

Proposal: Meeting the Needs of Children with Disabilities

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Introduction

The Henrico County Public library system is a well-funded, respected center of the Henrico County community with a robust collection and calendar of events to support their community. However, children and teenagers with disabilities may not find themselves as easily included or able to access these events due to limited support for their participation. Families of these children may also struggle to meet their information or recreation needs in the same ways as other families. However, careful planning to meet the sensory and informational needs of these patrons can increase accessibility and use by all of the community.

Community Assessment

The Henrico County public library system (HCPL) serves a community of 330,818 residents (US Census Bureau, n.d.d.). In the 2010 census, 59.2% of residents were white, 29.5% were Black, 6% Asian, 0.3% American Indian or Native Alaskan, with 2.3% of residents identifying as 2 or more races (US Census Bureau, n.d.c). Henrico County's community includes 80,317 residents under the age of 20, with approximately half of these children being 9 years or younger (US Census Bureau, n.d.a). 13.6% of children live in a household at or below the poverty label, with 18.4% of children receiving public assistance. 4.2% of children are identified with a disability (US Census Bureau, n.d.b.). Henrico County Public Schools includes over 40 early childhood special education programs, serving 626 students (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.a). In the school-age population, Henrico served 6,229 students with disabilities in 2019-2020. Of these students, at least 853 students are identified as autistic (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.b.). This is an underestimate of the number of students with disabilities and / or sensor processing needs, as this only includes students with an identified

disability within the K-12 school system. Sensory needs can occur in children who do not have a diagnosis or may not yet need special education support in school. The exact number of students with sensory support needs is thus likely higher. 2019-2020 student numbers are being used due to the impact of COVID-19 on enrollment numbers during the 2020-2021 school year.

HCPL circulated 4,983,690 items in 2017, for an average of 15.67 items per capita (Library of Virginia, 2017). This is one of the higher rates of circulation in the state of Virginia. It also had 2.1 million visits during 2017a, with 6.73 visits per capita (Library of Virginia, 2017b). This is higher than the median per capita visits, but below the average. The Henrico library system is frequently used by the community with robust collection, circulation, and calendar of events. As a center of the community, it is essential that the library serves all of its patrons well.

Targeted Patrons

This proposal targets children with disabilities, including autism and/or sensory processing disorder, ages birth through 17, as well as their families and caregivers. The Centers for Disease Control estimates 1 in 6 children have a developmental disability (Center for Disease Control, 2020). Despite this frequency, children with disabilities are a frequently underserved population in the library system, targeted by the Association for Library Service to Children in their Library Service to Underserved Children and their Caregivers committee (Eastman & Prince, 2020). Libraries have a responsibility to consider adapted programming, resources, or partnerships to support these patrons.

Service Need

HCPL's mission is to "promote reading and lifelong learning, connect people with the information they need, and enrich community life" (Henrico County Public Library, n.d.a., para

1). HCPL has a commitment to “equitable access”, emphasized in both their vision and values (para 2). As part of their mission, HCPL provides a wide variety of children’s programming throughout the year, targeted to pre-readers (ages birth through 5), elementary (grades K-5), and tweens/teens (Henrico County Public Library, n.d.c.). Storytime is divided into “Babies Songs & Stories”, story time, and “Family Fun” (family story time). Additional thematic programming is available monthly, featuring arts & crafts, STEM projects, and social interaction.

HCPL currently provides limited explicit support for children or teens with disabilities. Some of the newer buildings include flexible seating (e.g., cubbies, rockers). They have intermittently offered “sensory story time” but the current children’s librarians could not identify which branch or whether this service would begin again as the library began to re-open (M. Coyle, personal communication, June 23, 2021). As of July 2021, there were no sensory storytimes listed on the upcoming calendar of events (Henrico County Public Library, n.d.c.). Sensory storytime was one of only two initiatives related to disability in Henrico’s posted Equity & Inclusion plan (Henrico County Public Library, n.d.b.). The other initiative was a single training on autism provided by Faison, a local private school for autistic students.

Faison has an informal partnership with the public library system. Prior to COVID-19 closures, Faison’s students visited weekdays in small groups to browse books and use the computers (C. Holliman, personal communication, February 22, 2021). These are primarily teen student groups participating in community-based instruction. The children’s department speaks highly of this program and the relationships built throughout. HCPL also partners with public schools for field trips. However, many early childhood special education teachers have reported

concerns about whether the public library would be able to meet their students' activity level and sensory support needs. Because of this, they typically avoid trips to the library.

These feelings unfortunately are not unusual. Many families report a sheer dearth of available activities or peer groups available to their autistic children (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2019). Families have reported feeling "under scrutiny", while librarians have also noted concerns about staff's ability to respond to children with cognitive or behavioral disabilities (Prendergast, 2016, p. 75). These same children's librarians reported a commitment to including all children in their storytimes, but also said that they rarely had attendance by those with disabilities. This was similar to responses when I asked about attendance at story time by young children with disabilities at HCPL (M. Coyle, personal communication, June 23, 2021).

Additionally, families have noted difficulty with finding information about services or activities that are available to their children (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2019). This includes information about sensory-friendly activities, sports, peer connections, or transitions. As one interviewed parent said, they must continually search because there is "no one good source" (p. 561). Black parents were more likely to look for information from institutions or print materials (books, pamphlets), while white parents were more likely to rely on personal connections. Overall, families of children with disabilities have additional information needs, but did not feel that the public library was a source for meeting those needs (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2019).

To summarize, children with disabilities, their caregivers, and their teachers may feel alienated from the public library, despite the commitment of librarians' to serve all children. This population has unique sensory and social support needs, while their families have unique information seeking needs. A small amount of specialized programming has been tried by HCPL,

but it is not clear how successful this programming has been. Rather than additional specialized programming, this proposal targets creating a sensory-friendly environment throughout the children's department, while also meeting the unique needs of adults in these families. Much like baby spaces send the message that babies are welcome, sensory accommodations send the message that children with sensory, attention, or behavioral differences are welcome here. This includes:

- Sensory kits available at each branch for child use in the library.
- Sensory maps & schedules visibly posted in each branch.
- Board with specialized information for families of children with disabilities.

Sensory Kits

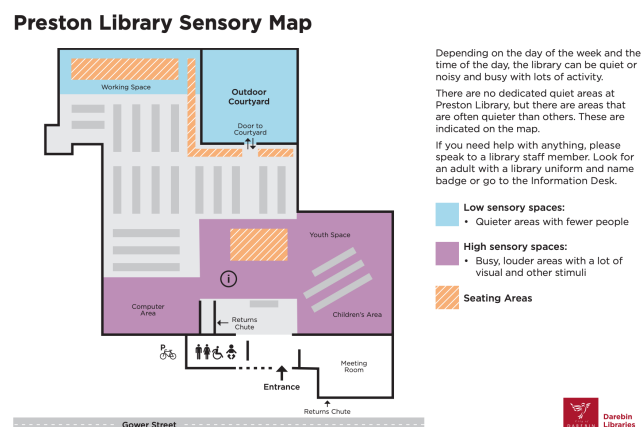
Sensory kits for self-regulation are a tool that have been used by public libraries throughout the nation (Weiss, 2018; Wheaton Public Library, n.d.). Libraries have created both kits that are for use within the library and kits that are available for check-out (Irdell County Public Library, n.d.; Crete Public Library District, n.d.). Indeed, one library system with poor turn-out for sensory story time found that sensory story kits were more successful as families required flexibility based on their schedule, their child's mood, and other factors (Sexton, 2017).

Sensory kits typically include: noise-cancelling headphones, flexible visuals, fidget toys, and items for tactile exploration, as well as movement or song-based story books. I additionally recommend a weighted lap pad and/or stretchy material for children who need proprioceptive input, as used by the Multnomah County library system in Oregon (Weiss, 2018). Kits stationed for use within the branch should be freely accessible to patrons for material use when exploring the library or participating in programming. All kits should have clear visual support on how

these materials could be used. Additionally, library staff should have training in the materials and recognizing signs of sensory distress, so that they can offer support to families (American Library Association, 2018). When interviewed, families reported feeling more welcome when librarians offer assistance rather than ignoring or turning away from meltdowns in the library (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2019).

Sensory Maps & Schedules

Sensory maps identify locations with high and low traffic, high and low noise, and natural lighting (Syracuse University, n.d.). They can also highlight sensory-relevant materials, such as sensory kits or where one could take a quiet break (e.g., study rooms with flexible seating). Additionally, some libraries post schedules that detail busy / quiet times so that patrons can select the least crowded time to attend. A sensory map and crowd schedule should be clearly posted at the entry to the library, as well as within the children's department and on the library's website. These visuals support patrons to locate the environment that best meets their needs. Below is an example of a library's sensory map from the Daredin Library system.



Darebin Libraries. (2019). Sensory maps.

https://www.darebinlibraries.vic.gov.au/Assets/Files/2019_Sensory%20Maps.pdf

Information Board

Families often have to expend large amounts of emotional energy to locate events and resources for their child with a disability (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2019). Libraries can reduce these barriers by creating a physical and virtual information board. This information board could include flyers from community organizations that host inclusive or disability-only events, a list of local organizations that serve children with disabilities, and specific tips or strategies for early childhood, early literacy, sensory regulation, or other topics of interest. Similar to how libraries create LibGuides to assist students with research, this board could provide resources for families and ease their stress through building their research skills. The Ferguson Library in Stamford, Connecticut offers an example of a similar program in their Special Needs Center (Ferguson Library, n.d.). The virtual page offers links to specific books of interest in the catalog and digital brochures with parental advice (e.g., “Making sense of sensory-processing disorder”), while the in-person center links families to specialized magazines, software, and notices of nearby events. Rather than a center at one specific branch, which may not be accessible to all of Henrico’s patrons, I recommend a standing information board for equity of access across the county.

Policy Review

Additionally, I recommend a review of library policies to ensure that autistic children, teens, and adults are able to be themselves in the library, which may include vocal and physical stimming. These self-stimulatory behaviors are often uncontrollable and can serve as a source of regulation amidst overwhelm, anxiety, or even joy (Kapp, 2019). Thus a sensory-friendly environment incorporates policies that allow for autistic patrons to engage in these behaviors without fear. The success of the Libbie Mill’s partnership with Faison showcases that it is

possible to welcome all patrons into the environment with empathy and compassion, rather than judgment or fear of disruption. The library's policies must ensure that "a person's right to use a library [is not] denied or abridged because of a disability", eliminating the invisible barriers that all too often exclude (American Library Association, 2018, section V).

Outreach & Collaboration Plan

Collaboration

The best organizations for collaboration are those who share an alignment in mission and values (Kowalsky & Woodruff, 2017). In addition to the public school system, Henrico is home to several private schools who serve students with disabilities, including North Star, St. Joseph's, and Faison. School systems offer an opportunity for partnership as their missions generally include a focus on improving quality of life for children with disabilities across the lifespan. Informal and formal groups (e.g., Facebook groups, Autism Society of Central Virginia, ARC, HCPS Special Education Advisory Committee) for families also serve similar missions in providing information and resources. Feedback from those served by these organizations is invaluable, guiding the selection of sensory materials, development of sensory maps, or providing information on specific local needs. Each of these organizations would also be an excellent source for the information board. Staff training on sensory regulation could be provided through partnership with Henrico County Public Schools, which has many occupational therapists on staff, or one of the private companies that provide occupational therapy services.

Outreach

While all new materials should always be advertised in the library, on the website, and on social media, HCPL cannot rely on these avenues for advertising sensory kits, sensory maps,

or information boards. Historically, the target audience of this proposal are underserved by the library and may not be connected to any of these channels. Instead, marketing should focus on partnerships that will assist in reaching new audiences. Flyers advertising sensory kits and information boards should be sent home to children receiving special education services in public or private schools. These flyers can also be posted at local therapy organizations (e.g., Children's Hospital of Richmond, Spot On Therapy, SOAR 365, Rehab Associates, HOPE Therapy, etc). Librarians should also consider intermittently presenting about the information board at parent support meetings (e.g., Special Education Advisory Committee, Autism Society of Central VA). The library should also advertise these new materials to private and public school classroom teachers in the county, inviting them to consider field trips with the addition of these sensory support materials for their students.

Throughout all marketing materials, photographs or quotes from previously successful partnerships should be used to showcase that every child is truly welcome in the library. As Kaeding writes, "Families of children with special needs face discrimination on a daily basis. It can take a lot of self-confidence and strength for families of children with special needs to ask for accommodations to be made. Marketing is an essential way public libraries can put out the 'welcome mat'" (Kaeding, 2015, p. 23). The inclusion of children with disabilities, such as children who use wheelchairs, communication devices, or headphones, in marketing materials and on the library website is part of creating that welcome mat (Rankin, 2018).

Identified and Needed Support

The bulk of funding for this program will be up-front costs, including the purchase of baskets, sensory materials, and new signs. Additional sensory materials to be used as

replacements during the first year of implementation will also be included in this pricing.

Libraries will need to locate a space to place an information board; they may need to purchase a bulletin board or display that can be placed at the end of shelving if there is not already available space. The library will seek grant funding for these items from Autism: We're Connected (\$5,000) or IMLS, which has funded previous grants for libraries to build sensory-friendly spaces (Farrell, 2014). Additional information on Autism: We're Connected grants can be found at <http://librariesandautism.org/grant/>. Ongoing funding for additional replacement materials will need to be incorporated into the library's operating budget. This guarantees the program remains stable, rather than reliant on donations.

Compensation for staff participation in training on sensory regulation may need to be considered if live training is offered. It may be possible to offer this training as part of the staff's built-in time, or through asynchronous materials that staff can complete as time allows. Free, asynchronous training is available through Project ENABLE, Autism Internet Modules, and Project PALS. For the remaining passive programming, there is a limited amount of time required from additional staff. This will include staff time to clean sensory materials and provide monthly updates to the information board. Volunteers and/or partnerships with community organizations may be able to fill some of these duties as they do not require specialized library & information science knowledge.

Strategic Alignment

This proposal aligns with the PLA Strategic, 2018-2022 plan, which sees the library as "the heart of every community" and "leaders of practicing inclusion" (PLA, 2018, 'Vision' para 1, para 3). Henrico County, much like public libraries across the nation, is not yet truly a welcoming

place for all residents, including those with disabilities. By creating sensory kits and sensory maps, HCPL will increase opportunities for the participation of children with disabilities across all library environments. Meanwhile, the use of information boards targeting families of children with disabilities will provide “relevant resources and research tools” for families who do not currently feel the library can meet their information needs (PLA, 2018).

Conclusion

Henrico County Public Library has the opportunity to create an accessible, inclusive environment that welcomes each child and family with open arms by developing sensory kits, sensory maps, and information resources. Sensory kits and sensory maps would increase the ability for children with disabilities to participate in book browsing, play-based activities, and programming in the library, while information resources would meet the information access needs of their families. By developing these resources, the library will not only meet explicit needs of patrons with disabilities, but also demonstrate a deep commitment to inclusive communities, welcoming to all.

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