

A Missed Opportunity

Increasing the Use of Inclusive Library Programs and Practices

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Libraries are meant to be welcoming places, offering a multitude of supports for the community, families, and young children. Given that libraries should reflect the fabric of a community, it is vital that all children and their families feel welcome at the library, and have meaningful access to the resources that libraries provide. This includes young children with disabilities and/or developmental delays (YCwD/DD) and their caregivers.

Public library spaces and programs are usually designed to be accessible to all members of the community. As a result, there is reason to believe that libraries possess many of the essential tools needed to make their resources accessible to YCwD/DD and their caregivers. As part of an ongoing multi-state research project

focused on ways that libraries support YCwD/DD and their families, we conducted focus group interviews with early intervention service coordinators in three Midwestern states to learn about their perceptions of libraries, including what libraries do well and how they can improve services for this population. Topics these practitioners mentioned included more visible inclusive programming for YCwD/DD and their caregivers, training and professional development to equip librarians to work with YCwD/DD and their caregivers, and intentional collaboration between children's librarians and other community members to support the needs of this population. Below, we draw on this data in offering recommendations for how children's librarians can meet the needs of YCwD/DD and their caregivers.



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Need for Increased Access and Inclusivity

Public libraries are widely recognized for offering high quality environments that include a range of developmental support and learning opportunities for young children with and without disabilities.¹ The provision of early literacy resources and educational opportunities are mainstays of library services.² Additionally, libraries are essential community hubs serving as central sites for community social interaction and information sharing.³ Providing access to resource and opportunity-rich environments is beneficial for young children.⁴ However, recent research suggests that aspects of current library environments and practices may not be inclusive or accessible for YCwD/DD and their caregivers.⁵ Specifically, research has highlighted the following barriers to active library use:

- Scant advertising of inclusive services and programming for YCwD/DD and their families.⁶
- Insufficient training and professional development resources for librarians.⁷
- Few programming options designed to meet the library needs of YCwD/DD.⁸
- Limited consideration of the accommodation needs of YCwD/DD and their caregivers when designing and implementing library programs.⁹
- Impression by caregivers of YCwD/DD that libraries and library programs are not suitable for their children.¹⁰
- Two additional barriers that affect YCwD/DD and their caregivers identified in focus group interviews conducted as part of the present study include potentially unique transportation needs, and the limited operating hours that libraries sometimes maintain in the evenings and on weekends.

Libraries are actively working to improve aspects of their service provision to address these shortcomings,¹¹ but it is clear that additional steps are needed to make libraries fully inclusive of and beneficial for YCwD/DD and their caregivers.¹² Considering that more than 1.2 million children ages 0–5 received early intervention and special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act during the 2018–19 school year,¹³ the inclusivity of public libraries for YCwD/DD and their families is an important issue affecting a significant portion of the child population in the United States.

Librarian Knowledge and Training Opportunities

Librarians are the heartbeat of public libraries. It is through their efforts and dedication that libraries are able to build and maintain the relationships that are essential for effectively supporting the local community. Equipping librarians with practical tools to understand and support differences in library-based experiences

and needs is one way to increase the inclusivity of library spaces and programming for YCwD/DD and their caregivers.

Knowing the Barriers

Normal, everyday aspects of library materials, spaces, and programs sometimes present significant barriers to access for YCwD/DD and their caregivers. Obvious examples include broad aspects of library practices that are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act, such as the accessibility of the physical environment, the availability of adapted literacy materials, and the inclusivity of programming for all people.¹⁴ Some less obvious examples can include noise-related rules, transportation needs, limited operating hours, and awareness of library services that can uniquely affect YCwD/DD and their families. One early intervention service coordinator stated, “It would be good, first off, to make sure that [library] programs can accommodate children with disabilities.” Another coordinator suggested revisiting “the behavioral expectations [in libraries]. The traditional expectations of a library maybe needs to be loosened.” A third coordinator echoed this suggestion by indicating a need to “relax some of the rules . . . to have room and opportunities for socialization.” The potentially unique transportation needs of YCwD/DD and their caregivers was also acknowledged by the early intervention service coordinators that we interviewed. One coordinator described, “The amount of families I have that don’t have transportation . . . I mean, the library may or may not be on a bus line. That’s a whole lot to ask for a family who is just trying to get by and then they have a child that might need extra assistance. I wouldn’t expect them to get on a bus to such and such or even walk.” Another coordinator noted, “Getting to the library can be a problem [and] some libraries maybe don’t stay open late.” Further, it may be especially important for librarians working in more isolated communities to be attuned to these and similar needs. As another early intervention service coordinator observed, “More urban areas have more programs for young children than the rural areas do.” Librarians need to be aware of the barriers in their libraries and understand how those barriers can prevent populations within the community from accessing and benefiting from the vital public resources that libraries offer.

Training and Professional Development

Just as important as knowing the barriers that can affect YCwD/DD and their caregivers is librarians’ capacity to address them through the implementation of inclusive practices. Although libraries excel in areas of service provision in general, library programming needs to serve all individuals in the community. Librarians need access to additional resources and tools to meet the access needs of YCwD/DD and their families, and this can be done by expanding training and professional development opportunities. One early intervention service coordinator recommended, “Some professional development . . . [consisting of] what can we do to make the library more accessible for children with delays and disabilities. What might that look like? What can we do

that doesn't cost a lot of money . . . ? Just basic, like, here are some things you can do. Here are some things you cannot do. Here's ways you can support parents who have a child on the spectrum who is a young child. . . . What can you reasonably expect from infants and toddlers and infants and toddlers with delays and disabilities and preschoolers with delays and disabilities? And how do we make it welcoming to all people?"

Another coordinator added, "I think with some education librarians could better accommodate children who are disruptive." Recent studies have shown that while librarians are committed to providing services that are accessible and beneficial for this population, many librarians feel underprepared to meet their unique needs.¹⁵ One avenue for training would be to focus on the use of evidence-based strategies for adapting and potentially redesigning library programs to meet the needs of YCwD/DD and their caregivers, or to make spaces more accessible. This suggestion echoes previous calls for expanded training opportunities to better equip librarians to meet the library-based needs of YCwD/DD and their caregivers.¹⁶

Increased Communication, Collaboration, and Partnerships

Collaboration is an essential part of nearly all aspects of current library practices. That is, libraries work not only for but with communities in order to understand and provide appropriate services to meet their information and social needs. Effectively collaborating with caregivers and other community service providers is essential for making library spaces and programming accessible for YCwD/DD and their caregivers.

Communicating with Caregivers

Librarians already recognize the importance of communicating frequently and effectively with caregivers regarding child participation and support needs. As suggested by our early intervention coordinators, there are three areas of awareness that we believe would facilitate communication specifically with caregivers of YCwD/DD. First, librarians should consider that caregivers are often very vulnerable when accompanying YCwD/DD in library spaces. That is, these caregivers don't always feel welcome in libraries,¹⁷ which can make them less likely to come to the library and communicate with librarians about the needs of their children. As one early intervention coordinator stated, "I think that stigma is so prevalent to this day . . . I mean, I can see where families would be like, 'that's the last place I want to take my sensory seeking child.'" Another coordinator added, "I sometimes wonder if there was a way to explain to families that everybody's welcome. We're here to help you. We want you here. We understand if things aren't perfect . . . I haven't run into a library yet that has said don't come. They're all happy to have us, but I don't always know that parents feel that or know that." These comments suggest how important it is for librarians to recognize that making the library a welcoming and supportive place for YCwD/DD often begins with proactively communicating with individual caregivers.

Secondly, librarians should recognize the value of socialization for caregivers. It is widely acknowledged that providing opportunities for children to socialize is an important benefit of library spaces and programs. It is less well known that caregivers greatly value and benefit from opportunities to socialize with other adults. This point is particularly important for caregivers of YCwD/DD who can be at greater risk of social isolation.¹⁸ One early intervention coordinator stated, "Parents in therapy that I knew were dying for some socialization with some other parents who were dealing with the diagnosis of or having a child with disabilities." Another coordinator added, "I definitely think different support groups would be wonderful . . . because oftentimes that's what parents are seeking out. They want to know other parents that have children just like theirs." Increasing the inclusivity of library spaces and programs for YCwD/DD has the added benefit of making caregivers feel seen, heard, and included by librarians and other caregivers.

Sharing Messages of Inclusivity

Libraries already actively engage in disseminating information regarding their services and programs within the community. For many libraries, though, it is not clear whether those services and programs are inclusive of YCwD/DD and their caregivers. For example, a study of Canadian library websites found that libraries often did not identify services and programs that were inclusive for this population.¹⁹ Further, our research team's recent review of library websites in three Midwestern states produced similar findings. Communicating more widely and clearly on the inclusivity and accessibility of library services and programs can benefit both families and other service providers in the community.

One early intervention coordinator recommended, "Telling those families more about the storytimes and those social interaction groups that those children can possibly go to. Sometimes we do, but not all the time. So, I think we can do a better job just helping to communicate what the library offers." Another coordinator added, "The other piece is just getting that word out that all are welcome . . . just sometimes families need to hear that it's OK," and a third coordinator suggested that libraries should "really put it out there that they are an inclusive location for people of all abilities of children or adults."

These comments suggest that libraries could significantly expand the inclusivity of their services and programming by being more intentional and transparent in their communications with families and service providers within the community. Messages of inclusivity should be conveyed through all forms of library communication: messaging and signage within libraries as well as on library websites and social media postings and on all promotional materials. Specifically, such messages need to indicate with words and images that children with all types of disabilities, delays, and needs are encouraged to come to the library.

Collaborating with Other Community Service Providers

Libraries already maintain a wide range of partnerships both within and across communities. For example, it is very common for librarians to sit on early childhood councils, collaborate with local child care and education institutions, and participate in community health fairs. Despite those efforts, it is not clear to what extent these partnerships specifically serve to address the access needs of YCwD/DD and their caregivers. Here we offer two recommendations to potentially address this concern.

First, libraries might consider establishing community-wide collaborative networks and procedures with other service providers. As one early intervention service coordinator suggested, “I don’t think it needs to be monthly, but maybe even like once or twice a year where we connect and kind of swap schedules, like this is what [the state’s early intervention program] is doing, and these are the programs libraries are offering now. That way we can share with our families, and they can share with their families.” Collaborative routines could potentially take many forms that might enable libraries to effectively leverage their partnerships to reach and serve all members of the community. Second, libraries might consider leveraging existing collaborative relationships in order to expand access to resources related to service provision for YCwD/DD and their caregivers. In particular, partnerships with local education partners may represent an untapped resource for expertise, materials, and strategies that librarians could implement within library spaces and programs. Another early intervention service coordinator stated, “Getting those librarians or whoever their youth representative is to those meetings . . . not just early intervention, but parents as teachers and early childhood special education, to know what resources are available and what programs they have to offer would be great.” Doing so could position libraries to better accommodate the varying access needs of different populations within their service community.

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Conclusion

Libraries are intended to provide welcoming environments that offer vital information and social resources that are accessible to all members of the community. Despite that, it is clear that more is needed to ensure that library spaces and resources are inclusive of and accessible to YCwD/DD and their caregivers. Using data collected through focus group interviews with early intervention service coordinators across three Midwestern states, we offer recommendations for libraries to consider implementing in aspects of their daily practices to address this issue. The recommendations provided here focus on equipping librarians with practical and effective tools and structuring collaborative practices with caregivers and other community service providers to potentially enhance library service provision for YCwD/DD and their caregivers.

We recognize the absence of easy solutions to the issues that we have raised here, and our recommendations should be read as plausible possibilities for libraries and librarians to consider using in their work. As one early intervention service coordinator suggests, “How do you make sure that that child can flourish in your community, wherever that might be, whether it’s rural or urban, or however, with this special need? So that’s a place that libraries could contribute a lot.” We echo that sentiment and call on libraries to use their resourcefulness and expertise to expand services for YCwD/DD and their caregivers within their respective communities. &

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