

## Services

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### Services to Preschoolers and Adults

“Children in the library/ stand no longer by your knee./ Children turning page on page/ are not children, have no age./ Have no heed, no hand to take;/ go at will, with whom they like.”<sup>1</sup> These lines from Norma Farber’s poem describe the self-confident and independent modern child, who approaches the library as one more experience in a busy life. For the preschooler, who by virtue of age shares the library experience with an adult, some wide-eyed wonder may still remain.

For librarians the word “preschooler” has taken on a new definition. It no longer refers to the three- to six-year-old child. From birth on the child has a place in the library’s scheme of things. For instance, Toronto, Ontario hospitals send the new mother home with a pamphlet from the Mississauga Library System describing sources in the library that will help her cope with and enjoy her baby.<sup>2</sup>

In short, the public library is involved in “early childhood education,” aptly defined as being “concerned with the total development of each young child from birth — with all his components for growth, including physical, intellectual, emotional, social and adaptive.”<sup>3</sup> Materials are chosen with child’s developmental and recreational needs in mind, creating an increased interest in realia, especially toys that can provide the concrete experiences to which the very young child responds best. Toy-lending arrangements of all kinds have been tried.

The Clovis (New Mexico) Public Library has developed The Parent/Child Toy Lending Library that operates on the theory that “the parent

is the most significant teacher for the child, and the preschool child who from an early age (almost from birth) is deliberately involved in the process of discovering and learning will be able to deal more effectively with the formalized learning procedures of schooling."<sup>4</sup> In addition to providing toys, the library runs a 5-week series of classes for parents to introduce the basic toys and explain the learning skills which they develop.<sup>5</sup> In Pittsburgh, the public library has recently established ties with a toy lending library run by volunteers. Instead of starting from scratch, the library moved into an established program and the volunteers received badly needed staff support and special programming.

In addition to the traditional preschool story hours, librarians are experimenting with a variety of programs ranging in scope from the Erie (Pennsylvania) Media Library for Preschoolers with its emphasis on a flexible environment and continuous, spontaneous programming<sup>6</sup> to the libraries with occasional one-time activities. The May 1977 *School Library Journal* describes two activities geared to the very young child. The Greenburgh (New York) Public Library runs a "Storytime for Toddlers."<sup>7</sup> Language development, verbal stimulation and socialization skills for two-year-olds come out of this activity, in addition to enjoyment for both the children and their parents. Craft classes for two- and three-year-olds were tried by children's librarians in Fairfax County, Virginia.<sup>8</sup> The experience itself, regardless of whether it ends in a finished product, is another opportunity for parents, children and the librarian to interact.

These programs are examples of ways to provide young children with verbal and visual stimulation. The cliché that play is the child's work is true, and the library has the potential to make this work more satisfying and productive. Library service to the very young is limited only by the librarian's imagination. Developing a program for this age group within the physical and financial confines of individual libraries is a challenge.

In our library, we have approached it from different directions in a piecemeal fashion. For example, the traditional preschool story time has not changed much in format, although we have experimented with moving the time from morning to early evening. Would some combination of realia and the verbal create a valuable experience? Since language development is so crucial in the early years, it is wise to rethink the format of one of the library's most prized programs — the preschool story hour.

There is a long way to go with service to the preschooler. Programs are normally dependent on parent participation. The preschooler is a physically, mentally and emotionally demanding individual; thus, parents need all the support they can get. Simultaneous programming for parents is one way to support both groups without causing a babysitting

problem. This requires more staff, of course, which is a problem in some libraries. It is not impossible, however; for instance, a capable guest speaker can be introduced and left to speak while the librarian works elsewhere with the children. Careful planning, as usual, is the rule.

That children's librarians are providing parent support programs is obvious not only from the literature, but also from conference activity. Those who attended the 1977 ALA conference in Detroit were exposed to a Parent Support Program Sampler. Librarians were able to examine it at their own pace and to question the people involved in its various components.

Through the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), ALA has provided numerous ideas for programs with preschoolers and parents. *Start Early for an Early Start: You and the Young Child* and *Opening Doors for Preschool Children and Their Parents*<sup>9</sup> are resource guides published by ALSC's Preschool Services and Parent Education Committee. *Toys to Go: Use of Realia in Public Libraries*,<sup>10</sup> edited by Faith Hektoen and Jeanne Rinehart, is another useful tool. There are resources, especially in the print area, available to children's librarians, but as Sandra Sivulich, writing in *PLA Newsletter*, states: "Wouldn't it be great if there was a 'Standard Catalog' objectively annotating what is needed for a basic pre-school library (other and in addition to books, that is)?"<sup>11</sup>

What kind of support programming should the children's librarian develop? Should all the programs, whether individual or in a series format, relate to library materials? Is the whole world of the preschooler grist for the mill, or can other agencies better handle questions about medical problems, for example? Do libraries need more cooperative programming? Should libraries have cooperative programming among departments in a library? How much of a referral function can children's services handle? In Parma, Ohio, an information and referral service for parents of preschool children has been carefully developed.<sup>12</sup> Should libraries providing this service follow up requests for information to ensure that parents get the help they need? This kind of information and referral service, with its attendant problems of updating and followup, is, of course, neither unique to children's services nor restricted to requests for preschool children's needs.

Other adults — educators, social workers, health personnel, and students — also benefit from parent support services and use materials for and about children. A parent-teacher collection housed in the children's department is an increasingly familiar sight. This raises the question of whether books about child development, as well as books about materials for children, should be housed in the children's room. If this is

physically impossible or philosophically undesirable, what is the best way to ensure access to this body of information? Are children's librarians sufficiently knowledgeable about these materials to do effective reference work with the adult community? Librarians are familiar with the adult refugee from the science and technology department who knows there must be a simple and clear explanation of how car engines work, or with the journalist needing basic information about an unfamiliar topic. Materials for children are the answer for these people. How do librarians let the adult community know? Smaller libraries have experimented with interfiling adult and juvenile nonfiction. When this is not possible, how do children's librarians promote access?

During a discussion at the 1977 Preconference on Children's Services in Public Libraries in Detroit, it was suggested that children's librarians were searching for a clientele when they served preschoolers and adults. That is not a question I wish to raise at this institute. I believe in service to preschoolers and adults. Moreover, librarians have always served these groups; now they are doing it better. The increased sophistication and range of services available to preschoolers and adults, especially parents, are highly visible both in the literature and in the local community. Individual creative efforts to serve this clientele, whose needs seem so divergent yet who are found together in so many settings, are happening around the country. It still remains, however, for the profession to articulate a policy that will generate a statement of needs and a statement of process.

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