

Foreword ...

by Cal Shepard and Satia Marshall Orange
Guest Editors

A frequent observation about children's librarians is that they are passionate about their profession. This is true. We are committed to our mission with what has often been called a missionary zeal. We all enthusiastically set about to convert children to become believers in reading. Where we differ is in how we set about to achieve this goal. There are purists — whose doors will never be darkened by Nancy Drew and the like — and pimps — who will go to any lengths and use any means, including McDonalds, to get kids hooked on reading. No matter what method we choose, however, we all can benefit from occasionally stepping back to consider why we are doing what we are doing. Only by clearly articulating our mission for ourselves, can we communicate it to our administrators. Holding storyhours "because we've always had a storyhour" is no justification. Having a craft program may be fun and popular, but does it further our goal to get kids reading?

Children's librarians can't be faulted for their zeal, but our efforts can become misguided if we don't take the time to formulate a program of service that is a reasoned extension of the library's overall goals and objectives. We may sponsor a good program, but it will not achieve our goals if it is not a good library program. Too many of us simply offer storyhours without offering an explanation of how storyhours fit into our mission. Too many of us sponsor craft programs because they're fun, instead of to expand the experience of literature. Too many of us just go along day to day without having any real idea of where we are going.

One of the reasons this has happened is because it has been allowed to happen. We have not been held accountable. The profession is losing ground, and it is very easy to point fingers at someone else — or our culture — or the poor economy. Perhaps it is time to begin pointing the finger at ourselves. We must start holding ourselves accountable for the service we render. While children may be a low priority in society at large, they are our first priority. They are the reason we hold our jobs in the first place. We owe it to them to hold ourselves and our libraries accountable in order to provide the best possible service.

In order to do this, we must think about what we're doing. We should seriously consider what the library's mission is and how our services fit into the total picture. We must articulate our particular mission, and formulate written goals and objectives that are updated regularly. We need to plan programs and know why we are planning them. Furthermore, we need to be able to tell others why we are planning them. Perhaps we should consider zero-based programming. Instead of starting from the attitude of "we have always had storyhours," we could start with a clean slate, open up our minds, and determine for ourselves what activities would best meet our goals. This need not be "reinventing the wheel," but it should encompass discovering or rediscovering for ourselves why certain programs work or don't work in terms of furthering the library's mission.

I often hear children's librarians complain that they are not taken seriously within their library environments, or that their position is being downgraded, or that they don't get their share of the budget. I see this not as a problem of attitude but of education. First, we must reeducate ourselves and relearn what makes a good children's librarian and a good program of service. Secondly, we must take the time to educate our administrators, our co-workers, and our funding agencies about our mission. If you think about what they often see us doing, it isn't hard to understand why they might have this attitude.

Children do have a low priority in the United States. That doesn't mean that this status has to be mirrored in our libraries. If we deplore this situation, then it is time for us to do something about it.

This issue of *North Carolina Libraries* is a good place to start. Frances Bradburn's thought-provoking article gets right to the heart of the issue in its discussion of access for children and young adults. She stresses that we are the ones who need to become accountable for policies, procedures, and even architectural components that function as barriers to children. We are not blameless however. Readers are exhorted to examine their own attitudes toward children and especially young adults.

Mel Burton takes a look at stereotypes in "Whose Mom is a Librarian?". The tradition of librarianship, and especially children's librarianship as a female dominated profession, is well known. What effect does this have within our profession?

The role of technology in our libraries is a problematical one. Cathy Collicutt examines not only appropriate uses of technology in our libraries and media centers, but also our responses to it. While technology may be new and different to us, it is simply a fact of life for our young users. Our challenge is to find ways to incorporate technology within the framework of our missions rather than simply because it's there.

The gathering of statewide and national statistics for youth services is well documented by Robert Burgin. He observes that "it is difficult to imagine how any library service can be effectively evaluated, funded, and improved without the adequate collection of statistical information." To become truly accountable for our services, we must increase our activities in this area. Robert's article is a good place to start.

Output measures are an ideal way to use statistics to assist in planning and evaluating our programs of service. Pauletta Bracy's article amply demonstrates that the use of these measures can and should be an integral part of any thoughtful program of service for children. It is only by evaluating what we are doing that we can know if we're doing the right things in the first place.

Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin looks at children's librarians who have moved into administration. "Moving on Up" is an interesting title, implying as it does that a move out of children's services is a move up. On the other hand, such a move also provides a wider forum to get the youth services message across. This interesting article is a must-read.

Finally, "Carolina Picks" lists some recent North Carolina Books for children and young adults. You might want to photocopy this bibliography for your vertical files. It should come in handy for that ubiquitous "I've got to read a NC book" assignment.

It is the editors' sincere hope that you will read these articles and, more importantly, *think* about the issues they raise. If we are to hold ourselves accountable, the sooner we start, the better.



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