

Parents, Children, Libraries, and Reading

Select quotes from parents and library staff

In addition to the statistics included in our report, we also asked parents and librarians from around the country about their thoughts on various library services for parents and children. The quotes below are from in-person and online focus groups of library patrons and staff, as well as an online questionnaire of library staff members. More information can be found in the full report at libraries.pewinternet.org.

How parents use libraries

Many of the parents in our in-person focus groups said they were introduced to libraries by their parents or by their schools. In general, they said they had very positive memories of their early library experiences:

“My parents were real big on [the library]. It was a treat for us, twice a week after church . . . You behave, you [get] to go to the library and get a book, get two books if you’re real good, read them that week and bring them back.”

In addition, many parents said they had very positive feelings about their libraries and library staff. However, many often wished that they knew more about what was happening at their library — “there’s so much good stuff going on but no one tells anybody,” one said.

We also asked parents to tell us more about how they use the library with their children. Many described the library as a destination for the whole family, with older children using the library’s resources for schoolwork or to surf the web while younger children attended story times and explored new books:

“A lot of times for school like [my children] need specific articles — like they need more than just one resource for information, so then I’ll take them to the local library . . . if we go, we’re there for hours. So, I just take my work from the office with me and then they do their research there. . . . If they have questions and if I can’t answer them, I ask somebody that works [at the library].”

Early childhood literacy and programs for children

In online questionnaires, many library staff members considered early childhood literacy programs and story times among their most important services:

“I feel that with the early literacy elements and story times and crafts, we are building a foundation for our young children to become lifelong learners. Story time not only provides a educational component, it also provides socialization for the children and the parents, building a close knit community.”

“If you’re trying to raise a reader, you need your library,” one librarian wrote. “It’s too expensive and somewhat wasteful to buy the hundreds of books a young reader goes through in those first years of learning to read.”

Others singled out the unique place libraries can have in children’s lives as a place for children to discover and pursue their own interests. One library staff member wrote that a major strength of public libraries is “serving children in that they are really the only public place in any community where a child’s wants and desires are treated as respectfully as an adults.”

Many library staff members wrote they wanted to help patrons learn to successfully navigate all types of media — and continue to do so as patrons age:

“I believe libraries should take a more active role in teaching patrons — both children and adults — how to interact with digital materials, whether that is computers, digitized materials, e-books, automatic book checkouts, or other devices. ... Libraries should step up to the plate and assume responsibility for the digital education of the community.”

Coordinating with schools

Many librarian respondents emphasized the importance of working with area schools. Many respondents said that area schools had little (or no) library support, leaving students to rely on local libraries:

“Our local school does not have a librarian, so we feel even more responsible to the students and their parents when it comes to literacy and academic support.”

And many library staff members said they were also seeking to complement schools’ efforts in bringing newer technologies into the classroom, including tablet computers:

“I want to be able to incorporate iPads into my story time and school-age programming, and I want to be able to include ‘appvisory’ services for caregivers so that they can utilize technology with their children in informed, intentional ways.”

Libraries as community centers

One subject that came up several times in the focus group discussions was how the parents valued the role of their local public library in the larger community. One parent who has a 3-year-old son said:

“To me, a library . . . is a necessity. They have lots of things to offer. It’s kind of like home room for your community. If you want to find something out then you just ask. And they have a lot of things that they offer that they don’t advertise.”

Other parents said they appreciated their relationships with library staff, who were able to recommend specific library books, services, and other resources the patrons would not have known about otherwise. One mother said it was helpful when library staff could point out resources she might be interested in, because many times she wouldn’t think to ask about them in the first place:

“If I want to know something, I’d know to ask [the library staff] questions, but I’m not going to always know what questions to ask because I’m not going to always know what information I can ask about. . . . [An activity] might not necessarily be posted, and if it’s not posted, how would you know to [ask]?”

Many parents said they use the library as a general destination for their family, and appreciated comfortable spaces where they and their children could read and work:

“I actually enjoy being able to go and sit down at a big table with my children and just do homework, lay all the books out. You know what I mean? Interact with them and be able to - instead of being all closed in in the house or whatever. It’s kind of like your mind flows more when you're at the library.”

When asked about public library’s strengths, one library staff member wrote:

“Libraries — especially public libraries — should be the great connector. Connecting people with information and the resources they need to make informed decisions about their lives. Connecting people with the resources they need for entertainment. Connecting children to books and the love of reading. Connecting people to their roots and their past.”

On responding to community needs

Many library staff members wrote about how libraries could respond to the broader needs of parents and children in the community:

“Many parents who are new to the community, or even to the [country], use the library as a gateway to learning about the area. They see us as an institution that has all the answers not just about books and movies, but about schools, daycare, local parks, other groups that cater to families, etc.”

“We’re definitely an important social place for many groups—children after school, the elderly and retired, job seekers, parents with children. I don't think we can be just an online presence. Our physical space means a lot to people in our town.”

“I think it is important for libraries to respond to their community needs. Not every library needs to be ran the same way or offer the same services. It is also important for libraries to offer services and programs that match the demographics of their communities. Freeing up space for children doesn't make sense when the majority of your users are 45+.”

Read more in the full report: <http://pewrsr.ch/10TOLgk>

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project
1615 L St., N.W., Suite 700
Washington, D.C. 20036

Media Inquiries:
202.419.4500