

WONDER LIBRARIES

20 Expert Perspectives on
What Kids Need Now

EDITED BY
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Elizabeth M. McChesney has three decades of experience in children's librarianship and library administration. She has earned *Library Journal's* Movers & Shakers Award, the National Summer Learning Association's Founder's Award for Excellence, and the Association for Library Service to Children's Distinguished Service Award, and she is a recipient of the John Cotton Dana Award. McChesney serves as the director of community engagement and early childhood for the LaundryCares Foundation, is a senior advisor in educational equity for the Urban Libraries Council, and is the field consultant in libraries and literacy for the National Summer Learning Association. She passionately believes in the public library as a place of learning, education, joy, and wonder for all kids. This is her fourth book.

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PREFACE

Anyone who does anything to help a child is a hero to me.

—Fred Rogers

I've been longing for Mr. Rogers. It started in the morass of 2020 as we grappled with COVID-19 and the parallel pandemic of racism and social injustice in this country. I started thinking about Mr. Rogers's neighborly words and caring manner, and found myself wishing he were here to explain to me, as he would to Daniel Tiger, why I was feeling the way I was. I wished he could "see" me through the television set and help to give a name to my confusing feelings and help me to work through them. I have been wishing for Mr. Roger's calm, steadying character and simple, wise words to help us through this turbulent time. But more than anything, it makes me sad to realize that our kids have no real Mr. Rogers now. Who is helping them with their big feelings? Where are all the national models who help children learn the kind lessons of neighborliness, love, and forgiveness? As we address what US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has called an epidemic of isolation and loneliness, we can see that there is no one quite like Mr. Rogers, who could quietly say to every child, "You are special," in a manner that genuinely conveyed, "You are unique in all the world, and *that* is a miracle." Now that Mr. Rogers is gone, who visibly cherishes and protects children in these turbulent times? Who helps safeguard childhood? Many adults view childhood as merely a means to an end, a step on the road to adult responsibility and agency. Childhood, however, is more than a stage a person moves through; it is a magical and fleeting period in human development to be protected and stewarded as a time of awe, wonder, learning, and risk-taking, and as the foundation for radically loving one another.

As public library professionals, we value so many of Mr. Rogers's core traits. Three of these traits are courage, love, and discipline. Our kids need us to serve with **courage** as we face increased attacks on democracy from the censorship of free speech and the suppression of books, stories, and histories

we hold on our shelves and in our hands. We must be courageous as we fight against social media algorithms that amplify and promote misinformation and disinformation and spread hateful opinions. These times also require that we summon the courage to look at ourselves and the services we provide and honestly answer the question of whether we are serving everyone. Merely “not discriminating” against people is not enough. Are we actively anti-racist and inclusive, seeking out and vigorously working to include all community members, striving for just and equitable library services, and creating genuinely welcoming, inclusive spaces? Our kids need our **love** as we work to understand and respond to the complexity and racial disparities in learning loss, social isolation, and complex mental health issues. They need us to hold them dear in every book we select, every program we conduct, and the way we build inclusive collections, services, programs, and spaces. Our kids need our **discipline** as we stand proud and true to our ALA core values and deepen and broaden our access to them.

Mr. Rogers famously repeated his mother’s words, telling us, “When things are scary, look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” It’s up to us to be the helpers. Public library service to children embodies Mr. Rogers’s principles. Our work must come from a place of love for America’s children and for the vibrant, thriving communities that support our kids. This book centers around some of Mr. Rogers’s enduring tenets: inspiring wonder through loving our communities and promoting each child’s joyful learning. Each chapter comes from a national leader who has been thinking deeply about this question: Given what our kids are facing, what do they need now? Each author very clearly articulated to me that they see how kids need to feel wonder and awe. From wonder comes the skills and attributes of curiosity and creativity, which are critical for life success. For us to get back to the profound emotion of wonder, we need our libraries to be places that inspire the natural world, the artistic world, and that foster an understanding of scientific learning. From access to beautiful collections, programs, meaningful relationships, and transformed spaces, we can spark the catalyst for wonder in our kids.

Although no book like this can be completely inclusive of all the work that needs to be done, the authors of its sixteen chapters address critical areas of our service that I hope can be translated across your neighborhoods, whether in early childhood settings, everyday scenarios, middle schools, or correctional facilities—wherever you may be working with children and

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families. Drawing on themes in Mr. Rogers's song "There Are Many Ways to Say I Love You," each chapter concludes with five steps. These are action items meant to amplify your service, to add to the many and meaningful ways you are already showing up for communities. The items are simple measures that you might implement in your own library practice to make small, actionable steps toward equitable outcomes to help children heal, grow, and flourish.

This book is a love letter to you and your work and a call to action to deepen our services even more and build inclusive neighborhoods that ask everyone, without exception and with dignity for all: "Won't you be my neighbor?"

INTRODUCTION

What Do Kids Need Now?

The last few years have been a time of incredible stress, unprecedented trauma, and unrelenting change for everyone and certainly for our very youngest. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear that children were extremely vulnerable to the vagaries of a pandemic: school closures, remote learning, lack of access to digital tools, families carrying increased financial and health burdens, and physical isolation all signaled a massive formal learning loss. The profound impact of social separation on children; increased parental stress; and the inability to be in classrooms, to play in playgrounds or with one another foretold of the children's mental health crises that we now face. The parallel pandemic of systemic racism and discrimination for communities of color brought toxic stress, grief, and loss, and heightened so much distress for our children. The reading wars have continued to rage as reading scores have woefully lagged. Book bans and censorship efforts have frightened children and put their library collections and, indeed, their ability to see themselves and learn about others in books, in peril. The rapid growth of artificial intelligence and its implications for learning and staying safe while online and for understanding what is fact versus what is misinformation and disinformation is a topic of the day. In my mind, it can feel as if childhood itself is being threatened by the attacks to children's books, the way they receive news, and how the world around them can feel hostile, non-nurturing and cold.

The question "What do kids need now?" has been on everyone's minds, including my own. Researchers have shown us that the last few years have taken a crippling toll on children's academic, social, and emotional lives. Fred Rogers said, "Our society is much more interested in information than wonder, in noise rather than silence. . . . And I feel that we need more wonder and a lot more silence in our lives."

For me, the answer to the question of what kids need now always comes back to one significant thing all kids need. That's the public library and what we as library professionals offer in support of eliciting wonder. By offering

a friendly and personal welcome to our kids when they enter our spaces, providing them with high-quality academic supports, finding their perfect book, and opening opportunities for them to experience the pure joy of learning through play or arts programs during the summer, we as library professionals provide so many ingredients of wonder to our kids and families. But how can we in the public library field take all the research that's been done and use it to deepen and strengthen the ways in which we show up for communities and help spark awe and wonder and consequently curiosity, joy, and a love of learning? This book is an attempt to humbly answer some of the questions concerning what kids need by drawing on the knowledge of experts outside of public libraries who have been deeply working in their respective areas and thinking about and advocating for kids. These authors bring the best of research, practice, and anti-racism to the interrelated fields of child development, out-of-schooltime learning, and authentic community engagement. These essays help show us that the profound and multifaceted needs of kids are tied to the inequities in this country. I hope that reading this will challenge you in your practice and give you creative, loving ideas to move forward in service to children and to the people in communities who have not felt welcomed or seen—perhaps not even in the public library. Welcoming beyond our doors, authentic relationships, and humble partnership with communities are recurring themes throughout this book. We cannot go back to the status quo. It's time to turn the page, take what has worked, and build new solutions deeply rooted in community brilliance and voice. This work requires us to stay firmly rooted in the knowledge that we must never turn away from the fight for equity for children. It also requires us to take good care of ourselves and our teams.

This book is arranged as a series of chapters prefaced with an introductory text box to introduce the chapter concept that centers the neighborhood or community as essential to supporting the child and cherishing childhood. Many of the essays emphasize the importance of a child's relationship with you and your library staff. Each contribution is a cross between a love letter to you and your work and a call to action for how public libraries can build even healthier relationships with communities—relationships that “tune out the noise” and promote wonder and serve more deeply. Some contributors examine ways in which we can tailor our programming and services to spark happiness and curiosity and deepen learning for all aspects of the community. All imply that our radical acts of literacy, the ways in which

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we build joy—which helps lead to wonder—and community outreach are essential elements of community service. Embracing the idea of learning with joy helps us shrug off antiquated notions of how children learn. Creating library spaces and practices that spark curiosity and instill a sense of true wonder is the heart of loving, community-centered library service. Researchers explain wonder as the “wish to understand.” Wonder is a swirl of joy, curiosity, and awe of a larger phenomenon, which has always been the central core for learning in libraries. Inspiring wonder is one of this book’s primary mandates because it is key to the process of healing our communities and helping our children and their families thrive. Community outreach is equity work because it raises *all* children’s voices, laughter, and learning, and we must strive to reach each child in this country.

Each essay concludes with a list of five action items that public library professionals can use as a jumping-off place to deepen library work and answer the question of what kids truly need now. You will, no doubt, find your own richer and more responsive ways to mirror who your community is and what they need.

The book ends with an epilogue written by beloved children’s author Carole Lindstrom, author of the *New York Times* bestselling and Caldecott Award-winning *We Are Water Protectors*. Lindstrom shares her experience with libraries and books during her childhood and the impact of not seeing herself accurately represented in the stories she read. She discusses the importance of accessibility and representation in the children’s books and stories we read, share, and shelve in our libraries.

I end this introduction with a cartoon by Martin and Richard Lee, who chronicle the experience and lives of the other kids in Peanutsville in their comic strip, *The Other Ones*. The Lee brothers provide representation to kids of color and children of immigrants in their daily comic strip, where they cover a range of topics—from racism and trauma to identity development and parent-child dynamics. The cartoon on the following page was created for this book and shares the positive role that we as librarians can play in children’s lives.

The research is clear: children need so many things now to grow and thrive. What I know in my heart is that they need wonder libraries and that starts with you.

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Martin and Richard Lee, *The Other Ones*

Martin Lee is a teacher, cartoonist, and fan of *Peanuts*. Martin and his brother **Richard Lee**, a professor of psychology, have created the daily comic strip *The Other Ones* to address the *other* kids in Peanutsville and explore what they were thinking and doing while Charlie Brown and his friends had their exploits chronicled.

Martin and Richard Lee understand that children as a whole can go unseen by society. Here the Lee brothers, who have many strips that celebrate the power of diverse books and who decry censorship, lift up library professionals who see each child as a unique and special gift. What a powerful reminder to all of us who work in libraries to greet and treat each child individually and work to understand and respect their needs.



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Trusted Messengers and Welcoming Spaces

SUSAN B. NEUMAN

Susan B. Neuman, literacy professor at New York University, looks at the ways in which public library professionals can support and thus strengthen parents and families when we reach into everyday spaces, build trust, and humbly and honestly open ourselves to community needs. Using her work with the LaundryCares Foundation and the Too Small to Fail Initiative, Neuman shares important research from this disruptive partnership to strengthen our work in creating meaningful exchanges with families in neighborhood spaces.

Parenting can be complicated. Many young parents struggle to determine what resources to trust and whom to rely on for information. They worry about false leads and fake news. They question whether they're doing the right things about their child's eating habits, sleep patterns, and social and emotional development. They often crave information on how to get their child in the right program at the right time. And many parents express a desire to get help but do not know where to turn.

According to a report from Pew Research Center, over 78 percent of the public will turn to the library to get that help.¹ About eight in ten feel that public libraries help them find information that is reliable and trustworthy; in fact, 56 percent believe that this helps them to make important decisions. Yet it's not only resources that make the public library a trusted source, but the people who work there: public library professionals. In response to a recent poll, for example, we found that librarians were considered to be the most trusted messengers, scoring only slightly below friends and family.²

Library professionals have historically been community advocates. They have influenced civic engagement by providing access to government

information, services, and programs; promoting participation in local elections; acclimating new residents; and much more. In the 2010s the role of library professionals in helping people understand their options and sign up for insurance coverage under the Affordable Care Act was a prime example of how libraries can help community members to interact with governments. More recently, library professionals have been instrumental throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, using creative methods to ensure that students and families received much-needed resources. The Institute of Museum and Library Services innovated a partnership between the Association of Science and Technology Centers, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Alliance of Museums, the American Library Association, and the Network of the National Library of Medicine to increase COVID-19 vaccine confidence in communities across the United States.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the traditional commitment to community engagement has taken an interesting turn. Research has shown that families living in high poverty are far less likely to use public libraries, whether it's because they're not acclimated to using them, because they're worried about being charged late fines, or because they're skeptical of putting their name on a card associated with a government entity.³ Therefore, rather than engaging with parents primarily in the library setting, library professionals have made efforts to be bigger than their buildings and “reach families where they are,” whether it be in the barbershop, grocery store, museum, or playground.

We had the pleasure of conducting an observation of public librarians in action in laundromats, which are unconventional spaces for reading and engaging with families. Our previous ethnography had shown us that parents and children spend considerable time at laundromats during the weekend. Throughout a year-long project, we observed how these librarians used the space and time to engage children in early literacy activities and to communicate with families in an informal way. And it was during these ongoing observations that we began to understand why librarians are rated among the most trusted messengers.

What Is a Trusted Messenger?

We are living in an age of information confusion. Consider the many complex issues young parents face. What should I do about screen time? Why doesn't he sit still when I read stories? How can I get her to play independently? At

a time when parents find it increasingly hard to know which messages to trust, they tend to turn to someone whom they already trust. Trusted messengers are people that community members regard as credible sources of information.

What makes them trusted? Just giving people information is not enough. One key characteristic is that trusted messengers know their audience. They know how to communicate with families. They understand their core values. They contribute new ideas that are aligned with these values and lifestyles. They are comfortable to be around, and not stiff or formal. Some families may be more responsive to messengers from a similar racial or ethnic group, or who live in a similar locale, because they engage in culturally and linguistically responsive talk strategies. For example, when speaking to parents, they might use the family's home language, as well as English, to have a conversation with a parent. These trusted messengers "speak" a family's language in many ways. They understand when to give advice and when to listen.

A Look into Laundromats

These qualities came to life in our observations at laundromats. A laundromat is not normally a particularly conducive space for a librarian or library activities. These facilities generally include a wide-open space, with machines humming in the background, a TV, a few places to sit, harsh lighting, and not much more than a gumball machine to amuse young children. However, the LaundryCares Foundation recognizing that "doing well by doing good" builds customer loyalty and increases community support, collaborated with public libraries in New York and Chicago and the Clinton Foundation's Too Small to Fail initiative to install child-friendly spaces in sections in laundromats, away from the machines but located so that parents could watch their children as they did their laundry. These areas included a child-size sofa, tables, and chairs; an open-faced bookshelf filled with books that were restocked monthly; a whiteboard with letter and number magnets; puppets; blocks; and paper for drawing and writing. The area also included signs written in Spanish and English to encourage parents to talk, sing, and read with their children and to play suggested games like peek-a-boo.

When the librarians visited laundromats for two hours a week, the spaces seemed to come alive with activity. The librarians read, sang, and danced

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with the children while engaging them in literacy activities that encouraged conversations. Throughout the weeks of observation, we recorded 1,379 instances of literacy-related activity, compared to 7 before the librarians' visits. Children were mesmerized during the storybook-reading portions of the day, spending an average of 47 minutes engaging in these playful literacy activities.⁴

It was during these times that we began to understand the subtle but important actions of librarians as trusted messengers. Our analysis indicated four distinctive features were especially important to connect with families and their children.

Four Features of Effective Trusted Messengers

Effective messengers employ techniques that encourage trust and engagement: engaging in translanguaging, using culturally and linguistically appropriate resources, becoming familiar with neighborhoods, and connecting with relevant organizations.

The Ability to Engage in Translanguaging

Many of the librarians were proficient in translanguaging, using phrases in the children's home language along with English. As they engaged with families, they would often weave together phrases in both languages in a way that seemed natural and fluid, thereby supporting children's use of their full linguistic repertoires.

For example, a librarian could give some pieces of paper and crayons to children and initiate a conversation.

Librarian: Do you know how to write your name?

Child 1: I do!

Child 2: Me too!

Librarian: (*Looks at the paper.*) Esta es escritora; you're a writer!

The librarians would often begin their conversations by asking children their language preference. Sometimes a child would answer; sometimes not. In one case, the librarian suggested, "Let's go find some books; vamos buscar los libros." The child did not respond, but shyly put her hands on a book. In response, the librarian said, "This is just in English. Do you want me to do a translation in Spanish?" The child nodded yes.

Speaking the parents' home language, the librarians frequently approached them to offer guidance about activities in the city and available resources. For example, when a 35-year-old Latinx parent was looking over the materials on the bookshelf, the librarian came over and greeted her in Spanish, telling her more about the activities for children taking place in this laundromat. They started a conversation as they played at a table with the children. When the mother returned to her laundry, she took the information on neighborhood library activities, along with a book for her child.

Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Resources

The second feature addressed the issue of selecting resources to use in these spaces. There was a deliberate attempt to include signs, materials, and books that represented diversity and had local relevance. Signs, games, and activities were in both Spanish and English. Book selections included stories and pictures about the cities in which the families lived, sometimes by local authors. Games engaged children in culturally relevant activities. During one observation, the librarian and children started singing the alphabet song. She then handed out maracas, and they sang the ABC song again, giggling while they tried to keep the beat with the maracas. Another time she chose a book called *Guacamole* that was written primarily in English with some Spanish words. "This is a cooking book about making guacamole. You like to cook?" The children then drew pictures of their own guacamoles.

Knowledge of the Neighborhood

The third feature was that the librarians knew the neighborhood well and used their understanding of the life experiences of its families to make connections with children and parents. They were at ease when approaching people and were able to strike up conversations with families, not just about library activities but about raising young children. Some of the families were in especially high need and benefited from learning about various social service agencies that would help them to find food, clothes, health care, and other services they could access. "I'm here to help," said one librarian. At times, a librarian might offer a free book to the children to take home. When the observer asked about one of these instances, the librarian replied, "These families need additional support. The schools can't do it all. It really does take a village."

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Creating Ties with Other Organizations

The fourth feature built on the librarians' cultural understanding of the community to create ties within and across other institutions. They knew their city, and as a result could help families navigate complicated waters. The librarians discovered that some parents did not know about kindergarten registration. One librarian recalled striking up the following conversation with a father.

Librarian: How old is your child?

Father: He's 4 years old.

Librarian: Is he in school?

Father: I'm getting him ready to start school next year.

Librarian: Is he enrolled in kindergarten?

Father: I'm not sure what you mean.

Librarian: In this city you need to enroll your child right now in kindergarten. There are only so many slots for kids. Here's the place to register. *(Gets out her phone to show him.)*

At other times, the librarians would hand out library registration forms, talk about special story hours, share information about clothing drives, and give out flyers listing where to get free mammograms, all of which built connections to other resources in the community. In this respect, they used laundromats as spaces to provide families with information on ways to access an array of resources from other external institutions. They learned that some families not only were struggling with reading but had other challenges as well and sought to show how different community organizations and institutions might provide support in raising their children and ensuring their well-being.

Together, these culturally and linguistically responsive features in the librarians' interactions with children and families appeared to create communication patterns that were empathetic, respectful, and practical, which enhanced the librarians' credibility as trusted messengers in the community.

Welcoming Healing

In today's noisy information environment, parents need support from people they can trust. As faithful community stewards, library professionals have the ability to be those trusted messengers. You have the capability to reach

families where they are, creating hybrid, welcoming spaces that build connections across home, schools, and neighborhoods to strengthen children's learning opportunities.

FIVE WAYS TO BEGIN TO BUILD TRUST

1. Get outside of the library and talk to people. Hang out at a laundromat or at other area businesses where families congregate. Bring along early literacy materials and humbly listen to what parents have to say about what they need.
2. Ask parents and community members what the library could help them with and then deliver as best you can. Open ears and open hearts are important for building trust.
3. Be your authentic self. People will see your sincere, humble commitment to serving all aspects of the community.
4. Extend the library into community by creating "literacy moments" when you share or spotlight several books in places families congregate (e.g., grocery stores, pediatricians' clinics, or nail salons).
5. Find other trusted messengers in your community. Who are the leaders to whom parents look up to or with whom they spend time? How can you learn from them? How can they help you increase the credibility of the library even more?

NOTES

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