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Working Together to Build a Better World

The Importance of Youth Services in the Development and Education of Children and Their Parents

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I have worked all my adult life in libraries, and in many kinds of libraries. I have enjoyed the intellectual challenge of academic reference work, the unique qualities of special library service, and the unpredictability of the public library reference desk. But nothing in my experience prepared me for the requirements or the extraordinary rewards of youth services. I have learned most youth librarians recognize they have an awesome opportunity and responsibility to influence the lives of children and their families in a way that allows them to reach their potential and become contributing members of our community.

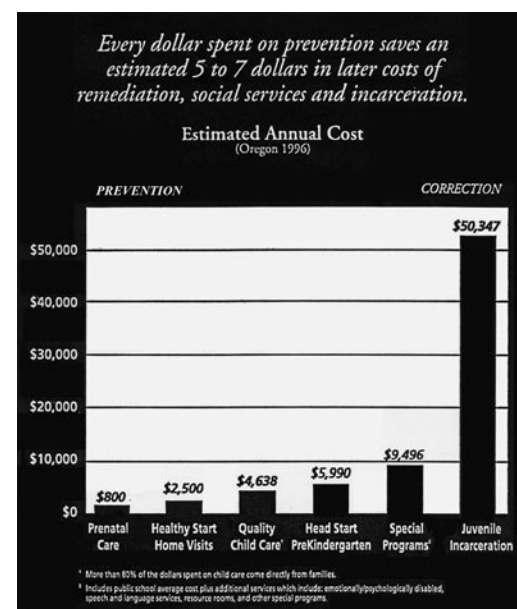
So what makes youth services, and particularly children's services, so important? Why do we feel we have this responsibility to the children in our communities? It is what we have learned through many different studies about children and their cognitive development, and the role we can play in this development.

Children are born with 100 billion brain cells. Even before birth those cells are starting to form connections and organize into patterns which will form the basis for all future learning and behavior for the rest of their lives. At birth, the connections in an infant's brain are essentially unfinished. The reason is astounding. The connections are made between cells in direct response to the stimulus the brain receives from the world, and for an infant the world consists of its parents and other caregivers. With positive stimulation, touching, talking and comforting, a child is much more likely to grow up secure and prepared to make the most of his or her experiences. By the time a child reaches three years old, 1,000 trillion connections will be made in the cells of his or her brain.

We have the knowledge that it is in everyone's interest to educate parents about the developmental needs of their children. Negative stimulation caused by neglect, lack of comforting physical contact, and verbal interactions can cause a child's brain to physically, permanently organize in an

abnormal way. Prenatal drug and alcohol abuse can also contribute to abnormal brain development. Brain chemistry affected by abuse may be permanently altered, leading to behavioral and learning difficulties. Developmental milestones such as speech and physical coordination may be delayed. Learning disabilities are much more likely. In her book *Ghosts from the Nursery*, Robin Karr-Morse offers convincing proof that violent behavior is fundamentally linked to abuse and neglect in the first two years of life. She has found that children growing up in an environment of abuse and neglect are much more likely to become involved with social service agencies and even juvenile authorities. As a result of this research it seems absolutely clear that the most important factors in the healthy development of a child's brain and personality are positive relationships with his or her parents and other caregivers.

I believe the same is true with youth services librarians and the children and



A seemingly small investment of time and effort in the early years can avoid sad and costly institutional intervention later on.



families they serve. Relationships with librarians, not the collection, services, or buildings, are the most important parts of a child's and its family's use of the library. As former youth librarian Patrick Jones wrote in an article entitled "Why We Are Kids' Best Assets," youth services are about forming relationships. "We build relationships, which help children thrive, and in turn benefit our communities. Youth librarians are in the business of making kid's lives better. We should recognize, if we don't already, that the small things we do can make a big difference later on."

Relationships are built in brief transactions such as answering a reference question or suggesting a book, and are also developed by taking a genuine interest in the lives of our young patrons. I firmly believe the key to making connections with children and their families is to treat them with respect and have genuine interest in their concerns.

As I learned to be a children's librarian I found that perhaps the single most important part of my job is to make the library a welcoming place for children and their families; to take genuine interest in each one as an individual. I've learned to take the time to learn the names of children, their new siblings, and to greet them whenever I see them, in the library or in the community. I treat each child with respect and as an individual no matter his or her age. I try to earn their confidence and the confidence of their parents by demonstrating that I care about them and the services we can provide.

Being a youth services librarian is about relationships with children, parents and caregivers, and the community. Think of the adults in your life who played an important role. I firmly believe we should aspire to have a similar role in the lives of the children we serve. These relationships with children and families are unlike any other institutional relationships they might encounter. Use of the library is a voluntary activity, unlike school attendance, a visit to

a medical clinic or a social services agency. As librarians we do not grade, direct, or compel children and their family members to do anything. In public libraries, youth services staff do not have to act as surrogate parents. We must enforce rules and policy from time to time, but this shouldn't stand in the way of developing a relationship with youth and families. Librarians act as guides and disseminators of information empowering children and parents. The same is true of working with children in the library; each child should be treated as an individual, not an age group or a grade. We have the freedom to not label a child. We can and should treat him or her as an individual, develop a relationship and provide the best possible personalized service. In identifying the key element of youth services, Patrick Jones states that "libraries are not in the information business or the book business, but in the people business."

We must help parents recognize the genuine desire of youth services librarians to support them and their children as they grow. We must convince parents their librarian can be a partner in providing their children with opportunities to develop to their fullest potential. We must demonstrate our knowledge and expertise of the many needs of their children and the role the library can play in meeting those needs.

Building relationships with parents and caregivers is essential. These are the most influential people in a child's life, and children model their behavior on actions of these adults. Most parents want to provide their children with the best opportunities to grow and develop, but many do not know how to maximize opportunities for their child's development. Brain development, language acquisition, emergent literacy, and appropriate materials are often outside the knowledge of a new parent. Parents must learn why and how to read to their children, and to discover the best activities to do with them. They need to know that children like repetition, need to get ready to learn before starting school, and that they



as parents are the most important teachers in a young child's life. Again, youth services librarians can provide guidance and information which will help parents and caregivers create a healthy and stimulating environment for their children. Librarians have the great advantage of having a relationship with a parent or caregiver that is voluntary and based on mutual trust and respect; a partnership where both are dedicated to achieving the best for a child.

Youth services librarians are working to provide opportunities for parents to learn how to best cultivate the minds of their young children. Developmentally appropriate storytimes demonstrate the selection and presentation of books, and the use of music, fingerplays and other activities. In addition, youth librarians provide workshops on brain development, why and how reading aloud is important to their children, and other activities designed to increase parental knowledge and skills.

Emergent literacy has been recognized as essential to the development of reading and writing skills in children. Emergent literacy is what children learn about reading and writing before they can do either. This process begins at birth and continues throughout the preschool years. Developing knowledge of spoken language, learning of letters, books, and writing are all parts of this process. When these needs are neglected the results can be catastrophic. According to a Carnegie Foundation study, over 35 percent of the children in this country lack these basic skills when entering school.

Parents are the best teachers for preparing their children to learn how to read. Children begin to get ready long before starting school. Parents know the best times to take a few minutes to read with their child. Other family members can also become involved and read with a child. These are skills that a child is unlikely to learn anywhere else. Emergent literacy skills are usually not taught by daycare programs, and certainly not one-on-one like a parent can. A child who does

not develop these abilities before starting school will begin school with such a disadvantage that it is likely to affect his entire school career.

Youth services librarians can begin serving the needs of families before birth and can extend this relationship through school and beyond. In any case it is the best way to meet the traditional public library goal of lowering barriers to access. What could be better for a parent than having his or her own personal librarian who will always be welcoming and able to provide the support needed to raise a healthy child?

Libraries and outreach services to low income children and their families can be an educational and economic equalizer. Research has demonstrated there is a strong and persistent relationship between the skills a child brings to school and later academic performance. For example, if a child is a poor reader in first grade there is a 90 percent probability he will be a struggling reader in fourth grade. The knowledge of the alphabet in students entering kindergarten has a direct correlation with tenth grade reading ability.

It is also very clear that children from lower income families tend to come from home situations where it is much more likely that they will have fewer books in their homes and less reading time with a parent. The gap between the number of hours of one-on-one reading time for children of professional parents and those of low-income parents is staggering. By first grade the child of a typical middle class home will have had 1,000 to 1,700 hours of one-on-one picture book reading, while a child from a low income home averages just 25 hours according to research from the 1991 Carnegie Foundation report "Ready to Learn, a Mandate for the Nation." Noted reading expert and advocate Jim Trelease in his book *The Read Aloud Handbook*, cites a study made in California comparing the number of books in the homes, school libraries, and public libraries of high school students from low income and high income neighborhoods in




Los Angeles. The study found a direct and dramatic correlation between the number of books in the home, the school and public library, and the success a student had in school. Trelease describes home and school environments as “book rich” or “book poor” and makes a very convincing argument for access to an abundance of print materials. Calling this a “rich print climate” Trelease points out that to become skilled at any activity, one must have sufficient access to the opportunity to develop needed skills. Simply put, more books equal more and better reading.

Relationships established by library outreach to low income families can encourage parents to read with their child and stress that the library and librarians can provide guidance in the selection of appropriate materials. For many low income parents the library has never been a part of their lives. For these families a lack of awareness of the purpose and resources of the library is a barrier. They may feel that the library is for “other” people but not for them. After all, if they did not grow up using a library and are not readers, and it can be an incredibly intimidating experience to enter this institution filled with books and people seated behind formidable looking counters. As mentioned before, their experiences with other government institutions are often less than pleasant. How do they know that the library is any different? Forming relationships with non-library using families and providing guidance while they use the library is vital to many people even beginning to make use of library services. We need to go out and get those parents and bring them to the library in order to promote reading and other skills that will allow their children to be successful in school.

Because of the need to find and serve non-library using children, outreach is an integral component of youth services. Today most children are either in school or in daycare, and many do not have the opportunity to visit the public library. By mak-

ing contact with children in these settings, and with the adults who are caring for them, youth librarians can expose children to literature, song, and stories and start to build a relationship, no matter how small, with each child he or she serves. I am constantly sought out by young children who proudly tell me that I was at their school, or that I gave their class a tour and a story. Even preschoolers will let me know that they remember my visit to their daycare. I see parents from read aloud workshops I have presented. I firmly believe that outreach and the relationships built through visits can raise a child's consciousness about visiting the library, and in turn persuade their parents or caregivers to start visiting their library.

Working with other community organizations devoted to assisting youth and families is essential to the success of outreach to non-library users. Visiting relief nurseries, family resource centers, boys and girls clubs, high schools with teen parent programs, and other programs is all a part of this outreach. Again, forming relationships is very important. Getting to know the people involved in providing these services, and letting them know what libraries and librarians have to offer is necessary to be effective. Gaining the trust of children and their parents is essential. This cannot be achieved with a one-time effort, but requires an ongoing commitment to these organizations and the families they serve.

If youth librarians are passionate about their work and its importance, it is because we see the potential embodied in every young person, from birth to adulthood. We know that we can make a difference and that difference will be a part of that child's life, the life of his or her family, and ultimately the community. We know how active we must be to teach all the families in our communities, to reach out and gain the trust of our young patrons and their families. All the materials, programs, and services of our libraries are of little use if we don't first develop a bond of trust with the youth and families of our community. 



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Hanging Out to Homework

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How Storytimes

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from the additional effort to incorporate early literacy information into age-specific storytimes, but the changes will not be "directive" or "instructional"—just more fun! 

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Libraries and parents are working together to give children a love of libraries and reading.

