

# Making the Wheel Bigger

## *Programming for Teens with Special Needs*

► KATIE MITCHELL

**W**hen I first entered the library profession, I worked in the youth and adult departments of my library. I was thrilled with the opportunity to work with patrons of all ages and, as I quickly found out, all abilities.

I had long known that one of the most fundamental principles of public libraries is our equal and open accessibility to all members of the community. It is a characteristic in which I take great pride and the one which we, as a profession, hope is known to all members of our communities. I was surprised to find, however, that this is a standard which, while taken as a given for librarians, is not as universally known as I would have hoped. In no area was this more apparent than in serving patrons with special needs.

Granted, I was in an interesting position to appreciate this conundrum. When I entered graduate school, my children were pre-school aged and younger, including my son who had been diagnosed with Autism. Although I was an avid library user and took my daughters to storytimes and other programs, my son's disability made these typical excursions difficult, sometimes unmanageable. While we were figuring out how to live with Autism and the challenges it presents, it was nearly impossible, to know if we could attend public outings without having the meltdowns that were characteristic for him. Our life following the diagnosis was often unpredictable at best and many of the simpler joys in life seemed out of reach. That isn't to say we weren't welcomed at the library, but if I didn't know how to manage the situation, I didn't know how anyone else could be expected to, either.

Intellectually, I knew that the library should also be a place for my son. And as one with a great passion for libraries, literacy, and the community, I hoped to find a niche that felt comfortable. My fondest area of research became understanding how libraries can best serve patrons with special needs and discovering what other librarians had already learned about this topic. At that time there wasn't a lot of published research regarding programming for special needs patrons. When I could find information, the articles were usually anecdotal or described the need for more and better services. A couple of cursory inquiries on professional listservs yielded similar results. Librarians were interested and ready—it was simply an area that was still being developed and modified. We were at the beginning of a generational change in the way services for special needs patrons were being viewed and provided.

National statistics support the idea of a generational shift. Since 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

(IDEA) has been in place to govern the educational services for people with special needs and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has protected civil rights for people with disabilities since 1990. We now live in a society that is much more inclusive and understanding regarding disabilities. IDEA statistics show that states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. In 1976, the number of students being served was 3.6 million. Inclusion has become a cornerstone for all public agencies and changes have

been made. In libraries, some of these changes have been out of necessity (complying with ADA laws for physical access, for instance), but the majority have come from the desire to bring library services to segments of the population who had not historically been library users. As Paula Schaffner, head of youth services at the Saline District Library said, "It wasn't reinventing the wheel; it was making the wheel bigger."

Inclusivity in the library has many facets. In a post for the American Library Services for Children blog, Renee Grassi suggests the top ten ways to tell if your library is inclusive. We

need our buildings, our staff, and our collections to reflect the needs of the totality of our populations. Supportive equipment and devices, as well as alternate formats and collections help us reach these standards. She also posits that programming is one of these top needs. "Programs for all ages are open and welcoming to patrons with special needs; surveys can be made available for parents with children with special needs about accommodations." Indeed, the time is right for inclusive programming for students with special needs. Since collaboration is also a hallmark of the library profession, sharing what works about this topic will help us to be comfortable with and truly enjoy special needs programming.

The best thing about starting new programming geared toward your library's special needs population is that it is a lot of fun. The amount of effort, money, and man-power that these programs need is eclipsed by the joy of bringing the library to a new and grateful audience. And the input of time and finances doesn't have to be a stressor. These are often the same programs we know and embrace, just tweaked for a different cohort.



KATIE DERSNAH MITCHELL AND AURELIA BERGER LIRONES  
SHARE A BOOK AT STORYTIME

Many libraries are already engaging in some form of special needs programming. Our standard storytimes, craft/games, and educational programs are easily fine-tuned for different populations and for people of varying abilities. Public librarians know how to do programs. The main challenge is actually finding your comfort level. The ease and joy one finds in typical programming is also part of special needs programming. But to get that assurance requires education, practice, and enthusiasm.

The first step in education is understanding what the term “special needs” means. The terminology for disabilities often shifts. The legal definition of disability is “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.” As previously noted, libraries as public spaces have already made changes to comply with laws regarding accessibility of public spaces, including getting rid of physical barriers and providing clear signage. While understanding physical disabilities is an important area to address when thinking about libraries, these are not usually the special needs which need to be specifically addressed in programming—cognitive and developmental disabilities are. Knowing what to expect from patrons with these disabilities in the library requires understanding just what is meant by these terms.

While these disabilities can be given general definitions, the occurrence and severity of any disability will be inherently specific to each individual. A developmental delay is any significant lag in a child’s physical, cognitive, behavioral, emotional, or social development, in comparison with norms. Developmental milestones may eventually be entirely or partially achieved, but may require assistive supports. A cognitive impairment affects the ability to think, concentrate, formulate ideas, reason, and remember. Previous terminology may have included mental disability or mental retardation, but these are not terms that are current standards within the special needs community. Moreover, mental retardation is a distinct diagnosis, one of many variations of cognitive impairments.

One disability that has skyrocketed into the public eye has been Autism, which is characterized by a marked difference in socialization, behavior, and communication. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the incidence of Autism Spectrum Disorder in American children is 1 in 88. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 336,000 students were categorized as having Autism in 2008/2009, up from 53,000 in 1998/1999, the first year Autism was listed as a separate disability under IDEA. Again, the level and severity of ASD will be personal for each youth, inspiring the common saying, “If you have met one person with Autism, you have met one person with Autism.” There are some specific characteristics and traits, however, that are helpful to understand for professionals who work with people with Autism. Socialization may be impacted by the lack of nonverbal behaviors to regulate social interaction (for example lack of eye contact or appropriate facial expressions), a

lack of spontaneous social interactions or emotional reciprocity, and an inability to understand another person’s perception of a situation. Communication may be delayed or a person with Autism who is not speech-delayed may find it difficult to understand the usual give and take of a conversation. Specific pragmatics of speech and communication may also be weakened. Slang, idioms, puns, and small talk are often areas of challenge for people with ASD. Behaviors may include repetitive

(sometimes referred to as stimming, from stimulating activity) or restricted patterns. Sensory characteristics may include difficulty in processing, defensiveness with tactile, auditory, and olfactory stimuli, and challenges with processing multiple types of sensory input.

It’s easy to get bogged down in the definitions and the myriad challenges developmental and cognitive disabilities present, but a solid base of understanding will go a long way for librarians and other staff members in knowing what to expect from patrons with these special needs. It’s equally important to acknowledge the strengths of these young people and support the ultimate goals of developing relationships, self-help skills, and the highest level of independence possible. This is where specifically planned special needs programming in the library has great potential.

One further point to consider before you start planning your programming is what the special needs community you are serving look like. The 6.5 million students listed in the IDEA encompass the ages of 3-21. As youth advocates, we need to serve the entire population. The programs we already incorporate for younger students can be modified and developed to appeal to older students as well. These children with disabilities will become

teens and then adults with disabilities. As our society becomes better equipped to support these people, they are staying in our communities and their homes. A main goal should be to help develop life-long library users and to, in fact, be “the peoples’ university,” a place of culture, entertainment, and education of all of the public.

Our professional desire to bring the love of the library to the entire population should be justification enough for developing specific special needs programming. Yet, in this era of tight budgets and minimized manpower, librarians often have to

provide extra corroboration for implementing new programs. The old model of assuming the whole community understands that they are welcome to library programming needs to be retired. Perception is key: while we know our programs are open to the general public, special needs families often feel uneasy about coming to them. One of the greatest challenges for special needs families is finding a social atmosphere that is welcoming to all their members. Specifically designing programs and inviting special needs families to the library is one of the greatest and most rewarding services we can offer to our patrons. Further, these are simply continuations of the programs with which we have expertise.

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THE DERSNAH/MITCHELL CLAN AT SPECIAL NEEDS MOVIE MATINEE

Developing special needs-specific programs should have two parts, in-house activities and community outreach. Within the library, programs can be book-related (book groups and storytimes), movie showings, hobby or health based, programs for parents, and library tours for school groups. Public outreach is also important—going into the community to promote these programs, identifying segments of the population who are not being served, and creating community partnerships that create a strong and inclusive society. Once one feels comfortable with the idea of this specific programming and has provided the rationale for supporting it, the fun of building these programs begins.

## STORYTIMES

All humans enjoy stories, but many families with special needs members don't attend our typical programs due to concerns about behavior and the ability to stay for the entire event. It's actually rather easy to make modifications to our existing storytimes if one cannot plan time for one specifically for special needs families. The keys are flexibility and invitation. Putting a statement of accommodation in library publicity is imperative. Something as simple as "People of all abilities are welcome!" will catch the attention of special needs families. Make sure that your room or storytime space has room for patrons who may need to move about. If you require registration, let families know they won't be penalized if they are unable to attend. Oftentimes, even with the best intentions and planning, families who are living with disabilities may find it impossible to make a planned event.

If you decide to do a storytime specifically geared for special needs patrons, your regular format will probably work well. Remember to keep these storytimes shorter (thirty minutes is usually sufficient), encourage participation (even if you don't get immediate responses, the youth are taking in everything you do), and pick books or topics that will be of high interest. Larger books with excellent illustrations are preferable for these programs. Crafts should be modified to allow a spectrum of participation. A coloring sheet is fine but even better if a variety of mediums are available to use for illustrating if the patron chooses to do so. One interesting thing to remember is that no program should be exclusive. Most parents of children who do not have special needs will not take spaces in a special needs-specific program, but if someone wishes to sign up, don't make them produce evidence of a disability as a prerequisite.

Outreach storytimes in conjunction with the public schools are also an option if your library has staff hours available. I developed and ran a storytime for a severely cognitively-impaired classroom through the Washtenaw (MI) Intermediate School district from 2007 through 2011. Once a week, I would show up with a bag full of books, silly props, and songs. The students were not otherwise receiving dedicated library programming at that time. I found that the keys to success were both flexibility and predictability. I had specific opening and closing songs and would have a general theme for the books. If a book wasn't working, the students were restless, or if any other variable required it, I would move on and try something new. Providing the teachers with a list of the songs, fingerplays, and books allowed them to use the library theme throughout the week.

Book groups are another program option, particularly for older students. Cognitive age should be the guideline for a program like this and a good name helps. Identifying it as "high interest books for teens and tweens" is much more effective and likely to encourage students who may have learning or cognitive disabilities, but are semi- or totally literate. Make sure you advertise the book titles ahead of time (this will actually also help patrons and their guardians understand the nature of the program) and actively recruit students from your interactions with the special education teachers in your district regarding students who might be interested in a high/low book group. (See sidebar for specific programming examples.)

## MOVIES

If your library has a movie license, you are incredibly close to having a very successful and well-attended special needs program. My first experience with special showings was in early 2002. A small, independent theater, South Lyon Cinema, started advertising a \$1-per-person showing billed as The Autism Show. Started by Corey and Pam Seeman, it was developed to "get autistic children into theaters, giving them and their families a 'normal' activity in a safe and non-threatening environment." The showing was not only inclusive, it kept the normally booming audio lowered and the house lights up, providing a safer environment for kids with sensory processing issues.

A few years later, some of the corporate theater chains started advertising these kinds of inclusive showings as well, but at a much steeper cost. A few minor adaptations made movie showings the perfect vehicle for Saline District Library's first special needs-specific programming. We now offer a free monthly Special Needs Movie Matinee, shown on our big screen TV in the local meeting room. Popcorn and a place where children and teens can be themselves are two of the most popular features of the afternoon.



THE AUTHOR AND HER SON, RHYS.

## HOBBIES

Your favorite programs to present and the typical fun and educational craft or hobby programs we routinely give are easy to expand to reach special needs patrons. In fact, doing the same program twice, once specifically for special needs patrons, can often make great fiscal sense. Young adults who have cognitive abilities that are lower than their chronological age often enjoy arts and crafts programs which are usually no longer available for their age group. Using the same craft ideas, or even having a hodge-podge crafting day with leftovers from previous programs provides a fun and social afternoon for these patrons. Again, advertising with teachers or identifying local community leaders who can get the information to special needs families is imperative for this kind of programming. If you don't know if your community has a local support group or parents' group for special needs families, contact your local intermediate school district.

A fantastic example of this kind of specialized programming is detailed in "Rated E for Everyone." The authors of this article promote special "gaming programs in libraries [which] provide the unique opportunity for children to improve eye-hand coordination, social skills, learning and memorization, pattern recognition, and basic literacy. All of these are important areas of

## STORYTIMES FOR OLDER STUDENTS

Storytimes for older students provide a great opportunity to showcase features of the library and create a core social group of interested teens and their families, which helps with promoting and marketing other special needs programming. Combining all of the inventiveness and creativity of typical storytimes with an eye toward introducing more library services to these patrons makes these programs particularly successful.

Focusing on an author/artist with a distinctive style is an easy way to bridge reading picture books with discussions of art. These storytimes can then branch into related art projects or be connected with longer books relating to the theme. Here are two examples:

### **Eric Carle Storytime**

**Papa Please Get the Moon for Me** (S&S, 1991), with its sweet plot and incredible fold-outs, pop-ups, and watercolors, is one of my favorites for an older student session. Have a display of his other picture books available.

**Eric Carle's Treasury of Classic Stories for Children by Aesop, Hans Christian Andersen, and The Brothers Grimm** (Orchard Books, 1988) and follow with longer, but familiar, stories, such as **The Lion and the Mouse** (Little, Brown, 2009). End with perennial favorite **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** (Philomel, 1996) (this really works well for all ages), and a watercolor mural—outline a butterfly on a queen sized sheet and let the students paint with wide stroke brushes. Serve make-it-yourself kabobs based on the fruits mentioned in the book for a snack.



### **Tomie de Paola Storytime**

This storytime works very well with students who may have some reading abilities or longer attention spans. Introduce the author/artist. Read **Strega Nona** (S&S, 1975) as an introductory piece. Read **26 Fairmont Avenue** (Putnam, 1999) either as a weekly chapter or as a whole book for a group that is able to do a book discussion. Lead into a discussion of the Caldecott and Newbery Awards—he was a winner and honor recipient for each, respectively. Make sure to introduce alternate formats for readers: audio, print, large print. Craft a macaroni mosaic and serve cold spaghetti from a large pot.

development, and offer children with special needs a fun, active, and engaging experience.” Even if your library doesn’t have a gaming console or vast collection of games, an old fashioned board game night is another inexpensive way to reach out to the community.

One remarkable model of dedicated inclusive programming comes from the Brooklyn Public Library’s The Child’s Place for Children With Special Needs. According to their website (<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/only-bpl/childs-place>), “We provide unique programs for children with and without disabilities from birth to age twelve. Fostering an inclusive environment, this unique Brooklyn resource opens its doors to all children, parents, caregivers, and educators.” Programming includes:

**After School Stories**, a fun-filled hour of stories and crafts for children with and without disabilities, their families, and friends.

**Weekend Programs** featuring guest performers who entertain and teach through puppet shows, sing-alongs, hands-on musical play with instruments, and interactive storytelling.

**Read and Play** provides children with and without disabilities up to age five (and their families) a book-sharing and creative educational playtime. Children learn social skills and language development is stimulated by playing together with age-appropriate toys.

**Our Garden Club** (April-October) in which participants focus on gardening and related activities.

Taking services a bit further, Jen Taggart of the Bloomfield Township Public Library has developed a workshop that brings these ideas to a larger audience. According to Taggart, “The Adaptive Umbrella workshop is a biennial day-long workshop featuring interactive sessions about current special needs topics, led by doctors, therapists, and other professionals working with youth who have special needs. The day is geared to librarians, teachers, and parents. As a result of disorders such as Autism being on the rise, many librarians are looking for ways to meet the needs of this increasing population in their communities through their collections and services. Because most librarians have not received formal training in special education or medicine, this workshop

encourages collaboration and gives librarians more confidence to interact with youth with different needs, build partnerships with special needs organizations in their community, and develop inclusive or special programming at their libraries.”

All of these programs require patience and enthusiasm, but the benefits are extraordinary. Kathleen McClatchey, the mother of a young man with Autism, summed it up, “It’s so important, and we are so grateful. There are things he can do as a twenty-one-year-old man that he wasn’t able to do as a child, and the library makes those available to him. And it’s a place with naturally softer sensory input. He adores the library. We can’t thank you enough.”

Let’s keep making that wheel bigger and open the library doors wider. ■

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Katie Dersnah Mitchell is a teen librarian at Saline District Library. She has presented about special needs programming at the Michigan Library Association Spring Institute in 2009, BTPL’s Adaptive Umbrella session in 2010, and The Library Network’s Youth Services Committee meeting in 2011. She is also a graduate of the Michigan START (Statewide Autism Resources and Training). Her favorite storytime theme for older or younger kids is “I love trash,” reflecting a life-long love of Sesame Street.



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