

## Librarians Should Take the Lead in the Family Literacy Campaign

by Steve Sumerford

**N**early a quarter of the adults in our communities feel that libraries offer very little that is relevant to them. If these thousands of men and women were politicians or business leaders, we would rush to survey their reading interests and develop our collections appropriately. The 25 percent of citizens I'm referring to, however, are functionally illiterate. They cannot read well enough to fill out a job application, understand a doctor's prescription, or help with their child's homework assignments.

Because non-reading parents tend to raise non-reading children, educators have concluded that family-based literacy programs are the most effective way to break this self-perpetuating cycle of illiteracy. These family literacy programs teach basic reading skills to parent and child together, or use a family-oriented reading curriculum with the parent.

Librarians (particularly children's librarians) are uniquely qualified to develop such family literacy programs. Since we are trained to provide educational services to both children and adults, we already have much of the expertise that our community needs to solve the literacy crisis. Through partnerships with Head Start, social services, and the public schools, librarians around the nation have implemented family literacy programs that have successfully rescued families from the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy.

These library-based family literacy programs can also bring numerous benefits to the library including an increase in the diversity of library users, an increase in funding, greater political support, and a stronger partnership with other community groups.

Some librarians argue that these are fiscally difficult times and therefore libraries cannot afford to launch new literacy programs, but I think it is obvious that we find money for what we want to find money for. Most libraries spend more on one CD-ROM service or a *Wall Street Journal* subscription than they do on their entire adult literacy collection. Besides, for the last few years there has been a great deal of grant money available for family literacy programs, so funding has not actually been a problem for any library that wanted to implement a program.

Furthermore, long-range funding for libraries is much more secure if we can define our library as a vital educational agency in the community. Family literacy programs may provide just the opportunity your library has been looking for to enhance its public image and market itself as an educational rather than recreational institution.

Family literacy programs can certainly curry favor with business and community leaders. A 1990 study by the Ford Foundation found that most business leaders in North Carolina were very concerned about employees who did not have adequate reading skills. The shortage of Danielle Steel novels in the library does not concern our community leaders nearly as much as the fact that one out of every eight employees is estimated to read at no more than a fourth grade level, and one out of five reads at only the eighth grade level.

Your community undoubtedly has a need for library-based family literacy programs and services, even if there are already other literacy services available. Studies show that all of the literacy programs combined still reach only an estimated 8 to 9 percent of the illiterate adults. There is obviously a need for innovative programs, which not only appeal to the unreached 90 percent of adult learners, while also assisting their children so that they do not become the illiteracy statistics of the next generation.

Family literacy programs can draw in a large number of citizens who are probably not regular library users. For example, one library I know has developed a program for parents receiving AFDC payments, three-fifths of whom are not high school graduates and none of whom have library cards. Once in the library to improve their reading skills and their children's reading skills, they became regular patrons.

It is time for librarians to take our expertise and move forward to the leadership ranks of the family literacy movement. Not only will we be providing a valuable service for our communities, but we will also bring an array of benefits to our libraries.

# COUNTER POINT



## Beware of Faulty Logic and Noble Causes

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

I don't mean to sound heartless, nor do I wish to appear politically incorrect, but I really don't see why we should develop library-based family literacy programs. Now don't misunderstand, there certainly appears to be a need for such programs and I'm sure some librarians would even volunteer to serve as tutors in their spare time. But in the end, I can't help but think, "it's really not our job," and quite frankly it shouldn't be!

Libraries are not, nor should they be, "All Things To All People." And goodness knows librarians have a hard enough time just trying to do the job we were hired to do, without trying to teach people to read. But perhaps this is the problem. We as a profession don't know, nor apparently do we wish to clarify, what it is we are really expected to do. The fact of the matter is, libraries cannot replace schools or community colleges in their mission to educate all citizens in a controlled and structured environment. Libraries were built to be, and continue to be, supported by taxpayers who want something very different from their tax dollars than the "bottomless pit of public education." Like it or not, tying ourselves to the albatross of public education will signal the demise of taxpayer support of libraries. To be quite blunt about it, we enjoy widespread support precisely because we can distance ourselves from costly mandated social services. Libraries do enjoy a special relationship with the taxpaying public which gives us a great deal of latitude in areas of programming and public service, but to take advantage of this is to court disaster.

Beware of faulty logic and noble causes! Does it follow that because we offer story hours for preschoolers, we should operate day care centers for disadvantaged single parents; because we already distribute state job applications, purchase resume books and subscribe to various employment dailies, we should run a job service program for the unemployed; and since we already maintain a great collection of popular health and personal hygiene publications, we should start distributing condoms and flu vaccines? Libraries are successful precisely because they attempt to supplement the information and recreational reading needs of a diverse public, not because they alone can completely satisfy that need.

It's not a question of resources, it's a question of mission. Thus, when we find the money for a new CD-ROM product or other expensive services, we do so in the hopes of providing our users with better and more comprehensive information. And as much as the truth hurts, we don't spend it on literacy programs because that's not what our budgets are for. Our collections are inadequate as it is, and it's our responsibility to improve and expand them the best we can. To spend our money on anything else would be gross negligence!

Let us not confuse our personal support of literacy with a need to implement a library-based family literacy program. We can and must do our best to encourage the development of these programs in our communities, but we cannot and should not, be the ones to develop or house such programs. Libraries cannot solve all of society's ills. Illiteracy is a terrible thing, and working towards its elimination is a truly noble cause. We would be doing our part if we continued to do what we do best, provide the materials necessary to help people help themselves!

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