

# Reference Interview: *Strategies for Children*

by Melvin K. Burton

A sixth grader and parent had entered the public library and asked for a book on the "carnivorous forest." Both nodded when asked if what they wanted was a place where plants like the Venus Fly-trap grow. When the boy indicated, "Maybe, but I think it's in Canada," the real question became apparent. What they needed was information on cone-bearing trees or "coniferous forests."<sup>1</sup> A best-seller of several years ago, *Men are from Mars, Women Are From Venus* by John Gray, discussed the communication between genders as happening from two different viewpoints.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, we could very well ask what planet we are on and what planet the child is on as we experience reference interviews with children.

Children are in the midst of developing intellectually, emotionally, and socially. This difference in development between children and adults leads to a difficulty in understanding when communication is attempted. Much has been written and studied about the reference interview, but not until the last several years has there been more focus on reference interviews with children and the strategies that can be used to help in the success of those reference interviews.

The PubYac listserv has had many postings about reference requests that might have led the answer quest to go awry. A four-year-old boy requested a book called *Rock Stew*, which had distorted the real title, *Stone Soup*.<sup>3</sup> A mother, going by what her son had written down, wanted information on the Soup Indians (Sioux Indians).<sup>4</sup> Other misguided requests for materials

include: Afghans — the blankets, dogs, or people; books about doctors when the child really wanted Dr. Seuss books; an adolescent boy asking for "Poison Sex" — actually wanting *Boys and Sex*; craft books when the original need was for books on Kraft cheese; *My Friend Scuba Diver* instead of Brinton Turkle's *My Friend Obadiah*; and the geography of Tuna, that is Tunisia.<sup>5</sup> These postings, though, are more about the distorted request than a very broad initial request that takes some time to narrow down the real one. Both types of queries probably occur more with children than with adults.

Writings and studies about the reference interview date as far back as 1954 when David Maxfield stated the four techniques — acceptance, understanding, communication, and collaboration — that should be used. Maxfield also alluded to specific skills such as listening carefully, observing the patron, and clarifying and amplifying what the patron is saying.<sup>6</sup> Robert S. Taylor's study in 1965, which was written about in the May 1968 *College and Research Libraries*, listed four needs: visceral, conscious, formalized, and compromised. Later an article by Geraldine King, Winter 1972 *RQ*, emphasized the use of open questions. William Katz' reference service textbooks gave the interview a separate chapter and, as a change from previous texts, did not fail to highlight the interview's importance.<sup>7</sup> Elaine and Edward Jennerich, who wrote *The Reference Interview as a Creative Art*, listed twelve skills that can be learned: eye contact, gestures, relaxed posture, facial expression and tone of voice, remembering, avoiding premature diag-

noses, reflecting feeling verbally, restating or paraphrasing content, using encouragers, closure, giving opinions and suggestions, and open questions.<sup>8</sup>

Possibly the most famous study of the reference interview was unveiled in an article in the November 1, 1985 *Library Journal* that described the development of the Maryland Model of Reference Behavior. A study conducted by the Public Library Branch of the Division of Library Development and Services (DLDS), Maryland State Department of Education, in the summer and fall of 1983 revealed that a patron may get a correct answer to a reference query only 55% of the time, and led to a more defined format for conducting the reference interview. Employees of the Survey Research Center at the University of Maryland asked 40 questions at 60 locations in the 22 public library systems in Maryland that chose to participate.<sup>9</sup>

The positive result of the study is that an increase in the percentage of correct answers is very possible since many of the variables that would help in this regard are within the librarian's control. The inquiry skills needed were compiled into a Model Reference Behaviors Checklist. These skills included: asking open questions, paraphrasing, clarifying, and using a follow-up question.<sup>10</sup> There was a North Carolina connection to the Maryland study. The stages of the interview — setting the tone, getting the facts, giving information, and follow-up — were adapted from a document prepared by the Office of Public Health Social Work, North Carolina Department of Health, 1974.<sup>11</sup> The authors of the *Library Journal* article cited that the single most

important behavior is asking the follow-up question, "Does this *completely* answer your question?"<sup>12</sup> Referring to the Maryland Model of Reference Behaviors, Gers and Seward stated, "If these behaviors are constantly and consistently exhibited, one's reference service performance should improve dramatically."<sup>13</sup> In order to find out if the three days of training that were held after the 1983 study made a difference in service performance, another study was done in 1986 in the same 60 libraries that were originally surveyed. It was found that the training made a substantial difference. Patrons helped by a control group that had not been trained received a correct answer 60% of the time, while patrons going to any of the 17 libraries where employees had been trained got a correct answer 77% of the time.<sup>14</sup>

In the September/October 1994 issue of *Public Libraries*, two faculty members of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Western Ontario reported on their latest annual assignment in which library school students were to ask reference questions and report on their experiences. Of the 77 participants, 52 asked their questions in a public library. The users' experiences confirmed previous studies that indicated about a 55% success rate. Only 28 users said they would return to the same librarian again.<sup>15</sup>

The narration of the users' experiences helped to identify helpful and unhelpful behaviors. Some of the helpful behaviors noted were using welcoming body language, asking open-ended questions, volunteering help, monitoring the referral, and using a follow-up question.<sup>16</sup> Many unwelcoming behaviors were noted. These behaviors included pursed lips, curt tone, not looking up from the desk, never smiling, rolling eyes, and looking at the ceiling. Other unhelpful behaviors were not listening, not informing the user of what was happening, not giving the question any importance, not conducting a reference interview, and not doing any follow-up. It probably was disconcerting for the library user who stated, "He made me feel as if he were happy that I'd be leaving the desk."<sup>17</sup>

All of these aforementioned writings and studies helped in the understanding of the reference interview, but none addressed the peculiar nature of the reference interview with a child. This decade, however, has seen more focus on techniques that are helpful when interviewing a child. Workshops

on the reference interview presented in the Gaston-Lincoln Regional Library in the fall of 1991 included a segment on the child patron, and workshops being presented at locations within the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County throughout 1998 also have a part devoted to dealing with children. Elaine and Edward Jennerich revised their written work, *The Reference Interview As a Creative Art*, so that the 1997 edition has a section on the young patron.<sup>18</sup> Cal Shepard, former Youth Services Consultant with the State Library of North Carolina in the early 1990s, noted on the NCKids listserv, September 4, 1992, that there are "special problems that can arise in reference services to children and youth." Those problems were stated to be (1) being more inarticulate in voicing information needs, (2) either caring a lot or not caring at all because of the request being a school assignment, (3) being more unfamiliar with the classification system, and (4) needing to get the same information as the rest of the class. Shepard cautioned that the child patron should be treated as seriously as the adult patron since children have the same right to information as everyone else.<sup>19</sup>

Kathleen Horning wrote a column for *Wilson Library Bulletin* (May 1994) that reiterated her plea from her February 1994 column for librarians to reflect on how reference work with children differs from reference work with adults. She encouraged including the child in the interview when both a parent and child are present and delineated the twists and turns that an interview with a child can take in a recreation of a real-life reference interview. Horning also asked questions: "Do we provide the same level of service that we would for an adult? Have we been trained to conduct interviews with children who have difficulty articulating their needs? Are we allowed the necessary time to help children state their questions and help them find the answers?"<sup>20</sup>

There have been responses to Horning's second question. In addition to the workshops already mentioned, a

workshop was presented at this year's Public Library Association Conference on the results of a pilot study from Maryland on the "Quality of Reference Service to Children." In 1997, as a follow-up to the previous study, the Maryland State Department of Education, Division of Library Development and Services arranged to survey librarians and children (defined as persons between eight and fourteen) to investigate the premise that "children should expect a public library to provide open and free access to information, provided by a staff who recognizes and welcomes their unique needs."<sup>21</sup> These types of efforts should help prepare librarians to conduct a reference interview with a child effectively.

In order to have a more successful reference interview, we need to be aware of specific differences between interviews with adults and children. These factors include being approachable, working more with the child than with the parent, using basic, understandable vocabulary, paraphrasing to catch pronunciation errors, dealing with other-generated questions or school assignments, being skilled at narrowing the question, and treating adults and children equally.

In *The Reference Interview As a Creative Art*, traits are listed that enable someone to be a good reference librarian. Those traits listed include the ability to jump quickly from one subject to another, patience and persistence, imagination and creativity, a genuine liking for people, dedication or commitment, and a sense of humor. Not only do Elaine and Edward Jennerich list a sense of humor among the desirable traits for a reference librarian to have, they also say it is the first trait needed. Humor should not be used to ridicule the patron, but should be directed at the situation. Humor can relieve stress and relax everyone. It was stated that "children love humor and the use of it with them makes the librarian seem a bit more 'human' and approachable."<sup>22</sup>

The 1997 Maryland study recommended not asking if the question was for a homework assignment and at-

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tempting to negotiate with the child rather than the adult.<sup>23</sup> Both strategies seem to be an attempt to give children equal status since normally one would not ask the adult why the information is needed and talking to the child directly gives the child status as a patron in the child's own right. In Edward and Elaine Jennerich's revised work, they affirm that children and teens should be treated respectfully and that the librarian should not imply that some questions may be out of bounds. In a further defense of the status of the child, the authors comment in regard to the accompanied child, "In the silent child and know-it-all parent threesome, the goal is to speak with the child without alienating the parent. Always focus on the child and confirm that the need expressed by the parent is really what the child needs or what the teacher suggested. Being at eye level with the child is particularly useful in this situation. It makes a nonverbal statement that the child's needs are important."<sup>24</sup>

While the written material handed out at the PLA presentation recommended not asking if the question was for a homework assignment, the panelists at the presentation expressed a difference of opinion on this issue. Librarians need to weigh the goal of equal treatment of children with the desire to know about homework assignments. Children also may worry about librarians giving them access to information. In the young adult novel *Reluctantly Alice* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, Alice wants to help her friend who does not know what a man looks like naked. Alice's father shows her that the library is the place to go for even that kind of information. Alice gains a new perspective of the library. As she tells the reader, "A librarian came by to get a book from the shelf, and she couldn't help but see what I was looking at; she didn't even blink. Like it was ok to be curious. I felt almost the way I did at the grade school the other day. Safe. Protected."<sup>25</sup> Giving equal access to information, not asking if the question is for homework, and talking directly to the child are all ways of ensuring that the child is getting the same service as an adult.

Vocabulary use and confusion about word meanings can be a stumbling block in conducting a reference interview with a child. At the age of 17 months, children have a vocabulary of about 50 words,<sup>26</sup> a child entering school may have a vocabulary of 3,000 to 4,000 words, while by the completion of college that vocabulary knowledge would have changed to 10,000 to 30,000 words.<sup>27</sup> Once a child asked me for tall tales, and I responded by asking if any particular tall tale was needed. The child answered "No," and after a confirming response on my part we proceeded to the 398s. As I began pointing out some tall tale stories of Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill, the child asked if we had any from Norway. This question told me that his idea of tall tales was the definition of folk tales. He went away pleased with getting Haviland's *Favorite Fairy Tales Told in Norway*. Basic and understandable words should be used in the reference interview. At the same time, trying not to talk down to the child, paraphrasing, and watching for body language response should help correct any misimpressions.

Pronunciation may lead to misunderstanding. The child may talk too softly, not use correct pronunciation, or mumble. An incorrect pronunciation that is also a word may lead the librarian off on a tangent if paraphrasing and clarifying are not used. One child came to me and said he wanted information about a "feeling in the mouth." I thought he needed something in regard to touch. When I asked if he wanted information on the tongue touching things, the child let me know he wanted books on dental work or a "filling." My favorite mispronunciation is when a child asked me if we had anything on "reptiles and amphetamines" (rather than "reptiles and amphibians"). When you do not understand what is being said at all, asking the patron to repeat what was said, asking the child to spell the word for you, or asking the person to write the topic for you might all be useful tactics.

Sometimes children do not know the additional information to give you. Often more children's questions are other-generated rather than self-generated.

The adult who needs information to repair the car was not sent by anyone else. However, many children are responding to teacher assignments and may not have a full understanding of the question themselves. The survey conducted by Transform Inc. in connection with the Maryland study revealed that 90% of the children's reference questions were school related.<sup>28</sup> If the child cannot tell you enough information about his question, asking whether the question is an assignment from someone else is in order. There may be an assignment sheet available with the child or a classmate who is in the library; there may be someone who could be reached with a phone call, or the teacher may have alerted the library about the assignment. If the exact question cannot be determined, the child may have to check with the teacher the next day to clarify the exact nature of the assignment.

Proficiency in narrowing down the question is helpful in interviewing the child patron. The Transform Inc. survey indicated that 70% of the time the reference interview started with a broad initial question. The Maryland study concluded, though, that "Librarians appear to have a problem using more than one open probe in questioning children, which tends to lead to a single open probe syndrome (SOPS)."<sup>29</sup>

The following scenario includes some of the factors that have been discussed:

Mother and child come into the children's area of the public library.

Mother: Could you help us with a question?

Librarian: I would be glad to. Is this a question that your son has?

Mother: Yes it is. He has a school assignment.

Librarian (looking at child): How can I help you?

Child: Could you tell me where your history books are?

Librarian: We do have quite a few history books. Can you tell me more about what you need?

Child: Yes, I need some information about the Civil War.

Librarian: That would be in the 973s. Do you have your assignment sheet or do you know what in particular you need to know about the Civil War?

Child: I don't have an assignment sheet with me, but I'm supposed to do a report on who killed Abraham Lincoln and how it

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happened.

Librarian: So you need information about the assassination or death of Abraham Lincoln?

Child: Yes, that's right.

Librarian: I see by checking the catalog that we have several biographies of Lincoln that would talk about his death and one book that just talks about the day he was shot. Come with me, and you can look at what's on the shelf. Here is the biography section, and here are the books on Lincoln. Look over these and see which books are the most readable for you.

Child: This one will work ok.

Librarian: Is that going to give you everything you need?

Child: Sure!

Librarian: Feel free to check with us if you have any other questions.

Of course, even with the same question, a different child or parent may cause the course of the interview to go in a different direction; but using the techniques discussed should help the librarian to bring the interview to a satisfactory conclusion.

The Jennerichs' discussion of young patrons summarized their recommendations by stressing the use of open-ended questions, paraphrasing, avoiding the use of jargon, finding reading levels needed or other limitations, not presuming the question is a school assignment, focusing attention on the child, and respecting privacy.<sup>30</sup> Working to provide equal treatment of children and adults, being approachable, trying to catch vocabulary and pronunciation confusion, being patient with getting to the specific question, and attempting to be aware of school assignments should all help to ensure that Kathleen Horning's question of provid-

ing the same level of service for a child as for an adult is answered positively. Just as the reference interview workshops in connection with the original Maryland study covered a three-day time period, being skilled in conducting reference interviews with children requires not just reading about what to do, but extensive practice and reinforcement. Children are not just the patrons of tomorrow: they are the patrons of today. Working to make sure we have the skills to serve children will give a good impression of libraries to children and ensure that the children we are serving today will remain the patrons of tomorrow.

#### References

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<sup>3</sup> Cheryl Marx, "More Kidspeak," PubYac@nysernet.org (January 23, 1998).

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Z. Jennerich and Edward J. Jennerich, *The Reference Interview As a Creative Art*, (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1987), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>14</sup> Maryland State Department of

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine S. Ross and Patricia Dewdney, "Best Practices: An Analysis of the Best (and Worst) in Fifty-Two Public Library Reference Transactions," *Public Libraries*, September/October, 1994, 261.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 263-264.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Jennerich and Elaine Jennerich, *The Reference Interview As a Creative Art*, 2nd ed. (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited Inc. 1997), 84-86.

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<sup>20</sup> Kathleen T. Horning, "Fishing For Questions," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, May, 1994, 57.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Lee Blatchford, Susan Paznekas, Marjorie Ann Crammer, Stacey Aldrich, Panel Presenter, "Quality of Reference Service to Children: A Pilot Study from Maryland," program handout at 1998 Public Library Association Conference, March 12, 1998. Kansas City, Missouri, 3.T.

<sup>22</sup> Jennerich, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Blatchford, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Jennerich, 1997 ed., 86.

<sup>25</sup> Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *Reluctantly Alice*, (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 90.

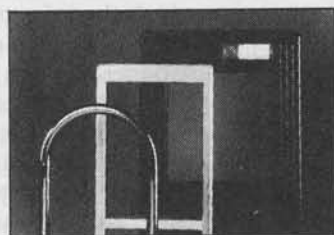
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<sup>27</sup> *The World Book Encyclopedia*, (Chicago: World Book Inc., 1997), v. 20, 434.

<sup>28</sup> Blatchford, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Blatchford, 7.

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