

The Children's Librarian

WILLIAM CHAIT

Director

Dayton and Montgomery County Public Library
Dayton, Ohio

The Children's Librarian as Viewed by Library Administrators

What does an administrator expect of a children's librarian? Everything! Experienced administrators in public libraries look upon children's librarians as among the most professional of the various specialist librarians on their staffs. Children's librarians need the characteristics, understanding and skills which will enable them to relate both to adults and to children, as well as to other staff members.

The most essential quality of any librarian is that of intelligence. This characteristic is defined as the ability to adapt to a changing society and a changing institution. In addition to being intelligent, the children's librarian must be articulate, i.e., must possess an ability to express ideas readily. The children's librarian has to establish a rapport not only with children, but with the adults concerned with children.

The children's librarian, especially in large public libraries, must understand the current urban scene. The factors which operate to make each U.S. city racially, ethnically and economically unique are all important to the children's librarian, who not only will meet the middle-class and advantaged children but also must learn to work with the retarded, the handicapped and the poor. The children's librarian transferring to another branch in a large library system will often experience a complete change of juvenile public. This means that the children's librarian must be daring in his/her approach to problems and be willing to experiment with new methods and procedures rather than rely on the traditional picture-book hour, story hour or film program. This requires constant experimentation with creative ideas to determine what will appeal to children

and what won't. Dramatic presentations, puppet shows, and arts and crafts programs have proven very successful in reaching children from preliterate homes. Books must be part of the program but need not be the beginning or all of the program.

Every large library staff composed of a variety of department specialists finds that at times they do not communicate effectively with each other. Children's librarians must convince the reference librarian, the cataloger, the bibliographer and others that they are not simply playing pattycake all day and that their job is as difficult and as demanding — physically as well as mentally — as many of the other jobs in the library. In relating to the administrator, children's librarians must be willing to apply businesslike procedures to their operation. They must help prepare and then adhere to budgets for staff and materials. They must, as must all librarians, learn to organize their work time and delegate responsibilities. An ability to supervise others, which children's librarians are not often considered to need, is actually essential in working with student assistants, members of social groups, parents and even children. In some libraries children's librarians have supervisory responsibilities.

Having considered the essential qualities of an ideal children's librarian, I will look now at some other desirable qualifications. Foremost is that of an orderly mind. People who are or often seem to be overworked are people who do not have an orderly mind. They flit from one task to another without finishing anything. They become increasingly disturbed over their lack of success and seem to be in a constant state of agitation. Children need the sense of stability derived from contact with adults who are in control of their own lives.

Appearance means a great deal to children. One's dress should be appealing and inviting to children; but that doesn't mean one has to be beautiful or handsome. Clothing should be chosen not only with the type of children contacted in mind, but also with the type of program being presented. A children's librarian may come as a witch for a Halloween program or in jeans to put on a marionette show.

Children's librarians should possess warmth and friendliness, but too many children's librarians are guilty of sentimentality. It is possible to have warmth without sentimentality. One needn't "love" children to work with them; one must care about them and enjoy being with them. Professionalism implies an ability to look objectively at one's work, fellow workers and the recipients of that work. This is sometimes difficult, but a good children's librarian can do it.

The ideal preparation for a good children's librarian is not easily definable. I have observed through experience with more than 100 children's librarians that the graduate degree is not the only preparation. Usually it

is good preparation and enables many children's librarians to start doing a good job immediately, but in the long run it is not enough; one cannot expect to board a bus and ride forty years on a single fare. Continuing education is important for all librarians. Children's librarians prepared with either undergraduate degrees in library science or elementary education sometimes do as well as librarians with graduate degrees if they have in-service training and continuing education.

Developing adult interests is good preparation for a children's librarian. Music, art and literature (both adult and children's) should be included in the preparation of all children's librarians. Relating to adults in a personal, social and educational manner is part of being a complete children's librarian. A good children's librarian is a member of the adult community and shares professionally with other adults as an authority in work with children in print and other media.

One important factor in the continuing development of an ideal children's librarian is participation in professional activities and contributions to the profession. Simply working every day, whether it is in a library or factory, may be enough for some people, but it can become very monotonous. It prevents a person from looking at what can be accomplished through trying new things, relating to new people, accepting or inviting new ideas. Activity in professional organizations makes the difference between a job and a profession and is therefore very important in the preparation and development of a good children's librarian. Professional reading and familiarity with and knowledge of both adult and children's books is an enriching aspect of professionalism for all librarians.

The performance of a good children's librarian requires constant revision of methods of reaching children, parents, teachers and others. As society changes, children must be reached in different ways. A child brought up on "Sesame Street" cannot be reached the same way as children of twenty years ago. Neither can their parents, contending with problems of earning a living and providing for children in an inflationary economy, be reached in the same manner as parents of the more affluent 1950s and 1960s. A recent drop in library use led us to the conclusion that an increasing number of mothers are taking part-time or full-time jobs because of inflation, which cuts down on their own reading time as well as on opportunities for trips to the library with their children. Therefore, children's librarians must try new procedures and activities when the old ones fail.

All librarians, and especially children's librarians, should set goals and objectives against which they can measure their own performance. People often act out of habit rather than in an effort to reach a certain goal. We should ask ourselves what we are trying to achieve with our

activities. A children's librarian should not put on a puppet show just because he or she is good with puppets, but because it enriches the lives of children and introduces them to a world of literature, art and music. Film programming is very simple in most libraries because films and projectors are available; it does not take much time and energy. There is nothing wrong with scheduling films, but the children's librarian must be sure that he or she knows why it is being done.

No matter how well we do our jobs, the task isn't finished until we let others know about it. Good children's librarians must relate their accomplishments and successes to fellow librarians, administrators, public officials and the people they work with in schools and recreational agencies. Their good work must be made known in order to gain public support. A good children's librarian must recognize and relate to the library system how the children's activities support and contribute to the library system as a whole.

Very often, competent children's librarians have become very good middle-management people. Branch library management positions have been filled by children's librarians who had been doing an outstanding job and thus came to the attention of their administrators and fellow staff members. Perhaps lost as children's librarians (although many branch librarians are also in charge of the children's section), they remain contributing members of the profession.

While attempting to delineate an ideal children's librarian, it is important to realize that not all children's librarians are cast in the same mold. One of the great joys of humanity is the diversity of people. The ideal children's librarian can have any variety of characteristics and a poor children's librarian can have the same characteristics but still be a poor children's librarian. Perhaps the characteristics which make the difference are hard to define, but it is this difference which must be cultivated.