

## Toys in the Public Library?

**"And Suffer the Little Children to Come . . ."**

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If Christ were to return to earth today, would He come in the guise of a public librarian? This is a new twist on an old question. A number of people, both in and out of the profession, would claim "no." They would argue that Christ taught that the Kingdom of Heaven is to be entered during childhood and therefore, Christ as librarian would exhort children to enter the library. And since librarians do not exhort youngsters (especially pre-schoolers) to come visit the library, Christ could never "fit" among public librarians.

While this debate may not ring through the stacks of libraries across the state and nation, it has served to introduce a question that deserves discussion in the profession. What role are public libraries to play in the area of service to pre-schoolers?

Traditionally, librarians have offered picture books and story hours, since with rare exception pre-schoolers do not read. Should the public library attempt to do more? Library use is certainly part habit, and any program which would bring enthusiastic pre-schoolers into the library must be given consideration.

The pre-school movement in the United States gained recognition with the successes of the Head Start program in the mid-1960's. Since that time, many other experiments such as the award-winning "Sesame Street" television series have proved again and again the importance of

the early childhood years in establishing healthy attitudes toward learning, books, and indeed life. One of the most recent innovations has been the establishment of toy lending centers where pre-schoolers can browse for toys and games which will aid their developmental learning. This type of center would seem to fit well into the existing programs of any public library, but in reality this phase of the pre-school movement seems to be marching right past the doors of most libraries. A recent article in the August issue of *Women's Day* discussed some of the toy lending "libraries" in California. No mention was made of a toy center housed in a public library.

Mrs. Tommie M. Young, Assistant Professor of Library Science and Director of the Early Childhood Library Specialist Program at North Carolina Central University in Durham, feels strongly about making the toy lending concept an integral part of the public library's service to children. She is equally concerned that librarians be adequately trained for the task. Her pilot project, The North Carolina Central University Early Childhood Program in North Carolina is almost unique in the nation. It is funded on a three-year basis by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the U.S. Office of Education. Provision is made for a full-time program director, a secretary, five student fellowships per year, and the establishment of the learning center labora-

tory which is located in the School of Library Science at North Carolina Central University.

This toy library, called the Toybrary, is a large, cheerful room filled with music and light. Multicolored toys and games are casually arranged on low shelves with cassette recorders and small filmstrip viewers dividing the room into small learning centers. Some of the toys have been handmade by library science students as part of their training, a welcome sign in an era when adults feel obligated to buy expensive playthings which are advertised on children's primetime television. Many of the toys are designed to teach shapes, colors, and spacial relationships; others, manual dexterity.

Currently, five children and their parents visit the Toybrary twice a week. The librarian and student librarians work with the parents, stressing the importance of play in developmental learning and helping them to chart their child's progress. The youngsters browse among the toys and stop to play tapes and watch filmstrips. They examine the games excitedly, choosing things to check out and eyeing others they want "next time." The enthusiastic pre-schoolers explore the Toybrary carefully, unearthing everything from art prints to stuffed animals. They know all of the toys can be "theirs" for a few days and watching their expressions is a rewarding experience.



Tommie Young with several young patrons in the NCCU Early Childhood Learning Center.

However, not everyone would agree with Mrs. Young's contention that the toy library has a home in the public library. In Washington, D. C., private foundations have funded toy libraries as separate institutions. The Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, an HEW-funded leader in the toy library movement also seems to favor the toy library as a separate institution. Few will deny that the concept has real value, but as seen above, disagreement centers around where such a center is to be located.

Mrs. Young emphasizes that the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research

and Development is not the same model nor concept of an early learning center, as the one housed at North Carolina Central University. She notes further that while the desired ends may be similar, the means to achieve them are distinctly different. The center at NCCU is not just a toy-lending library; rather it is a library which uses toys along with all of its other media as a part of the learning process. In fact, Mrs. Young points out that she in no way endorses the use of toys in libraries for the sake of toy lending. Rather she discourages the acquisition and distribution of toys by librarians who are not trained at the minimum level in the selection and use of such materials and who do not implement proper programs for their use. To quote her, "The toy collection entered upon with zeal but without the appropriate knowledge is a tricky business." Further she says that the significance of the program at NCCU is as a training model meaningful to the profession of librarianship, as librarians undertake further training and assume new roles in their services.

Public librarians will generally raise three objections to accepting the idea as "theirs:" (1) lack of money for equipment, (2) lack of trained personnel, and (3) traditionally, libraries dispense books, not toys.

The first of these objections can be overcome with a degree of creativity and belief in the idea, as evidenced by some of the aforementioned hand-crafted toys found in the NCCU Toybrary. In fact, such toys are probably preferable to many of the slick commercial products available. The question of trained personnel is being met locally by the NCCU program. It is hoped that other universities in the state and nation will become more innovative in their approaches to early childhood library service. The third matter is not going to be resolved here. Either public librarians move with the times or the times will move on past them. However nostalgic we may get about the good old days, it is not possible to go backwards — not politically, not personally, not professionally.

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