

Media Mentorship in Libraries Serving Youth

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Abstract

The number of children and families who use digital media is growing, and children require mediated and guided experiences with digital media for the experiences to translate into positive and productive digital literacy skills. Libraries have the capacity to support families with all their literacy needs, traditional and digital, including needs as they arise. Librarians and youth services staff support children and their families in their decisions and practice around media use. Library staff serving youth and families embrace lifelong learning, take advantage of training programs, and create opportunities to develop media mentors skills. It is the responsibility of library training programs, including library schools and formal professional development opportunities, to prepare future and current librarians and youth services practitioners to serve as media mentors. It is the responsibility of supervisors, administrators, and professional associations to support practitioners in this capacity.

Background

Libraries serving children and their families serve digital.

Services required by the families we serve change and expand, and core services serving youth change and expand as well. This premise of providing services is built into ALSC's Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth, updated most recently in 2009. These core competencies assert the importance of staff regularly assessing community needs (1.3); responding to needs of

the service population (I.6); creating and providing an environment that is both enjoyable and offers "convenient access to and use of library resources" (I.7); listening to children and families to ascertain their needs (III.2); and continually developing skills pertaining to technology and related tools (IX.2). All five of these competencies contribute to a central concept that it is a fundamental responsibility of youth services staff to meet the needs of children and their families with regard to both access to and support of digital media and to prioritize the development of our own knowledge of these areas so that we might best serve our communities.

There is little doubt that our communities are utilizing, and have personal interest in, digital media. Digital media refers predominantly to apps and e-books, but it may also include software programs as well as broadcast and streaming media. Typically, digital media involve one or more

aspects of interactivity "designed to facilitate active and creative use by one or more users."

programming and services for which libraries are most well-known have historically supported specific literacy needs among the service population. According to Nelson and Braafladt (2012), "Storytimes were never about teaching kids to read; rather they were developed to expose them to literacy practices in a safe setting with a wider array of tools than most families could provide" (8).

There is precedent for libraries creating and tailoring programming and services to best meet the needs of the children and families they serve, and this relatively new need for digital literacy is no different. It follows that libraries, in fulfilling their charge, support young children and families in this digital landscape to the best of our abilities.

Yet when it comes to supporting families in a world of tablets, apps, and interactive e-books, libraries providing access to the media and relevant equipments not, in and of itself, enough. Access alone is insufficient for facilitating children's positive and fruitful experiences with digital media; there also needs to be a degree of both regulation and modeling of use by adult caregivers for the digital media experience to be productive (Takeuchi 2011). Access to media only provides children exposure to certain functionalities of the media and platforms. Yet even this exposure may itself be inherently limited, as technology and media of any type may not be fully accessible to children if there is no caregiver positioned to provide guidance (Daugherty, Dossani, Johnson, and Oguz 2014). A child requires the instruction of an adult in order to use digital media appropriately and effectively, then mounting an iPad in the youth department alone does little to develop the digital literacy skills of the children who attempt to use it.

Children require mediated and guided experiences with digital media for the experiences to translate into positive and productive digital literacy skills; this requirement holds true across a wide age range of youth. Children who are less likely to have direct adult or caregiver guidance when using digital media...

experiences with media of all types are not limited to supporting digital literacy skills development, however, rich experiences also support development of other core literacies, including social-emotional literacy and media literacy, both of which are integral for youth to succeed as both students and eventual members of the workforce (The Aspen Institute Task Force on Learning and the Internet, 2012).

and whether the child has a television or device with Internet access in the bedroom;

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In 2012, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media released a joint position statement that has widely been considered the counterpoint to the AAP position (Schomburg et al., 2012). The

percent reported new media use in some capacity in programming and services for young children. The most frequent types of tablet utilization were offering tethered devices for young children in the library (40 percent of respondents) and using devices as part of storytime programming (39 percent of respondents). Libraries also indicated making devices available for checkout and use both inside and out of the library. Ninety libraries, or 22 percent of the survey population, reported providing device mentoring services (Mills et al., forthcoming). While this data regarding device use and tablet ownership resembles the 2013 Common Sense Media family media use data, the comparatively small number of libraries currently offering device mentorship in any capacity would seem to be the area primed for growth.

In 2014, Lisa Guernsey, director of the New America Foundation's Early Education Initiative, gave a TEDx talk in which she proposed, "What if we were to commit to ensure that every family with young children had access to a media mentor? This could be someone like a children's librarian." With this suggestion, Guernsey ushered in the idea of youth services library staff as a fundamental resource and support in the digital lives and decisions of the families we serve.

Considering the potential positive outcomes for children engaging with developmentally appropriate media, the goal of supporting

worthwhile and needed one, in particular regard to digital media; research indicates the huge potential impact of youth services libraries filling this role: “Teachers, child care providers, and families could benefit from seeing both appropriate and inappropriate practices in action” (Daugherty, Dossani, Johnson, and Wright 2014, 6). The needs of the children and families we serve—both spoken and implicit—and the fundamental role of librarians and youth services staff as resource and support for these children and families situate our profession to serve our communities in the capacity of media mentors.

Position

Taking into account the core functions of library services for youth, the evolving digital landscape, and children’s and families’ needs for support and resources, the following is recommended:

- Every library have librarians and other staff serving youth who embrace their role as media mentors for their community.
- Media mentors support children and families in their media use and decisions.
- Library schools provide resources and training to support future librarians and youth services practitioners in serving as media mentors.
- Professional development for current librarians and youth services practitioners include formal training and informal support for serving as media mentors.

In their report *Growing Young Minds*, the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) asserted the vital role of libraries as centers for providing families support and access to media of all kinds (Howard 2013). As “important community digital hubs, with expertise promoting digital, media, and information literacy” (22), libraries have already assumed an informal role in providing children and their families with access to and experiences in the digital landscape. With the IMLS recommending that

libraries are ensuring that they are equipped to support the developing and evolving needs of youth and families. A commitment to media mentorship in every library is a firm commitment to the full spectrum of being a supporter and champion of literacy.

Media mentors support children and their families in their decisions and practice around media use. This role encompasses a variety of strategies for support, with each child or family requiring individual mentoring to ensure that support is respectful, appropriate, and relevant.

The fundamental role of media mentors, according to Guernsey, is to assist families to “make choices about media and learn to use that media in developmentally appropriate ways” (as cited in Jackson, 2014). A foundational aspect of this type of support is having access to and sharing recommendations for and research on children’s media use from established medical, educational, and institutional sources. A media mentor provides recommendations to meet a family’s stated or implied needs based on authoritative recommendations. A family looking for recommendations will be given these resources with objective interpretation by the media mentor, and it is up to the family to use the recommendations to make their own decisions regarding media use. As each family is different, so, too, will their media use choices and habits be different—from eschewing all screen time to extensive media use, and everything in between.

In addition to providing access to and knowledge of media recommendations and research, media mentors provide opportunities “to help young children navigate, filter, and learn from the teeming media around them” (Guernsey, 2013b). Media mentors actively engage with children and families interacting with digital media provided within the library context, both guiding children through positive and efficient uses of the technology and modeling for caregivers how they can support their children’s digital literacy development outside of the library. Once families have made their media use decisions, media mentors support those decisions to the best of their abilities. This level of support may include providing access to technology, offering programming with intentional technology use and related digital literacy learning experiences and information; and any other activities that support children and their families in using the technology they choose to

research on literacies, child brain development, and education. It is the responsibility of individual librarians and youth services

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