Bringing Books to Life
Running child friendly libraries
Bringing Books to Life: running child friendly libraries

This guide aims to introduce you to ideas to make libraries friendlier places for children. Sometimes as an adult it is easy to forget what it is like to be a child. As you read this guide, we want you to step into a child’s shoes, and think about what would make you, if you were a child, want to visit a library. What would attract you through those library doors?

By offering a welcoming and friendly library, the right books and a range of book-related activities, you can help provide children with the start they need in life.

As a children’s librarian, you have a vital role in making the library an enticing place where children are encouraged to develop a love of reading and a thirst for knowledge. By offering a welcoming and friendly library, the right books and a range of book-related activities, you can help provide children with the start they need in life.

This is the third guide in Book Aid International’s ‘Bringing Books to Life’ series. We hope you find it useful. It follows on from two guides aimed at teachers and librarians in schools – ‘Starting and Managing a Book Collection’ and ‘Using Books in the Classroom’. These are available from our website, www.bookaid.org.
Making the most of books in your library

The value of libraries to children lies both in the materials provided and how they are presented. It is important to provide services, programmes and areas for children that are age appropriate and well thought out. Staff working with children should create a welcoming environment that encourages use of books and the library. It is important that you know what is in the collections in your library and which books are suitable for what ages. Reading widely yourself, scanning the shelves and flipping through books, as well as talking with children about which books they’ve enjoyed, gives you the knowledge to recommend books to others.

Good library materials offer children:
- information
- enjoyment
- knowledge of the wider world
- understanding of other people, their behaviour, cultures, situations
- opportunities to develop vocabulary, speech and language skills
- support for both formal and informal education

Staff working with children should create a welcoming environment that encourages use of books and the library.
Early literacy and libraries: working with children from birth to 5 years

Services and programmes for very young children are new to many libraries but they are becoming more common. Babytimes and toddler storytimes are appearing on many libraries’ programming schedules along with the more traditional storytimes for older children.

What is early literacy?

‘Early literacy is what children know about reading and writing before they can actually read or write’

(American Library Association, Every Child Ready to Read).

Why serve young children who are not yet readers?

Children who are exposed to books and reading from birth have an easier time learning to read, and have a larger vocabulary and stronger language skills than children who are not exposed to books. Pre-reading skills can be developed through everyday activities that parents and carers take part in with their children.

Libraries and librarians can support parents in helping their children develop these pre-reading skills through programmes for this age group, and by providing books and special children’s areas within libraries that are welcoming for parents and very young children.

Early literacy is an area that is a natural fit for libraries. Young children who are not yet in school depend on books being available in the home for their first exposure to them. If there are no books in the home, the library is a place where books can be browsed and borrowed free of charge or for a low cost. This also gives parents a wider selection of books for their children along with the expertise of the librarian who can recommend books that will support the development of their child’s pre-reading skills.
What are pre-reading skills? Why are they important?

Pre-reading skills are the building blocks of early literacy. While some of the terms sound complex, they are actually all quite simple and the methods to pass on these skills to children are often things that parents do naturally and frequently, such as talking to their children and singing songs to them. Children who have acquired strong pre-reading skills will find it much easier to learn to read because they provide a foundation for literacy development.

The six building blocks of literacy in the early years:

• **Print motivation**: excitement about reading; children want to read books and are motivated to do so
• **Print awareness**: being aware that we are surrounded by print in many different contexts, such as on signs, in books, billboards and shops
• **Letter knowledge**: the ability to recognise letters and to know that words are made up of individual letters
• **Phonological awareness**: the awareness that words are made up of smaller sounds and that these sounds can be combined in different ways to form different words
• **Vocabulary**: the more words that children hear, see and know, the easier it is for them to read
• **Narrative skills**: the ability to tell a story and to understand how a story is structured, with a beginning, middle and end

Even newborn babies are learning by responding to their environment and benefit from having books read aloud to them. As their motor skills develop, babies can play with board books and as their vision develops, they can focus on contrasting colours and large images in books.
‘Babies need books’ is becoming a common phrase used by many librarians. Reading to babies and young children helps to increase pre-reading skills, which gives a solid foundation for when they begin to learn to read. It also introduces them to the rhythm of language. As their motor skills increase, young children can begin to turn pages of books, to point and babble, and say words related to the pictures.

Babies cannot focus until they are much older, so books with simple but well-defined shapes work best to get their attention.

Board books are a good format for babies and toddlers as the pages will not rip easily, they are smaller and easier for little hands to handle and they can be cleaned easily. Look for books with black and white or bold lines, babies’ faces and strong shapes with very few words or none at all. Babies cannot focus until they are much older, so books with simple but well-defined shapes and strong colour contrast work best to get their attention.

Toddlers will also enjoy bright books. Animals and transport (such as lions and trucks) are usually popular topics. Board books are also a good option for this age and they enjoy lift-the-flap books. Books that have rhythm and rhymes work well to support their awareness of language, and simple text works best for this age group. Many young children will love to hear the same story several times and will also enjoy stories where lines are repeated throughout the story because they can join in. Books with all of these features are great for storytimes.

Concept books (books about basic concepts, such as alphabet books, counting books, colours and shapes) will help children acquire basic knowledge about the world around them.
Older preschool children and those entering primary school will continue to enjoy similar types of picture books. At this age, they can learn how to turn pages more carefully so will no longer need to use board books, although they may still enjoy them. Picture books with more text can be read with an adult. They can also use picture books with only a few words or one line on the page to begin practicing reading themselves with the help of an adult or older sibling.

Children learn to read more easily when exposed to books in their own home language. If there are no books in local languages, librarians can work with local children and teachers to create their own books using simple drawings and local stories. Early exposure to books in other languages can help them to learn to read and write in these languages as well.

Picture books with more text can be read with an adult

Activities for younger children and parents

Providing a programme of activities for very young children is not only aimed at the children themselves, it is also an opportunity to share ideas with parents on how to encourage early literacy skills and use of books. The rhymes and songs that you do during story sessions can be used by parents and carers at other times to entertain the child. Share your knowledge of the importance of rhymes, songs and exposure to books at an early age in establishing children’s pre-reading skills with parents. These story sessions also give parents and carers a chance to come together and give children a chance to have social time together. It is a good idea to run the activities when older children are at school, especially in small libraries, as the singing may be disruptive to those who are studying.

Babymatnes:
These are story sessions for parents and their babies. Parents sit in a circle with their baby in their lap and the librarian leads them in singing songs and doing rhymes and chants with their baby. A parent attending with more than one young child can still participate in the sessions. You can offer to take one of their babies in your lap for part of the session, singing and doing rhymes with him or her. Older children accompanying parents with babies will enjoy singing and listening to stories. A few simple books are read to show parents the types of books they can read with their babies. Sessions are often held weekly at the same time and last for 30 to 60 minutes. Contact local health centres, nurses and midwives to ask them to pass along information about library babyme sessions to new parents.

Running a babyme session:
• Sit in a circle on cushions or chairs, parents hold their baby in their lap or the baby can sit in front of them
• Ask parents to introduce themselves and their baby
• Ask questions for parents to answer such as one thing that has changed over the week
• Read books with rhymes and teach songs to show parents how they can read and sing to their babies
• You can ask parents what their favourite rhymes or songs are and they can then teach everyone else

The rhymes and songs that you do during story sessions can be used by parents and carers at other times to entertain the child
Activities for younger children and parents

**Toddler storytimes:**
These are storytime sessions for 2 to 3 year olds (approximately) and their parents or carers. Toddler storytimes have many action rhymes and songs. This gets children moving and dancing around as at this age they find it difficult to sit still and concentrate. Several short picture books are read by the librarian with songs and rhymes in between each book. The point is to make reading and learning fun. Sessions are often held weekly at the same time and usually last for 30 minutes.

**Running a toddler storytime session:**
- Find out what is right for the community and work around this. Find out when parents can bring young children to the library and base your session times on this.
- Put out cushions, carpets or mats and get children to sit in a circle if possible so that they can all see you.
- Children respond to signals so use the same opening and closing songs to signal the beginning and ending of storytimes.
- Children love to hear stories over and over. Use different methods to tell the same story - with a book, with puppets, with felt shapes on a board. Try cutting out some of the shapes in the simple stories or rhymes e.g. five little ducks. Use them while telling stories or singing songs.
- Get children to join in the story by repeating sentences after you. For example in the story ‘We’re Going On a Bear Hunt’, ask the children to repeat every sentence after you and to do the same actions you do.
- Get children to stand up and dance or act out rhymes in between stories. This gets energy out and allows them to settle for the next story.
Books for school aged children

Books for this age group should vary greatly, ranging from simple picture books and readers to novels. A strong non-fiction (information) book collection is needed to serve the various interests and school work of children once they enter primary school. Good non-textbook reading materials, such as storybooks and folktales, are important to sustain interest in reading and improve literacy.

Typical book collections for school age children include:
- Picture books
- Illustrated storybooks
- Graded or levelled readers – a series of books written in which each one is given a level to show if it is for a beginner or a more advanced reader. Children learn a new set of words while reading each story, with more difficult words added as they move to a higher level, increasing their vocabulary and reading skills.
- Easy chapter books – books with short, easy to read chapters
- Children’s novels
- Non-fiction (information or factual books) both for school support and general interest
- Audio visual material such as videos and audio books
- Comics and graphic novels

Books for school age children should also be bright and attractive. Younger children who are beginning to read will often feel more comfortable with books that have many pictures and larger text. For children who are proficient readers of words and short sentences, graded readers and easy chapter books are a good building block for increasing their reading skills. The shorter sentences and chapters in these types of books give children a sense of accomplishment. For new readers, finishing a chapter, no matter how short, will build their confidence in reading. The key to building a strong collection for children of this age is having books that reflect their interests while building their reading skills.
Activities for school aged children

Activities for this age group are, like the book collections, more varied than those for younger children. Storytimes are still popular with younger children just starting school, while slightly older children will appreciate other activities that may require more concentration. Working with teachers is a good way to organise programmes and provide fun activities after school or on weekends that can attract children to the library.

- **Storytimes:** The librarian reads and tells stories to children who usually sit in a circle and join in singing and chanting rhymes. Several picture books are read by the librarian with the songs and rhymes in between each book. Sessions are often held weekly at the same time and usually last for 30 minutes.

- **Storytelling:** Often for older children and adults, storytelling sessions tend to feature one longer, oral story.

- **Puppet shows:** The librarian (or children) use puppets to act out stories. There are many types of puppets that can be used, such as hand puppets, finger puppets, or shadow puppets.

- **Craft programmes:** The librarian provides materials and space for children to do either a specific craft or several different crafts. Younger children especially may need instructions and guidance depending on the difficulty of the craft. Older children can help younger ones, and crafts can be as simple as cutting out and gluing shapes or colouring. Look at the craft books in your collection for ideas, or you might base your crafts on characters or events in a book.

- **Bookclubs:** How to run book clubs and ideas for activities is covered in the following section.

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**Storytimes are still popular with younger children just starting school, while slightly older children will appreciate other activities**
Running a bookclub

Objectives of a book club

- To encourage children to read
- To enhance comprehension skills
- To improve grammar and writing
- To encourage reading for enjoyment
- To build self-confidence

Starting a book club

There are various ways to find members and to set up a book club, including approaching schools, churches, community-based organisations and youth groups as well as talking with existing library members. Pick which approach works best in your situation.

Pair older and younger children together and have the younger one read aloud to the older child

If you have a number of students who come in several times a week who are readers, ask them if they are interested in forming a club. You may wish to form clubs in partnership with schools or youth groups by offering the programme to their members. In all cases, you will need to discuss the idea with possible members to find out who is interested and when they can meet. When working with schools or youth groups, you will need to have discussions with teachers and leaders to get their support for the club and to discuss how to best arrange the club meetings. Some may wish to come to the library, but others may prefer that the librarian brings the books to the school or organisation and that the meetings take place there.

Being flexible to the needs and schedules of partners and book club members is important. Make improvements as you go along and don’t be afraid to try different things to see what works best.

School-based book clubs: an example

The teachers from the participating school bring their students to the library. Each school has a specific time during the week to come to the library to get books and have discussions, with the classes taking turns coming in during this time. Each class is divided into a smaller group of ten children who form a single book club in which they read the same title and then discuss the book. It is important to ensure that the sessions are as enjoyable as possible and each group is given a book that they identify with.

Reading buddies: Programme

where older children volunteer to help younger children with reading. Pair older and younger children together and have the younger one read aloud to the older child. The older child helps the younger one sound out and define words they do not know.

Author readings: Have a local writer come in to talk to the children about writing books and to answer children’s questions.

Library scavenger hunts: This is a game that teaches children where to find things in the library. Give the children a list of things to find in teams. Examples of questions (if your library uses the Dewey Decimal Classification system):

- What is the number for books about dogs? Answer: 636.7
- What can you find out about at 567.9? Answer: Dinosaurs.

Run activities on special days – World Book Day, International Literacy Day, Day of the Child – use the day to celebrate reading!

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Guidelines for a book club:

• Who will you ask to be members and how will you approach them?
• What is the appropriate number of members?
• What activities can be done?
• How often will you meet?
• How will you find out if the clubs are successful or not?
• How many book clubs will you run or do you aim to start?
• How will you sustain it?

Guidelines for a book club: an example

• Members - Children of mixed gender in the last two years of primary school who are regular users of the library will be asked to join
• Size of club - Maximum 12 children, minimum 5
• Meet once a month when school is in session
• Ask children what they think of the book club after second session to see what they enjoy and what they would change
• Staff time covered by library, local business asked to sponsor refreshments provided during session, books taken from library collection

Being flexible to the needs and schedules of partners and book club members is important

Activities and discussions during book club sessions

Questions to discuss:
• What was the book about?
• Who are the characters? Describe them and their actions in the book.
• Did you like the book? Why or why not? (Not everyone has to like every book!)
• What did you learn from the book?
• What do you think about the plot of the book? (e.g. Was it hard to follow? Easy to figure out what would happen? )
• What is the most memorable thing about the book?
• What was your favourite part of the book? What was your least favourite?
• What character did you like the best and why?
• What character did you like the least and why?
• If you are only half-way through the book, what do you think will happen next?

As the librarian leading the book club, it is important that you also read the book and can give opinions and ask more specific questions relating to the book as well as these more general questions.

The key activity of the book club is to encourage and nurture reading but other activities can be carried out.

Activities that can be done in book clubs:
• Storytelling
• Reading
• Debates
• Writing competitions
• Puppet shows
• Showing videos based on books
• Talks - ideas for topics should come from the club members
• Sports or games
• Community work
• Arts and crafts based on the books read

Librarians can organise the activities that are most applicable to their members by finding out what the members are interested in doing during the book club.

Activities that can be done in book clubs:
A large focus of many library collections for teenagers is on supporting school work. Many libraries do not have a separate section for teenagers at all, or if they do, it is only for fiction. Teenagers’ information needs are often driven by school work and many of the books that are in the adult non-fiction section will cover these needs. However, teenagers do have specific information needs, especially in regard to their own development, and libraries can try to build collections based on these interests. In many countries, young adult (or YA) fiction is an area that has rapidly expanded over the past ten years, with many titles and series for teens outselling adult fiction titles.

Magazines are often a popular format with teenagers as well as audio visual materials such as popular music and films. Many youth organisations publish their own newsletters or magazines, and it is worthwhile to talk with people running these organisations to find out what materials they may be able to provide for free.

Creating a separate section for teenagers is something that requires space, but can be useful as their needs are different from younger children and adults who come into the library. Many secondary students wish to quietly study, but some may also wish to meet in groups to do school work. Smaller libraries could have general ‘quiet study’ and ‘group study’ areas and shelve books for teenagers close to the area that you notice they most frequently use. Putting new books with attractive covers on display will draw attention to the fact that you have books for teenagers.
Activities for teenagers

Organising activities for teenagers can be more difficult than for children as they are often very busy with school work and friends, and have more responsibilities than younger children. Teenagers often come to the library specifically for study and school work. Getting to know the teenagers who come in to study can give the librarian a better idea of what types of activities they may be interested in and what may suit their needs.

- **Bookclubs**: How to run book clubs and ideas for activities is covered in the previous section
- **Reading buddies**: Teenagers are volunteer tutors helping younger children to read
- **Library committee/friends**: Teenagers that are frequent users of the library can be excellent members of a library advisory committee or friends group. Ask them to help out in the library and to attend meetings to represent the interests of other students and people their age, who make up a large group of library users
- **Storytelling**: Storytelling sessions tend to feature one story told orally
- **Author readings**: Have a local writer come in to talk to teenagers about their books, writing and to answer their questions
- **Writing clubs**: Bring together teenagers who are interested in writing on a regular basis. They can share and critique each other’s writing. The librarian can facilitate this or members can take turns at facilitating. If possible, bring in local writers to talk to the group and display and share books of interest, such as good new fiction or books on writing
Shhh….? bringing excitement into the library

The children’s area of the library should be a lively, cheerful and welcoming place, and identifiable different from the adult section and study areas. Reading is and should be enjoyable, and children should feel relaxed when browsing and using their book collection. To give children positive experiences of books and the library, there should not be too many rules. This is a chance for children to explore what’s available and discover the power of reading!

Things to consider in the library environment:

- There should be as much space as possible for reading and enjoying books
- Provide comfortable chairs or mats. Try not to fill up the whole space with tables to avoid the impression that the area is for studying only
- Ensure there is enough natural light for children to read
- Paint the library a bright, attractive colour
- Display new and interesting books with their front covers showing
- Have puppets or toys that readers can use to re-enact the story
- Have a space near the entrance of the library for users to leave their bags to reduce the risk of theft
- Don’t over-stuff your shelves with books, making it difficult to remove them and hard to see titles on the shelves
- Books should be at a level where readers of all ages and heights can reach them easily
- Put up displays and posters in the library, including children’s artwork and writing on the walls. Try creating a reading tree with the titles of books children have read
Further reading and resources

American Library Association. Every child ready to read
www.ala.org/everychild

Friends of African Village Libraries. Activities guide for librarians
http://www.slideshare.net/favlafrica/librarian-activities-guide

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Guidelines for children's library services

IFLA. Guidelines for library services to babies and toddlers

IFLA. Guidelines for library services for young adults

Osu Children’s Library Fund. How to set up community libraries for children

South Africa family literacy project
http://www.familyliteracyproject.co.za/

Books have the power to change lives

Books open up our understanding of the world. Books give us the power to discover what others have written hundreds of years ago and to understand the technology that shapes our future. Books have the power to change our lives.

As a children’s librarian, you have a vital role in opening the windows to a world of knowledge, learning and books. We hope you will be inspired by this simple guide to try new things in your library, to make it a fun and vibrant place, a place that children want to visit whenever they get the chance.

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Book Aid International

Book Aid International increases access to books to support literacy, education and development in sub-Saharan Africa.

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