

Children Choose: Children's Advisory Boards in Libraries

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Sponsored by the Collaborative Summer Library Program



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Introduction

Children's collection development and programming is implemented by adults based on librarians' knowledge and experience of what children might need. Children's services in libraries are mediated entirely through adults. Libraries are missing direct input from elementary-aged children regarding books and programming. MLIS students at the University of Washington created a research-based framework to implement Children's Advisory Boards (CABs) in libraries.

The University of Washington MLIS students pilot tested the Children's Advisory Boards at three different locations: the Central Branch of the Santa Barbara Public Library in Santa Barbara, California; the Hayden Branch of the Community Library Network in Hayden, Idaho; and Central Heights Elementary in Billings, Montana. The data and observations from these pilot locations were compiled to create the following toolkit. All three pilot locations have expressed interest in continuing CABs in their libraries.

What is a Children's Advisory Board?

A Children's Advisory Board (CAB) is a facilitated group where elementary-aged children advise libraries on collection development and library programming specific to children.

Mission

The mission of this research project is to promote the beliefs that:

- Children are experts in their own interests, needs, and peer groups.
 - For libraries to be fully inclusive, children's opinions must be given respect and consideration.
 - Including children's opinions in library collection development and programming improves the experiences of children, their caregivers, and librarians.
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Why Have a CAB?

- Library purchasing and programming is mediated through adults and based on adult opinion, research, and expertise. Children's expertise is not utilized in these decisions.
- Children have the right to opinions about the spaces they use.

- There can be a drop in book circulation for middle grade readers. Listening to children's opinions can improve collection development, displays, and circulation.
 - CABs can increase librarians' understanding of what children want from their libraries.
 - Program ideas from children could help libraries have better attended, new, and/or more innovative programs.
 - CABs can lead to increased pride and ownership children and families feel in their library.
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Where to Have a CAB

These are the types of libraries we piloted CABs in, but CABs can be remixed to fit any library that serves elementary-aged children.

- The Santa Barbara Public Library
 - The Santa Barbara Public Library has 5 branches in the County of Santa Barbara and 2 branches in Santa Barbara, California.
 - The Santa Barbara Public Library city branches serve a population of 91,930 people. This was piloted at the Central Library.
 - At the Central Library there are 40 staff members.
 - The Community Library Network (Hayden branch)
 - Community Library Network has 7 branches and a bookmobile in Kootenai and western Shoshone Counties, Idaho.
 - While the Hayden branch is located in a town with a population of 14,400, the Community Library Network has a service population of 105,500 people in two primarily rural counties covering 1,150 square miles.
 - The Community Library Network has 93 employees, 30 of whom work out of the Hayden branch.
 - Central Heights Elementary
 - It is a K-5 school in Billings, Montana and serves 286 students.
 - All students go to the library once a week for library skills.
 - There are 64 4th graders and 52 5th graders at Central Heights.
 - It is one of 22 elementary schools in the Billings Public School District.
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Ways to Run Your CAB

- Discussion Based
 - After setting the ground rules, the library facilitator asks (of those who wish to participate in discussion) open-ended questions regarding books the children have read, programs they have attended, programs they would like to see, and trends in their peer groups.
 - Example questions: What games are kids in your class playing? Is there a new video game you would like to play? What types of books are your favorites? What have been your favorite library programs? What programs would you like to see at the library?
 - Exploratory
 - Set up activities or stations for the children to explore.
 - After 20 minutes of exploration, discuss what the children did and their opinions.
 - Discuss what the children would like to do more of and what they want to do with the materials and activities provided.
 - Could be done in a drop-in program/open house format, with smaller group discussions.
 - School Lunchtime Clubs
 - Run CABs during students' lunch period
 - Use short (i.e twenty minute) blocks of time while students eat lunch.
 - When the weather grows nicer in the spring, students may want to go outside for lunchtime recess. Give students who want to stay inside and read the option to do so. For this reason, plan to split longer tasks into two parts:
 - Part 1: Peruse NetGalley or catalogs
 - Part 2: Hold discussion about choices, how they chose materials, programming brainstorm session, in the next meeting.
 - Maintaining a regular meeting schedule will help with retention. A set schedule makes it easier for students to remember.
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How to Start a CAB

- **Promote:** Advertise for your CAB!
 - Use formal library channels to publish advertising about upcoming CAB meetings.
 - Use informal advertising (talking to children you think might be a good fit or interested) to encourage children to attend.

- Many participants in our pilot CABs said they learned of the CAB after their caregiver read about it on Facebook.
 - **Gather:** Gather materials for your CAB.
 - Our pilot locations sourced advance reading copies (ARCs) for children to review and make purchasing recommendations. ARCs can be sourced from publishers, library conferences, and from soliciting ARC donations from bookstores.
 - Provide catalogs or websites for children to “shop” and make recommendations about programming or materials purchasing.
 - Provide a technology petting zoo (robots, coding, drones, etc.) for children and families to try out new technology purchased by the library to gather informal observations about programming needs and wants.
 - **Maintain:** Keep a regular meeting schedule (i.e. the third Thursday of each month) Advertise frequently.
 - Realize that not all children will be able to make every meeting.
 - Think about structuring meetings in a way that will provide enough flexibility to host a fluctuating number and group of children.
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First CAB Meeting

It was very important to all pilot locations that we set firm ground rules to create and foster a welcoming and comfortable environment where all children felt safe to share their ideas and opinions.

- **Rules:** Based on research of child information behavior and the needs of children in a research setting, we established the following protocol for our pilot CABs:
 - Children could leave at any time.
 - Children were given access to advance reading copies (ARCs).
 - Children were not required to read the books.
 - Children chose their level of participation at each meeting.
 - Children were not required to attend the next meeting.
 Librarian acted only as a guide to facilitate respectful discussion.
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Our Takeaways

- Children learned to debate opinions in a positive and productive way.
 - Some participants were shy, but warmed up as the meeting progressed.
 - Others were very outspoken and interrupted others.

- Political conversations were brought up. Library facilitator ensured all opinions were heard and respected.
- When provided with a wide variety of books, children chose those with diverse covers and/or subject matter.
 - Mirror and window books were selected often.
 - CAB groups reflected diversity of communities.
 - In two instances, CABs were more diverse than their respective communities.
- Children at all three pilot locations liked books that had/were:
 - Scary (based on the cover or summary)
 - Mysteries
 - Animal books
 - Graphic novels
 - Had cool titles or covers
 - Funny
 - Explosions on the cover
 - Adventurous (based on the cover)
- Depending on location, 50-80% of CAB members were new to library programming.
 - Scheduling was a problem. The children were unable to consistently attend each one.
 - Each program achieved about 50% retention
 - Attendance numbers stayed the same, which meant new attendees each month replaced participants unable to attend that month's program
- Children informed facilitator of new gaming and entertainment trends among their peer groups that the facilitator had not previously been aware of.
- Caregiver buy-in was enthusiastic.
 - Although some caregivers watched and listened in on the program, none participated.
 - Parents contacted librarians and were among those who voted for CABs to continue at their libraries.
- Children suggested programs that they would like to see in the future such as:
 - Children's treasure fair (each child brings their favorite items to display at a fair)
 - Career fairs
 - Inviting descendants of famous people to speak
 - Family book club
 - Family dance party
 - Knifemaking
 - Science presentations
 - Book clubs
 - Cooking classes

- Art classes
 - Nature discovery (pelts, animals, etc.)
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Activities Your CAB Can Do

- Booktalks
 - Suggest new purchases for the children's department
 - Plan programs
 - Help redesign library space
 - Recommend their favorite technologies
 - Assist in book selection and collection development
 - Talk about book trends
 - Discuss trends among their peers at local elementary schools, homeschools, or other places they spend time with peers.
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Best Practices

- Establish ground rules and stick to them, while remaining flexible. Ground rules are there to help children feel welcome and safe.
 - The ground rules create a safe space that conveys to each child, "You don't have to speak or participate, but are always welcome to participate." Repeat this throughout the meeting as a reminder that it is a safe space.
 - Discussions should be kid-led. While the facilitator will prompt with opening questions, the children lead the discussion. Facilitator helps to guide discussion to maintain a positive and respectful atmosphere.
 - Encourage children to not give away spoilers in their book talks/reviews. It is not fun for those who have not read a book for it to be spoiled by those who have read it.
 - Ensure what you promise is followed through. For example, if the children choose things from a catalog or NetGalley, ensure those items are available as soon as possible. Children should have tangible proof their ideas come to fruition.
 - Look for the "yes" in each child's idea. While all ideas may not be feasible (such as having a famous singer come to the library), find the doable aspects in each idea. There is a "yes" in each suggestion a child has, even if it requires reframing and creativity.
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Research Summary

Implementing Children's Advisory Boards in libraries sought to fill the information gap between programming and ordering books for children and what children actually want and need. The need for this type of program is based on the fact that "adults control the world of children's literature: adults write the books; adults choose which books to publish; adults review the books; adults bestow the awards on books; and adults purchase the books for their homes, bookstores, and libraries. In the midst of all this adult control, children's opinions are often overlooked" (Davila & Patrick, 2010, p. 201). The same can be said for libraries of all types: librarians put books on shelves using a knowledge of literacy and trends, cross their fingers, and hope that children like them. Sometimes these items never circulate, costing the library money, space, and time. "The challenge for the children's librarian, therefore, is to work out how to facilitate participation in the development of children's collections in an appropriate way" (Aggleton, 2018, p.8). Our group proposes that Children's Advisory Boards are a potential bridge to this information gap. CABs incorporate children's opinions in a way that could improve materials and services provided for children.

Including children's opinions in library collections helps to build a collection that is more representative of children. Jen Aggleton, of the Faculty of Education at University of Cambridge, argues that children should be involved with collection development in both school and public libraries as both contain collections that children interact with (2018). On this basis "children should therefore have the right to be involved in the development of these collections" (Aggleton, 2018, p.11). In addition to including children's opinions in library collections, libraries work to encourage students' self-selection of reading materials. Students' self-selecting methods are driven by interest, comfort, and familiarity (Fresch, 1995). Letting children self-select reading materials aids in their literacy skills (Fresch, 1995) and growth on state standardized tests (Smith & Becher, 1960). "In order for children to have a real voice in the development of children's collections, it is essential for librarians and archivists to actively seek out methods of participation beyond the request box" (Aggleton, 2018, p.14).

Our research-based framework in conducting the pilot CABs was guided by Jen Aggleton's recommendations that we "have a balance between allowing the children to participate and not putting undue pressure on them" (J. Aggleton, personal communication, January 24, 2018). It was Aggleton's suggestion, based on her own research and experience, that we not "require every participant to attend every meeting, but allow them to temporarily withdraw if they have other things going on" (J. Aggleton, personal communication, January 24, 2018).

Our group size was guided by Greene and Hogan, who recommend child focus groups "contain no fewer than five children and no more than eight" (2005). They suggest that facilitators should be flexible and "should be prepared to terminate discussion early if children

appear bored or tired and may prolong the session if children appear engaged and eager to contribute” (Greene and Hogan, 2005). Greene and Hogan also state there are three responsibilities for the facilitator:

1. To make the group feel “comfortable and at ease” (Greene and Hogan, 2005) by “using language [the children] understand” and by acknowledging each child’s contributions (Greene and Hogan, 2005). Engaging activities will help to keep children’s attention and make them comfortable in the group setting (Greene and Hogan, 2005). Additionally, if the facilitator makes it clear that they are not there to discipline or act as an authority figure, they can maintain a comfortable atmosphere for the children.(Greene and Hogan, 2005).
2. To “keep the group discussion focused on the topic of interest and to ensure that all children have the opportunity to contribute” (Greene and Hogan, 2005).
3. Finally, to clarify any ambiguous or contradictory remarks a child may state (Greene and Hogan, 2005).

Greene and Hogan identify four rights of children:

1. The “right to satisfactory development and wellbeing (welfare rights)” (Greene and Hogan, 2005);
2. The “right to protection from harm (protective rights)” (Greene and Hogan, 2005);
3. The “right to appropriate services (provision rights)” (Greene and Hogan, 2005);
4. The “right to express opinions which are taken account of (choice or participatory rights)” (Greene and Hogan, 2005).

It is our belief that through the use of Children’s Advisory Boards, libraries can move one step closer in fulfilling these fundamental rights of children.

Websites

Toolkit: www.childrenchoosetoolkit.weebly.com

University of Washington Capstone Projects:

<https://ischool.uw.edu/capstone/projects/2018/children-choose-childrens-advisory-boards-libraries>

Researcher Biographies

Stacey Akahoshi:

Stacey Akahoshi laughed the first time someone suggested she become a librarian. Although she thought the idea was absurd, she researched librarianship and realized this was the perfect career for her. She often refers to her job as a scavenger hunt. She has worked in public libraries in

California for three years. She is currently a Senior Library Technician of Youth Services Programming at the Santa Barbara Public Library.

Mandi Harris:

Mandi Harris is an accidental librarian, and there has been no happier accident for someone who loved to alphabetize books as a kid. She adores getting to see children fall in love with reading, learning, and the world around them. She has been a Youth Services Specialist at the Community Library Network in Kootenai and western Shoshone counties for five years.

Kourtni McHugh:

Kourtni McHugh grew up wanting to be a spy, a pirate, or a Christmas elf; the job of an elementary librarian sometimes feels like all three of these. She has been an elementary librarian at Central Heights Elementary, in Billings, Montana, for five years. She loves the flexibility, the variety, staff, and students at her school!

Appendices

Children's Advisory Board Advance Reading Copy Review Form

For children to take home and use for notes on their ARCs

- 1. What is the title and author of the book?**
- 2. Why did you choose this book?**
- 3. Did you like the book? Why or why not?**
- 4. Would your friends like the book? Why or why not?**
- 5. Would you recommend this book to anyone? Why or why not?**
- 6. Should the library purchase this book?**

Children's Advisory Board "Shopping" List

Used to review books from NetGalley or catalogs

1. Book Title _____

Author _____

Why? _____

2. Book Title _____

Author _____

Why? _____

3. Book Title _____

Author _____

Why? _____

4. Book Title _____

Author _____

Why? _____

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