



The Children

We Serve

Five notions of childhood suggest ways to think about the services we provide

By Virginia A. Walter

In *Children and Libraries: Getting It Right* (ALA Editions, 2001), I proposed three alternative visions for the children we would be serving as we moved into the 21st century: the original notion of the child reader, an idea that inspired and guided the founders of library service to children; the child of the information age; and the child in the community. It's now time to revisit those three concepts and look at two additional notions of childhood that might usefully inform our thinking today. These new ideas are "the global child" and "the empowered child."

Each of these five concepts of the child leads to a different approach to library service. All are plausible, all are hopeful, and all are obtainable. They may not be mutually exclusive, but each is based on a different understanding of the child who will shape and claim the future of the 21st century.

The Child as Reader

The library for the child reader is the vision that offers the most continuity with the past. It builds on the core values and visions of the librarians who founded library services for children in this country. It is consistent with the niche that these services have traditionally occupied. It is therefore a conservative vision, in the sense that it conserves a cherished and valued tradition.

As we think about the future of library service to children, however, we must look at even our most cherished and valued traditions to see how they hold up against today's realities. Can we be sure that books and reading will continue to be valued by our society? Will parents, educators, and policymakers continue to believe that books and reading are essential to the healthy development of children? Will voters agree that providing books and promoting reading for children are appropriate and necessary functions for tax-supported public libraries? I

responsible for the original program drew on research findings from the National Reading Panel and even hired academics with impeccable credentials to design the workshop curricula. Not satisfied with that, they commissioned a research study to determine whether the research-based curriculum achieved its desired learning and behavior outcomes. The study showed that parents of every age, educational background, income level, and ethnicity who attended the ECRR workshops significantly increased those behaviors that research has shown stimulate reading readiness in young children. So we're feeling like we're on pretty solid ground here, at least in our efforts to improve literacy in young children. The big lesson we learned is that we can't do this job alone; we need to enlist caregivers and especially parents as the child's first and best teachers.

The Child of the Information Age

Computers, with their access to myriad digital resources, have already changed the way we deliver many of our services to children. Children of the information age—boys in particular—have breached the walls and claimed their right to computers and the internet. Never mind that they do not have all the rights that adult library patrons do;

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am writing these words during the worst economic recession our country has known for decades, when even the most basic government services are threatened. Will we librarians be able to make a case for the importance of books and reading in the lives of children?

It has been interesting to observe the profession's effort to build a rational foundation for our reading mission. I have previously written about our faith in a deeply held but unproven belief in the power of reading "good" books as a means of improving human nature and presumably human behavior. However, the world we operate in now seems to require something more, and children's librarians have dutifully looked for research findings that bolster their claims of doing good work and providing meaningful service.

One of the more significant initiatives has been "Every Child Ready to Read" (ECRR), a joint initiative by two American Library Association divisions, the Association for Library Service to Children and the Public Library Association, to educate parents and caregivers in techniques they can use to transfer critical emergent literacy skills to their preschool children. The association leaders

many, perhaps most, libraries use filtering software to screen content on computers in the children's room. Most young patrons probably don't care as much as we intellectual freedom advocates do; they are not there to access forbidden websites. They may not even want to access information sites at all. Mostly, librarians tell me and my own observations confirm, they want to play games.

We children's librarians tend to be a little dismissive of those computer and video games, unlike our colleagues in young adult services. Sometimes it seems that the best rationale we can offer for this activity is that we encourage reading for pleasure. Why not computing for pleasure? We should probably pay more attention to voices like that of Steven Johnson, who claimed in his book *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (Riverhead, 2005) that computer games place heavy cognitive demands on their players. In fact, much of these games' captivation is due to the challenges they place on individuals to persist in their efforts to solve complex challenges. In *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever* (Harvard Business School Press, 2004), John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade go even further.

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They insist that the hours spent playing video games have given young people now entering the workforce some unique and badly needed skills: an ability to multitask and a willingness to take risks. Those 10-year-old boys clustered around a computer in your children's room arguing about the best strategy for knocking out an opponent's avatar may be engaged in the same kind of reasoning 20 years from now in some corporate boardroom.

However, access is only part of the problem. The other two issues that we need to think hard about are content and education for information literacy. And if we are going to fully realize the potential of this marvelous device that computer scientist Seymour Papert called "the children's machine," we also need to consider how we are going to integrate computers and digital resources into our services and collections.

The Child in the Community

Although the founders of library service to children designed their services to promote books and reading, they still understood the importance of their young patrons' environment. Librarians working in rural areas pondered schemes to bring books to children in remote farmhouses far from the nearest library. Urban librarians were concerned about crowded tenements and unsafe sweatshops where children labored for pennies. In a speech to ALA in 1905, Frances Jenkins Olcott, then head of the children's department of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, talked about the demographics of her city, where more than two-thirds of the total population of 321,616 were "either foreign born, or children of foreign born parents, and persons of negro descent." Olcott was knowledgeable about the employment opportunities, the housing conditions, and the curriculum of the public schools. She knew the city inside and out, and she understood what living there was like for children.

Olcott knew that the Carnegie Library was reaching thousands of children through its branches and through the city schools. She worried about the large numbers of children who didn't come into the library and were not enrolled in school. She did not abandon these at-risk children. She organized an initiative that cooperated with "institutions for social betterment," such as social settlements, the juvenile court, and the Newsboys' Home. Library

staff established home libraries—small cases of books—in working-class homes. During home visits, librarians would gather a group of children from the neighborhood and talk about the books, read aloud, tell stories, and organize crafts such as sewing or basketry.

Outreach or social work? Librarians sometimes embrace the first activity and shun the second. Yet when they truly begin to plan and implement programs that take into account the communities in which children live, the lines tend to blur. Traditional library missions may expand when we go beyond superficial marketing studies or environmental scans and really dig for insights into our communities.

We will rarely find those useful insights if we stay sequestered behind the walls of our library buildings. I understand the competing demands of reference desk schedules, storytimes, and staff meetings. In spite of those very real constraints, time must be found for walking in the footsteps of the children and families whom we serve.

The Global Child

The world feels more interconnected all the time. The increasing urgency of global warming has alerted us to both the fragility and the importance of those connections. Our economic system is now international as well. Banks fail in New York, and stock markets in Japan, Hong Kong, and Europe shudder along with our own. And sadly, war continues to remind us that we are all citizens of one world. In addition, the United States continues to attract immigrants from all over the world.

It is no longer unusual to find large urban school districts in cities that serve as ports of entry for new immigrants where the number of languages spoken in the homes of the students exceeds 50. In my own city of Los Angeles, these languages include the mostly oral dialects spoken by indigenous people from Central America as well as the more familiar Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, Thai, Filipino, and Armenian. For the children of these newcomer families, the country of origin remains an important influence.

It is easy to see that the children whose families maintain their international connections are living in a global village. I suggest that other children, like my

grandchildren who are now fourth-generation Americans, are also residents in one global village. The ecological and economic and geopolitical realities of the 21st century place them there. The library can help prepare them to be more competent and compassionate global citizens.

Our materials collections serve us well as a resource in this endeavor. I still have the copy of Paul Hazard's 1944 book *Books, Children, and Men* that I bought when I was in library school. I was taken with his notion of the world republic of childhood. This French scholar wrote eloquently about the capacity of books to connect children to one another across national borders.

Books in languages other than English are most likely to be found in children's collections serving large immigrant populations. They are well used by children who haven't learned English yet and by families who hope to keep the mother tongue alive even as the children become fluent in English. I have found, however, that even monolingual American children are intrigued with books in other languages. They are especially fascinated by different alphabets. I'm not sure what an American child learns about Japan when she leafs through a Japanese picture book, but it can't hurt to be exposed to the notion that not everybody reads from left to right in the Roman alphabet.

If we begin to think of the American children we serve as citizens in the world republic of childhood who will grow up to be decision makers in an increasingly interconnected global village, we also add another critical dimension to our understanding of contemporary childhood

The Empowered Child

Children have little legal power. They are dependent on their parents by law and in practice. They may depend on their parents to sign them up for soccer or to take them to the library. Even ALA, whose Library Bill of Rights asserts that "a person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views," affirms the right and responsibility of parents to guide their own children's use of the library and its resources and services.

Given this legal and social reality, what is the justification for empowering children? Why should librarians be advocates for children's rights? In an essay in *Rethinking Childhood* (Rutgers, 2003), Barbara Woodhouse proposes that we recognize two categories of rights especially for children—needs-based rights and dignity-based rights. Needs-based rights would include positive rights to nurturance, education, medical care, and other goods and services that children need to develop into productive adults. Dignity-based rights, on the other hand, recog-

nize that children are fully human from the time of their birth. Dignity-based rights reflect both the inherent dependence and fragility of children and their developing capacity for participation in decisions that affect their lives. Woodhouse identifies five principles of human rights that could and should be applied to children:

- The equality principle: the right to equal opportunity
- The individualism principle: the right to be treated as a person, not an object
- The empowerment principle: the right to a voice and, sometimes, a choice
- The protection principle: the right of the weak to be protected from the strong
- The privacy principle: the right to protection of intimate relationships

This framework resolves much of the tension that has plagued the issue of children's rights. It acknowledges the child's right to protection as well as the child's right to autonomy. Librarians can contribute to this framework a principled defense of children's right to information and the active dissemination of the information that children need in order to exercise their other rights

We can work even harder than we do now to ensure that the library operates in the best interest of children; we have a long tradition of advocacy; and advocacy, along with public relations and networking, is one of the seven core competencies for children's librarians put forth by ALSC.

One important document that deserves our attention is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a framework for guiding their work. This document, adopted by the United Nations in 1989, has been ratified by every country in the world except Somalia and the United States. It is a remarkable international consensus on the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children. It covers just about every aspect of children's lives, and it emphasizes respect for children's dignity. It manages to avoid focus on either protection or self-determination for children, the usual opposing viewpoints, and instead promotes liberty, privacy, and nurturance.

The child as reader, the child of the information age, the child in the community, the global child, or the empowered child? Which child will we target as we plan and deliver library services in our communities? Better yet, can we strive to target them all? ■



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