

# One Public Library Administrator's Views on Children's Services

Patsy Hansel

This writer is the director of the Onslow County Public Library, a medium-sized public library by North Carolina standards. OCPL has four full-time staff members involved in children's programming. Children's circulation, book processing, and other support services are handled by other staff members, although all children's staff do spend a few hours a week on the central circulation desk. It is from the administrative perspective of this structure of children's services that this article is written.

This administrators's first view is that children's services are the foundation blocks upon which the rest of library services are built. Children's programming is a great way to start in a library that has never done programming before, and an almost sure bet to get the library some good publicity. Storytimes are fairly easy to initiate, especially if the library gets the expert advice of the North Carolina State Library Children's Services Consultant, Diana Young. It also helps to have someone on the staff who has a natural rapport with children, and practically every staff has at least one, whether trained in children's services or not. If the event is published widely, a nice turn-out is almost assured, assuming there are a fair number of children in the community. Local media are generally receptive to providing publicity for a children's program. After all, few can resist the appeal of scores of charming children responding to a storyteller at the library. In generating favorable community response, children's programming can be a boon to the whole library system because, if the community is talking about something, the politicians are likely to be listening. They are the ones who ultimately decide whether any library program makes it or not. There is a danger in a library's having an active children's program which generates lots of publicity if it is not soon supplemented by programming for other age groups. There are people in the community, some who sit in the commissioners' chairs, who think the public library is a resource only for children and mothers of children. The best way to combat this misconception is to develop well-rounded library services with appeal to all segments of the community. Children's services are a great place to start, but libraries should not stop there.

It is axiomatic, of course, that children's programming itself can draw adults into the library. That is one reason that weekend and evening children's programming is so rewarding. At those times, programs often appeal to fathers as well as mothers. OCPL's first regular adult programming was a direct offshoot of storytimes—programs for parents, usually mothers, coinciding with morning preschool storytimes.

Now, an administrative pet peeve: negative attitudes toward paperwork. This problem is not confined to children's librarians, but they can be just as

uncooperative about it as a group as anybody else with whom this administrator has had to deal. Apparently, the assumption is that creativity and paperwork are antithetical; so, to be considered creative, one must deplore paperwork. This administrator makes no apologies for paperwork, whether in the guise of performance appraisals, purchase orders, travel requests, or monthly reports. Paperwork is vital and may be a creative part of library work. It is a tool that enables the library to live within its budget, to set priorities, to assess where the organization has been and, best of all, to plan where it is going.

Performance appraisal/goal setting sessions supplemented by periodic reports can be some of the most creative parts of anybody's job. Goal setting with one's supervisor or subordinates should be a time for looking to the future and setting realistic program and budgetary goals. Periodic reports demonstrate to the worker and to the supervisor how well goals are being met, and what alterations may need to be made as time moves on and inevitable changes occur. This is planning. It enables all of us to be better organized and give a higher quality of service to library patrons, but it is probably the part of our jobs that we all spend too little time on.

Good organization is an important topic in itself. The best children's programmer on the staff can quickly become a liability if she/he is consistently late for programs, makes appointments and does not keep them, or over-schedules and consequently gives low quality service. This is poor organization and poor community relations, not to mention cheating the children who are supposed to be served. Children's librarians need to be particularly careful about it since they are so often out in the community for programs and interacting with community leaders. An appearance of disorganization and inefficiency on their part can reflect on the whole library operation. In these days of tighter and tighter budgets, organizational efficiency becomes even more important.

When it comes to selecting books for young readers, children's librarians sometimes exhibit a disturbing tendency to set themselves up as arbiters of taste. Adult book selectors are generally responsive to adult requests for light romances and murder mysteries, while children's book selectors are often reluctant to allow children equal access to their Nancy Drews and Hardy Boys. We would all probably prefer to have the world reading Good Literature, but time immemorial would seem to have demonstrated that denying youngsters or adults access to the not-so-good literature that they may request from their public libraries is not going to effect that millenium. In this administrator's view, librarians should not deny children the same right to recreational reading that adults enjoy.

Of course, the really tricky part of children's book selection is how to handle junior novels that deal in any way with sex. By putting a "J" or similar notation on a book, the library is certifying it to fit to be read by children; and neither all librarians nor all parents agree on what "fit to be read by children" means in practice. Children's librarians are sensitive on this issue, and they ought to be. This is one administrator who has no solution to such a problem.

Any library with more than one staff member has internal communication problems. Setting up a special section of the staff to handle any special area of services, for example, a children's department, isolates those people to some

extent from the rest of the staff and exacerbates communications problems. This administrator's view is that an ongoing effort to integrate all staff members into the total library mission is an essential of any library administrator's job, but it is not the responsibility solely of administration. Administration must establish an environment open to communication, but staff must make the effort to provide feedback about any work-related issues that concern them, positively or negatively.

Children's staff as well as the rest of the staff can help general staff relations by trying not to be overly turf-conscious. Any time there is a task that requires a total staff effort, children's librarians should join in willingly. When feasible, involving other staff members in special children's programs can also be a staff benefit. Numerous sleeping talents have been awakened this way, and having other staff members become more aware of what the children's staff does can generate a lot of respect.

About blowing one's own horn: children's people should not be afraid to do it. No library staff member should forget that any good job (bad, too, for that matter) ultimately reflects on the administrator of the system, even if all she/he contributed was enough benign neglect to allow it to happen. Creative children's people will find a way to ensure that their looking good makes their boss look good, and that it all comes together to keep children's services moving right ahead.

Finally, this administrator's views on children's services converge into one very basic emotion: jealousy. Children's librarians get to wear amusing outfits and tell stories to adoring children; administrators have to act humble and beg for mercy before funding bodies wielding red pencils. Children's librarians get presents of broken-stemmed dandelions and sticky kisses; administrators get summoned to the County Manager's office to justify a supplement to the budget for "processing," whatever that is. Children's librarians get thank-you notes on that weird paper that seems more pulp than processed product; administrators get to read the notes and realize that they probably did do something to help it all happen.

It is rewarding work—for all of us.

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