

The Children's Librarian

NORMA L. ROGERS
Director of Children's Services
Urbana Free Library
Urbana, Illinois

The Children's Librarian as Viewed by Children

In an attempt to find out what children, i.e., patrons, think of librarians, three different techniques were utilized in the Urbana Free Library to elicit responses. The first was a brief survey, involving a one-line question asked of the children in thirty classes visiting the public library last spring. The second was a 2-page questionnaire filled out by some children who were regular library users, and the third was a 2-hour discussion with members of the Junior Critics organization of the library.

The first technique attempted to determine how children describe librarians. Children were asked to write a brief, even one-word description of a librarian. Most of the responses defined a personal quality, but a number of the children chose to list types of work performed by the librarian. The examples of work cited were almost entirely of a professional nature, with fewer than 10 percent describing any clerical jobs. Forty-four different descriptive terms were used, ranging from words like *happy, smart, intelligent, dramatic, interesting, understanding, cheerful, fun* and *polite*, to *mean, unfriendly, grouchy, weird* and *strict*. Some even thought of librarians as "pretty." The number of positive words far outweighed the negative, but of the variety of words used, 50 percent of the children described librarians as "nice" and another 20 percent as "helpful." The librarians on the staff should probably be quite pleased to find themselves viewed positively, but not much can be learned about the individuals or the profession from finding out that librarians are "nice."

Since the first technique proved to be generally inadequate, a 2-page questionnaire was designed which asked children about their use of the library, and their perceptions of the librarians, the children's department, and the adult department of the library. The children's interest seemed to dwindle quickly after filling in the data concerning themselves, and it is possible that the short, unimaginative answers reflect their dislike of filling in blanks and being tested. The written questionnaire was rather ineffective, other than revealing that the ideal children's librarian might also be "tough," and that given a chance to change the library, large fish tanks should be added.

The third step in this inquiry was to ask the children who were between the ages of ten and fourteen and were members of the library's Junior Critics book discussion group to meet to talk about librarians. As "junior critics," they had indeed discovered the true joy of criticism, and were very happy to criticize in any way that would be helpful. The children in this small group are regular library users and, given their frequent attendance and active participation, they are presumably children who are well served by the public library. These children were very much at ease expressing their opinions, and were reaching an age at which they were able to make useful judgments and incisive comments about the world around them. These children were knowledgeable and demanding.

The initial response of this group was that librarians should know books, like children and reading, like the work, and be helpful and patient. When asked what had been meant in the earlier survey by "nice," they responded that young children probably used "nice" to mean "helpful." In the words of one of them: "You can be nice and just sit there and hand out candy to the kids, but that's not helpful." What these children expect from their librarians is service.

One thing that stood out very strongly, both in the opinions of the group's members and in the earlier survey, was that many of the children regarded the children's department of the public library specifically as a place away from home and school, in the adult world, where they knew they would be welcomed. They were appreciative of librarians who came up to them and asked whether they could help them when they first used the library and were shy. A number of the children seemed particularly aware that librarians would take the time to help them. As one girl stated, "The card catalog is helpful, but sometimes you really need a librarian."

The Junior Critics group saw books and reading as a very important aspect of a librarian's job. They considered it important that librarians "always be on the lookout for new books," attend to the ordering of the new books, and read the books. None was so naïve as to think that librarians read all the books, but the group members believed it was very im-

portant that librarians read as many as possible in order to be able to know what is new and to recommend good books to children. They thought that this was especially important for librarians working with the younger children who might have a hard time finding good books. For themselves, these young people preferred to rely heavily on booklists, and wanted frequent annotated booklists of titles new to the collection. In the area of readers' advisory work, these children wanted librarians to be able to describe interesting books, but not to "give them a big explanation and almost give the book away."

The children had some difficulty dealing with what are called "good books." One boy described a book of which he said: "It looked terrific, sounded terrific, the librarian said it was terrific, and it was the dulllest book I have ever read. It took me six weeks to read that book." When asked why he read it if it was so awful, he replied that it was a Newbery and he was reading it in order to get his name on a plaque on the wall. The group believed that it was the job of librarians to motivate kids to read, but concluded that librarians should have programs to interest children in reading which use good books, i.e., books that children are interested in reading. They agreed that librarians would be wrong in assuming that all youth want to read the same books, and should consider the children as individuals with distinct reading tastes.

Frequent reference was made to the need for librarians to be "well informed." If a child were to ask for a book about Fonzie and the librarian said "Who's Fonzie?" they would be very distressed with the service. Even the most avid readers are very television-oriented, and want books immediately on subjects they become interested in from television. Since television is an important source of their information, they insist that librarians be aware of it.

When asked about the educational background of librarians, the children had some very definite opinions. They thought that a librarian training program must exist somewhere, but that librarians didn't "have to go through a big school for ten years or something, like if you want to be a doctor or a lawyer." They agreed finally that librarians have to go through college, and had some recommendations about the kinds of courses librarians should take. They suggested areas of developmental reading, child development, anthropology, English, and social science, but "mostly about kids, because kids are the people that use the children's library." Their primary concern was that librarians be well informed and know about things that interest people.

In the area of job responsibilities, the children were basically unconcerned about the specific duties required to achieve good service. Collec-

tion maintenance was considered important, but specific duties were dismissed with "librarians have to get their paperwork done."

These children seemed to have a fairly clear picture of librarians, and could probably write a very acceptable statement of requirements and responsibilities for librarians. To summarize briefly, they thought that librarians should be people who care about children and like to work with them. Librarians should be knowledgeable about books and children, and should be well read and well informed in order to provide adequate reading guidance. They would have librarians obtain a liberal arts background, with a specific concentration of courses about children. They would expect efficient functioning, but also that the work be enjoyable.

Many assumptions are made about the library public; one of the most common of these is that "people think that librarians check out books." The children consulted in this case did not think so. They perceived librarians in very much the way we are attempting to project ourselves. These children indicated that they relied on librarians to help them to find books, to tell and read stories, to show films, to give puppet shows, to encourage them to read, and to plan programs and activities to interest them in reading. This study had progressed far past the initial stage before clarifying the fact that much has been accomplished when a majority of the children indicated personal satisfaction with library service by describing librarians as "nice." As one child said, "I think librarians are very nice and helping to all kids, and the library wouldn't be like a library without them."

It is important that children's opinions be expressed as part of an objective self-evaluation of librarians serving children, but it is even more important in the larger context of public library service, where the "public" does not always include children. Librarians must be aware of how often community surveys, reference use surveys, user satisfaction studies and image studies exclude children — or worse yet, do not include them simply because they were not even considered.

It is perhaps more difficult to obtain useful input from children, since they are unlikely to respond as easily to a written questionnaire as adults. There is a need to experiment further with asking children questions about library service, and then to share what is learned about worthwhile techniques. A fine study which would be useful to anyone working with children is the research report completed in 1977 for the Regina (Saskatchewan) Public Library.¹ The report should provide an excellent model for librarians attempting to obtain user input from children. A very detailed questionnaire was administered orally to children on an individual basis, and the data gathered provide much useful information on the ways in which children use (and do not use) the library.

Too often, input regarding children's use comes from parents and

teachers working with children rather than from the children themselves. Questions must be redirected to the largest group of users, and this must be done soon if children are to be given a respectful hearing when the public library redefines its role as a community-based user-oriented organization in the next few years. There is a commitment to the child who wrote: "I think librarians are nice. They have a big responsibility."

REFERENCE

1. Fasick, Adele, and England, Claire. *Children Using Media: Reading and Viewing Preferences Among the Users and Non-Users of the Regina Public Library* (prepared by the Centre for Research in Librarianship, Faculty of Library Science, University of Toronto). Toronto, Centre for Research in Librarianship, University of Toronto, 1977.