A New Normal: Creative Library Services to Young People during Abnormal Times
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In the United States, the Coronavirus pandemic is presenting challenges to young people's learning and highlighting issues of the digital divide—those who have access to technology, versus those who do not.

This lack is especially prevalent in Spring 2020 as learning for all children has moved online. Even before the pandemic, the Pew Research Center described a "homework gap" which exists because "roughly one-third (35%) of households with children ages 6 to 17 and an annual income below $30,000 a year do not have a high-speed internet connection at home." Subsequently, many young people are left struggling to attend online classes and get their work done. The full outcomes of this inequity remain to be seen, but we can already guess at the results of this disparity. Those who have access to technology and Internet at home (as well as parents who can support their learning) will undoubtedly fare far better academically, socially, and psychologically than those without.

Libraries are doing what they can to fill the gaps in access to technology. According to Kyra Nay, Children's Librarian at the Maple Heights Branch of the Cuyahoga County Public Library, CCPL is lending portable hotspots, which provide free internet access to those who have phones, tablets, or computers, and is providing reference services and reading recommendations via email. Nay has ideas for digital programming for children, including weekly LEGO building challenges, "read-to-a-librarian," and an online children's art show.

The American Library Association has recommended that libraries leave their WiFi on beyond usual building hours so that people can have free Internet access from outside the building. Libraries are working with Internet providers to expand the reach of their WiFi and are even using bookmobiles to bring WiFi out into remote communities.

Libraries are also boosting online learning opportunities. According to Heather Soyka (Sokya, in Johnston, 2020), libraries are increasing their spending on digital streaming services, such as hoopla, which offers access to digital versions of all the types of resources libraries have always provided: ebooks, audiobooks, magazines, movies, and music, and making these resources available. Children's librarians are curating lists of authors and illustrators offering reading books or providing drawing lessons.

Virtual storytimes are available for those with internet access, but also for those without. As Alaska Librarian Claudia Haines points out in her blog, her library was accustomed to planning for the types of disasters that could strike in Alaska, such as tsunamis and earthquakes, but not for a pandemic. In rural Alaska, where Haines lives and works, lack of Internet access is also an issue. Instead of internet-based storytimes, Haines has partnered with a local AM Radio station to provide radio-based storytimes.

Outside the Homer, Alaska library, there are storywalks, with book's pages spaced 6 feet (2 meters) apart. Storywalks encourage reading, whole-family-engagement around literacy, and as an added bonus, exercise.

During the Coronavirus pandemic, librarians are proving their worth, providing access to the Internet, creating and curating materials which enhance learning, and thinking creatively to provide out-of-the-box (or building) service to all patrons. The spirit is very much: We will get through this together!

References

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