



FIVE WAYS TO MAKE YOUR LIBRARY MORE ACCESSIBLE

Raising children with disabilities is tough. After an unpleasant experience at a local library, LIZ PARNELL looks at ways librarians can help.

I am a student librarian and a parent of five children, three of whom have a disability – although their disabilities are not immediately visible. Earlier this year I took my children to the library where my son was loud and active. I did my best to redirect his energy and encouraged him to sit quietly. However, the librarian at the desk – rather than approach me or allow me to supervise my child – stepped in to reprimand my son directly.

To me, this communicated that my parenting wasn't adequate. To my son, it communicated that the library was not a welcoming space where he is able to be himself. For

both of us, it made for an unpleasant experience in the library.

Unlike many other places, libraries are supposed to be accessible spaces. They are meant to be places of safety where people can learn and be themselves. However, all too often this does not hold true for my family. Library staff need to better understand that not all disabilities are visible and not all users can be treated in the same manner. Librarians need to be patient with patrons, especially those that may not fit their ideals. If you would like to better welcome patrons of all abilities to your library, you can look into the following:

1 EXAMINE YOUR OWN BIAS

Do you have a certain image about what an ideal patron should look like? Do you have assumptions about what disability looks like? Before you can address these biases you first need to acknowledge them, only then can you educate yourself.

2 REMEMBER THAT NOT ALL DISABILITIES ARE VISIBLE.

Some disabilities are immediately obvious, like a wheelchair or a cane, however, there are many disabilities that are not so obvious at first glance.

3 DO NOT INTERVENE IF A CHILD IS BEING ATTENDED TO.

If a parent or carer is addressing a child's behaviour there is no need for anyone else to intervene unless there is a significant risk of imminent danger. If in doubt, ask the carer if they need assistance and listen to their response before acting.

4 CONSULT WITH THE COMMUNITY.

Many environments, like the cinema, need modification to be inclusive, such as dedicated accessible time-slots. Most libraries will not need to make such allowances. However, people with disabilities in your local community and their families may feel this would be useful. Contact local organisations to see if a dedicated accessible time-slot would improve user accessibility.

5 PROVIDE STAFF WITH TRAINING.

If you are in a position of authority in your organisation, consider organising additional training for your staff. Knowing what to expect and having confidence to deal with difficult situations may bring about a change in attitude.

Together we can ensure that libraries are safe and welcoming spaces for all. A person with a disability, or any person in fact, who is welcomed into the library and made to feel comfortable is more likely to return. 🌟

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