

## Children's Rights v. Parental Guidance: The Effects of Modern Parenting on the Public Library.

Recently, the first release of classic Sesame Street episodes from 1969-1974 was released on DVD, on the case there is a disclaimer that states, "that they are intended for grown-ups and may not suite the needs of today's preschoolers."<sup>1</sup> Parenting has changed quite a bit in the past twenty years, many parents are overly protective and not only is this effecting the children its also affecting the public library. Parents have with more ferocity than before have been challenging books on the shelves and even have sued a number of libraries because of materials on the shelves. To combat these parents librarians have responded by not purchasing books that they feel may be challenged, hiding through cataloging materials that may cause an uproar, or marking materials as *special* books which keeps them behind the reference desk only to be checked out when requested. The American Library Association has been a big fighter for intellectual freedom and has made it a part of their "Key Action Areas" which means that intellectual freedom is one of their, "guiding principles for investment of energies and resources" (ALA Website). This essay will explore what the latest research writings on modern parenting and children's access in public libraries are fighting against and ways to stop this in the future.

Children's rights within the public library should seem so obvious, but they are actually one of the most controversial issues that the library system has to

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<sup>1</sup> National Public Radio Story, "Sesame Street Reissues Not for Kids." 15 Nov 2007.

face. The United Nations held a convention in 1989 on the Rights of a Child where it was stated that:

It is the responsibility of libraries to guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including, those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable... It is the responsibility of libraries to guarantee the right of free expression of by making available all the library's public facilities and services to all individuals and groups who need them...Libraries should resist all efforts to limit the exercises of these responsibilities while recognizing the right of criticism by individuals and groups.

Sadly, there are only two countries, which chose not to adopt these principles, one being Somalia and the second the United States. Even though we did not agree to the principles of this convention, it is important to understand what the rest of the world aspires to and what we should aspire to. The ALA has fought many times for the rights of children and believes that they should have open access to all materials housed within the public library system. In an interview with the ALA President, Ann Symons, in 1997 the interviewer asked: "If I were 13 and went to a public library... and I wanted to get a variety of pornographic material... would the library stand in my way?" Symons responded, "I would say from my point of view... that should be granted to you just as it would be of an adult patron."

Furthermore, children's rights are not well understood by librarians. Marian Koren in her article, "Children's Rights, Libraries' Potential and the Information Society," admits, "[L]ibraries deal with human values protected by human rights. This basic truth seemed to have been forgotten or put aside..."

An important fact to keep in mind is that public libraries do not have to act in loco parentis (as the parent) (Koren, Wilhite, Thomson), this means that a public library does not hold the burden of choosing what is right or wrong for a child in the way that a school library or a parent at home does. Valerie Thomson in her article, "Children's Rights in the Library," fights for intellectual freedom for children when stating:

Freedom means that no one has the right to tell you what you can and cannot see, read, hear or say. This freedom can only exist if society ensures you have unrestricted access to all information and ideas, while allowing you to express yourself however you choose, regardless of what you have to say, or how you choose to say it.

Modern parenting is influencing the modern librarian into restricting this access.

In the article, "Intellectual Freedom Issues in Public Libraries," Dr. Margaret Wilhite focuses on the rights of children. Wilhite discusses all of the laws that have been passed such as Neighborhood Children's Internet Protection Act and the Children's Internet Protection Act in which the government is making attempts at restricting children's access to Internet materials. An important point that she makes is that because of the chance for legal suits to be filed against libraries, "it is important for libraries to have written policies regarding the retention of the records. Record retention policies should cover circulation records, patron registration records, computer use logs, backup tapes, and any other records containing personally identifiable information."

One of the biggest issues facing intellectual freedom is internal censorship. Librarians may not realize that they are censoring materials for children, but there is the chance that good material is not purchased because it

may be seen as controversial (Berman, Thomson). Sanford Berman in his article, "Inside' Censorship" discusses all of the ways in which librarians today are unknowingly (usually) censoring materials from within the library system itself. He breaks down the internal censorship into these groups:

- [F]ailure to select whole categories or genres of material, despite public interest and demand on the one hand or the need to reflect a broad spectrum of belief on the other.

- [I]rresponsible, often circulation-driven weeding, consigning sometimes valuable, classic, and unique works to the dumpster.

- [E]conomic censorship in the form of fines collected solely for revenue and the imposition of fees for services that make them unavailable to poor or fixed-income people.

- [I]nadequate, if not outright erroneous cataloging, as well as restrictive shelving practices, rendering much material inaccessible even though it is in the collection

- [R]epression in the workplace, denying staff the opportunity to express themselves without fear on professional and policy issues and – especially by means of electronic monitoring – creating an atmosphere of intimidation and submissiveness.

These are all very important areas to address in respect to children's freedom in the public library system. Very often there are patrons that come to the library that request materials for children and the request is dismissed. As Elaine S. Ackroyd-Kelly addresses in her article, "Spice It Up in the Library: Integrating Multicultural Literature into the Collection," she addresses the overall lack of multicultural materials represented in most libraries proactively by giving a list of resources where multicultural materials can be found and a list of the benefits of children reading these materials. Nevertheless, as long as America is still

prejudiced against these cultures libraries will continue to not collect as many of these materials as is worthy of the collection.

The next point the Burman addresses in his inside censorship is overweeding. Recently in a trip to my local library I found an issue with this, a week earlier in the children's collection the library had the book, "Holes" by Louis Sachar the next week it was no longer a part of the collection it was for sale on the first floor. This book has won the Newberry Honor and many other awards and should remain a part of any libraries collection. Further more there is internal weeding based on the information within books, as Gillian O'Reilly discusses in "Freedom to Read = Respect," she discusses the censorship issues faced by a book entitled, "Quid Pro Quo" by Vicki Grant, many of the themes in the book were very similar to Harper Lee's, "To Kill A Mockingbird," so it came as a surprise to the author when the book was being banned and dismissed from collections after it was initially hailed and was a best seller. Ultimately, "the publisher agreed to change the chapter heading [in the book]," now the book has been repurchased with glee and all is right with the world, or is it?

The next category of inside censorship, Burman states is economic censorship and in his article he provides a good example of how and why this is occurring. "[F]ines are discriminatory...So are fees for core services – like Internet use and video borrowing. Three or more ALA policy statements unequivocally proscribe fees, yet libraries continue to assess them, in effect censoring certain resources and service for people with the ability to pay." This is a major issue for children because they are one of the most frequent users of the

Internet within the library (Loertscher). Children do not have jobs or means of making money so if a library imposes a fine or a fee for certain usually free services they may be scared away from the entire library system.

Cataloging, Shelving and other organizational tools that limit the access of materials is the next point of Burman's, "Inside Censorship." As Jennifer S. Knisely in her article, "Children's Library Spaces Support Emergent Literacy," she discloses, "many times the layout of a children's library space is taken for granted by the patrons who pass through on a daily basis. The deliberate selection, arrangement, and atmosphere may only be known to a library manager or team who actually designed the space." This is an unfortunate case for the children's library section, because the librarian may take their own beliefs into the cataloging and arrangement of the materials and knowingly or unknowingly hide materials from children. An example of this could be taking a book similar to the "Goosebumps" series by R.L. Stine that is targeted for the early chapter books range of readers and placing it instead with the Young Adult (YA) materials. A librarian may move this book because the librarian feels that too many children or parents are complaining about the horror story series causing nightmares, this is inappropriate.

The "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries," by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) recommends various skills that Children's Librarians must uphold in order to fully consider themselves proper children's librarians. They state the children's librarian must, understand and apply "search strategies to give children full and equitable access to

information from the widest possible range of sources, such as children's and adult reference works, indexes, catalogs, electronic resources, information and referral files, and interlibrary loan networks." The systems created today within libraries for children to search catalogs are very inefficient. Consistently they all default to searching the children's collection and nothing more. Immediately this censors all of the young adult, adult, reference, and periodical information that the catalog holds.

Which is unfortunate as, Carol C. Kuhlthau determined in her study entitled, "Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User's Perspective" of cataloging searching performed by patrons of the library, that all searching is generally conducted through key word searching. This means if a child is looking for a book about spiders, but the title does not contain the phrase "spiders" it will be ruled out of the search results. The systems within the library have not been developed in general with children in mind. Too often there is not proper signage or materials are placed out of reach so that children will not have access.

The final point within Burman's internal censoring piece is that many times the librarians within a library feel suppressed by their management. To this it is also necessary to add the suppression of their patrons (parent's) in the case of the public library. In Patty Campbell's article, "The Pottymouth Paradox," she details the inconsistencies in the censored book world. Campbell is surprised by people's reaction to children's books versus their reactions to YA books which she refers to as, "chock-full o' fuck books." It is quite common for young adult

books to contain many swear words she states an example of “Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist” by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan where in “the first two chapters alone, the word fuck appears twenty-two times, other obscenities twenty-five times.” There is a major discrepancy between the needs of parent’s for clean books for children in the children’s section and the lack of parent worry at the young adult level. The struggle of this is fought constantly for librarians, when a parent may find a piece of a children’s book offensive, often the librarian then has to turn to management for answers. Many librarians face fears from the management of libraries in confronting these issues. They are afraid they may be ridiculed for handling a situation poorly. So because this fear exists, librarians will not take this step and take the book off the shelf, just because of one complaint.

Parents are tended to quite frequently in the public library. As Renea Arnold writes in her article, “Coming Together for Children: A Guide to Early Childhood Programming,” she recommends a partnership amongst parents and the librarian. “This partnership is one of the most significant reasons we have grown so much in the past ten years. We listen to (parents) we are trying to serve. We find out what their needs are and adapt our services to suit those needs as best we can” (Arnold). This relationship development is not a bad idea. Giving parent’s a sense of having a voice and also providing an understanding of the ALA and the collection policy for the library are also key to giving a librarian a force to go against any parent’s objections. Continuing, Carolyn Bourke writes in an article, “Working with Schools, Parents, and Other Community Groups,” she

reiterates that, “often library professionals do not promote themselves well enough. Many... do not think of public libraries as potential partners (referring to parents).” Developing a relationship with parents is the key to creating an environment for parent’s to feel comfortable within. Also parent’s are usually the people who bring the children to the library, so maintaining a good relationship with parent’s is important to keep patrons coming back to the library space.

Lastly, it is important to discuss the effects of Internet censorship. Recently there have been acts put into place, as mentioned earlier, which restrict access to certain web content in public libraries. Beyond this according to “Don’t Fence In: Is It Worthwhile to Have a Squeaky-Clean “Kids’ World” on the Web?” by Walter Minkel that the current president, George W. Bush has also implemented a “law creating the “kids.us” web domain in December (2003) he said that no objectionable material would be allowed there.” It is impossible to have a proper Internet filter set up to shield the correct materials from children. Basic freedoms are under possible attach as James Jatkevicius questions in his article, “Satisficing.’ Public Libraries, and Internet Filtering,” “[c]an [internet filters] do the job it implies that it can-that is can it protect children from legally defined obscene material while not curtailing free speech?” Treading upon this line are the people who want Internet filtering for children, children have all of the rights to free speech and access as another other person in this country. In a letter by Richard Matthews, who holds a position with the ALA Office of intellectual Freedom in the Contra Costa Times in 1998, he stated, “[w]e recognize that

minors have First Amendment rights, and any attempt to treat them differently from adults really infringes on those rights.”

The current research stands to fight against those who may infringe on the rights of the child. Surprisingly the biggest fight librarians have to face is a parent. Parents should respect their children’s rights more and allow them to have access to information. As Marian Koren upholds, “[i]nformation can also be used to prevent children from harm. Children can learn how to use different sources of information, being critical of their quality and content and aware of the effects that they have.” Koren continues, “[p]arent’s have to take into account the evolving capacities of the child.” Children deserve to be respected in this world and given open access to all materials in the library.

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