

What Do You Say, Dear; What Do You Do?

Creating a Welcoming Library Environment

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How do you feel when you walk into a new place and someone welcomes you with a smile and a big “hello?” How do you feel when you enter a new place and no one speaks to you?

For most, an enthusiastic welcome puts them at ease in an unfamiliar situation and creates the expectation of a pleasant experience. One of the most important aspects of the librarian’s job is to be welcoming, sincere, and friendly to all who come to children’s programs. Here are some tips offered by seasoned professionals who have spent years working with parents and babies regarding best practices for interacting with parents, caregivers, and children.

When people arrive, stand near the door and greet each one warmly. Select phrases are:

- Hi or hello.
- I’m so glad you’re here!
- Thanks for coming today!
- Hello, my name is ____; what’s yours?
- Welcome! Come right in!
- Hi, I’m ____; I’m so glad you’re here today. Your name? Your baby’s?

These are only suggestions. Most importantly, be yourself; use words you are comfortable using. Remember how it feels to come into a new situation, and consider how you would like to be greeted.

When you meet a toddler or preschooler for the first time, they are less inclined to tell you what their name is and more inclined to answer yes-or-no questions. Commenting positively on an item of clothing or something they have in their hands can forge an initial bond. You could also ask about what they’ve done so far today or what it was like getting to the library.

- What a lovely pink shirt you are wearing today.

- Oh, you have Teddy close to you today.
- Those are great light-up sneakers!
- You’re all bundled up for the snow outside.
- I love your sweatshirt; I wish there was one just like it in my size!

Refrain from commenting on the child; when you make comments about hairstyles or physical characteristics, even to say something like “What a pretty young lady!” you are passing judgment. Even if you think you are saying something positive, parents may not appreciate your comments.

Also, other parents might get offended if you do not say something similar to their child. If you repeat the same thing, though, parents will sense you are insincere. So, find some article of clothing or a favorite toy that invites positive comment, and initiate conversation with the child.

One of the best times for socializing with parents is immediately following a children’s program. For the parents of very young children, this time can be extremely important. Bringing out age-appropriate toys and giving the children a chance to play while the parents interact can be just as important as the

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formal program itself.

During this time, the librarian can play with the children and model play behavior or converse with parents. Parents can also get to know each other. These informal conversations create personal bonds and give the adults an opportunity to ask questions. Librarians can then offer support and information to the families.

Making conversation with strangers is not easy. For some librarians, this part of a programming session can be very difficult. Below are some tips for utilizing the time after a program most effectively:

- Ask a parent simple questions or make observations regarding their child. Parents welcome the opportunity to speak about them. Your comments will encourage them to make observations of their own. Possible questions and observations for programs geared for children under the age of two are:
 - *Please remind me of your child's name.* Don't ask, "What is your child's name?" because then it sounds like you never knew it. By saying "Please remind me" you are letting the parent know that it is important to you, that you know you have heard it at least once already but you would like to be reminded.
 - *How old is your child?*
 - *Does your child sleep through the night?* Most young children do not sleep through the night. Because of this, the parents end up getting very little sleep. Bleary-eyed parents will appreciate hearing that someone can relate; being able to talk about it relieves some of the burden. Just listen to them. You do not need to offer any cures. If the parent seems to want advice, you can mention that there is book on getting your child to sleep through the night in the library's parenting section (but make sure there really is one there before you recommend it).
 - *Susie looks like she's ready to walk all over the room!*
 - *What new things has your child done this week?*
 - *Tell me about your baby. What is he or she like?* This is a great conversation starter. When a librarian is a good, active listener, he or she can learn a lot about the parent and baby and how they are doing together. And with that information, he or she can let parents know the library can provide parenting information and direct them to any community resources they may need.

Questions are easier because you can just listen to what the parents have to say. Observations require more attention on your part.

Additional useful prompts include:

- What makes him smile?
- What soothes him when he's crying?
- Does she have a favorite thing to hold or play with?
- How is she alike and different from her brothers or sisters?

This is a good time to observe the nature of a new baby. From the start, we can often see a unique personality emerging, and that's fun to point out and celebrate:

- Your daughter seems very curious about the world around her.
- Your son seems to gravitate toward other children.
- I noticed Joey really responded to the bell portion of the program today.
- I loved watching Ellie bounce with the shaker eggs.
- Your son really watches what's going on and takes a lot in.

It's important to follow parents' cues. Respond based on what they have said to you. And it's okay if a parent doesn't want to talk or is just reserved or shy. You can always say:

- You're doing a wonderful thing by bringing your baby to the library.
- You're giving your baby a great start. Fantastic!
- I really admire your effort in taking two buses to get here each week.

When they are more comfortable, and see your genuine interest, quieter parents will ask for information. Don't be pushy about questioning; just be available! And then, just like the warm welcome you offered at the beginning, give parents a hearty goodbye and thanks for coming:

- It was great seeing you today!
- Looking forward to seeing you next week!
- I loved having you and (baby's name) in our program today!

When young families bring their babies to the library and receive a warm and friendly welcome, they learn about community support and resources and they will soon realize they are never alone.

Words have power, and our easy and frequent conversations with parents can go a long way in acting as a gateway to the larger world of books. Children's librarians have the privilege of helping parents raise children who are readers and lifelong library users, and it only takes a few words and a few thoughtful moments. ☺