
Looking at Environments for Children in Public Libraries

by Holly G. Willett

Here is a scene from an actual public library: Entry to the children's room is down a steep, unlighted staircase with no handicapped access. Furniture crowds the room; all the picture books are shelved on a stage-like area with no railing; the meeting room is used for storing audiovisual equipment; and the staff "lounge" is a shelf of coffee supplies in the magazine storage closet. Conditions in the adult area are similar. The staff knows what the problems are, but they have not been able to convince the community that it needs a new library building.

This library represents a point at the far left edge of a continuum of challenges facing public librarians who wish to provide an environment that stimulates and welcomes children. The staff and the public would benefit from taking a systematic look at the many factors that contribute to a desirable milieu for children. At present, I am working on an instrument for evaluating public library environments for children through methodical observation which will also provide some guidance for improving those environments.

Tentatively titled, "Environment Rating Scales for Public Library Children's Services," the work is modeled after environment rating scales for child care settings developed by Thelma Harms, Richard Clifford, and Debby Cryer¹ of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From their work I have adopted the format, the concept of environment, and some of the items. My scale has evolved from a single scale with forty-four items to two separate scales, one with one hundred items for libraries with three or fewer staff members and the other with two hundred items for larger libraries. More than one hundred thirty children's librarians, consultants, and library educators have been involved in suggesting items for the scales, and draft versions of the scales have been pretested in public libraries in California, Wisconsin, and Illinois.

Although "The Environment Rating Scales for Public Library Children's Services" are still in draft form, I will share some of the methods and conclusions developed in the course of working on them. First, I will present a definition of "environment," followed by a presentation of the values used in designing the Environment Rating Scales. Then, specific aspects of the scales will be explored. Finally, some questions to assist the reader's "looking around" at the library where she or he works and a sampling of items from the actual scales will be given.

When one thinks of a public library as an environment, one may first consider that the subject is physical facilities, such as furniture, carpeting, equipment, space, shelving and storage, architectural features, and interior design. However, one dictionary defines "environment" as "The total of circumstances surrounding an organism or group of organisms" and goes on to

include "The complex of social and cultural conditions affecting the nature of an individual or community" as well as the physical surroundings. Using this broader definition, physical facilities are clearly an important part of the environment of public libraries, but other factors are involved as well. The Environment Rating Scales include collections, policies, procedures, staff attitudes and behavior, materials, and services in the concept of environment because they represent the social and cultural conditions which affect users.

All of these factors must work together in order for the library to achieve its goals, and the goals must be appropriate to the physical facilities, the staff attitudes, the materials, the services, etc. If the environment and the goals do not work together, then staff will change the goals, the environment, or both, but may not be aware of doing so.² Suppose that Library X, using the Public Library Association's *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries*,³ selects Formal Education Support Center as one of its roles and then designs goals and objectives suitable to that role. Unless Library X has adequate space for children to work on school assignments, a strong collection of reference and nonfiction materials, staff knowledgeable about the local school curricula, plus evening and weekend open hours, the library will make little progress towards fulfilling the role of Formal Education Support Center, no matter how much the staff and the community value that role.

Evaluating the environment, then, means comparing the value system which guides public library services to children to the actual provision of services. Major references from public librarianship, child development, and other relevant professions which suggested important values for the Environment Rating Scales for Public Library Children's Services are given in the "Additional Readings."

The priority focus of the Environment Rating Scales is the child, the secondary focus is the adult living or working with the child, and the staff is the third focus. Policies, activities, furnishings, etc., that promote children's discovery and independence, provide for their comfort, show respect for them, encourage their participation, and recognize their needs and interests are preferred over things that might be easy for staff but not as positive for children. Children are understood to "learn by doing," that is, by actually taking part in physical and mental activities, but they also learn by observing social interactions involving themselves and others.⁴ It is this "social learning" that makes it so important to consider staff behavior and library policies when evaluating the environment provided for children in the public library. Children not only observe what librarians think of them individually and as a group, children also form judgments of librarianship as a profession.

Another strong preference in the Scales is for involving the

community in the design, provision and evaluation of services; even young children have information and opinions to share. Planning and evaluation are strongly valued in the Environment Rating Scales, especially having and knowing one's goals and objectives.

These, then, were the values used to determine items to be rated and to describe levels of achievement for each item. Each item is rated on a seven-point scale; the odd-numbered levels, starting with one, are labeled Inadequate, Minimal, Good, and Excellent, and for each of them there is a description of the conditions to be met in order to attain that level. The even numbered intervals are intended as midpoints to be used when all the conditions of the lower level are met but only some of the next higher level's conditions are attained. For any particular item, if the library has all of level three (Minimal), but only part of level five (Good), then the appropriate rating is level four.

For the sake of consistency, it was necessary to define Inadequate, Minimal, Good, and Excellent in the context of the scales. **Inadequate** means:

"Lack of provision for the item, no awareness, accommodation, or consideration for it. Safety hazards exist." **Minimal** means: "Awareness of the item with some attempt to provide, ameliorate, or satisfy it. Basic safety and legal requirements met. A basic level of service provided." **Good** means: "Accepted professional practice beyond the minimum level of service, but lacking a conceptual basis or planning to meet goals and objectives or fulfill Public Library Association roles. Limited knowledge of child development." **Excellent** means: "Concern for optimal performance or outcome; intention to provide service at the highest possible level. Full awareness of child development, such as fostering independence and allowing children to be active participants. Regular planning and evaluation cycles." It would be a misuse of the scales to desire that all public libraries attain an Excellent rating on all items, though librarians will certainly wish to improve any areas rated Inadequate.

Because there are about 15,000 public library buildings in the United States, it is important to make the scales as flexible as possible and to avoid prescribing specific solutions as if there were only one valid approach to services. Communities differ, staff abilities differ, and creative innovations are always welcome. Therefore, the scales suggest *qualities* to look for, rather than exact phenomena. For instance, to earn an Excellent rating on the item about "facilities modified or designed for children with disabilities" requires that facilities be planned in consultation with local special needs professionals, but it does not prescribe specific modifications or designs.

Each of the two scales has three main parts: "Safety, Access, and Management," "Services and Materials for Preschool Children (Ages 0 to 5)," and "Services and Materials for School Age Children (Ages 5 to 12)." Within each of the main sections, there are further topical divisions. Because this issue of *North Carolina Libraries* is concerned with physical facilities, little will be said about items that rate staff, services, collections, or policies. The reader should remember that the Environmental Rating Scales do cover these aspects of the public library environment for children.

Part One—Safety, Access, and Management includes three divisions: Personal Comfort and General Safety, Physical and Intellectual Access for Children, and Needs of Adults (Staff and

Patrons) and Management Issues. The first division, Personal Comfort and General Safety, includes restrooms, drinking water, bicycle racks, parking, fire safety, emergency exits, and so forth. A concern that was added by a number of librarians from larger cities was the need to protect children from the unwanted attention of unrelated adults. Mirrors and other surveillance systems are being used, and in some cities, adults are not allowed into the children's room unless they are accompanied by a child or have legitimate reasons to use the room, such as gathering materials for use with children.

The portion of the scales which covers Physical and Intellectual Access for Children is concerned with children's being able to make full use of facilities, equipment, services, and collections regardless of their physical or intellectual development or their social situation. Specific items related to physical facilities include handicapped access, doors that can be opened by young children, access to the children's room during all open hours, access to equipment such as audiovisual items and microcomputers, and outreach efforts for children who may not be able to attend the

library due to distance and transportation problems.

The third portion of Part One deals with the Needs of Adults (Staff and Patrons) and Management Issues. Adults have always been important users of children's services. Recently they have become a major focus of children's librarians who have realized that parents, teachers, child care providers, and agency personnel are key allies in encouraging intelligent use of books and other media by as many children as possible. Clearly the adult patrons' needs must be considered, and so, too, must the needs of the staff. Although many factors combine to create an adult's response to her work, the work environment can affect staff's willingness and ability to provide an atmosphere that fosters and stimulates child development. Even the most committed staff need to know that their efforts are supported in concrete ways.

Therefore, the Needs of Adults section includes space for staff away from the public floor for work, relaxation, and staff meetings; and furnishings for adult use, along with various policy concerns for staff and adult patrons. Other items regarding services to adults appear throughout the scales so that adult needs are linked to the needs of children.

The two parts that follow Part One are "Services and Materials for Preschool Children (Ages 0 to 5)" and "Services and Materials for School Age Children (Ages 5 to 12)." Both of these sections are further divided into segments which cover the following topics: Furnishings, Display, and Space; Language and Literature Experiences; Educational and Informational Experiences; Physical Activities and Motor Skills; Creative and Cultural Activities; and Social Development of Children and Social Awareness of Staff.

Services and Materials for Preschool Children (Ages 0 to 5)

The items in Part Two — Services and Materials for Preschool Children, take into consideration several developmental facts about preschool and kindergarten children: They are much shorter than adults; they do not yet read; they do not have the kind of logical thinking we associate with adults; they are active, curious, and less than completely aware of physical dangers; and for some observers, they (and older children) inhabit a culture different from that of adults.⁵ Librarians consider developmental differences when selecting materials for young children. Also,

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librarians usually provide low chairs, tables, shelves, and bins, and perhaps even stools to accommodate the young child's stature at water fountains and public service desks.

The things that are sometimes forgotten include low height toilets and diapering tables in restrooms and signage that includes clear pictorial images as well as words placed at young child eye level (about three feet). Children look around an unfamiliar place to see if there is any indication that it is a place for them. Displays and exhibits can give children the information that "child culture is spoken here," with age-appropriate visual materials (toys, puppets, and posters) clearly distinguishing the young child's area from that for school age children.

Safety for young children needs special attention. Preschoolers like to jump, so climbing structures need railings, and carrels should be placed away from the preschool area. Electrical outlets should be covered. Preschoolers (and older children) also like to sit on the floor. Rugs, cushions, or other comfortable, movable floor seating allow them to relax with books in ways that chairs, even preschool chairs, do not permit. Librarians may wish to include one or two chairs for adults in the picture book area to encourage parents to sit and read with their children, an important interaction.

The Environment Rating Scales stress the physical activity component of services to preschoolers, as well as intellectual content. Sensorimotor activity is an important learning mode for children, especially those under the age of seven, and is considered essential to becoming ready to read.⁶ Libraries which provide toys and equipment for in-library use and/or circulation generally emphasize the parent's interaction with the child while using the materials. In some communities, parents may have few resources or little knowledge about how to provide the necessary stimulation, and the public library is one of the very few public institutions able to serve the young child on a drop-in, no-fee basis.

One of the best ways to find out if the environment is appropriate is to interview patrons. Yes, it is possible to interview preschool children! McDonald and Willett offer some advice on how to do so.⁷ Additionally, the librarian can watch children's reactions and talk to parents: Are most young children eager to use equipment and materials? Do they find the young child's area of the library with little or no help? Do their parents say that they ask to be taken to the library? "Yes" answers indicate that the environment "speaks" to preschool children.

Services and Materials for School Age Children (Ages 5 to 12)

The environment must also be acceptable to older children. Part Three of the Environment Rating Scales is devoted to this group. Although kindergarten and first grade children are comfortable in the picture book area, beyond that age, spaces visibly separated from each other provide psychological comfort for both younger and older children. Environments for school age children take into account their larger stature, developing ability to read, more sophis-

ticated information needs, interest in their peers, and their desire to be recognized as competent and skillful persons in their own right. Frequently, librarians meet these traits with furniture and shelving intermediate in height between preschool and adult furniture, and signs that are mostly words.

Care should be taken that signs are placed where children can read them and where they are not confusing. Furniture may be needed next to the children's reference collection so that they may use the materials comfortably. Adult areas often have reading lounges, but few libraries create comfortable reading areas with upholstered chairs and movable cushions for school age children.

The older and more independent they become, the more options children have for spending their leisure time, and their library use may become more purposeful, more goal-directed, and less frequent. The public library may become a place to follow a hobby, do homework, and hang out with friends. Librarians are sometimes uncomfortable with the social aspects of older children's use. Peers are immensely important in the development of identity in teens and preteens, but there are few

safe public places for them. Facilities that allow some space for children to work or socialize in groups, if only a table set away from a quiet study area, give a message to older children that their social needs are respected. This is an example of a policy translated into physical facilities. Clear rules, consistently applied, are necessary for the use of such areas, of course.

Physical competence, especially at sports but also in other areas, is very important to the school age child. While it probably is not appropriate for public libraries to be a venue for sports, a good environment for school age children recognizes their physical development and physical activity needs with policies that allow them to move around while using the building or participating in programs. Another way of encouraging and respecting the competence of school age children is to display their hobbies, collections,

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The horseshoe in the children's area of the Harnett County Public Library in Lillington provides two tiers of seating in a cozy setting while the outside of the horseshoe holds books for young readers at levels they can easily reach.

Photo: Ed Menninger

and art work on a regular basis.

School age children's increasing intellectual competence should be recognized, as well. Some librarians find that older children are able to contribute to the design and production of programs and facilities for themselves and younger children. Older children's opinions and ideas can be actively solicited when the library is evaluating its services or planning a new library.⁸

Although public librarians tend to group service to all school age children under one rubric, it would be more congruent with the major theories of child development to speak of at least two developmental stages among the five to twelve year olds. After all, a seven year old is still a child, but many ten year olds are already adolescents. This means that all the various aspects of the environment—materials, staff behavior, policies, programs, and physical facilities—must be capable of modulation and adjustment to the variation in skills, abilities, and interests across the age group. Often, it is the older end of the children's age range that is less served, especially with programs, but displays may also betray lack of interest in ten to twelve year olds. Visual clues are important to school age children looking to see if "school age child culture is spoken here."

The Environment Rating Scales attempt to translate our present understanding of child development into specific aspects of the public library environment. The scales are intended to help librarians observe their libraries in a systematic way and set appropriate agendas for children's services. In using the scales or doing any form of evaluation, it is important not to assume that one already knows the answer—if you are sure you know, there is no point to doing an assessment. If you are asking questions and ready to take a close look around, the following are some questions to ask yourself while you are looking.

- How does this library give the message "child culture spoken here" in nonverbal ways (visually, body language, tone of voice, etc.)?
- If I were four years old, how would I know where my part of the library is?
- If I were ten years old, how would I know where my part of the library is?

- If I were a parent, a teacher, or a child care provider, how would I know what to do to find things related to children?
- What would I think of this library if I were four years old? Ten years old? A parent, teacher, or care giver?
- What do the library's policies and procedures say about the staff's beliefs about children?
- What are the goals and priorities of the library as a whole?
- In what ways does the environment for children fit the goals and priorities?
- In what ways are the environment for children and the library's goals not congruent?
- What can I do right now to improve the environment for children at my library?
- What should I put on my agenda for future evaluation and planning?



A story book come-to-life marks the entrance into a fantastic children's area of the expanded main library of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

Architect: Middleton-McMillan (Charlotte, NC).

Photo: R. A. Simon



An enchanting wall mural, painted by local artist Lamar Wilson, provides a wonderful backdrop for the children's area of the Cleveland County Memorial Library in Shelby. The fairy tale theme is further apparent in the design of the adjacent listening center.

Architect: Martin, Boal, Anthony, & Johnson Architects (Shelby, NC).

Photo: Elwin Stilwell

Sample Questions from the Scales

To give you a taste of what the Scales are actually like, ten questions are included for you to use at your library out of the two hundred plus items on the version of the scale intended for large and medium-sized libraries. The items were selected to represent the range of the Scales. As you apply these items, remember that in order to achieve a particular rating, the library should meet all the conditions of that rating. If the situation meets all of a lower level and only part of the higher odd numbered level, the rating is the even number between the two odd numbers. It is not expected that any library would be rated Excellent on all items. Remember that it is important actually to look at the situation and not assume you already know the answer.

| ITEM | INADEQUATE | | MINIMAL | | GOOD | | EXCELLENT |
|--|--|---|---|---|--|---|--|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Staff availability when patrons enter children's room. | No staff visible at any time when patrons enter. | | Staff is visible but does not approach children or adults. | | Staff smiles and gives verbal welcome to patrons. | | In addition to friendly welcome staff conveys readiness to assist patrons. |
| Locked storage for library equipment and supplies. | Storage areas not locked and are easily accessible to young children. | | Storage is either locked or not easily accessible to young children. | | Storage is locked and located away from areas used by young children. | | All of 5 plus written procedures on storage of equipment; procedures are followed. |
| Bicycle racks. | No place where bikes may be locked. | | Outside fixtures for locking bicycles to accommodate average number of bicycles. | | Fixtures adequate for the number of bikes at peak child use times. | | All of 5 plus bike rack is visible from within children's area. |
| Doors can be used by young children, i.e., light weight, easy to use handles, graphic signs for non-readers, handicapped operable. | No attention to weight, handles, signs for non-readers, or needs of users without fully functional hands. | | Attention to one of the following: weight, handles, or signs for non-readers. | | Attention to two of the following: weight, handles, or signs for non-readers. | | All doors children use are operable by young children; graphic signs for non-readers; handicapped accessible. |
| Furnishings for routine use by young children & their adults. | No tables or chairs at heights appropriate to preschoolers. Ex: chair seats 12-14", tables 20-22" high. | | Seating and tables for preschoolers but no seating for adult use in or near young child's area. | | Furniture for preschool children & chairs for adult use in or near young children's area. | | All of 5 plus walls & furnishings well cared for; room not crowded with furniture. |
| Office & workroom space for staff. | No staff workroom or office space for children's staff. No storage for personal items. All preparation must be done on the public floor. | | Staff workroom or office space shared with other library staff. Minimal storage for personal belongings. Shared desks. | | Workroom & office space for children's staff separate from other staff. Individual desks. Central storage for personal belongings. | | All of 5 plus workroom & office space have adequate storage for supplies & equipment. Table space for large projects. Secure individual storage for personal belongings. |
| Design of literature & language activities for older children. | Literature activities poorly designed in relation to children's verbal skills & interests. | | Literature activities designed to suit children's current interests & skills, but emphasize rote repetition or "follow the leader." | | Literature activities chosen to extend as well as reinforce current interests & abilities & allow for individual expression. | | All of 5 plus program planning includes a means for evaluating literature outcomes including older child's responses, i.e. talking about books at home, checking out books, etc. |

| ITEM | INADEQUATE | | MINIMAL | | GOOD | | EXCELLENT |
|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Materials for adults on literature for older children. | Few materials on children's literature anywhere in the library. | | Materials on children's literature but shelved elsewhere in the library, not in children's area. | | Collection of materials about older child's literature in children's area, clearly labeled. Booklists available. | | All of 5 plus staff assists adults using parent/teacher collection. Booklists include suggestions for use with older children. |
| Services for families with children needing special help with education. Ex: Home schoolers, children with learning problems. | Little or no attention paid to needs of parents & children with unusual educational needs. | | Staff serves patrons who ask for assistance with unusual educational needs. | | Staff works with individuals & groups to provide in-library services. Staff has identified groups who may need services. Information & referral files kept up-to-date. | | All of 5 plus staff engages in outreach activities & markets services to reach potential new users with educational needs. |
| Tone: General impression of the quality of interaction between children & staff. | Relations between staff & children strained, voices seem irritable & angry. Some age groups less welcome than others. | | Staff inattentive and unresponsive unless asked directly for help or problems occur. | | Calm, busy atmosphere, children seem happy most of the time. Voices are cheerful; frequent smiling. Explicit, consistent, & obvious behavioral norms. All ages treated with dignity by all library staff. | | All of level 5, plus staff prevents problems by careful observation & intervention as needed. Staff models ways of resolving conflicts. |

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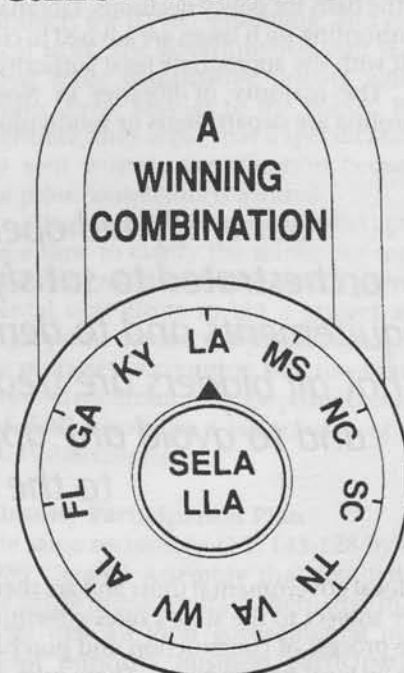
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