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**in**




**Children's  
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**Second Edition**

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**Penny Peck**

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# **Crash Course in Children's Services**

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**Second Edition**

**Penny Peck**

**Crash Course**



**LIBRARIES UNLIMITED**

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

Welcome to the world of library service to children! Helping children find great books to read, assisting them with homework assignments, and leading them to be lifelong readers and library users is a very rewarding career. But there can always be frustrations, too. Children may be left by inconsiderate parents, who expect the library to serve as a babysitter. This crash course guide is intended to help you find job satisfaction as well as cope with a variety of different aspects of serving children in your public library.

In the eight years since the first edition of *Crash Course in Children's Services*, there has been a great deal of change in the landscape of children and libraries. Children are reading eBooks and using apps for learning, their schools have adopted the Common Core curriculum that encourages reading more informational nonfiction, and library programming has expanded to include more hands-on activities, including Lego clubs, Makers' Spaces, and gaming. On the other hand, some traditional services are as popular as ever, with an increase in storytime attendance. This book covers both traditional practices of library service to children and many new innovations that can make the library an essential part of the 21st-century child's life.

Designed for persons working in small- and medium-sized libraries, this book will increase your comfort level while working with children in your library. This guide covers library services particular to children such as programming, including storytime and book discussion groups. Programming has become a big element of library service to youth, so we will also discuss gaming programs, therapy dog reading programs, and other new ideas that bring families into the library.

In many small public libraries, only a part-time person may be assigned to children's services. If no single person is assigned full-time to conduct programs or to offer homework assistance, your volunteers may be as important as volunteers in schools or in hospitals. This book gives lots of practical advice on basic children's library services that you or another staff member can perform with confidence when there is no children's librarian at that site. It will also be very useful for you to train new staff or volunteers to work with children.

This book covers tried and true, practical library service to children based on 25 years' experience in a busy suburban public library, working in a community with no school librarians at the elementary level. It also brings the experience of teaching others who will be working with children.

Because this is a "crash course," meaning a brief, quick handbook on serving children in a library, it cannot cover everything. It will not go into specific service issues to teens or young adults, but some of the advice can easily be adapted to serving that audience. Nor will we cover making flyers, how to write a press release, or management of employees. Many other books will go into detail on how to perform those tasks; this book covers procedures specific to serving children in the library. It also does not go into circulation or related issues.

So whether you are assigned to the children's desk or you are responsible for choosing and perhaps training this person, this book is for you. It is not all inclusive; it is also a quick overview for those already on the job, who need some assistance in taking on a new task such as storytime or a summer reading program. Alongside the relatively brief descriptions of practices and procedures, you will find references to books and websites for you to further explore a topic of interest.

What are the essential qualifications of those who work with children in a library? It is the interest in and concern for children and their well-being. Also, children's services is more book driven than some other library services that are currently more centered on using computers for research; helping to nurture the love of reading is still a top priority in children's services. That is why so many of us went into

## **xii Introduction to the Second Edition**

the profession in the first place: to promote books and reading for fun as well as help children be better students. So if you enjoy books and helping children, you are well on your way to being a successful children's library service provider, and hopefully this book will give you more confidence so you will go on to achieve job satisfaction. After all, what could be more enriching than nurturing the love of books and reading in a child, making that person a lifelong learner?

# CHAPTER 1

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## Reference

### REFERENCE: THE FIRST STEP

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Reference is often the first step in assisting children, parents, and teachers who come to the children's desk seeking books, materials, and information. Folks come up to the desk and ask "I need a book about dogs," and the staff member explores if this is for a report on dogs, or if the family has a new pet dog, or if the child wants a story about dogs or a book of poetry about dogs. This chapter defines the child as your customer and gives tips on the reference interview, a simple overview of child development levels to show what children can handle at certain ages, and tips for assisting parents or teachers in finding materials. A major focus is on library tours for teachers and their students. The chapter also covers teaching children how to perform basic public access catalog searches and some of the newer online reference experiences available.

### CORE VALUES OF CHILDREN'S LIBRARY SERVICES

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The Association of Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association, spells out its core values and purpose in its Strategic Plan ([www.ala.org/alsc/aboutalsc/stratplan](http://www.ala.org/alsc/aboutalsc/stratplan)). ALSC sees its core purpose as "creating a better future for children through libraries." Through advocacy, education, and access, it envisions a future in which "libraries are recognized as vital to all children and the communities that support them." ALSC goes on to state: "Through free, public, and equal access to library services,

## 2 Crash Course in Children's Services

children develop the love of reading, and become responsible citizens contributing to a global society.”

As individuals, we can mirror the ALSC vision by offering our best customer service skills when we serve any child in our library. This includes being a good listener, giving each interaction our best effort, and taking every child's request seriously.

Doing our best can be challenging, especially in hard economic times when our libraries may be understaffed and underfunded. In this book, we will explore ways to provide the best possible service to children and their families, working more effectively and efficiently—without spending more money.

Virginia A. Walter, former ALSC president and professor Emerita at the UCLA library school, offers her own five “laws” of children's librarianship as core values of the profession (from Walter's book *Children & Libraries: Getting It Right*, American Library Association, 2001):

- Libraries serve the reading interests and information needs of all children directly and through service to parents and other adults who are involved with the lives of children.
- Children's librarians provide the right book or information for the right child at the right time in the right place.
- Children's librarians are advocates for children's access to books, information, information technology, and ideas.
- Children's librarians promote children's literacy in all media.
- Children's librarians honor their traditions and create the future.

Although these core values are directed at “children's librarians,” all library staff members who serve children should embrace these values. Support staff, as well as librarians, influence many children and may be key to the success of the child's library experience. As we move through this book, we will revisit these values. They are especially important when we discuss safety and legal issues regarding unaccompanied children in the library and the use of the Internet by children.

## CHILDREN AS REFERENCE CUSTOMERS

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When children come into the library, they deserve the same level of customer service as an adult. Children are in the library to find books and materials for homework as well as recreational reading; in many libraries, circulation of children's materials is greater than that of adult materials. Once you become accustomed to assisting children, you may find that they are a rewarding group to serve; they express excitement at finding what they like as well as being appreciative and can be regular customers. There are a few things you will benefit from knowing when it comes to serving children in the library, in regard to how they may differ from our adult customers.

Children are not mini adults. When it comes to library reference, children often are more straightforward in their requests than adults are. Adults may ask, “Where are the cookbooks?” but children may be more specific, “I need a recipe for my Native American Indian report on the Navajo tribe.” This may be due to the fact that children know what the specific assignment is and may even have a handout spelling out what is needed. When asking adults questions to help figure out what they really need, some get edgy, as if the librarian is invading their privacy. Children seem much less resistant to the librarian's

questions; maybe they realize the librarian is asking so he or she can find exactly what students are looking for. So in some ways, children can be easier to wait on than adults at the reference desk, because they are usually more straightforward than adults in the way they ask for things.

Sometimes children will have trouble understanding that a library doesn't own every book ever made or that a library doesn't have enough books on a topic for every person who asks. Children have less experience in "shopping" than most adults, so they don't always do so efficiently. Many of us have seen children playing on the library computer for an hour and then rushing up to the desk asking for a book, but they need it right now since parents are in the parking lot, honking their horns to pick them up. So we have to help them use their time more efficiently. It is okay to tell a child, "Next time, ask for what you need before you sit down at the computer so we don't have to rush to find things." An adult would be offended by such advice, but to a child, it is just information that helps you to help them, especially if spoken in a kind voice.

Younger children may be unable to evaluate if what you find for them is what they want. Don't hesitate to ask follow-up questions after they have looked at the material for a few minutes: "Is that on your reading level, or do you want me to find something easier (or more challenging) to read?" You can also ask if what was found fits the assignment, or should you and the student keep looking. Students may need to be taught that they can ask for several things at once, rather than come up to the desk every five minutes with a new request. Librarians may be the first people children work with on a regular basis in this type of retail experience, so if we offer advice on the best ways to ask for help, it isn't just to make our jobs easier. It can be advice that helps them in the future when they have interactions with other adults who are helping them, such as doctors or barbers.

Reference assistance to children can include finding materials for homework assignments, as well as finding recreational reading materials. Even with the Internet and other online resources, most children are in the library to find books to borrow. Whether the books sought are for fun or for homework, both requests are equally important when serving children's requests. Many times teachers give specific instructions on what children are to look for, and we need to help them fulfill that goal with the best customer service possible.

Children do have strong opinions, especially when it comes to recreational reading. They often are open-minded and will try a longer book or something else that is new to them, but when they ask for a "Goosebumps" book, see if you can find one for them. Don't just assume that it is not literary enough to give them; if that is what they want to read for fun, try to meet that need. You may ask if it is for a book report, and check if the teacher will allow a series book for a book report (many do not); offer alternatives if it is determined that the request won't fit for a school assignment. But to be too snobbish about what children read can backfire; children won't find you helpful and will not listen to your advice on what to read in the future.

## **CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

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When children are your customers, it can be beneficial to know some basics of child development so you can serve them better. There can be some developmental reasons for children's inability to express their needs or to work efficiently in the library. Knowing a few facts on child development can help us be better listeners and to be more patient