lure more children into the library by gimmicks has increased. The result is that many of the children who do use the library come for reasons other than books.⁴ This fact, I believe, gives us reason to pause and reflect on what the purpose of a children's department is, or what its basic priorities are.

This may seem an extremely pragmatic viewpoint, but I believe this viewpoint is a sign of the times. Consider the uproar which has resulted from the report from the Commission on Excellence in Education on the declining quality of education in our country, and notice how newspapers and magazines are echoing the hue and cry. William Buckley, in a recent newspaper column, noted the number of passengers on a recent DC-10 flight—over one-half—who were simply sitting. He stated:

[A]nd my point is, of course, that they were not reading—not books, or newspapers, or the magazines the airplanes put into the marsupial pouches in front of you . . . There is little doubt that the observation of the president's educational commission released last spring was correct, that we are becoming a nation that encourages mediocrity; and this is in part, because we do not read.⁵

The schools, however, cannot solve all educational problems alone, because they did not cause all of them; numerous factors enter into the decline of literacy. Besides, exposure

to books and a positive attitude toward learning should take place long before a child enters formal schooling if he is to have a hope of achieving his potential. One of the very best places for this love affair with learning to begin is in the public library, for nowhere else can such a vast array of books and other materials be made available. The catch is that small children must be brought to the library by someone—an adult who has enough confidence in the library to feel that it is good at what it is in existence for.

To my knowledge, the basic reason for a library is to provide people collectively with materials which they could not afford to provide for themselves individually. The basic format for these materials still is, and I hope will ever remain, the book. Those who are intent on bringing about a bookless society I sincerely hope are struck with a plague before their dirty deeds are done. The printed book is as yet the only medium which allows the reader all the time he desires to peruse a particularly provocative passage or study intensely an appealing illustration, or to skip entire segments altogether, if he desires. There is also evidence that the printed page is superior to other methods of relaying information in the enrichment of language skills in children.⁶

There appears to be a back-to-basics movement underway in libraries as there is in the schools, but I hope it does not get carried to the opposite extreme. There are those who advocate abandonment of programming in public libraries,⁷ but each community is different and has different needs. It boils down to a matter of priorities—putting first things first. As Ervin J. Gaines stated in an article in the *Wilson Library Bulletin*, "A little benign neglect of social involvement and a greater emphasis on improving

those things that cause people to use libraries in the first place will be of greatest service to our citizens."⁸

Regarding children's services in particular, we might do well to read from time to time the *ALA Standards for Children's Services in Public Libraries*. I will not repeat here the six objectives, but the first two are (1) To make a wide and varied collection of books easily . . . available, and (2) To give guidance to children in their choice of books and materials.⁹ The *Standards* also state that "Individual reading guidance is a day-to-day activity in each agency and the most important (underlining added) children's service performed."¹⁰

I do not think anyone would deny that programming is an integral part of children's services, but it is unfortunate that children's programming has been cited as the main reason why children's librarians leave the field.¹¹ I do not think this would be the case if there were not pressure, real or imagined, on children's librarians to undo themselves. The point I am trying to make here is that the basic objectives need always be kept in mind and taken care of before the extras. As Patrick O'Brien so aptly stated in an issue of *Top of the News*, "The public library is one of the few (it may even be the only) institutions left in this country where a child can still get one-on-one professional help free and without question."¹² Let us not spoil that special relationship by having children's librarians who are just too busy or too tired to fulfill their basic purpose.

There are those who insist that we must "sell" our libraries to the public, that we must be super-creative because, after all, we have TV and the movies and video games to compete with.¹³ One of the most respected figures in children's services, Ann Carroll Moore, once wrote:

And in so doing I would remind you that although children's books may come and go, children's reading is not a problem to be solved by anyone. It is, or may be, a very wonderful, rich, and free experience which should never be cheapened by artificial stimulation or reward. Reading is an art. It cannot be measured by graphs or statistics. The glow of enthusiasm a boy or girl brings to the first reading of a book—whether old or new—to which he feels spiritual kinship is an infinitely precious thing to be cherished and respected on its own terms.¹⁴

I do not believe that the passing of time has changed the overall purpose of the children's room. I believe that instead of trying to compete with the fast-paced action of children's entertainment we need to offer an alternative. In speaking of justifying children's services to library administrators, Patrick O'Brien stated, "You don't have to be super innovators to promote the value of your service. All you have to do is keep the quality of your service as high as conceivably possible and toot your own horn."¹⁵

It is certainly true that children are much more easily bored and are more sophisticated than they were 50 years ago, but it seems futile to be forever trying to top our own gimmicks in order to attract their attention. Why not offer them a refuge—a relaxed atmosphere where, for a change, someone actually has time for them?

To summarize: (1) We need to keep our basic objectives in mind and make sure they have top priority. The extras are marvelous, but they are frosting on the cake. (2) We need to avoid redundancy and not overlap with other programs in the community. Children can find entertainment elsewhere; they cannot find books, films, records, etc. elsewhere without buying them. (3) More emphasis must be placed on the younger child in order to help effect an improvement in the educational level in our nation. (4) We

need to relieve some of the pressure on children's librarians to be ever more clever and witty, and allow them to concentrate on quality of children's services over quantity.

It is entirely possible that along with the renewed emphasis on basic skills in the educational system will come a renewed interest in the public library as a preparation and support system for the schools. But this will happen only if children's services are looked upon with respect and if children's librarians are considered to be performing their basic responsibilities well.

My pre-Children's-Librarian paper was somewhat unrealistic in espousing the belief that we needn't feel we have to compete for children's time. Ideally, all we would have to do is provide a wonderful collection of books and other materials, be helpful and friendly, publicize what we have to offer, and children would flock to the library in droves. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be enough these days. Competition for children's time has become fierce. Even some preschoolers have a difficult time fitting story hour into their busy schedule of swimming classes, gymnastics, ballet, and nursery school.

On a recent day when our local schools were out of session for the semester break, our Audio-Visual Department reported a tremendously heavy flow of people coming to get videotapes. Disappointingly, our Children's Department was no busier than usual. Patrons seem to be rather fickle in that if we have a special event planned they will flock to the library, at least as long as the activity we have to offer is as enticing as anything else going on in town. If there isn't something special for them to attend, all too often books just don't seem to be

enough to tempt them.

Sometimes I feel like I'm caught on a merry-go-round that keeps going faster and won't let me off. No matter how well you do one year it seems like you have to do better the next year or you are not doing your job. Library boards, library administrators, and the public like to see an increase in services, statistics, and creative ideas. I have become weary of reading ads for Children's Librarian positions which emphasize that the applicant needs to be "enthusiastic," "energetic," and "creative." Don't other positions need those attributes, too, or is it acceptable for a Reference Librarian to be dull and lethargic?

I, like many librarians I know, am forever remarking about "the things they didn't teach us in library school." No class can properly prepare you for dealing with a screaming three-year-old who will not be pried from his mother's arms or a four-year-old who insists on resting on top of the book-cases or the two-year-old who falls backwards off the chair. No one warned me that if I planned for 25 children, 100 would show up; or if I planned for 50, only 10 would actually come. It never occurred to me while taking classes that I would make trips to the library in the middle of the night to perform Caesarian sections on chicken eggs that weren't hatching properly so there would be live chicks the next day for children to see. I never dreamed that I would breed gerbils and then watch in horror as the parents promptly devoured their young. I never really believed that if I did the things Children's Librarians typically do to promote the library in the community and the schools that I would find myself to be the lowest-paid department head in my library. (I hasten to add that my expression of displeasure over the salary situation did result in an upward adjustment.)

Although I concede that my 1983 philosophy of Children's Librarianship was not wholly realistic, time has not changed my belief in the principles I espoused. However, like the "before" and "after" pictures in ads for make-up, hair care products, and weight reduction plans, there is a considerable difference between my idealistic image of what a Children's Department should be and the reality of what it must be to get the attention of the people it is intended to serve.

Of Related Interest

1. Ballard, Thomas H. "More Books, Not Market Surveys!" *American Libraries*, Feb. 1981, pp. 76-78.
2. Young, Diana. "Library Service to Children — A Job or a Profession," *Public Libraries*, Spring 1981, pp. 24-26.

References

¹Heim, Kathleen M. "A Comparison of Children and Adult Librarians' Salaries in LACONI Member Libraries," *Illinois Libraries*, Dec. 1982, pp. 1160-1168.

²Todaro, Julie Beth. "Job Burnout: It's Time We Had a Telethon!" *Illinois Libraries*, Dec., 1982, pp. 1153-1157.

³Wilson, Pauline. "Needed: A Market Decision and Some Market Research," *Public Libraries*, Fall

1980, pp. 69-70.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Buckley, William. *United Publications Syndicate*, July 30, 1983.

⁶Wilson, Pauline. "Children's Service and Power: Knowledge to Shape the Future," *Top of the News*, Winter 1981, p. 120

⁷Ballard, Thomas H. "Programming in Public Libraries: A Dissenting Viewpoint," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, Feb. 1981, pp. 413-418.

⁸Gaines, Ervin J. "Let's Return to Traditional Library Service: Facing the Failure of Social Experimentation," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, Sept. 1980, p. 78.

⁹American Library Association. *Standards for Children's Services in Public Libraries*. Chicago: ALA, 1964, p. 13.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹¹Kozak, Ann M. "Top That! — The Children's Programming Bind," *Top of the News*, Spring 1981, p. 243.

¹²O'Brien, Patrick M. "An Administrator Speaks of Services to Youth," *Top of the News*, Spring 1981, p. 243.

¹³Somerville, Mary. "How to Knock the Stuffings Out of Your Summer Reading Program," *Top of the News*, Spring 1981, pp. 265-274.

¹⁴Moore, Ann Carroll. *My Roads to Childhood*. Boston: The Horn Book, 1961, pp. 338 & 339.

¹⁵O'Brien, Patrick M. "An Administrator Speaks of Service to Youth," *Top of the News*, Spring 1981, p. 246.