



# Standards for Public Library Services for Children

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IN LATE 1960, Elinor Walker, president of the Public Library Association, announced appointments to a subcommittee to determine standards for public library service for children. Beginning with an organizational meeting during the 1961 midwinter meeting of the American Library Association in Chicago, this subcommittee began the drafting of a statement of standards. The subcommittee is directly responsible to the standards committee of the Public Library Association, a standing committee with rotating membership. Drafts of the statement of standards for children's work in public libraries require the approval of this committee as well as the approval of the board of the Public Library Association. Because the standards committee has prime responsibility for the overall statement of standards for public libraries, it is essential that subcommittees working under its aegis operate within the framework of those standards and according to the form used therein.

The eight members of this subcommittee bring to it experience in many aspects of work with children. Specializations include storytelling, services to schools, supervisory experience, state field work, and general administration. The range of libraries in which subcommittee members have worked varies also in size, type, and geography throughout the United States. A key member in the organizational period of this committee was Frances Lee, who had served on the committee which compiled standards for work with children for the California Library Association. Drafts of those standards provided guidelines for the PLA subcommittee.<sup>1</sup>

Why such a subcommittee in the first place? Why a separate state-  

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ment of standards for children's work? The standards statement for public libraries, published in 1956<sup>2</sup> and revised with cost studies thereafter, outlines standards for public libraries in general, but there are special areas for which specific standards were not spelled out. The areas in most need were probably the first to work on separate statements. A group of young adult librarians had been working on a handbook for work with young adults; redrafting produced a statement of standards for work with young adults. Two similar groups had begun standards statements for bookmobiles and small libraries before the organization of the subcommittee on children's work. The cry for a statement on standards for children's work had come clearly from children's librarians and supervisors of work with children; with less emphasis, it had been taken up by administrators seeking a norm or a pattern for the many facets of public library service to children.

It was an administrator, Harold C. Hammill, director of the Los Angeles Public Library and president-elect of the Public Library Association, who spoke to the first subcommittee meeting, urging the group to "Be bold! Be specific!" From the first, with such encouragement, this subcommittee has attempted to be bold.

With the pattern of the PLA standards and of the California Library Association draft of standards for children's work before them, the subcommittee members divided the areas of responsibility thus: administration, personnel, materials, services, and physical facilities. Teams of two worked on the sections on materials and services, and three members worked individually on each of the other sections. To determine areas in which standards were needed, one member surveyed the study of organizational patterns of library service to children made by Elizabeth Gross.

At this point, the greatest possible pitfall probably was the tendency to write a handbook. During the subcommittee's second meeting at the Cleveland conference of 1961 and in the exchange of first drafts for critical reading by other subcommittee members, this was the recurring criticism. Item by item, step by step, members wanted to hammer out practicable but normative standards, in implementation of sound principles, and in accord with but as an extension of the PLA standards themselves.

Particularly in the area of services, it is difficult to avoid the tendency to produce handbook or "how-to" materials. Reading guidance, storytelling, production of book lists—these are services about which each member has a firm set of *do's* and *don't's*, a conviction about the

ultimate goals of such activities. Subcommittee members deliberately limited themselves to formulating standards rather than suggestions for improvement, and in so doing realized more sharply the great need that exists for handbooks on the practice of these skills. But with their vision fixed upon standards and principles, the subcommittee avoided, as far as possible, suggestions on programming and, instead, prepared such statements as: "The public library maintains its standards of service to children through both formal and informal activities for individuals and groups." As is indicated by the following paragraphs, members touched upon each of various kinds of programming to point to the standard which it should attain. All of this has been put into context by Harriet Long's statement that "A conscious and deliberate effort to advise and guide reading is the primary purpose of every activity and program planned for children in the public library."<sup>3</sup>

It is Harriet Long who has most cogently summarized the aims of public library service to children in her book, *Rich the Treasure*. She notes six:

1. To make a wide and varied collection of books easily and temptingly available
2. To give guidance to children in their choice of books and materials
3. To share, extend and cultivate the enjoyment of reading as a voluntary, individual pursuit
4. To encourage lifelong education through the use of public library resources
5. To help the child develop to the full his personal ability and his social understanding
6. To serve as a social force in the community together with other agencies concerned with the child's welfare<sup>3</sup>

Standards are required to implement such goals, and formulation of them appears more onerous when one considers the unique tradition of service which children's librarians have established. Administration within the area of children's service and with children's service in relation to the library as a whole requires standards to insure continuance of that tradition. With the public library statement of standards in mind, the subcommittee began by stating that "The director of the library, as the chief administrator, is responsible for programs, services, book selection, and personnel management," and then focused quickly upon the administrative officer for children's services by stating, "The director of children's services has the re-

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sponsibility to interpret children's services to the library staff and to the citizens of the community." This procedure seemed most in keeping with the pattern of responsibility suggested by the public library standards.

Among subcommittee members themselves there was the greatest difference of opinion in the area of standards for materials. In practice, it may be safe to say that it is in this area that the children's section of each library departs most radically from practices of other sections of the library. The need for reading and examination of books before purchased was keenly felt; yet the value of sound reviewing media is undermined if every system, no matter how small, requires a limited staff to read each title under consideration when good critical reviews are available. The subcommittee members reached a tenuous consensus on this point, agreeing that children's materials should be read or examined before being added to the system, but already there have been sharp criticisms of this statement, and the subject faces further discussion.

Indeed, the entire statement of standards for children's work in public libraries is in only a "tentative final draft" stage as of January 1963. Following revisions made during the Miami conference in 1962, the subcommittee issued this draft to the board of the Public Library Association, to the standards committee and its subcommittees, and to members of the board of the Children's Services Division who are also members of PLA, as well as to librarians who had requested copies of such early drafts. Comments which have come from these recipients have been rather predictable. The same points which required the most discussion during subcommittee meetings have aroused the curiosity, criticism, or compliments of this larger group of librarians. The subcommittee will meet again to incorporate some changes, many of them initiated by the subcommittee itself following cogitation on earlier discussions. Other points will not be changed, if convictions hold that the first statement was justified. One statement which was quickly challenged was the indication that the age group for whom children's library service is intended is the preschool through junior high school age group. Among themselves, subcommittee members argued vigorously for this and for other age limitations. The decision to use preschool through junior high as the specific group was reached when members ascertained that the constitution of the Children's Services Division establishes this arbitrary limit, and the statement of standards for

work with young adults indicates no specific beginning age. The subcommittee's decision seems defensible and realistic.

Even before the standards have been stated to the satisfaction of the subcommittee itself, it is possible to predict controversy about them when they appear. At this point it has been decided not to include quantitative standards for furnishings, etc. The reason for this decision is that such standards are rapidly outlived and may provide only frustrations to the libraries capable of implementing standards for services, materials, etc. Perhaps other factors may alter the final decision.

When the statement of standards appears, several points must be kept in mind: this is a supplement to *Public Library Service*; it is not intended to be a restatement of any of those early standards, but an amplification of those standards applying to public library service for children; and the standards are proposed, not as a monolithic law incapable of change, but as a realistic norm for libraries to attain.

### *References*

1. Children's and Young People's Section, California Library Association. "Standards of Service to Children in Public Libraries of California." Unpublished paper, 1961.
2. American Library Association. *Public Library Service*. Chicago, American Library Association, 1956.
3. Long, Harriet G. *Rich the Treasure*. Chicago, American Library Association, 1953, p. 15.