

The Severely Retarded Child in the Library

Keith Boehme and Sue Weller

The public library can play a role in the life of a severely retarded child. Language can be stimulated through the reading of books and the labeling of pictures. The sense of vision can be aided by the use of slides and films. Auditory awareness can be enhanced by the variety of records available. And, as a public facility, the library can affect the social life of a severely retarded child by providing an atmosphere of acceptance for the child and their family.

We would like to share experiences of a Special Education Teacher and a Children's Librarian, who incorporated the services and physical boundaries of the public library into the lives of a small classroom of severely retarded children.

The key to success in incorporating the public library into the experience of the severely retarded child is carefully planned visits.

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The class gathers to listen to a flannelboard story presented by Sue Weller.

In order to begin the planning, both the teacher and the librarian should be familiar with the children's needs so that the library experience will be meaningful. In our particular case, familiarity was established through the teacher's daily contact with the children and the librarian's weekly contact through bookmobile service provided at the school.

Descriptively, the six children we worked with varied in age from five to eighteen years. According to the Alpern-Boll Developmental Profile,¹ the children had the following levels of development: physical (large and small muscle coordination, etc.)—2.7 years; self-help (eating, dressing, etc.)—2.8 years; social (interpersonal relationships)—2.4 years; academic (intellectual abilities)—1.9 years; communication (expressive and receptive language)—1.6 years.

This description generally indicated that the library could aid these children in the following ways: stimulating self-help skills by having the children take care of their personal needs in a public place, e.g. using the restroom, removing boots and coats, etc; developing social skills through the meeting of other children and adults; encouraging intellectual growth by the child absorbing the total experience and thus laying the basis for new concepts; stimulating expressive language by the child responding to new situations; and finally, stimulating receptive language through the listening experiences of records, books, slides and flannelgraphs.

During the pre-visit planning session, we established the agenda and traced the route that the children would take during their library visit. While following the route, we made decisions as to the

order and content of activities and the physical movements required so that each experience could be accentuated. For example: Should we use the stairs or the elevator? What should be the length of each record selection? After listening to records, should we work with puzzles or listen to a story? Which medium should be used in storytelling—slides, flannelboard, or book presentation?

The agenda was used consistently during return visits to enable the children to gain a sense of security during the library field trip. Two forty-five minute visits were scheduled at the public library during the school year, usually in the fall and in the spring. The agenda that we used is as follows:

1. Upon arrival, the librarian greets the children in the Boys' and Girls' Department. The children hang up coats, remove boots, etc.
2. The children go to the phonograph listening area. Headphones are worn by the children while a contrasting variety of brief musical selections are played, e.g. marching band, symphonic, lyrical. These have been selected by the teacher and librarian during the planning session.
3. The children leave the listening area and go the lower level of the library, usually by elevator. Storytelling activities presented here include a slide showing of picture book illustrations with an oral or musical accompaniment, flannelboard stories, fingerplays and movement exercises.



Before leaving the library, a child and his mother check out books to take with them. Parent involvement in the library is strongly encouraged.

The children have been the most receptive to the flannel-board presentation of the book, *Roar and More* by Karla Kuskin (Harper, 1956) where they can participate by mimicking animal sounds. Another successful story time incorporates slides of the illustrations in *The Little Drummer Boy* by Ezra Jack Keats (Macmillan, 1968) with musical accompaniment.

Note: The storyteller should not expect a quiet, spell-bound audience. The children usually respond with verbal sounds and physical movements.

4. The visit resumes in the Boys' and Girls' Department where the children spend about fifteen minutes in the Toddler Corner. Here they can play with puzzles, blocks, wooden toys and stuffed animals. There is also an opportunity for interaction with other children here.
5. The children go to the picture book section and choose from a group of books which have been pre-selected by the teacher and librarian and placed on a shelf where the children can reach them. These books are based on the children's interests and usually contain simple, clear-cut drawings or photographs and are usually accompanied by short, simple texts. Examples of books which have been used in classroom are listed in the bibliography.
6. The children take their books to the circulation desk for checking out on their teacher's library card. This routine enables the children to interact with other library staff members and to observe other library patrons checking out materials.

Morrisson-Reeves Library has offered special services for the mentally handicapped in the community since 1965. Weekly book-mobile service is provided for a public and a private school serving ages one through sixteen in the classroom, and for post-school adults in a sheltered workshop. Many of the educable and trainable mentally handicapped students have participated in programs at the library. Now, the public library has extended service for severely retarded children. Thus it is serving everyone in the community.

Notes

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