Parent Participation

Central to the provision of library service for young children is the recognition of the family’s importance. Communication between librarians and parents is based on the concept that parents and family are the principal influences in a child’s life and that the library is there to extend and enrich this lifelong dialogue. Parents, not professionals, are the “constant” figures for children. Librarians must focus on what they can do to support parents in their multifaceted roles as primary caregivers and first teachers. If they are to meet the needs of young children effectively, librarians must acknowledge and validate complex parental roles and accept the unique perspectives of parents as partners in the library mission. A family-centered library is an outgrowth of the genuine belief that parents can and should contribute to the development of library services.

The participation of parents is the hallmark of high-quality early childhood programs. Librarians need to listen to parents. The reaction of parents to programs, their insights into their children’s behavior and the behavior of staff and volunteers, and their ideas about library policies, future programs, and resource development are important contributions. Communication needs to flow in both directions. Building the parent-professional partnership is a necessary ingredient of every aspect of library service for young children.

When parents are welcomed as partners, contributors, observers, participants, and collaborators, their presence and expertise enrich the program and the library. They, in turn, become better informed about the breadth of library and community resources and the particulars of their own children’s development. Including parents in early childhood programs and program planning reaps benefits for individuals, families, and the community. It fosters adult development, nurturing a growing confidence and competence in parenting and in community advocacy for young children.

It is essential for children’s librarians to form a partnership with parents to effectively plan, implement, prioritize, and evaluate services for young children. Partnerships based on a common interest, need for action, and sense of mutuality enhance joint efforts. Trust and
confidence in the library reinforce the community’s image of the library as an institution committed to families and young children. Partnerships grow out of mutual respect.

Sharing knowledge nurtures the development of mutual respect and understanding. It is facilitated through the use and elaboration of multiple communication pathways. Although one-way communication from the library to parents through newsletters, bibliographies, and handouts is important, librarians need to look for avenues that encourage both communication from parents to the library and an active exchange among all library stakeholders, including parents.

PARENTS AS CRITICAL FRIENDS

The business community has long recognized the necessity of consumer input to build its customer base and product image. Quality library-based early childhood programs reflect a user-oriented and customer-driven approach to public library service. Through this approach, services are designed and evaluated based on patron input. Seeking parent input creates a new image of children’s services and identifies “the better and the best” practices affecting families and their access to library services.

Highly visible and attractive suggestion boxes or log books are typical vehicles for encouraging communication from clients. One of the best techniques to encourage parent input and participation is the use of focus groups designed around particular issues. Focus groups provide librarians with the opportunity to view library services through the eyes of parents who use the library and, if effectively conducted, generate a bond between the librarian and the parent participant. By conducting focus groups, librarians become more customer oriented.

Focus groups are usually made up of supportive families (families that use the library) so the librarian has a chance to learn from “critical friends.” Focus groups can help sort out the confusion that surrounds a service and the issues that must be addressed.

Parent interviews, program evaluations, and parent surveys are other practical methods for improving services. Individual parent interviews may be more difficult to conduct in the library setting than focus groups. Sometimes parents feel uncomfortable relaying messages about library service, particularly if asked specific questions that may result in ambivalent or potentially negative responses. Distributing questions before the interview or using nonstaff interviewers are possible ways to alleviate discomfort.

A written questionnaire or survey, filled out while the parent uses the children’s room or the preschool child attends a story time, may generate a more positive and thought-provoking response from parents. Parent surveys are a simple method for obtaining relevant input. Like focus group questions, interview or survey questions must be well designed to gather useful information.
An evaluation questionnaire at the end of a program is one form of survey that is an excellent vehicle for eliciting timely and useful information from parents. This brief set of questions can be distributed to parents at the end of a program. Program evaluations can become part of regular library service and can be saved for inclusion in the library’s portfolio.

Implementing the Early Childhood Quality Review affords the library an excellent opportunity to reach out and engage parents in the development of children’s services for families. Although the prospect of an entire review may seem overwhelming, components of the review are critical to achieving success. Parent focus groups and parent interviews are a part of the review process. They can be used to assess individual elements such as children’s programs or the social environment. They are also an effective strategy to begin the parent participation process in the library setting.

PARENTS AS ADVOCATES

Although soliciting parental suggestions and staff understanding of a parental perspective is essential to the development of library services for young children and their families, of equal importance is the provision of opportunities for the development of an ongoing dialog. Individual parents may be valuable volunteers and/or members of the Friends or the library board. Their active presence at site visits, at meetings with other community agencies, or with potential program funders may enhance the library’s presentation. Parents may feel that it is an honor to be asked to participate in these and other “behind-the-scenes” aspects of the library.

When parents participate on committees, advisory and policy-making boards such as Friends’ organizations, or the library’s board of trustees, they are embarking on a path of collaboration, a two-way communication. From this position, they are able to exchange information with librarians, staff, and administrators.

In addition to providing feedback on programs and services, parents gain a better understanding of the resources and constraints influencing the initiation and support of library services. Speaking out on services for young children and their families from within these organizations and at government meetings promotes and emphasizes the importance of library service for children. The presence of parents at this level makes a clear statement about their value to the institution. It is from this vantage point that parent leaders may galvanize a community to action.

Since programs and areas of participation differ in the degree to which parental involvement is integral to their mission and activity, it is important that both parents and staff have a clear understanding of responsibilities and expectations. For many parents membership on library advisory boards, committees, or evaluation teams will be a “first”
experience of this nature. In order to avoid confusion and misunderstandings that could undermine the development of a working partnership, parents need to receive appropriate information about time commitments, goals, roles, meeting agendas, and program structure in a timely manner. It is important to present this in a manner free of jargon, both orally and in writing, before the beginning of each session, workshop, or meeting. Some parents may need encouragement to participate at this level. They may need training in the culture of the library as an institution and its relationship to other community agencies and services.

Collaborating with parents to improve library and community services for children is a relatively new concept for children’s librarians. However, parents are powerful allies. Forming an alliance can be a boon for children’s services in a public library. The idea of family-provider partnerships is synonymous with better practice. It supports and enhances library-based early childhood service.

In communities where libraries are supported directly through a public vote, parents become an important constituency for the library. They can ensure that budget appropriations take into consideration the needs of young children and their families and that monetary resources are appropriately allocated to address these needs. Parents of young children can be encouraged to vote in the library election and will often get other parents to vote. This political process is vital for building a constituency for children’s services.

Providing good service is the library’s best method for attracting and developing advocates. Parents who regularly use the library and the early childhood programs spread the word about this community resource, bringing friends, neighbors, and relatives into the library. Active participants and patrons often give regular feedback to staff regarding programs and collections. Building relationships with young children and their families is in the best interest of children’s services. It is a way of nurturing generations of library enthusiasts.

PARENTS AS PARTNERS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

As partners, the librarian and parent pool their knowledge to facilitate the learning process for the child. This involves identifying library programs and services that are of interest to the parent and/or child, locating community and library resources that parents may need to guide and educate their children, or introducing a range of written, manipulative, visual, or auditory materials to satisfy the child’s and/or parent’s needs. Helping parents understand their child’s unique process of discovery learning and emergent literacy, providing appropriately designed programs that target both parents and children, and designing the environment using the best materials available are examples of the role of the librarian as educator and facilitator.

The design of children’s programs, the opportunity for one-on-one interactions, and a diverse selection of activities and resources provide
parents with a range of opportunities to observe the scope of children's learning styles, approaches, and timetables. The librarian's acceptance of diversity and individual differences enables parents to better understand their own child. Alternative approaches to specific situations can be suggested in a nonjudgmental manner.

The librarian is an outsider to the family dynamic and brings an objective perspective into interactions with both the child and the parent. Library staff and program personnel can help parents observe their child's behavior and can provide reassurance and information about typical developmental stages.

Understanding the feelings of parents and empathizing with their particular situation is of utmost importance in establishing trust and forging a partnership. Effective communication between parents and the librarian is based on active and reflective listening skills, mutual respect, the ability to respond to nonverbal messages, and a willingness to explore alternatives. These communication techniques need to be part of each interaction and practiced regularly. Information may need to be made available in languages other than English for parents and grandparents for whom English is a second language. Other adults and children with special communication disabilities may need technical assistance or specialized materials to ensure effective communication.

Linking Parents to Resources

It is important to present the library as a path to information and services without implying that librarians have the solutions to interpersonal problems, particularly when talking with a parent about a concern or issue. As an educator, a librarian describes observed behavior or offers information about typical development. Conducting a professional reference interview and locating information for parents on any one of the many child-rearing issues of today underscores the work of the public librarian working in children's services.

Picture books and videos can help parents better understand and approach young children concerning emotional issues and even provide insight into typical child behavior. Librarians need to be aware of children's materials that can assist parents with everyday as well as sensitive or difficult issues. A general knowledge of issue-oriented picture books is important for librarians and staff working with young children and their families.

Libraries need an array of good bibliographies and a sampling of the recommended picture books with effective cataloging to facilitate access to these titles. *Books to Help Children Cope with Separation and Loss* (Rudman et al. 1993) is an excellent bibliography which can help to access picture books dealing with such topics as the death of a grandparent or parental divorce. *A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books* (1993) and *The Bookfinder: A Guide to Children's Literature about the Needs and Problems of Youth Aged 2-15* (1994) are two other excellent sources listing books for young children that deal with sensitive issues.
Direct counseling on the actions, expectations, or options appropriate for an individual child or family requires a different type of expertise. Library staff and program personnel can help parents to observe their child's behavior, providing reassurance and information about typical developmental stages. However, if a parent needs a counselor, the librarian's role is to acknowledge the need and act as an information resource professional providing referral choices that address the need. Chapter 5 describes the librarian's role as an information and referral provider.

During the field testing of the *Early Childhood Quality Review Initiative for Public Libraries* (1995), reviewers noted that referrals can occur in the context of library programs such as the Parent/Child Workshop (Feinberg and Deerr 1995). “Verbal cuing by the librarians and staff, to inform and prepare parents about resource people visiting the program, upcoming activities, available resources, program goals etc., empowers parents to approach and utilize the resource persons most effectively (appropriate questions to ask, language to use), and lets them take the lead concerning issues regarding their own child” (Notes, MCPL 15).

**SUPPORTING ADULTS IN THEIR ROLE AS PARENTS**

Parenthood requires a range of skills and knowledge for which most adults are minimally prepared. Without formal preparation for the tasks of parenting, most adults attempt to handle each parenting task to the best of their ability given the totality of their life experiences and current pressures. Parenting is a minute-by-minute proposition, occurring “between the lines” as well as at easily recognizable junctures. Learning is also a daily affair for children and their parents. Yet the small successes and accomplishments that provide the texture of everyday parenting are rarely acknowledged in a society that is quick to criticize less than perfect outcomes.

Parents need encouragement. Their steps toward enhancing their own skills and those of their children need acknowledgment and praise. Librarians can provide positive support and join parents in their daily struggle to raise children. Library programs for infants, toddlers, and young children provide an opportunity for librarians to involve parents in their children’s learning and to mentor adults in their roles as parents.

Special programs that are designed to facilitate parent-child interactions support the parent's teaching role. Librarians can encourage parents to take an active role in their child's earliest experiences and to be involved in their child's development. It is exciting for parents to recognize learning in their child. Observing their infant listening intently to a nursery rhyme or hearing their toddler ask for “Open, Shut Them” during circle time amazes parents who may not be engaged in these activities at home. Often parents tell librarians about the child
who does not do fingerplays during story time, but repeats them verbatim when driving home from the library.

Story time or nursery rhyme programs for parents and children are opportunities to demonstrate to parents language enrichment strategies while enhancing mutual learning. This approach places equal emphasis on developing the skills of parents and on the language development of the child. Participating in Mother Goose or story time educates parents on the “what and how” of repeating rhymes and stories.

Sometimes parents feel uncomfortable acting “silly” and using playful verbal and body language. They may not have observed emotionally expressive storytelling or considered this type of interaction as part of their parental role. Many parents are isolated from their own extended families and do not recall finger games or favorite books. Libraries and librarians can support the idea that having fun together can enhance the learning experience and set the foundation for a positive relationship throughout life.

One member of a field site review team, in observing a “Mostly Mother Goose” program, commented on the interaction and the participation: “The impact is greater on the parent who learns how to interact with their children” (Notes, PML 10). Parents who were interviewed acknowledged the mutual learning process. One parent, commenting on a positive aspect of the early childhood library program, pointed out: “Parents are able to learn right along with their child and learn in a fun way too” (Notes, SPL 8).

The early learning environment in a library setting can teach parents through example about appropriate toys and other play materials, as well as provide a model of a child-centered and safe setting. Libraries have a wonderful opportunity to expose parents to well-designed equipment and materials, including early learning software. Parents learn from librarians where to purchase toys and ask to borrow special catalogs of early learning materials that are not typically promoted to the home market.

Sharing a story, talking about favorite characters, and discussing feelings and ideas are integral to engaging young children and parents in the learning process. Librarians can create an atmosphere that helps parents to feel comfortable with a range of language-rich interactive styles. They provide examples of songs, games, and stories from around the world that can assist parents in finding a personal play vocabulary. Parents are often surprised by what their child can and will do when involved in a new experience.

The librarian sets an example for parents by guiding a child through a project (or an activity) rather than doing it for the child. When “library staff provides information to parents during art activities in a variety of programs, explaining the significance of the process and encouraging parents to explore different mediums and continue the activities at home, [it] reinforces the parent’s role as their child’s first teacher” (Notes, MCPL 5). The combination of new strategies and renewed feelings of confidence empowers parents in their teaching role.

Talking with parents before and after programs is a good time to emphasize the parents’ importance in the child’s learning. Materials
directed toward parents that help extend the learning experience for them, as well as for the child, need to be made available at each program. The carryover from the library to home is an important part of the sequential learning that is stimulated by the library experience. Providing support and encouragement to parents helps them to better understand developmentally appropriate practices that facilitate learning for infants and young children in the library, in child-care or preschool settings, and at home.

Librarians need to focus their energies on enabling successful and satisfied parents. Helping parents to understand and appreciate their own child's strengths and needs is a key aspect of good library service. By integrating parents' and children's services and providing a continuum of parent-involvement programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, librarians can let parents observe firsthand how their child learns and adapts to a variety of situations. Knowledge and acceptance of one's own child are fundamental to the parent's role as teacher.

Educating and informing parents about child development and encouraging the use of library services to bolster emergent literacy, reading readiness, and social development through child-child and adult-child interactions are primary tasks of the children's librarian. Library programs for young children are often a child's first social experience. Through these programs, parents not only view their child's learning style but they gain insights into the way their child approaches new social encounters. Focusing on the social aspects of learning, librarians model for parents alternative strategies for resolving social conflicts. Parents are more likely to adopt these practices at home once they have observed their successful use within a library program.

**PARENT EDUCATION AND SUPPORT**

In the midst of everyday hassles, adults frequently make parenting decisions based on memories of their own childhood and the collective wisdom of extended family. Although schools are acknowledged guardians of information about children and education, these institutions are also in a position to evaluate children and, by extension, their families. Many parents have uneasy memories of their own school experiences, however, and are reluctant or ambivalent in seeking answers to questions about parenting from school officials.

Libraries, on the other hand, are neutral, safe, and, ideally, associated with positive feelings and impressions. Providing services for young children and their parents helps both of these generations turn to the library as an important community resource to facilitate learning. Building competence and confidence in parents is a primary goal of the partnership model.

In constructing a quality early childhood service program, children's librarians need to recognize parents as adult learners. By serving the parent as an individual, not only as part of the family unit,
Informal Learning

Friendships formed by parents who repeatedly meet at library programs designed for their children are an important part of the social fabric of parenthood. While participating in library programs or visiting the library to check out materials with their young children, parents identify others at a similar stage in life. They recognize others with children the age of their own. These parents and families are potential friends not only for the adults but for the children. These meetings may initiate the start of play groups, cooperative child-care arrangements, clothing and equipment swaps, and even more formal support groups or networks.

Through these informal meetings, parents have the opportunity to exchange information and advice. They are able to observe a range of abilities and behaviors in children of similar ages, and to assess the style and sometimes the efficacy of a variety of parenting strategies. Parents have few situations that allow for these types of casual learning opportunities.

As they follow housing and work opportunities, many parents have had to say good-bye permanently or temporarily to work-based friendships, familiar neighborhoods, and extended families. Young parents often begin the process of parenthood in relative isolation. As new parents, they seek new companions to share this stage of life and responsibility. Libraries and librarians can help alleviate this sense of isolation.

The best practices identified during the field testing support the importance of the informal learning that occurs at libraries when adults make a parent-to-parent connection. One parent reported: “Young parents talk to each other, helping each other” (Notes, SPL 12). Others related: “Parents learned many parenting tips from the library’s programs and from other parents that they met in the programs, many of whom developed friendships as a result of their library connection” (Notes, MCPL 13). “I feel [the library does] a fabulous job! I know it’s hard to do too much for the children under 1 1/2 years old, but I also know first-time Moms with very young children sometimes need some extra support, especially those new to the community” (Notes, SPL 16).

Parent Education Programs

Casual learning within the library setting, while critical to family learning, is not always enough for parents. In many situations parents need more direct avenues for their education and development. During inter-
views and focus groups, parents often requested workshops on specific
topics such as how to use pre-reading and math materials; things to do
in the area for children of different ages; instructional workshops on
educational software; selecting good literature for children; child devel-
opment issues such as toilet training and sleep problems; and discipline
techniques (Early Childhood Quality Review 1995).

Providing parent education and support groups that deal with a
wide range of parenting challenges and dilemmas is an essential part
of early childhood programming. These can be facilitated to enable
parents to learn not only from the library staff but also from each other.

**Program format**

Designing a program series for parents underscores the children’s
librarian’s acceptance of serving adults in their parenting role. Parents
learn best when their knowledge and needs are respected. Using a
variety of real-life situations to illustrate the issue or to stimulate dis-
cussion engages parents in active problem solving and assists them in
relating topics to their own family and circumstances. The development
of a positive emotional climate within the program or workshop allows
parents the opportunity to identify those aspects of information and
parenting strategies that best fit their own needs (Involving Families in
Advisory Roles 1994).

The adults who take part in any particular parent education work-
shop, program, or series usually come from a range of backgrounds
and experiences. Depending on the focus and meeting location, there
may be a diversity of ages, cultures, socioeconomic levels, and inter-
est, as well as social and language skills. Expectations may vary
widely. Some parents may be more familiar with group discussion for-
mats; others with settings in which an authority figure hands down
information. For this reason, it is important that programs be offered in
a range of formats, and that ground rules for the communication and
sharing of ideas, thoughts, and experiences be made explicit from the
beginning. Oral and written presentation of this information, along with
a clear description of program goals and structure, can facilitate the
group process.

In order for programs to be successful, participants need to feel
comfortable in expressing their feelings, voicing their concerns, and
offering examples of their successes. Simple strategies such as name
tags and “ice breakers” that encourage individuals to talk with each
other can be employed to encourage individuals to feel comfortable in
the group setting and to identify with group goals.

Since not all adults have had the opportunity to talk about their
feelings or to practice public speaking or respectful listening, initial
meetings of some programs may need to devote time to the develop-
ment of communication skills. The sessions themselves may be
designed to explore alternative approaches to information and group
exchange such as brainstorming, role playing of family or group roles,
dramatizations, short lectures, debates, and open discussions. Other
parent education formats include book discussions and reviews and even previews of children's or parent's educational and recreational videos or computer programs.

Experts or professionals may be brought to the library from the community for individual sessions or as members of a panel or symposium. They can be joined by individuals offering the parent perspective on the issue. Alternatively, either parents or members of the library staff may act as moderators who can pose questions from their own perspective, read questions submitted prior to the program, or solicit and select questions from the audience. A variant of this format offers two parallel panels, a panel of experts and one of parents.

Oftentimes, these programs can be designed cooperatively with other community agencies. The library may supply meeting space and publicity. Visiting parents in other local settings to talk about the library's resources can be another avenue for reaching this targeted audience. Chapter 5 focuses on outreach efforts as part of family centered services.

Each of these formats requires a slightly different room arrangement. The physical arrangement of chairs and tables influences the flow of conversation and provides messages about the formality of expected social interactions. The space between furniture and the nature of the decorations provide cues for behavior and influence whether parents expect the tone to be formal, as in a theater, classroom, or boardroom, or informal, as in a living room or lounge area.

Cross-cultural studies confirm that side-by-side seating is considered the most intimate of seating arrangements (McAndrew 1993). However, this arrangement may have an inhibiting effect on conversation, whereas furnishings that encourage corner-to-corner or face-to-face interactions may facilitate exchanges. These physical structures encode expectations for social interaction. For this reason, such factors as the location of visual aids, lights, and microphones; the hardness or softness of the furniture; and the shape of tables and the grouping of chairs around them should be taken into consideration when selecting a meeting location.

Learning styles

In designing parent education programs, it is important to keep in mind that adults have a range of preferred learning styles. Visual, auditory, and, where appropriate, tactile materials should be incorporated into program design. Opportunities to interact in large and small groups should be considered during the planning process. Handouts, brochures, and bibliographies are a positive addition to these events, as are concrete examples of home-based applications. Some series of workshops incorporate take-home assignments to encourage parent exploration of new parenting techniques as well as participation in group discussion.

Whenever possible, books and audio and video materials from the parents' collection relevant to the program should be available for
parents to borrow and take home with them. This may involve securing sufficient copies of key resources, as well as items in alternative formats for parents with special needs or those who are learning English as a second language. Materials from the children's collection can also be included to encourage that the learning that begins in the program will be explored at home. An evaluation component is a critical part of parent education workshops. Librarians should set aside time to talk to parents both before and after programs.

Building in a social time during or after parent education programs can facilitate the development of informal support networks. Parents who meet to discuss child-rearing issues are able to use this opportunity to make friends and identify individuals with similar interests and perspectives. Those parents who hesitate to take part in a parent workshop or program may find network participation a more satisfying vehicle for developing friendships and gaining advice. They may be attracted to the informal one-on-one aspects of a network rather than the group environment of a parenting program or they may prefer the flexibility of connecting as needed rather than keeping to a fixed schedule.

Libraries need to initiate or facilitate the development of a parent support network as distinct from the parent education programs. One format is a parent mentor program that matches first-time parents with more experienced parents who can provide alternative models of child rearing and information about local customs and resources. Both formal and informal parent support programs provide opportunities for adults to broaden their social connections. These networks of peer relationships among adults can enhance the emotional climate within families.

Parents’ Collection

One of the most effective ways to provide education and support for parents is through the establishment of a parents' collection. Types of materials include books, videos, audio books, periodicals, electronic resources, and pamphlets. Information on child development, reading and literature, activities for young children, health and nutrition, music and art education, child rearing, and children with special needs helps parents to better understand their role in the learning process.

Attractively packaging and locating these materials encourage the use of this collection. Kits can be assembled that offer an array of materials on special topics such as going to the hospital, death and dying, sibling relationships, and having a new baby, or that build connections between books and a range of activities focusing on current or classical children's interests. These kits are not only successful with parents but are attractive to grandparents and family home day-care providers.

Having Web sites bookmarked with Internet resources on child development and parenting provides parents with current child-rearing
information and indirectly strengthens their computer literacy skills. It is not uncommon for parents to first use a computer in the children's room. Encouraging parents to join their young children in the computer area and having resources specifically earmarked for them as well as their children afford the children's librarian an opportunity to foster family computer literacy.

Based on a list developed by Barbara Jordan (1996), parents need information on an array of topics, including:

- child development (mental, physical, social, and emotional)
- common childhood illnesses
- discipline and parenting skills
- infant care and child rearing
- language and reading activities
- nutrition and physical fitness
- speech and language development
- children's fears
- toilet training
- home schooling
- sleep problems
- emotional disorders of childhood
- children and the media
- death and bereavement
- home and school issues
- working parents
- developmentally appropriate activities for children
- divorce, single parent, gay family, and stepfamily issues
- communication and family relationships
- family travel and recreation
- safety and health
- parenting children with special needs
- sibling relationships
- pregnancy and prenatal care
- stress and depression in children
- sexuality education
- children's parties
- children's toys, furniture, rooms, and equipment
- adolescent issues
- child abuse and family dysfunction
- adoption and foster care
- alcohol and substance abuse
- specific health and disability topics
Traditional methods of promoting collections and resources also help to alert parents to the availability of library materials directed to their parenting needs. Bibliographies, resource displays, and exhibits on parenting issues provide adults with suggestions of other community settings where information is available. When arranging the parents’ collection, it is important to keep in mind that these materials need to be in close proximity to or accessible within the children’s area (Lobosco et al. 1996; Jordan 1996). Collection visibility, special publications, and displays make a statement about the importance of parents in the growth process of children. They serve as reminders to parents that children’s librarians can help them with their parent education needs.

PARENT/PROFESSIONAL COLLECTIONS AND SERVICES

Selected Resources


PARENTS AS LIFELONG LEARNERS

Serving parents is critical to the future of children's services in public libraries. Interacting with the parent as an adult learner and recognizing the information needs of parents enhance the role of the children's librarian within the library as well as in the greater community of family support professionals. When the librarian forms a relationship with the parent, she or he facilitates lifelong learning within the family unit and underscores the value of educating the parent to educate the child.

A basic thrust of library-based early childhood service is the active involvement of parents in all aspects of the library. In the public library setting, infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and early elementary school-age children are usually accompanied by family members or child-care providers. This affords the librarian an extraordinary opportunity to promote the library during the child's earliest learning years. Through the active participation of a parent or caregiving adult, librarians facilitate an exponential learning process that begins with the parent/child dyad.

Children's librarians need to be familiar with the entire range of adult services and seek opportunities to inform parents as potential users. Adults who may first enter the library to entertain their child or to enlarge their social group begin to expand their own educational horizons. Information for adults within the secure early childhood setting may woo a reluctant adult into investigating additional library resources directed primarily to adult interests and needs. This sets in motion a cycle of continuous learning for all family members.

Family literacy programs can often be incorporated within the domain of the children's services department. Librarians need to seek out effective programs and adapt them to the library environment. This type of service usually requires that the librarian collaborate with another local agency that has access to parents who cannot read or who have low literacy skills. Using computer software that emphasizes reading readiness and emergent literacy skills in the library and encouraging parents to attend story times with their children allow libraries to help parents as well as children become literate.

ASSESSMENT OF PARENT PARTICIPATION

Parent participation is best evaluated using methodology designed to assess the attitudes and perceptions of parents and professionals. Interviews, focus groups, surveys and questionnaires are useful tools. Additional information can be found by reviewing the library's documents dealing with parent activity, including written program announcements.

When assessing parent participation, it is important to consider their multiple roles. Parents of young children should be recognized as
a child's primary teacher; guided in developmentally appropriate practice; encouraged to actively participate in their child's learning; provided opportunities for parent education and support; and viewed as partners in planning and evaluation and as advocates in support of the development of services for families and children. It is helpful to assess services from the point of view of the parent as mentor, teacher, and model of behavior for his or her child as well as that of a direct beneficiary of the library's programs and services.

Specific items in the appendix that apply to parent participation include forms B-1, B-2, B-6, B-12, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-7, D-5, and D-6.

REFERENCES


Notes from interviews, focus groups, and surveys conducted at the Middle Country Public Library (MCPL), Newburg Public Library (NPL), Patchogue Medford Library (PML) and Shoreham-Wading River Public Library (SPL). The Early Childhood Quality Review Initiative for public libraries. Centerreach, N.Y.: Middle Country Public Library, 1995.

B-1 Parent Interview

Date __________  Interviewer __________________________  Time: from __________ to __________

Type of Interview/Survey (check one)  □ in person  □ phone  □ self-administered

Element(s) __________________________

What programs, materials, and services do you and your young children use at the library?

How often do you use the library? attend programs? borrow materials?

How do you think the library helps you and your child learn? Can you give us any examples?

Please suggest additional ways the library can help you and your child.

This form may be adapted to use as a written survey and distributed in the children’s room or during a program.
B-2  Professional/Staff Interview

Date __________  Interviewer ____________________________  Time: from ________ to ________

Type of Interview/Survey (check one)  □ in person  □ phone  □ self-administered

Element(s) ____________________________________________

Using these questions to guide you, comment on the evidence of better practice and areas of reflection and concern regarding the library’s service to young children and families based on your experience.

What are the strengths of the library in serving young children and their families?

How do parents support their young child’s learning in this library?

How do parents participate and provide input or feedback in this library?

In what ways do parents serve as resource people for each other?

From your perspective do parents understand the goals and objectives of the library’s programs/services/collections?

How do you feel this library supports the parent in the role of teacher?

How are parent suggestions handled in the context of programs or in the children’s area?

What recommendations do you have for changing the way this library serves children and families?

Are there any other comments or suggestions you would like to make in relation to the content of this interview/survey?
## B-6 Parent Participation/Collaborations/
Professional Development/Social Environment

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<td>Date</td>
<td>Interviewer</td>
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<td>Source of Information (check one)</td>
<td>survey</td>
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Based on interviews, surveys, and focus groups, check Rarely, Sometimes, or Frequently regarding staff attitudes and behaviors. Refer to chapter 5 for background descriptions.

1. Respects parents as primary teachers of their child
2. Recognizes that the family is the constant in the child’s life while the library staff fluctuates
3. Treats parents as partners in the development of library service
4. Facilitates the parent/professional partnership
5. Expresses support and empathy toward parents
6. Regularly uses active listening skills when working with parents
7. Communicates policies and practices to parents
8. Distributes information to new families in the community
9. Provides new families with an orientation to the library’s services through a routine process
10. Encourages parents to act on their own behalf
11. Encourages parents to act on behalf of their children
12. Designs programs and collections to enhance parenting skills and confidence
13. Designs programs with parents and children in mind
14. Encourages parents to observe and/or participate with their children
15. Includes circulating materials in programs to extend early childhood learning to the home
16. Integrates materials for parents into children’s programs
17. Integrates materials for children into parents’ programs
18. Provides access to children’s materials to help parents discuss difficult issues
19. Provides settings for parents to gather and interact informally
20. Provides formal setting for parents to share information and learn from each other and from professionals
21. Encourages parent-to-parent communication
22. Recognizes family strengths and diversity
23. Presents a variety of alternatives to encourage parent involvement in children’s activities
24. Offers programs in parents’ home language or provides translators as needed to facilitate parent participation
25. Offers alternative forms of communication and participation for parents with disabilities

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B-12  Parent Focus Group

Date __________ Facilitator ____________________________ Time: from __________ to __________
Element(s) ________________________________________

The questions below may also be used as part of an interview or survey.

Introduction

Good evening and welcome to our session tonight. Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion of the library's parents' and children's services. We know and appreciate how valuable your time is. My name is Michelle Langa. I am an early childhood consultant. I was asked by the director, Mrs. Sandra Feinberg, to conduct these parent focus groups.

This is one of several meetings we are holding with parents who use the library's services. The purpose of this meeting is to get your input about services for parents and their children, birth through eight, as part of our Early Childhood Quality Review. We want to learn what you as a parent think about the types of services and programs you receive now. We also want to learn what you would like to see in the future. You have been selected because we trust your judgment. You are frequent users of the parent and children's sections of the library. We consider you our critical friends. We want to hear your ideas of how our parenting and children's services can improve.

Today's session will last a little over an hour. I will be taking notes and using a tape recorder in order not to miss any comments. We ask that you please speak up. Only one person should talk at a time. If several people are talking at a time the tape will get garbled and we may miss your important comments. I will combine your views with those from our other groups and summarize them in a report to the director and library board.

Let's begin. We've placed name cards in front of each of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's find out a little more about each other by going around the room one at a time. Please tell us your first name and how you heard about the library's parenting programs and early childhood services.

Parenting Services

We will focus today (tonight) on library activities for you as a parent and those that you and your child use. We'll begin with library activities for parents.

1. How have you used the library as a parent?
   Probe: Name a few of the services you have used in the past week or month.

2. If you were to recommend the library's parenting programs to a friend, how would you describe them?

3. How has the library helped you as a parent?
   Probe: Did you learn a valuable parenting tip or technique?

4. Have you experienced any inconvenience or difficulties in using the library? The parenting series?
   Probe: Can you be more specific?

5. Do you personally know someone in your neighborhood who does not use the library's parenting services?
   Probe: If so, have they shared with you the reasons why they do not use the library?

6. As a parent, what other services would you like to see that do not exist presently?

7. Do you feel you have a way to influence what parenting services are offered at the library?

8. Has anyone ever suggested a topic for a parenting program?
   Probe: If not, are there reasons why you have not suggested a topic?

9. Is there an area of the library that is uncomfortable for you to use as a parent?

(Continued)
B-12  Parent Focus Group  (continued)

Children’s Services
Now let’s shift our focus to talking about library activities for parents and their young children.

1.  Do you enjoy coming to the library with your child? Why?
   *Probe:* What are the activities that you and your child do at the library?

2.  Does your child have a library card?

3.  What are some of the things that your child has learned at the library?

4.  Are there any rules or policies of the library that make it difficult for you and your child to use the library?

5.  Is there an area of the library in which you or your child feels uncomfortable? comfortable?

Library Staff
We would like to hear your views on the staff of the library.

1.  Have you ever approached the librarians at the reference desk?
   *Probe:* What was that experience like for you?

2.  How would you describe the librarians’ attitudes toward parents?

3.  What has been your experience when asking the staff for assistance?
   *Probe:* When was the last time you asked for assistance?

4.  Do you feel comfortable when checking out materials at the circulation desk?

5.  Would you go to a librarian with a suggestion for change?
   *Probe:* If you have already done so, what was that experience like for you?

6.  Have you ever used a suggestion form?

Suggestions for Improvement
We want to hear your opinions regarding ways to improve the library’s services for parents and children.

1.  What recommendations for improving the parents’ and children’s services of the library would you make?

2.  This meeting has given us a lot of valuable information. Can you think of other ways parents can give us input?

3.  If we were to plan more of these meetings in the future, would you be willing to attend?

Closing Questions
We value the time you have given us today and want to ensure that you have had the opportunity to tell us what you think about the library’s parents’ and children’s programs.

1.  Have we missed anything?

2.  Is there an area of discussion that you think we should have covered but did not?

3.  *Summarize participants’ comments in two or three sentences and ask:* Is this an accurate summary of what we discussed today?

(Continued)
Note
Three focus groups were conducted at the Middle Country Public Library (Centereach, N.Y.), one of the field site libraries. Parents were contacted by staff and asked to participate in one-hour focus groups that would examine parenting and early childhood services as well as general staff responsiveness to patron comments and/or suggestions. The focus groups were conducted by Michelle Langa, a consultant hired by the library, and designed with input from the review team. This section outlines the introduction and the questions posed to participants. A tape recorder was used during the sessions.

A summary report of the comments that reflect the quality, staff attitude, and responsiveness to parents, user friendliness, and recommendations for change was provided to the children’s department staff, administration, and board of trustees. This document provided further evidence about the library’s practices and areas of strength and concern regarding service to parents and young children.