

## On the Front Lines: Providing a Place for Youth and Families



Family Storytime attendees engage in crafts and play at Swansboro Branch Library

Public libraries have become the go-to place for families looking for activities that are fun, educational, and free. This has been apparent in the library where I work in Onslow County, which has seen a dramatic increase in storytime attendance since reopening after the pandemic. Homeschooling families regularly use the library for resources, and teens use the library for volunteer hours and to meet with peers. Youth Services staff serve all of these populations, keeping in mind ages, stages of learning and individual and group needs, making the library a welcoming resource.

Over the 14 years I have spent working in Youth Services, the most important skill I have learned is to

keep an open mind. Situations are not always what they seem. For instance, the family with the children who appear unkempt and unruly may be the folks who will find library programming life-changing. One storytime mom recently expressed how important the program is to her and her children because it not only provides a fun learning experience, but it also provides a sense of belonging and a chance to socialize with other families. Her daughter had just completed the last of many long sessions of physical therapy. She had some mobility difficulties, and the mom found it easier to limit the places she went with her daughter than to answer questions about her daughter's disability – or worse, face criticism from

other parents and caregivers. This mom is now one of our biggest storytime advocates and often invites other families with young children to attend with her.

The second most valuable skill I have learned is flexibility. The key is intentionally designing programming with anticipation of the needs of participants, and I tend to have more than one prepared option. When I hold family storytime, I thank my audience for coming and verbally give them the general itinerary for the day, just as I would in a program for adults. I have picture books for various ages, and I can choose what I read according to the average age of the group. If I have someone who needs an object to hold during a program, they can choose from a stack of board books or simple objects. If there is a parent or caregiver with a child who gets overstimulated in storytime, I encourage them to take a break whenever needed and rejoin the group when they are ready.

The advantage of working with elementary groups is that they can use their words to communicate with you. Last year, I decided to highlight a novel written for upper elementary readers and quickly discovered the majority of the participants were not at the level I had anticipated. Because I allowed for flexibility, I was able to have a successful program. I ended up giving a preview of the book and the characters. We discussed the power of stories, especially the ones we carry in our own names. I connected the theme of the book with various folk tales that were more on their level and did some scaffolding activities to get them interested in the book so their families could read it together when they were ready. By intentionally designing our programs with flexibility, we make our programs more accessible for participants with various abilities and needs.

A skill that goes along with flexibility and keeping an open mind is learning from young participants and incorporating the information into programming. I get to know my regular attendees, and I am constantly learning from them. Our elementary program is designed for readers and non-readers, and it tends to draw a large number of boys. In the group I presently host, almost all of the participants are homeschooled, and a few of them are neurodivergent. One day as we were playing a game, one of the boys told me that it is not important to have a win-

ner, but it is important for everyone to have a chance to finish. This was something I had not considered, but now that I know, I can make sure we allow enough time for everyone to complete activities.

When working with teens, it is important to listen and to learn, both from them and alongside them. Encourage teens to take the lead in suggesting the activities they would like to see. Perhaps they might even volunteer to lead one of their own. We had a teen who was taking a course on Japanese culture and wanted to share a slideshow she had completed. She had the experience of sharing a subject she was excited about, and her audience was engaged. By making a space for active conversation and learning, we empower our participants.

One last important thing a programmer needs to do is to take time to refresh to avoid burnout and to rekindle our enthusiasm for programming. Take a short programming pause to regroup and breathe, especially before and after Summer Reading Program. If you are questioned by participants about the break, share that you are taking a pause and will return with new and fun program ideas after the pause is over. The other part of refreshing ourselves involves professional development with colleagues. Webinars are great, but we need connection with other Youth Services staff. I would suggest attending workshops and conferences whenever possible. Meet with coworkers to exchange ideas and feedback. If you are not a part of NCLA Youth Services Section, look into joining and signing up for the listserv. When we take a time out for ourselves to refresh and return excited to share what we have learned, our program participants will catch our excitement. We communicate that the library is a place where we never stop learning or growing.

Programmers may not spend most of their time at the front desk, but we are front line workers. Programming is serving. It is challenging and requires that we continue learning and supporting each other to be able to put forth our best. By being flexible and intentional with program design, keeping an open mind, encouraging interactive dialogue and participation, we provide a space for connection and learning while increasing accessibility. We create a space of acceptance and belonging and empower those we serve.