
Exceptional Children: How Do We Serve Them?

Cate Howard

Shortly after my arrival as coordinator of children's services for the Wake County Public Libraries, one of the children's librarians related a typical story to me. She had been asked to provide a story time for several children from the Tammy Lynn Center, an instructional center for mentally handicapped children. The teacher who called asking for this special story time indicated that the children were all profoundly retarded. In preparing for these children, the children's librarian thought that a puppet show would appeal to these exceptional children. Unfortunately, it was not until the group arrived that she noticed that over half of the children were blind! Fortunately using her good common sense, the children's librarian went ahead with her planned puppet show. Then she allowed the children to feel the puppets and even work them if they were able. This "tale" is probably one of many that can be related by frustrated children's librarians.

Children's librarians may find themselves working with institutions such as schools for the blind and deaf as well as mental hospitals. In a sense, these groups are the easiest to provide programs and materials for because *all* of the children tend to have similar problems. Children who are mainstreamed into regular classes present somewhat different challenges. It is important to include these exceptional children without specifically pointing them out. Many times a "normal" child has been assigned to assist the mainstreamed child whenever he or she needs help. If this does not appear to be the case, include *all* of the children in the touching and listening process so that those with the handicaps can participate as well.

Crutches, wheel chairs, and other equipment necessary for the orthopedically handicapped can create problems if your facility is not prepared to handle nor large enough to hold those necessary tools. Learning how to pick these children up or manipulate the equipment so that the child and you can enjoy the program to the fullest is imperative.

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For the most part, we are finding ourselves having to tackle this type of situation without an adequate background or training. An inadequate background for most of us cannot be changed. However, adequate training is relatively easy to accomplish. If there are undergraduate or graduate level courses in Special Education offered relatively close to your area, consider buying the textbooks they will be using, if actually taking the course is not possible. Talk with your area's Special Education teachers and ask them to recommend some good basic reference tools. Often parents and support groups involved with exceptional children will have book lists with appropriate materials. Physicians and therapists can also be excellent sources of information.

Workshops using these resource people could stimulate an interest not only for children's librarians but also for administrators, reference librarians, technical services, acquisitions personnel, and others. State libraries across the country have divisions concerned with handicapped services and materials. They have professional librarians whose expertise can prove invaluable.

Finally, for those Library and Information Science students determined to be public library professionals (not just children's librarians), take a basic introductory Special Education course while you are in the masters program. You will never regret the time, the energy, or the money spent.

Why?

Why go to all this trouble? Two important federal laws—the Rehabilitation Amendments of 1973 (P.L.93-112), sections 503 and 504; and P.L. 94-142, or the Education of All Handicapped Children Act—have legally created the means for equal employment and equal education for all handicapped people. No longer can we ignore or simply refuse to serve this population.

In preparing to work with exceptional children, I can make several suggestions.

Find out who your handicapped population is. This can be accomplished through your school system, local organizations such as the United

Way or local agencies concerned with particular handicaps, and of course, parents of exceptional children.

Take some time to read about the various handicaps. A good Special Education textbook or one of the books mentioned later will give you brief backgrounds of the various handicaps.

Check your collection to see if you have materials or media that these children could benefit from. Present a sound case to your administrator.

After all, *all* children are "special."

Once you feel that your collection, staff, and programming ideas have been adequately surveyed, approach these agencies as well as individuals through newspaper articles, cable TV announcements, and personal appearances.

In establishing service to these "special" children, remember above all that they are children with as much right as "normal" children to be in your library. They have needs just like "normal" children. After all, *all* children are "special."

In developing some expertise in working with handicapped children, several library-oriented books have recently been published. All are appropriate for reference shelves as well as for general collections.

Baskin, Barbara H., and Karen H. Harris. *The Mainstreamed Library: Issues, Ideas, Innovations*. ALA: Chicago, 1982.

Included in this text are short papers by leading authorities in such areas as the physical environment; materials selection; technology; software; programs; and outreach ideas. The up-to-dateness of this text is particularly important when reading the section on technology where the Kurzweil reading machine and research in technology indicate the progress and sophistication of various machines.

Dequin, Henry C. *Librarians Serving Disabled Children and Young People*. Libraries Unlimited, Inc.: Littleton, Colorado, 1983.

Taking the librarian's point of view, Dequin includes such areas as assessing the need for library services; who is disabled; historical and current treatment of the disabled; attitudes; general and specific library services per handicap; specific types of library programs appropriate for the different handicaps; evaluating and selecting materials. Along with these helpful suggestions, there is an up-to-date list of retrieval systems and organizations where further information can be obtained.

Lucas, Linda, and Marilyn H. Karrenbrock. *The Disabled Child in the Library: Moving into the Mainstream*. Libraries Unlimited, Inc.: Littleton, Colorado, 1983.

This particular book briefly explains various physical and mental disorders in layman's terms. The second section develops library and information needs for these children and for parents and professionals working with handicapped children. Materials and equipment, as well as programming ideas, are adequately discussed. A long, extensive bibliography and an example of standard criteria for the selection and evaluation of instructional materials are included in the appendix.

Needham, William L., and Gerald Jahoda. *Improving Library Service to Physically Disabled Persons*. Libraries Unlimited, Inc.: Littleton, Colorado, 1983.

In evaluating general library service to disabled persons, Needham and Jahoda discuss the importance of the facility, services, resources, staffing, and funding. There are appropriate checklists for public libraries, school media centers, academic, and special libraries. Addresses for organizations and companies involved with equipment pertinent to the disabled are also included.

Wright, Kieth C., and Judith F. Davie. *Library and Information Services for Handicapped Individuals*. 2nd ed. Libraries Unlimited, Inc.: Littleton, Colorado, 1983.

Wright and Davie consider the history of handicapped individuals as well as definitions for the various handicaps. The laws pertaining to the handicapped are discussed. Program ideas, information sources, and society's attitudes are included for each handicap.

Although these five sources are not the only books available in the area of handicapped services, they are the most up-to-date and provide a wealth of information.

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