The Public Library Serves
The Exceptional Child

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The exceptional child has been defined by William Cruickshank as "one who, by reason of a physical or intellectual deviation, is considered unique among children."¹ Thus, the term is used to designate a child who is intellectually superior or retarded, as well as one who is physically handicapped.

The need for special education for exceptional children was recognized by the National Education Association as early as 1922, when it established the Council for Exceptional Children, organized with the purpose of promoting "strong educational programs for exceptional children and youth."² More recently, there has been a growing public interest in the education of exceptional children, with public schools establishing departments for special education and parent groups organizing to bring the needs of these children to the attention of community groups and legislative bodies.

The Cincinnati public schools have had a Special Education Department for about 15 years. Working closely with the schools in providing library service for children in the elementary grades, the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County has long endeavored to serve children with special needs, but the average children's librarian lacked the time and background to do informed work in this area. Those children whose book needs were unique, or who would benefit from specialized services, were the concern of Eulalie S. Ross, Coordinator of Work with Children in the Library, when she recommended that specialized library service be extended to them even as special education served them in the schools. Acting upon Mrs. Ross's recommendation, the Library Board of Trustees approved such

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service, and in September 1959, the author was appointed as Specialist, Exceptional Children, to direct the program.

The groups of children served through this program include the gifted, the retarded, the blind, the deaf, other physically handicapped, the ill, the emotionally disturbed, and the delinquent. The service includes the making of special book lists, the giving of book talks to children and their leaders, storytelling, assisting in book selection for special libraries, the setting up of public library book collections for special institutions, and in some cases administering them.

As Emerson Greenaway indicated at the Montreal Conference of the American Library Association, the most highly developed of the programs for the handicapped in the library field is work with the blind. Most librarians know about the regional libraries for the blind, stocked with books in braille and talking book records by the Division for the Blind of the Library of Congress, but one is reminded by Robert S. Bray in his "Books for Young Blind Readers" that "there is a great deal to be done in making maximum use of these books." 4

Of the regional libraries for the blind, only the New York Public Library has a full-time children's specialist. Cincinnati can now offer more reading guidance to blind children and in some cases be more helpful to them in their school work. To stimulate the children's interest in books—both braille and talking books—and to offer them reading guidance—the Specialist has visited the special classrooms for the blind several times a year since coming to the new post. In this program books are introduced through storytelling and the book talk much as they are for sighted children. Through school visits the librarian makes certain that all of the blind children are registered borrowers of the Cincinnati Library for the Blind and that they understand the procedure for securing books. Lists of the library's holdings are made available to all braille teachers and children's librarians. Children's librarians use titles available in braille in their book talks to visiting classes when a blind child is present with the sighted.

Some of the children telephone the librarian when they have special requests and assignments. These calls provide further opportunity for guidance. Very limited reference work is possible, but it has recently been augmented by the braille edition of the World Book Encyclopedia. There is still "a great need for reference material which can be used by the students themselves." 4

Meaningful book service to the deaf child is beset with many difficulties and requires an understanding of his learning problems.
Charlotte Avery, of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, says: “The child with permanently impaired hearing, by the very nature of the impairment, has handicaps which have an impact on his total development and adjustment. The effects of impaired hearing pervade all communication: understanding, speaking, reading, writing, as well as hearing language.”

Until his education is begun, the young deaf child “does not know there is a sound in the world, nor is he aware that such a thing as language exists.” Language understanding and reading skills, even with good teaching, are usually about four years retarded in the child who has never heard, and this lag requires that his books for a long period be largely pictures. The first picture books for the deaf need to be about familiar things in the child’s environment: home activities (such as those pictured in *Papa Smurf*), familiar animals and pets, foods, flowers, the seasons, stores, farm and city life, etc. Books in which the pictures tell a simple story give the child his first introduction to what the printed word can mean to him. The pictures need to be realistic with not too many ideas conveyed on a single page. The child will progress slowly to books with more text and fewer pictures, but through the intermediate grades books with relatively simple vocabulary and good illustrations are necessary.

Because classes of deaf children visit several of the Cincinnati branch libraries periodically, the Exceptional Children Specialist has worked with the children’s librarians in preparing a good selection of books appropriate to the children’s understanding. Acting in accordance with the philosophy of Patricia Cory, librarian for the Lexington School for the Deaf, she has undertaken to introduce some books through storytelling, with the children lip-reading. Mrs. Cory, who gives many helpful suggestions for storytelling to the deaf in her book *School Library Service for Deaf Children,* considers storytelling to the deaf “the chief device the librarian will use in guiding the children to appropriate . . . literature.” It is worthwhile for its general stimulation of the children’s interest in books.

Working with deaf children and their teachers during these visits to the library has been helpful in evaluating the usefulness of specific titles for the children’s use. Two lists, one for the primary grades and one for the intermediate, have evolved from several years of work with the children. The lists have been made available to parents, teachers, and children’s librarians as guides to book selection for children with this handicap.

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Unlike the deaf, who may have the potential ability for eventually becoming good readers and library patrons, the mentally retarded will never be able to enjoy the full benefits of library service. However, librarians have come to feel that the library can make a real contribution to the development of the limited capacities these children do have for learning. According to G. Orville Johnson, "The mentally handicapped, like other children, should be educated so as to make the greatest use of their abilities to satisfy their own needs as well as the demands of the society in which they are living." From the author's experience with the educable retarded and from the comments of their teachers, it is evident that the library's contribution can be that of offering them the valuable social experience of visits to the library for storytelling, brief browsing periods, and help in selecting suitable books. Most of these children do eventually learn to read, some of them up to fourth grade level, but their reading-readiness program is much more extended that that of the normal child—usually three or four years. During this period their language understanding and knowledge of the world about them can be promoted by a program of reading aloud and storytelling. Stories about animals and familiar things prove most successful with the younger retarded children. Realistic stories continue to be enjoyed more than fantasy and fairy tales, even by the older retarded child, although some stories in the latter category can be successfully used with the middle and upper elementary groups. Contacts with these children in their classrooms and during class visits to the library have helped in developing lists of suitable books in this area which are useful to parents, teachers, and children's librarians.

The importance of books to the hospitalized patient is generally recognized, and their place in the therapeutic process is explored in the October 1962 issue of *Library Trends*, devoted to bibliotherapy. Eleanor Walsh, a pediatrics nurse, has experimented with storytelling as a "prescription to shorten and brighten children's hospital stays." She believes that books often fill a need which young patients have for something more than the treatment ordered on their charts. The Cincinnati Public Library feels that the availability of books to the long-term patient is especially desirable, and where there was no library service in the Cincinnati hospitals treating children for extended periods, efforts have been made to supply it since 1959.

The Cincinnati Public Library's most nearly complete service to hospitalized children is now at the Convalescent Hospital for Chil-
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dren, where there is a collection of some 400 books. Weekly visits
are made to the hospital to give service to the patients—usually
around 65—to whom books are meaningful. Some of these children are
seen in the hospital classrooms, where book introduction to groups
is possible; the others are served in their wards. During the summer
months there are story hours in the wards and in the recreation
room. Many rewarding experiences here are assurance that this book
service fills a genuine need, and that its benefits are far-reaching.

The mentally ill children at Longview State Hospital are served
through a smaller collection of books placed there by the Library
and administered by teachers in the hospital school. This service is
supplemented by books borrowed from a neighborhood branch by
those children well enough to leave the hospital under supervision
and visit the branch. At the time of these visits some book talks are
given, and then individual guidance is offered. The Library caters
to the children’s interests but also suggests titles which might support
the child in time of stress. The author works closely with the children’s
librarian in this program.

At the Child Guidance Home, a residential treatment center for
emotionally disturbed children, service is given in various ways. It
is a situation in which books can be used to good advantage as an
adjunct to other therapies, for the children all have good native intel-
ligence and all work with a psychiatrist. The Home receives monthly
classroom collections from the Library when the Specialist visits there
for storytelling and book talks. Books are selected with the individual
child’s interests and problems in mind and are introduced in a class-
room setting. She also makes special book lists for the psychiatrists
when they feel that a child’s problem may be helped by bibliotherapy.
Although the results of such reading cannot be measured, there is
evidence that books often mean a great deal to a disturbed child by
helping him to express his own feelings and to identify himself with
book characters or situations.

Another agency served with a book collection is the Hamilton
County Youth Center where children who have been law offenders
await trial in Juvenile Court. Because their period of confinement is
relatively brief, their collection consists of short works of fiction and
biography, books which can be read to advantage in parts, and titles
that invite constructive browsing. The circulation records of this
collection show the children’s interest in problems of growing up,
with books like *Twixt Twelve and Twenty* being especially popular.
Stories of jungle life and those in which violence in nature is described are also popular. This interest supports the theory that the reading of such stories may give the child a healthy release from his own feelings of hostility.

In terms of what it may mean to the world of tomorrow, work with gifted children probably offers the greatest challenge, for these boys and girls are future leaders. Books for gifted children need to satisfy their characteristic curiosity and imagination, have sufficient merit to stir their thinking, and convey truths to promote their maturing sense of values.

Cincinnati has no special schools or special curriculum for the gifted in the elementary grades, but most of the schools have homogeneous grouping so that the gifted are classed together. Enriched programs are made available as the teachers find them possible, and here the library stands ready to cooperate by furnishing special book lists, and other services. One of the most successful cooperative efforts has been in the Great Books kind of discussion program. For one series of such discussion programs the Specialist suggested titles for use by second and third graders and served as co-leader for one of the groups in the classroom. The children had been selected for their keen interest in reading and their response to the discussion was excellent, with their perceptive comments reflecting their comprehension and understanding.

Another project—a summer enrichment program for academically talented fifth and sixth graders—was also planned in cooperation with the schools. In this project, however, the discussions were held in a branch library, and the library was responsible for both the selection of books and leading the discussions. The branch children's librarian and the Specialist compiled a list, "Fiction to Enjoy and Remember," to guide the children's summer reading, and the Specialist led the discussion of five of these titles, using the Great Books question method. The children in this group had been chosen for their general scholastic abilities rather than their interest in reading fiction, and the response was not quite as good as it had been with the groups in the classrooms. However, almost all of the children expressed a liking for this kind of discussion, and both the children and the leaders gained enough from the experience to make it worthwhile.

Lewis L. Burkhart, Chairman of Special Education in Ohio, calls for "community awareness of the need of every exceptional child to realize his full potentialities for self-expression, self-realization, and
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service.”¹¹ In all areas of work described in this article the purpose has been to be aware of this need and to contribute to its fulfillment.

References


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