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What Do Public Libraries Need From Managers and Missionaries for Children's Services?

As a former children's services librarian and a library administrator in several public libraries, I've spoken on this topic numerous times over the last twelve years. In general, the audience expects to hear words of wisdom about how children's librarians need to know the literature in the field and the wide range of needs of their varied audiences, how to budget, how to select materials and do programming, and how to get the administrator's attention. Certainly an M.L.S., a little experience in the field, and some continuing education will provide an awareness of these needs. Therefore, it is obvious that libraries and children's services librarians can address needs other than those that are specific to children's librarianship.

Over the years many librarians have realized that those in children's services need to know more than just the literature of the field. For instance, only after I ceased being a children's librarian did I have a conversation with a friend who explained the development of motor skills in young children. With chagrin, I realized that almost all the finger plays selected for use in programming had been inappropriate and probably very frustrating.

Children's services librarians need to know about child development (both mental and physical) as well as how children learn to read. Although not all practitioners agree with the methods used in schools, we need to know the current methods being used in our schools and, more importantly, we need to be aware of curriculum changes. Just as we need to know about child development, we need to know how children build vocabulary skills, word recognition, sentence patterns, and comprehension.

Most children's services librarians, even in very large systems, do their own public relations so they need to know what sells their programs and how to put it into a format that will "talk" to children or those who pay

attention to library services for children. Program planning is a necessity for all children's librarians and one that takes great skill. Children's services librarians would do well to spend time learning how to put together a good program as well as concentrating on the content.

But, I'd like to move on to a larger issue. After the basics are there, what do libraries need from children's librarians? I would suggest the following: advocacy, political savvy, initiative, commitment, pride, and professionalism.

Although Frances Clark Sayers (1965) is most often quoted for her insightful comments on the philosophy of librarianship to children, I particularly like her quote from *Summoned by Books* when she says: "If she (the children's librarian) is left outside the realm of the intellectual and administrative concern of the library staff with which she works, she had better look to her own attitudes" (p. 44).

As a library administrator, I market and sell library services everyday. I also react to "being sold" a service or library product that I am convinced will benefit both the public and position the library in a prominent and respected place in the community. Without well planned, specific advocacy on the part of children's librarians, the library administration will respond to its own agenda or to those on the staff who are pushing certain services. Children's services librarians have consistently suffered from the syndrome of waiting for the recognition they know they deserve and it's obvious that that isn't working.

Closely aligned with advocacy is political savvy. In other words, what is going on in your community that is such an obvious match with service to children that you could use it to make children's services a higher priority in your library? Learn to translate local community efforts, interests, and plans into needs for library service. Watch for issues that surface in every community—emphasis on job training, education, community education centers, preschoolers, reading readiness—and make certain that the library is involved. Make a plan, call whoever is in charge, tell them what you can do for them. Learn to think of the library as a place that can offer infinite possibilities for services and translate those possibilities for others in the community who don't think of the library that way.

Libraries are always looking for employees with initiative, but it is believed that children's librarians need initiative more than others. You are often the only professional who exclusively serves children in your library (a lonely spot) so it takes more and harder efforts to do the work that needs to be done and be the standard bearer for children's services. Make certain that initiative is recognized by volunteering to give reports to friends groups and the library board about what is happening in children's services and why. Parlay your ability and initiative into becoming recognized as a valuable and respected voice for children's services.

Commitment and pride are two needs that go closely together. I have made it a point to always tell others about my beginnings in the profession, and I have advocated and supported children's service as an administrator. Too often, however, I have watched children's services librarians negate their own image by both downgrading what they do and permitting others to do it. Students often ask me where I learned to be a library director and I always tell them I learned two excellent skills as a children's librarian—how to tell a story and how to manage a crowd of three-year olds! Children's services librarians need to decide that they are going to commit themselves to being a good one and make certain others know how good they are.

Libraries need librarians who look, act, and perform in a professional manner. We can learn much from professionals in other fields when we recognize that they are consciously portraying an image to the public that *they* want the public to believe. Be very aware that you are always representing the library profession and the institution for which you work—if you don't like the image, you are in control of changing it.

Finally, I know what to look for in children's services librarians. I want to know that you decided to become one, that you know what you're doing, but, more importantly, *why* you're doing it, that you have the ability to articulate that why to varied audiences (including me), that you can see the possibilities of library service to children in everything that happens around you, and be able to determine how and why some of them fit into library service. I look for the philosopher, the dreamer, the innovator who is part pragmatic realist. Coupled with practical library skills, this is what public libraries are searching for in their children's services librarians.

NOTE

Sayers, F. C. (1965). *Summoned by books, essays and speeches by Frances Clarke Sayers*. New York: Viking.