CONNECTING WITH SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES: AN ADELAIDE HILLS LIBRARIES, SOUTH AUSTRALIA, INITIATIVE

Jo Kaeding, *Community Programs and Promotions Coordinator, Adelaide Hills Council, SA; PhD candidate University of South Australia*
joanne.kaeding@mymail.unisa.edu.au

Abstract
Within the library profession there is widespread support for access to libraries for people with disabilities. However, literature on the topic of access to public libraries for people with disabilities has largely overlooked children with special needs and their families. This paper introduces the topic of access to public libraries for this group of the community, it then discusses some of the access problems this group experience, which leads to a description of a library program for children with special needs being run by the Adelaide Hills Council Library Service in South Australia. The paper concludes with the initial findings of a study of public libraries in the United States and Canada that focus on access for this group. The study was undertaken by the author of this paper.

Background
In 2011 the Adelaide Hills Library Service introduced a story time session for children with special needs and their families. Impetus for the introduction of the new program came from staff observation and patron comments. Patrons commented that the regular early childhood group sessions were too large and too loud for their children. Children with autism and hearing difficulties were overwhelmed by these sessions. The sessions were also intimidating for some parents/carers of children with disabilities. Staff noticed that these families were dropping out of the sessions.

Children with special needs, like all children, benefit greatly from literacy activities. As with all children, the earlier the interaction with books and other literacy activities, the greater the long term results. Staff was keen to ensure that these families had the same opportunities to access library based literacy activities. The program continues to run and in 2012 won a national Friends' of the Libraries Australia, Peter McInnes Award for library services for children and young people.

In 2014 the author of this paper undertook a study tour of public libraries in the United States and Canada that focus on programs for families of children with special needs. The Catherine Helen Spence Scholarship, the Public Libraries of South Australia Rod East Award and the ALIA Twila Ann Janssen Herr Award funded the study.

Introduction to the issue of library access for children with special needs
Fundamental to the concept of the public library is that it is accessible to everyone in the community. It is widely agreed that disability access to public libraries is an important part of this principle.

One of the key principles of a library is that access is provided equally to all citizens of the community it serves.[i]

Accessibility for people with disabilities is not a new concept to libraries. Hearing and digital format books are available for borrowing in virtually all larger public libraries and libraries for people with a vision impairment exist throughout the world. Ramps, elevators, wheelchair accessible desks, etc. are also good examples of public libraries addressing physical disabilities. In many places access to public buildings for people with physical disabilities is legislated. The focus for public libraries has primarily been on physical and sensory disabilities (such as vision and hearing) for adults. A search for accessibility on the web page of many public libraries clearly illustrates this focus, as do the accessibility policies of public libraries. The accessibility documents of the state libraries of South Australia and Victoria are good examples of this.[ii] It is however, the more hidden disabilities of developmental, intellectual, psychiatric and sensory processing that remain unaddressed by public libraries. The lack of focus on a broader range of disabilities is even more pronounced when considering access for children and is also reflected in the research literature on the topic of disability access to public libraries. [iii]

According to the Australian Library and Information Association public libraries should be " … safe and trusted public spaces where everyone is welcome..." [iv] Unfortunately, this is not always the experience of children with special needs and their families. The following quote gives a clear illustration of this.

People with autism are often loud. They may feel the need to touch, pull out or even mouth books. They may have a hard time if a book or video they want to borrow is out on loan. ... librarians in general have no training in helping patrons with developmental challenges. As a result, they often respond negatively to disruptive behaviour... [v]

Public libraries can be intimidating or uncomfortable places for children with special needs. For example, a child with cochlear implants can be overwhelmed by noise in open spaces. They may have difficulties communicating and may not be able to participate in traditional children's programs. Similarly, a child with autism may be sensitive to noise, bright lights and smells. This discomfort may reach a point at which the child begins to scream and engage in repetitive behaviours. The parent may then feel self-conscious and concerned that that they are being judged by other library users and staff. The child and family may choose to leave the library.

Children with special needs and their families are a disenfranchised library user group. According to UNICEF [vi] the largest minority group in the world is people with a disability and children with a disability are amongst the most excluded. In 2003 approximately 1 in 12 children under 14 in Australia had a disability, and in 2006 intellectual/learning disabilities, for example autism, was identified as being the greatest cause of disability for children under 14. [vii] Other countries such as the United States report similar statistics. [viii] Clearly, children with special needs and their families are a large minority group in our communities.

Clearly, there are issues of equity when not all members of a community are able to access a public library. For children with special needs and their families this also means that they are unable to access early literacy opportunities, which for a child with special needs can be even more important. The development of early literacy skills is widely accepted as a key indicator to the later literacy success of a child. [ix]

Increasingly the public library is being recognised as having an important role in developing early literacy skills. The implementation of literacy programs for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers in libraries is evidence of this; as is government programs such as the Little Big Book Club in South Australia, which uses public libraries as a distribution point for free books and public education pamphlets on children's literacy development for parents. Similar experiences in public libraries can be found in other countries, for example the United States and Canada through the public library program, Every Child Ready to Read.

Public libraries are also able to provide opportunities for children with special needs and their families to be part of their community, which again can be crucial to overcoming the isolation that having a disability or being a carer can bring. Public libraries provide opportunities for children with special needs to engage in activities that are not therapy related and which can be positive and fun for the whole family. Once again this can be important in families that are stressed and financially disadvantaged.

The implication of public libraries not meeting the access needs of this segment of the community is that they may be failing to meet the following legal and/or professional obligations:

- Disability Discrimination Acts
- Rehabilitation Acts
- United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Disability Discrimination Policies of Professional Library Bodies
- Disability Discrimination Policies of their government funding body (local, state or federal)

Although there are many other reasons that access to public libraries for this group is important, one final one is that many children with special needs will grow up to be adults with special needs. Thus, developing and nurturing a relationship with the public library for children with special needs will have both immediate and lifelong benefits.

Adelaide Hills Council Libraries Program
The Adelaide Hills Libraries program, Library Lions, is a literacy based early childhood program developed for children with special needs. The team leader of the libraries children's and youth services, in partnership with service providers for children with special needs, developed the program.

The program uses a variety of communication methods including, Makaton (keyword) sign language, communication cards, picture cards, and props. It also includes a variety of sensory objects and activities to provide greater accessibility to the stories, songs, and rhymes of the story time session.

The program promotes interaction and involvement with literacy at whatever stage and/or capability of the child. The pace and developmental level of each session is dictated by the children involved. The needs of all children are taken into consideration when developing each session. Specific examples of this include: a child with autism who is comfortable participating when she is provided with a large cushion under which she can lie; another child with vision impairment will participate if he is able to view the book up close before each page is turned. Siblings of the children with special needs are welcomed and included in the sessions with the aim that they will feel important and accepted too. The siblings also have an opportunity to meet other children in their community who have brothers or sisters with special needs. Each session is followed by a free play session for the children and an opportunity for coffee and a chat for the parents/carers. This provides a valuable opportunity for families to meet and to support each other.

The goals of the program are to:
- Enable children with special needs to access, and become involved in, literacy based programs within the library.
- Assist the parents/carers to access the library and its resources.
- Provide a safe and welcoming environment for parents/carers and their children with special needs to attend library programs.
- Encourage parents/carers and their children with special needs to feel welcome at all times within the library.
- Provide opportunities for parents/ carers of children with special needs to meet and support each other.

The process of establishing the program involved:

- Securing permission from the Library Manager to trial a story time session for children with special needs.
- Obtaining a grant from the Friends of the Library to purchase resources.
- Researching other story time sessions for children with special needs - only to discover that very few resources on how to develop and run such a program exist.
- Developing partnerships with local allied health workers and organisations that work with children with special needs.
- Developing and trialling a story time for children with special needs with the assistance of the above groups.

The program is run weekly, for approximately 30 minutes, in the library's community room. One staff member runs each session. Sessions are promoted through word of mouth, flyers, the library's website, local organisations for children with special needs, and the occasional article in the local newspaper. Staff do not have formal training in working with children with special needs; they do however, have many years of experience in working with children in a formal setting and a genuine interest and desire to be involved with the program.

Benefits of the program include:
- Increased confidence in the library environment by the families that attend the session, evidenced by the families visiting the library on days when the program is not run.
- The families provide support for each other, thus increasing their local support network.
- Library staff have developed relationships with the families and as a consequence are more confident in their interactions with the families of children with special needs.

Lessons learned from this program are:
- Talk to families of children with special needs. Ask families what are the barriers that they face; what do library staff need to be aware of in regards to their child; and what was successful or not successful in the session for their child?
- Develop partnerships with service providers that work with children with special needs in your community. These groups are vital to making contact with families of children with special needs. They may also assist in the development of your program.
- Finally, do not be afraid. Children with special needs and their families just want to be part of their community; libraries can help provide opportunities for that to occur.

U.S. and Canada study tour
      Introduction
The study tour involved visiting five major United States and Canadian cities and surrounding greater areas. A total of 20 public libraries and 2 cultural institutions that deliver programs for children with special needs were visited. Eighteen participants were interviewed as part of the study, including two authors who have published on the topic.

      Research questions and methodology
The purpose of the research project was to investigate the factors influencing access to public libraries for children with special needs and their families. The research received ethics approval. Questions and response options were formulated through the author's experience in delivering programs to children with special needs and through documents and how-to manuals that give

guidance to public librarians on this topic; for example, *Including Families of Children with Special Needs: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians* by Banks et al. [x] Questions were trialled with library staff working with children with special needs. The research focused on the following questions:

- What are public libraries currently doing to improve access for children with special needs and their families?
- What are the barriers to access from the perspective of the public librarian?

The research used a mixed method approach incorporating qualitative and quantitative techniques. A one-on-one semi-structured interview research tool was applied. The interview consisted of 41 items that allowed respondents to reflect upon their knowledge and experience related to providing library services to children with special needs and their families. The questions included multiple-choice answers as well as open-ended options.

Findings
This paper will report and discuss the initial findings of the study as they relate to the above research questions.

The 18 libraries involved in the study answered every question in full. Nearly all libraries (94%) described themselves as being in an urban environment and over half (61%) as being a large library. Libraries from a higher socio-economic area formed over half (60%) of the libraries interviewed and over half (60%) had a community with a predominately English speaking background.

So what are public libraries currently doing to improve access for children with special needs and their families?

Participants were given a list of eight possible barriers to public library access for children with special needs and their families. Participants were then asked to choose all of the barriers that their library had attempted to address. They were also given the option to note barriers that their library was focusing on, but which had not been listed.

As can be seen in Table 1 there are three access barriers that the greatest numbers of libraries have attempted to address. These barriers in order of highest response are:
- Library programs do not cater for children with special needs.
- Library staff attitudes, sensitivities and awareness towards children with special needs and their families.
- Libraries do not know the characteristics and needs of children with disabilities in libraries community.

Table 1

Has your library made attempts to address any of the following barriers?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Library staff (attitudes, sensitivities, awareness)	88.89%	16
Other library visitors (attitudes, sensitivities, awareness)	38.89%	7
Library's physical environment (lighting, noise, universal design)	55.56%	10
Information technology (hardware, software and website design)	66.67%	12
Programs on offer do not cater for children with special needs	94.44%	17
Collection resources not appropriate	66.67%	12
Communication difficulties	44.44%	8
Libraries do not know the characteristics and needs of children with disabilities and their families within the library's community.	77.78%	14
No	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	16.67%	3
Total Respondents: 18		

A barrier that was not listed but which was noted by two of the participants was an economic barrier. The libraries of both of these respondents waived fees and fines for children of special needs and their families.

When asked about the kinds of programs that the libraries ran regularly for children with special needs the results showed a more even spread of responses. Table 2 illustrates this spread. The biggest response (72%) was story times targeted to children with special needs; 61% ran an inclusive story time for all children; 44% had therapy dog programs and 44% provided an outreach program. Participants were also given the opportunity to list other programs that they provided for children with special needs. Of the eight responses given, activities that focussed on social interaction made up the greatest number (62%) of responses in this answer choice section.

Table 2
Does your library offer any of the following library services or programs for children with special needs on a regular basis?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Story times specifically for children with special needs on a regular basis	72.22%	13
Inclusive mainstream story times for children with special needs on a regular basis	61.11%	11
Music programs which specifically cater for children with special needs	33.33%	6
Assistance dogs visits / programs on a regular basis	44.44%	8
Crafts which specfically cater for children with special needs	33.33%	6
Gardening which specfically cater for children with special needs	16.67%	3
Outreach program for children with special needs	44.44%	8
None of the above	11.11%	2
Other	5.56%	1
Other (please specify)	44.44%	8
Total Respondents: 18		

In order to find out what physical environment changes libraries had made to improve access, participants were asked the question, "Has your library made any of the following changes to the physical environment with the intent to improve access for children special needs?" The most common response (77%) was, "Ensured the library was wheelchair friendly." The next most common response (66%) was "Created cosy spaces for children". Table 3 shows that the remainder of responses was more evenly spread, for example 50% of respondents reported that their library had created quiet spaces for children and 44% had installed large clear signage.

Table 3
Has your library made any of the following changes to the physical environment with the intent to improve access for children special needs?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Introduced natural lighting	27.78%	5
Introduced light dimmers	16.67%	3
Increased lighting	5.56%	1
Subdued lighting	22.22%	4
Created quiet spaces for children	50.00%	9
Created secure spaces for children	38.89%	7
Created cosy space for children	66.67%	12
Created low sensory spaces	22.22%	4
Created outdoor spaces	27.78%	5
Changed to non-allergenic cleaning products	38.89%	7
Bought low allergenic furniture	22.22%	4
Used low allergenic building materials	11.11%	2
Ensured the library was wheelchair friendly	77.78%	14
Installed large, clear signage	44.44%	8
None of the above	5.56%	1
Other (please specify)	16.67%	3
Total Respondents: 18		

Participants were then asked how their library indicated it was disability friendly. Responses to this question showed very little variance. The two most common methods, at 55%, were the promotion or presentation of community disability awareness programs and the use of images of people with disabilities in their newsletters, flyers etc. Other popular responses were: provide fidget toys for children (50%); provide hand held magnifiers (50%) and the use of signs, decals, flyers, newsletters or social media (50%). It was interesting to see that 44% of the libraries had developed and made available through print or on the web social stories for children with special needs. These are stories that use pictures and text to prepare children for the experience of visiting a library.

Finally when asked about the future plans for increasing access to their library for children with special needs and their families the responses were varied. The greatest number (38%) responded that they wanted to focus on staff training and development. The next most common response (16%) was introducing or developing technology, in particular iPads for children with

special needs to use as a communication aid.

What are the barriers to access from the perspective of the public librarian?

Participants were asked what they thought the greatest barrier to access for children with special needs and their families was. They were able to give up to three answers. Table 4 shows that the variance in percentages between responses was not considerable. The largest number (55%) of participants responded that library staff attitudes and sensitivities was one of the greatest barriers. The next most common response (50%) was that library programs do not cater for children with special needs and 44% selected the library's physical environment (noise, lighting etc.) as a barrier.

Table 4.
What do you think are the greatest barriers to access for children with special needs and their families? Please select up to three answers

Answer Choices	Responses	
Library staff (attitudes, sensitivities)	55.56%	10
Other library visitors (attitudes, sensitivities)	38.89%	7
Library's physical environment (lighting, noise, universal design)	44.44%	8
Information technology (hardware, software and website design)	11.11%	2
Programs on offer do not cater for children with special needs	50.00%	9
Collection resources not appropriate	0.00%	0
Communication difficulties	27.78%	5
Libraries do not know the characteristics and needs of children with disabilities and their families within the library's community.	38.89%	7
I do not think there are any barriers	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	22.22%	4
Total Respondents: 18		

In response to the open-ended question, "What one thing do you think would have the greatest impact on increasing access if it could be implemented?" the biggest response (38%) was staff training in disability. This response confirms that staff attitudes and sensitivities are considered to be the greatest barrier to access for children with special needs and their families. The next most common response (27%) was reaching out to families of children with special needs.

When asked what the respondents thought prevented libraries from addressing barriers to access, 77% of respondents answered lack of knowledge on how to address the barrier; 66% answered limitations on staffing resources, and 61% answered limitations on financial resources. Participants were able to give up to three responses. This result also

correlates with the finding that respondents believed staff training in disability would have the biggest impact on access for this group of the community.

Discussion

The findings of this study concur with research findings in previous studies undertaken by Murray in Australia and Hill in New York [xi]. Both of these studies also highlighted that librarians considered staff training in disability to be a major barrier to library access for children with special needs.

Several other findings are worth noting. In particular, despite only 11% of the respondents identifying technology to be a barrier for children with special needs, 66% of the libraries have addressed the issue of technology for children with special needs. One possible conjecture to why this might be is that technology maybe an easier barrier to address than for example community attitudes, which 38% of respondents considered to be a barrier. Similarly, 66% of libraries have addressed the appropriateness of their collections for this user group – yet not one respondent considered this area to be a barrier to access. Again, is it because this an easier barrier to tackle? It would be useful to know from families of children with special needs how much of a barrier technology in libraries is.

A content analysis of the literature on disability access to libraries by Hill [xii] found that 50% of articles written in a ten-year time frame focussed on the topic of electronic accessibility. It is therefore very interesting that only 11% of public librarian respondents in this study answered that information technology software, hardware or web design was a barrier to access for this group. None of the respondents named technology as an area that the greatest impact on improving access could be made. This reinforces Hill's question as to whether research is being undertaken in the right areas on the topic of disability access.

Two participants in the interview raised the issue of economics as being a barrier to public library access. Considering that free access is a key principle of public libraries this would be another interesting area to explore.

Finally, when asked what participants thought were the greatest barriers to access, one librarian made the following comment, "I don't think the families see libraries as having anything relevant for their children. Libraries are places full of books and their children don't read and possibly won't read so why would they visit?" It would be interesting to see if families of children with special needs hold this belief.

Limitations of the study

The major limitation of the study was that it focussed on public librarians who had knowledge or experience in this area. A broader study of librarians without knowledge and experience in this area would help inform why public librarians are not focussing on access for this group. Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, including families of children with special needs would give a better understanding of the issue from the perspective of the user.

Conclusion

Research into access to public libraries from the perspective of families of children with special needs would be of benefit in understanding the barriers to access. The author of this paper will be, as part of her PhD, researching the issue of access from the perspective of the families of children with special needs as well as the public librarian with little knowledge and experience in the area. Families and public librarians interested in being involved in the research are encouraged to contact the author. [xiii]

Learning Outcomes

- All library staff should receive disability awareness training.
- Developing relationships with external individuals or organisations that work with children with special needs and their families is an important part of reaching out to this group of the community.
- 'Have a go' and talk to your families. Ask the question: 'How can children with special needs be involved?' with every decision made in the library (very quickly this will become part of everyday practice).

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[xiii] joanne.kaeding@mymail.unisa.edu.au