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Children's Cognitive Development

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Using Research to Inform Library Practice

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Incorporate Current Research

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

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OLA Quarterly is indexed in *Library Literature*.

Editorial

Change or become irrelevant. That seems to be the essence of the messages bombarding libraries and librarians in this new century. We must be the change brought about by the explosion of information and technological innovation. Librarians are now challenged to create new paradigms and discard many of the old assumptions about library service.

Most of these comments seem to be the result of the onslaught of the digital information age. Online reference, databases of all shapes and sizes, Web pages, workstations, webcasts and many other Internet and computer related developments are the most often mentioned agents of change in our profession. But new developments have occurred in nearly every discipline. Now the information gleaned by researchers using the latest in medical imaging has brought new knowledge about a unique and powerful information processor—the human brain. The human brain is an incredibly complex and sensitive organ. No one really realized how sensitive it is to outside stimuli as it is developing until scientists could actually observe brain activity with the use of Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scans and other non-invasive technologies.

We now know that brain development takes place even before a child is born. We also have learned that the first three years of a child's life are the most crucial for healthy brain development, yet this development continues through adolescence. My proposal to have an issue of the *Quarterly* focus on an exploration of cognitive de-

velopment and libraries comes from my growth and development as a children's librarian. My original training and experience was as a reference librarian and cataloger. I enjoyed the challenges of these positions and never really imagined myself working with children. Then, after several years as a cataloger I had an opportunity to become a children's librarian. The time was right, as I was the father of two young children and had become very interested in children in general, but I knew next to nothing about working with children in libraries.

As I worked to gain the many skills I needed to be a good children's librarian and to serve our young library users, I realized it was necessary to learn about brain and cognitive development. I wanted to understand the mystery of billions of neurons making connections and how all these cells became a functioning human brain! As I learned more about brain development, and read of recent discoveries concerning the effect of parenting and environment on the development of a child's brain, I realized that the ongoing question of "nature versus nurture" at least in regard to this subject, now had a one word answer—yes!

In this issue, MaryKay Dahlgren presents the latest literature on cognitive development in the early years of life. This is a study of enormous value to anyone interested in working with children in libraries.

Recent research confirms brain development continues through adolescence. In fact, there may be some physiological basis for a teenager

to suddenly become an "airhead." This continuing process of cognitive development has a profound impact on the way libraries and librarians serve teens, and on the quality of that service. John Sexton presents an illuminating glimpse of teen cognitive development and its impact on library services.

Ellen Fader, in an article originally written for the Public Library Division of the American Library Association, presents the latest on incorporating the latest knowledge of cognitive development in children's programming.

Brain development and learning are inextricably intertwined. Fred Reenstjerna explores the crucial distinction between "life long learning" and "life long schooling" and the implications this has for both the library user and the library professional.

Finally, in my article I attempt to present the unique challenges of children's librarianship and why youth librarians feel so strongly about their chosen work. As more research becomes available it seems clear that librarians need to have a greater understanding of the complex continuum of brain development and cognitive functions in youth and how they are linked to the process of life long learning.

—Dan R. White
Children's Services Librarian
Douglas County Library
Guest Editor

QILAQ

Better Libraries Through Research: Using Research to Inform Library Practice

MaryKay Dahlgreen
Youth Services Consultant,
Oregon State Library

If I could wave a magic wand and say, based on research, here is a fact that will impress all the public officials, from mayor and council to local principal, to fund this service that will break the cycle of illiteracy in the United States of America, I would do it. But research itself is not magic: it is a tool. It is the people who wave the wand who provide the magic.” (Kimmel, 1991, p. 95.)

While taking the time to read and use research to improve our practice may seem like substantially more work than waving a wand, it is an important component of what we do as children’s librarians. Policy makers and administrators are no longer satisfied with, “we have always done it this way” or “everyone loves us.” The following literature review is designed to provide librarians with an overview of some of the current research.

Margaret Mary Kimmel (Kimmel, 1992) and Shirley Fitzgibbons (Fitzgibbons, 1990) have both provided excellent background on the implications of research for practice. The basis for this review has been reading done in the course of working on an analysis of the Ready to Read Grant Program. The focus

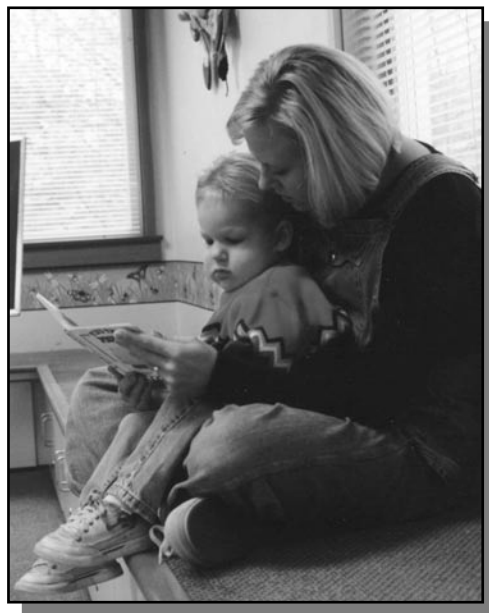
is on public library service to children. The main sources were the bibliography of a study done by Keith Curry Lance and his associates about the importance of school libraries in student achievement in Oregon (Lance et al, 2001), and the bibliography of a report commissioned by the Pennsylvania Library Association to evaluate the role of public libraries in Pennsylvania in children’s literacy development (Celano and Neuman, 2001). As is often the case, the list was expanded as other resources were discovered in the course of the reading.

This review will cover several issues of concern to children’s librarians in developing and justifying library services. We will begin with early brain development and early cognitive development literature as a basis for our examination of library research. Research relating directly to library service for children and families will follow. Next will be an examination of research on how children learn to read, followed by a look at the focused area of research that examines the importance of access to reading materials and free reading time. Finally, we will look at libraries and educational reform.

The past five years have seen a great deal of early brain research and cognitive development research by the National Research Council, an organization commissioned by Congress to study specific policy questions. Brain development research and the impact on policy development are examined in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Other books that analyze early learning research include *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers* (Bowman et al, 2000) and *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Bransford et al, 2001).

First Lady Laura Bush held a White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development in July 2001. A most germane article from that Summit was presented by Patricia Kuhl, a linguist whose work involves children and how they learn language (Kuhl, 2001).

While the research literature of chil-



Parents reading to their children have a tremendous positive influence on their child’s cognitive development.

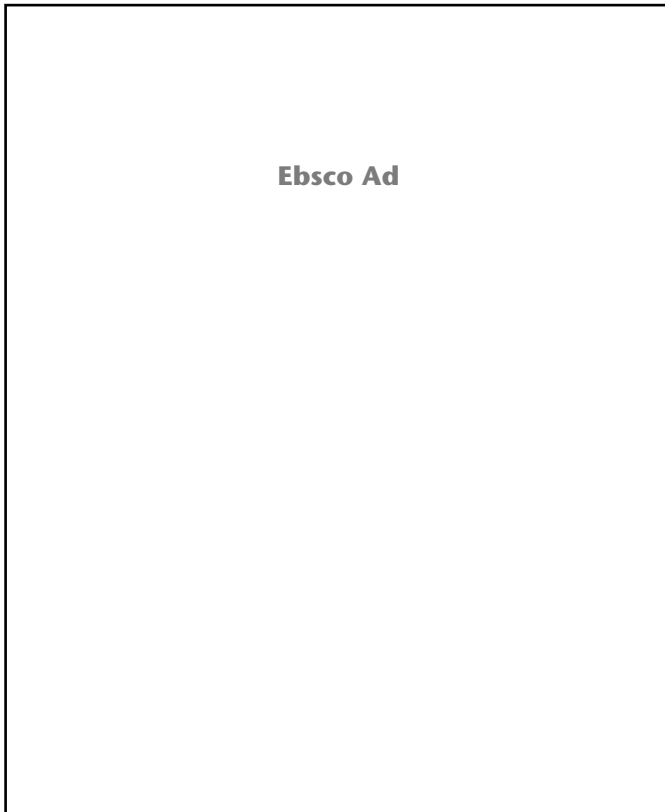


dren’s librarianship is not as rich as some other disciplines, there are a variety of studies available that can be used to inform the development of programs and services. Two early, small studies (Razzano, 1985 and Perry, 1980) confirm that the use of the library by children has a positive effect on their library use as adults. Several studies have examined what works and what doesn’t work for a variety of services from preschool storytimes to summer reading programs. The Pennsylvania Library Association commissioned a study (Celano and Neuman, 2001) to examine preschool programs and summer reading programs in public libraries in Pennsylvania. An early research study (Smardo, 1983) examined the effectiveness of “live,” filmed books, and videotaped storytimes. In the process, the research confirmed that storytimes are effective in increasing receptive language skills of preschoolers. The Los Angeles County Public Library (Evaluation, 2001) evaluated the impact of their Summer Reading Program, and a large-scale study was undertaken in England (Elkin and Kinnell, 2000) to determine the impact of children’s library services and define “good practice.”

We can also learn from library research coming out of other disciplines. Using the child development theory of Lev Vygotsky, “action creates thought, development results from dialectical processes, and development occurs in historical and cultural contexts” (McKechnie, 1997, p. 66) to study children in public library settings, McKechnie discovered that “libraries provided many learning opportunities, particularly for learning how libraries work and for acquiring emergent literacy skills.” (McKechnie, 1997, p. 67.) A process for developing toddler storytimes based on child development principles has been outlined in the literature (Dowd and Dixon, 1996). Researchers from other disciplines have discussed using library outreach to develop emergent literacy skills (Fehrenbach et al, 1998). They have also provided informa-



While the research literature of children’s librarianship is not as rich as some other disciplines, there are a variety of studies available that can be used to inform the development of programs and services.





Interactive computer games contribute to cognitive development.

tion about a variety of library programs that encourage emergent and family literacy (Birckmayer, 2000/01) and supplied a variety of suggestions about how libraries can promote early literacy learning (Teale, 1999).

Parental involvement in children's early literacy is crucial. Studies have examined the role of parental involvement in a Head Start program (Nespeca, 1995), Even Start (Padak et al, 1997), a teen parent program (Neuman, 1995) and a study designed around parental reading proficiency (Neuman, 1996). Each of these studies can give librarians insight into collaborating with these programs and working with parents.

There is a very large body of research (and controversy) related to methods for teaching children to read. Librarians can gain insight into a variety of issues by examining this research. Marilyn Miller (Miller, 1993) provides a very cogent argument for

becoming familiar with reading research. Recent research is showing that the early years, birth to age five, are absolutely crucial in the process of learning to read and write. William Teale provides an excellent overview of the history and current trends in early literacy (Teale, 1995). There are a variety of factors that promote early literacy development (McConnell and Rabe, 1999). There are also a number of professional organizations that have issued positions on early literacy learning (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

The past several years have seen numerous analyses of research about reading instruction. One of the most comprehensive, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al, 1998) has a companion volume, *Starting Out Right* (Burns et al, 1999), designed for parents and teachers, with specific suggestions on early literacy and beginning reading. A report issued in 2000 by the National Reading Panel (National Reading Panel, 2000) provided the information for two documents, one for parents, *Put Reading First: Helping your Child Learn to Read* and one for educators, *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*, that provide an over-



A philosophical article posits,
 "If educators invested a fraction of the energy they now spend trying to transmit information in trying to stimulate the students' enjoyment of learning, we could achieve much better results."



view of evidence-based reading research.

Research from the teaching profession addresses some areas of concern for children's librarians including reading motivation and loss of learning over the summer. The results of a study by an education professor and a classroom teacher recommend the following to increase motivation, reading comprehension, and rate and accuracy of oral reading:

"Read aloud to students daily; provide a daily sustained silent reading; model personal reading enjoyment each day; provide for formal and informal book sharing; regularly provide students with a collection of reading materials from the school or community library; arrange for effective use of community volunteers to encourage recreational reading." (Moser and Morrison, 1998, p. 245.)

A philosophical article posits, "If educators invested a fraction of the energy they now spend trying to transmit information in trying to stimulate the students' enjoyment of learning, we could achieve much better results." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 115.) A study on the effects of summer vacation on test scores showed, in a review of 39 previous studies, that:

"... Achievement test scores decline over summer vacation. The loss equals about one month on a grade-level equivalent scale. ... There was evidence of] greater negative effects on the reading skills of lower-income students. ... The income differences also may be related to differences in opportunities to practice and learn (with more books and reading opportunities available to middle class students)." (Cooper et al, 1996, p. 264)

Chilling evidence that poor neighborhoods have less access to print materials has been documented in several studies. Courtney Smith and his colleagues discovered that children in Beverly Hills had an average of 498 books in their home as compared to one book for children in Watts. Comparing these same two communities the ratio of books in the classroom was 7.3 to 1, in school librar-

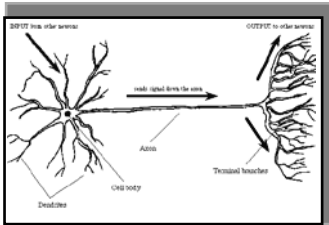


The availability of current research provides opportunities for children's librarians to persuade administrators and policy makers that the programs and services we plan and present are of benefit to our children and our communities.

ies 2.6 to 1, and in the public library 2.4 to 1. (Smith et al, 1997.) Another California study which examined the disparity of public libraries showed that the Beverly Hills Public Library, with a service population twice as large as the poor community of Santa Fe Springs, had four times as many books and programs as the Santa Fe Springs Library. Beverly Hills Public Library had 14 youth services librarians while Santa Fe Springs Library had no personnel assigned to youth services (Di Loreto and Tse, 1999). Susan Neuman has devoted much research to the issue of access to print resources and the impact on literacy. One study is the outcome of a project to provide books and literacy training to child care facilities in Philadelphia (Neuman, 1999), another is a comparison of the print environment of two low-income and two middle-income communities in Philadelphia (Neuman and Celano, 2001).

As a corollary to the research that suggests poor neighborhoods have less access to print other research shows that more access to print increases reading ability and test scores. Krashen shows that the number of books per student in the school library and average circulation at the public library were significant predictors of performance






Neurons are the basis for all brain development.

on the NAEP reading comprehension test (Krashen, 1995). Greater access to the public library and materials in the public library showed an increase in interest in reading and the library (Ramos and Krashen, 1998). Two books (McQuillan, 1998 and Krashen, 1993) survey the research and argue very persuasively that access to print materials and time for free reading can have a significant impact on reading achievement. A very creative doctor, Robert Needlman, created Reach Out and Read, which provides books to families during their children's well-baby visits. The pilot study (Needlman, 1991) showed an increase in the literacy orientation of the parents who were given the books during visits.

Libraries are an important part of the educational system of the United States. During the period from 1998–2000 the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a study called "Assessment of the Role of School and Public Libraries in Support of Educational Reform." The purpose of the study was to find out "how school and public libraries were performing as education providers and how well they were responding to the country's urgent demands for school improvement." (Michie and Chaney, 2000, p. 3.) The study included national surveys of school and public libraries, case studies, and commissioned papers on selected topics. One paper examines the strong connection between public library services and young children and their families (Herb and Willoughby-Herb, 2000). Another paper relates to independent (free) reading and its affect on school achievement (Cullinan, 2000). The relationship of school and public libraries is another area of interest and concern. A third paper of the Assessment examines school and public library relationships, including cooperation and combined facilities (Fitzgibbons, 2000). The Library Research Service at the Colorado State Library has also researched the link between public libraries, school libraries, and student achievement. (Library Research Service, 1998a, 1998b.)

The availability of current research provides opportunities for children's librarians to persuade administrators and policy makers that the programs and services we plan and present are of benefit to our children and our communities. The research presented here demonstrates that:

- The early years of a child's life are crucial for building a basis for school success and lifelong learning.
- Access to reading materials, both at home and in public and school libraries, can have an impact on a child's ability and motivation to read.
- Public libraries are particularly well suited to provide early literacy experiences for children and to provide assistance to parents and caregivers in nurturing reading and writing. 

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From Hanging Out to Homework: Teens In the Library

John Sexton
Young Adult Librarian,
Jackson County Library

It's just past three o'clock and here they come clomping into the library, calling loudly to one another over the bass-thumping of their headphones, tossing backpacks across tables, and colonizing computers in clusters. The teens have arrived and whether they settle down to address the day's homework or simply hang out waiting for a ride home, the library is suddenly host to the energy unique to adolescence.

How librarians acknowledge, understand, and accommodate that energy can help shape the quality of the library experience for teens, other patrons, and staff.



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But is it really possible to understand this species that emerges like mutants from the sweetness of late childhood? Or is it simply easier to wait out the turbulence caused by hormonal floods and watch the clock, trusting in two certainties: that the teens will eventually go home, and that someday they will mature into adults? Fortunately, recent research has opened new avenues of understanding about adolescent brain development that provide those who live or work with teens an opportunity to reconsider our perception of teen behaviors.

Brain Development

An assumption of brain development theory has been that human brain growth is more or less completed by the onset of

puberty. Recent research (Geidd 1999) however suggests that not only is such development not finished, but that adolescence is a time of growth as explosive for the brain as during the first few years of life when neuron connections increase tremendously. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), researchers have been able to observe brain activity and determine which parts of the brain use energy when performing certain tasks. Comparing brain activity of adults and adolescents suggests that the behavior of teens has as much to do with brain development as it does with hormones.

In one study researchers scanned the brain activity of teens and adults who were asked to identify the emotion displayed in photographs of facial expressions. All of the adults were able to correctly identify the emotion of a fearful woman. But less than half the teens, and none under fourteen, were able to correctly identify fear as the emotion they perceived. Instead, teens saw confusion, anger, and sadness. Researchers conclude that teens process information differently than adults and can easily arrive at different perceptions. What adults think is obvious teens may not recognize at all. Consequently, a librarian's frown in the direction of a table of rowdy teens may be a meaningless gesture for its intended audience.

When adults were naming the emotion in the photographs, two regions of the brain were involved: the limbic system and the frontal cortex. The limbic system is the brain's more primitive component and is associated with gut reactions like anger, fear and aggression. The frontal cortex is associated with more complex functions such as judgement, insight, self-awareness and goal-oriented behavior and organizing skills. When teens studied the photographs, only the amygdala, the core of the limbic system, was active among the younger teens. Activity began to gradually increase in the frontal cortex among older teens, suggesting that development was ongoing there through the teenage years.





Since libraries are often rule-driven environments, librarians can put teens at ease by developing spaces, attitudes, and policies that are more flexible and supportive of this phase of adolescent growth.

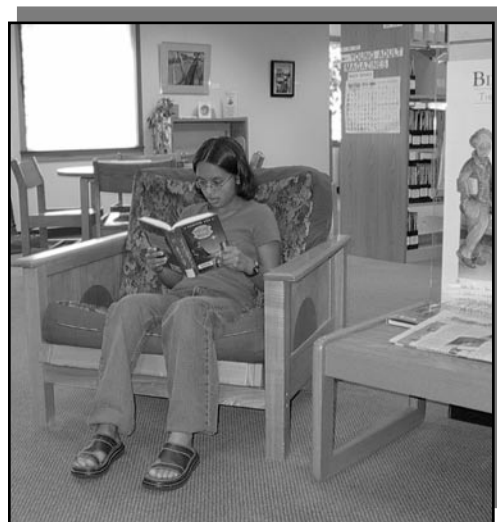
The lack of a fully developed frontal cortex in teens has many implications. Consider the list of chores a parent gives a thirteen-year old: clean your room, empty the dishwasher, fold the wash and sweep the porch. Ten minutes after grudgingly agreeing to do the work, the same thirteen year-old is sprawled on her bed lost in music and a magazine. This behavior is neither churlish nor rude if viewed from the perspective of brain development because the same lack of frontal cortex development that prevents her from identifying facial expressions also precludes her from organizing information, especially if that information is multi-layered. In the library, these same teens may have difficulty when given multiple resources for their homework projects. They may simply not be able to process the information we provide them about these resources and how each one may help them complete the assignment. Perhaps it would be better to give them a single source to get them started and then provide them with another some time later.

Cognitive Development

One of the more interesting aspects of cognitive development is the concept of adolescent egocentrism whose two types of thought are apparent to observers of teens in the library on any given day. One type

is the imaginary audience which describes the teenager’s belief that everyone is as interested in them as they are in themselves. That is one reason why teens are so loud—they simply want to be sure that no one needs to strain to hear what their life is like today. Another type is personal fable which refers to the teen’s belief that they are unique and no one else can understand them. Because of personal fable, a teenager will believe himself to be the exception to any rule. Since libraries are often rule-driven environments, librarians can put teens at ease by developing spaces, attitudes, and policies that are more flexible and supportive of this phase of adolescent growth.

During adolescence a transition occurs from concrete to abstract thought. Until about age fourteen, teens deal with what “is” rather than grasping the concept of what “could be.” This developmental stage underlies the all-knowing attitudes of many younger teens who insist they know everything about searching the Web because they can get to “Ask Jeeves.” These teens need concrete examples and visual demonstration in order to solve problems, which is why teaching information literacy skills during middle school years is so challenging: the



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Perhaps a reason librarians experience frustration with the lack of information literacy among students is that, like algebra and logic, it requires a mature brain to process the complexities of an information search strategy.

process demands one-on-one instruction in order to be successful.


From age fourteen, teens grow more logical, abstract, and idealistic in their thinking and less reliant on concrete examples as they become more facile at creating hypothetical solutions to problems. This growth seems fundamental in order to develop essential internet research skills such as evaluating search tools and hit lists, author credentials and content. Because younger teen brains are not yet wired for such tasks, it may be futile to try to teach more than the most simple search strategies and evaluation skills until they are ready. Perhaps a reason librarians experience frustration with the lack of information literacy among students is that, like algebra and logic, it requires a mature brain to process the complexities of an information search strategy. And, not surprisingly, teens don't get that they don't get it. Just because they may look mature does not mean that their brains have matured.

The Physical Space

Perhaps nothing is as obvious about teenagers as their physical growth. Teenagers take up a lot of space. They often come into libraries in groups, but frequently they

come in alone. It is important for libraries to provide teens with space that can accommodate their need to be in a group and socialize (usually loudly) as well as a place where an individual teen can curl up in a small secluded area to read or study.

Providing them with supportive environments and attitudes becomes critical when considered in terms of brain development. Dr. Richard Geidd of the National Mental Health Institute believes that during adolescence the brain "hardwires" the activities learned and repeated during the teen years into lifelong skills (Geidd 1999). In other words, sports, music, and academics engaged in repeatedly during these years become part of the brain's repertoire, whereas parts of the brain not engaged by frequent activity are pruned away. Geidd refers to this as the "use it or lose it" hypothesis (Geidd 1999).

If libraries are to play a role in "hardwiring" reading, information literacy and even library use in the teen brain, then librarians will want to do all they can to understand what's going on inside the growing adolescent brain. 

See Hanging Out to Homework page 19



Children model the actions of their parents.



Libraries and Learning

by Fred R. Reenstjerna, Ed.D.
Cataloging Librarian
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and
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Publications Committee

We must be careful, as librarians, to recognize the differences between “lifelong learning” and “lifelong schooling.” If we fail to understand that profound distinction, we will fail in our professional mission. The distinction must also be communicated to, and understood by, the entire library workforce.


Notice that this issue of *OLAQ* is about cognition (an individual process), not about schooling (a social institution). Knowing how our customers process information is essential for our most basic professional practice.

All of us are involved in teaching and learning, whether we are helping someone who is looking for new fly-tying techniques, or we are helping a newly-unemployed mill worker who's never completed a résumé discover the difference between functional and chronological experience summaries. The interaction we call the Reference Interview is the ultimate “teaching moment:” it is a confluence of student-generated subject interest and teacher-based resource availability. This most-human interaction does not require a prepared lesson plan or memorizing Bloom's Taxonomy (though such knowledge can enhance any librarian-customer interchange). It does require familiarity with cognitive processes, and recognition that librarians are at that moment teaching—with or without faculty status.

Socrates did not prepare lesson plans to teach philosophy. Indeed, since Socrates left no written record, our only knowledge of this early Master Teacher comes from the notes of his student, Plato. And yet, who among us would claim that their lesson plans rival the Socratic method in their effectiveness? This is not to say that anticipating learning outcomes is meaningless. Rather, it is to stress that our focus as librarians must be on individual cognition, not on institutional structure.

Distinguishing between “lifelong learning” and “lifelong schooling” has important

consequences for students as well as for teachers. As librarians, we are faced with continual change in job-related technologies. Even the rate of change is increasing, so we are dealing with more and more new ways to accomplish our missions. The rate of change is too much for the formal schooling/classroom training approach so common in the 1980s and into the 1990s, yet too many library staff want that safe predictability. How many of us have encountered professional and paraprofessional staff who are using outmoded procedures because they “haven't received any training” in the technology available on their desktops? Their attitude can be a coping skill for the primordial human fear of the unknown (“Here be dragons”), or for punitive management (one cannot be evaluated negatively for skills not formally taught), or just another form of passive aggression in a poor-morale institution. Whatever the cause, the result is the same: an unproductive, closed attitude that the only form of “learning” is “schooling.”

Lifelong learning has always been the *raison d'être* of libraries. We need to recognize that fact, to celebrate it, and to strive continually to apply the principles of lifelong learning to our professional practice. 



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“lifelong learning” and
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How Storytimes for Preschool Children Can Incorporate Current Research

by *Ellen Fader*
Youth Services Coordinator
Multnomah County
Library System

Public libraries have been presenting fun and interactive storytimes for many years, engaging children and helping them love books and libraries. These programs typically include a combination of short and long books, music and action rhymes. Children are surrounded with stimulating speech and interesting topics, creating a language and literacy experience beneficial to children's development. These storytimes provide parents with a model for how to read enthusiastically and involve their children in books. Parents observe their children's interest and excitement and enjoy together what library staff present. These programs have excelled in developing a child's print motivation, an important emergent literacy building block.

Recent research in the field of emergent literacy has led to the development of new best practices for public libraries that want to help parents and teachers of preschool children get ready to read. Storytimes that incorporate these practices differ in subtle ways from the storytimes described above; however, building in the early literacy information does not change the basic nature of these programs. Storytimes continue to present the quality characteristics listed above, but also contain some additional information for parents and caregivers concerning the reasons and rewards for reading to children. Library staff who present age-specific storytimes, from babies to preschoolers, can add short, instructive phrases to help adults who are present understand how children are benefiting from the activities and to show them ways they can facilitate children's literacy development. In this way, the library helps to increase parents' and caregivers' skills in developing narrative skills, vocabulary, letter knowledge and phonological sensitivity, in addition to print motivation.

For example, during storytime for babies, the storyteller might say to parents, "Did you know that hearing language actually changes the structure of babies' brains? Language builds more connections

between neurons in the brain. So the more you talk with your baby, the more connections she will have in her brain." Also: "Sometimes reading looks like chewing. That's okay because he's learning to feel comfortable with books. Babies who play with books will find it easier to learn to read later on."

During a storytime for toddlers, the storyteller might add, "Toddlers are learning about nine new words a day; books are a wonderful source for this growing vocabulary!" Also: "Toddlers understand many more words than they say, so be sure to talk to them all day long about what you are doing and about what they are doing."

In storytime, library staff will also demonstrate specific techniques that facilitate emergent literacy, since how adults read to preschoolers is as important as how frequently children listen to stories. For example, librarians will occasionally model dialogic reading by asking questions in a toddler group so that the child becomes the teller of the story. Because a central basis for learning to read is understanding that words are made up of smaller sounds, librarians will play language games in preschool storytime to demonstrate for parents how to encourage phonological or phonemic awareness. Parents and caregivers will learn how to have fun with phonemes by having children complete the rhymes in songs, such as "Down by the Bay". To encourage narrative skills and to help children learn sequence, the storyteller will occasionally recap a story: "First it started to rain, then the puppy played in the mud puddle, then she got all dirty, and had to get a bath!"

An important thing to remember is that storytime will still be fun if these techniques are used judiciously: some in every program but not every technique with every book. Researchers say that children learn more from books when they are actively involved. All children will benefit

See How Storytimes page 19



Working Together to Build a Better World

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

by Dan R. White
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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.

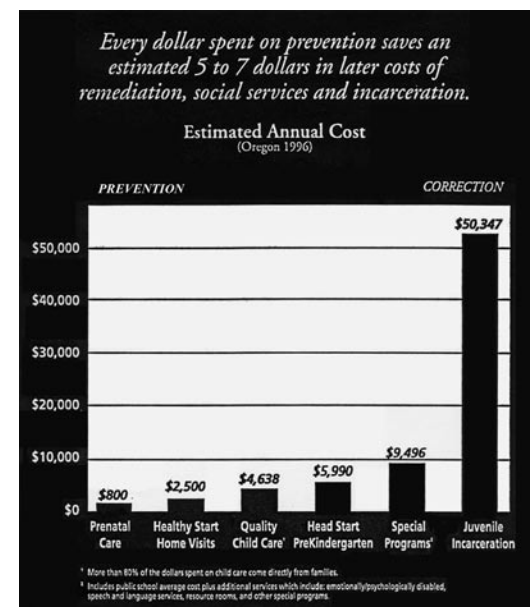
So what makes youth services, and particularly children's services, so important? Why do we feel we have this responsibility to the children in our communities? It is what we have learned through many different studies about children and their cognitive development, and the role we can play in this development.

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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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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