

Working With Libraries

The following conversation thread occurred on one of the AHA email lists...

We are Billy and Nancy Greer, co-founders of North County Home Educators, a local Maryland homeschooling support group, and the Family Unschoolers Network which produces a national newsletter for homeschoolers.

We have worked with local libraries to set up homeschooling resource folders for the librarians that include descriptions and contact info for support groups, sample magazines and newsletters, etc. We wanted to provide some homeschooling magazines to our libraries, but one thing we discovered was that the libraries here do not keep donated periodicals. Apparently, they must pay for a subscription in order to catalog them and keep back issues. Do other libraries have similar policies?

Diane Adams wrote:

I am the Youth Services Librarian at Monmouth Public Library in Monmouth, OR. I am currently in a small library with a few homeschool families. They do not have an organized group and I have had difficulty in working with them. They seem to prefer to be left alone at this point.

I'd love to hear ideas on how to approach my families with ideas and resources and other things the library might be able to do for them. I come from an area with highly developed groups and lots of activities as a group. I worry about both the parents and their support system for help and resources and the kids for their social structure. (Most of the ones I have tried to work with are very shy both around me and the other kids in the library.)

David C. Brostrom replied to the above inquiry from Diane Adams:

I would humbly recommend to slowly get to know your homeschooling families in Monmouth by chatting a bit more with them, then invite them to share their talents with the library in some way; as volunteers, newspaper clippers, book suggesters, etc. I bet they'd really warm up to you if you showed them a copy or three of some new home education titles the library recently purchased and asked them if they had other suggestions and/or favorites.

At our large library in suburban Milwaukee (population 70,000), we library managers discuss how to make people feel comfortable in our library and how we can give straightforward assistance to customers who seem unable to "acclimate" in our rambling building. Many folks, it seems simply feel content to wander around, very likely not actually finding what they want since they don't ask a REF librarian, etc.

This continues to bother us, so we'll soon be adding a roving REF librarian who reaches out to the wanderers and shy people (lots of those in the upper Midwest!). We don't intend to bother those who just wish to roam, but hope we can help the people struggling with assignments, research, and just regular reader's advisory.

My point is this--it's not just the home educators who may feel they intrude when they ask us questions, or get to know us better as professionals, but a cross section of all our customers.

Also, I've mentioned some new ideas in an article in School Library Journal, March 1997. You may want to check out the ones on page 108. Good luck!

David Brostrom
Waukesha Public Library, Wisconsin

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Barbara Page, McKeesport Area Homeschoolers, also replied to Diane:

If I could give my favorite librarians a wish list of what I would like to see available at the library for homeschoolers this is what I would list:

- * a copy of the state's homeschooling law,
- * samples of the required forms and paperwork required by the state's homeschooling law,
- * Curriculum suppliers catalogs,
- * a reading list of available books at the library that begins with the easiest possible readers and ends with the more difficult books. This list should include fiction and non-fiction,
- * a bulletin board listing homeschooling field trips and events,
- * a 'class' offered by the library on how to utilize library resources,
- * a reading club offering small prizes to children after they read a certain number of books,
- * a book discussion group for older readers...

Many people voice concern about the socialization of homeschooled children but my opinion on this is that a library should not feel any responsibility in this area of homeschooling.

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Ann Lahrson Fisher wrote:

I love, absolutely love, libraries and librarians, the keepers of the keys of knowledge, if you will. I dream of increased interactions between homeschooling families and libraries, and turn enviously green when I hear of libraries that are developing learning centers, or educational materials lending libraries (hands on stuff as well as textbooks and other more traditional resources), or letting homeschoolers use conference rooms, bulletin board space, and what have you.

Some libraries in our area have developed Homeschooling Notebooks, an extremely useful tool for the new homeschooler who does not know where to turn. Some are trying to find ways to offer storytimes and special events during school hours for homeschooling families. I applaud the efforts.

Joyce Dowling of Maryland writes

I would love to have a library that was responsive to homeschooling, but we are busily developing our own resources. I asked both the local and regional libraries about any resources they had, e.g. knowledge of local groups, but they didn't have any information. They said they had done some "how to use the library" tour with organized homeschooling groups, but they didn't keep any record as to who they were. I tried to get them to host some kind of homeschooling workshop, but they were not cooperative. Any suggestions?

I don't remember my librarians even checking in a file cabinet. They just told me they didn't have any information. Are all libraries supposed to keep resource files and are the librarians supposed to check them when asked for that kind of information? I could approach them again as if I had never done so before and see what happens. How should I respond if they don't refer to any file cabinet?

How do they give this information out? Just verbally? Or do they allow a person to take it to the copy machine?

Our libraries have taken a lot of cuts in the past few years and they are constantly being threatened with more. I've participated in petition signings which seemed to help. But the quality of service seems to have gone down in some areas. I really don't know what is reasonable to expect from a librarian.

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Billy and Nancy respond:

Dear Joyce,

The original message may not have been clear. We put together these packages a couple of years ago. We put materials in folders and provided them to the librarians ready to put in their resource files. This way they had minimum work to do (just file it). The resource files are something they look in to get information when they are asked questions by patrons. This was not material for them to distribute to people, and it was not material specifically about our local support group or our own national newsletter. We tried to do the work for them to gather information that would help them be better equipped to answer questions about homeschooling. One of the items we included was a booklet we had put together that listed support groups in Maryland with a description of their activities and benefits, their membership requirements, and contact information.

The other part about subscriptions was not directly related to the resource packets. We had thought about buying a subscription to some homeschooling magazines (like Home Education Magazine or GWS) in the name of the library. We discovered that if we did that, the library would display the current copy, but would not keep the old issues. Apparently, they have to purchase the subscription in order to be able to keep and display back issues.

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David C. Brostrom adds:

Regarding the "apparently they have to purchase the subscription in order to be able to keep and display back issues...." I intuit that you're getting the 'run around' if that's the case. It just doesn't make sense. At our library, we have MANY gift subscriptions and they are all treated the same way as the others we purchase. Is it possible that the librarians just didn't want to have the Home Ed. mags in their library?

We have Home Education magazine in our large suburban library; it circulates quite well too. Before we started the subscription, we went thru our normal process of selection/winning...in other words, we sat down as a group of REF librarians, and talked about what we should remove because it's not moving, and what periodicals should we add, and why? We do this process many times yearly.

My point here is this--because libraries are bureaucratic entities, and because those of us who work in them dutifully (usually) operate them for the benefit of all community and regional taxpayers, we often make decisions that are deliberate and measured (read her /oops...should be "read here" IOW's we are very slow in our processs and in changing our ways. This is not a bad thing. It just is. So, what I would urge you to do, speaking as a library administrator and Homeschooling advocate,

is try again by contacting the person in your library (ies) that will perhaps be the most receptive to your interests. The one who wouldn't see your donation as something bad, or that has 'an agenda' that goes along with it. Good luck!

Another thing I'd like to comment on...I don't feel that it's fair for libraries to 'cry about their poor funding situations' because there are Always ways to improve their financial position. Our budget is 2.4 million dollars annually and we still want more! We all do it--we all scream for a bigger piece of the pie. But I think we just need to get out there and do our PR work. We need to stop whining and start wining and dining the local politicians, just like everybody else does!

David Brostrom
Waukesha Public Library, Wisconsin

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Billy & Nancy Greer write:

I don't think it was the "run around," because shortly after our offer, they purchased a subscription themselves. We are on friendly terms with the librarian and the explanation was that the work of cataloging issues and the cost of supplying the storage bins for keeping back issues is not done for donated materials. (Any books donated to the library are sold to the public to raise money rather than being put into the library system, I believe for similar reasons). There is a "cost" associated with maintaining even donated subscriptions, and they apparently set the policy that they would only bear that cost for materials that had been selected and approved by the library.

It seems to me that the expenses would be minimal, but perhaps they want a policy that doesn't hurt the feelings of people who donate materials the library doesn't want to display, or don't want to be in the position of having to spend time and money at the mercy of any patron that wants to donate subscriptions.

Billy & Nancy wrote:

Joyce,

I would just ask them if they maintain information/resource files on homeschooling. If you have materials you would like to contribute to such a file, tell them that. If they don't have a file, ask if they would like you to prepare one for them. As you mentioned, many library systems have had cut-backs and the staff is busier than ever. Make sure they see you as offering to help them rather than as someone who is just going to make more work for them by requiring them to set up a file and keep track of resources. It also makes a difference if the material is seen as useful. If your library doesn't get many requests for homeschooling help, they may not have seen a need to get more information on the subject.

We use the meeting room at our library to host a games club for homeschoolers and to have open houses for homeschooling information. There is no charge (other than the taxes we pay <g>).

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Julie Miller added:

I talked to my local library and offered to buy them a sub to Home Education Magazine. They do

not accept such gifts, but they will consider whether they would want such a sub, then get back to me next summer. So, I advise talking to the library BEFORE making up a big list, etc.

Looking for homeschooling information in our library was like looking in a black hole. I complained to many friends before I decided that if I wanted it to be different, then I would need to do something positive before I complained to someone higher up. Because I set up advertising and coordinated the last HERO of OK conference, I had several bags of the information we handed out at the conference left over. For under \$5.00 I bought two 1" three ring binders, some clear pocket folders and plastic magazine holders that go into three ring binders. I then made copies of:

- the HERO of OK handbook (this is available by e-mail if you want a copy of the handbook, it also has a list of books we all recommend),
- a family information form,
- flyers for our local group meetings and contact numbers,
- a sample copy of the HERO newsletter,
- flyers from GWS and their suggested further reading list for learning without a curriculum,
- Oklahoma University correspondence course,
- Missouri University correspondence course,
- Clonlara, sample copies of HEM,
- The LINK,
- HomeEducators Family Times,
- F.U.N. News,
- F.U.N. catalog,
- Ultimate field trip flyer,
- FAQ's from HEM website.
- I have since added a copy of Practical homeschooling,
- a newsletter from Oklahoma Central Home Educators' Association.

The second three ring binder I filled entirely with catalogs that might be of interest to homeschoolers.

This was all extra stuff I had laying around, the only real effort I put into it was deciding which binder each item would go in and placing it in them. As I find more info to add I can always buy more binders if I need to. And when I am surfing the web I often e-mail companies asking if they would like to donate info for the resource notebooks. I will be planning the next conference and also handling the advertising so, I will have no trouble adding to these notebooks or making more to place in other libraries. HERO of OK has said they will donate a copy of the handbook to anyone making resource notebooks for their library.

When I brought the notebooks in to donate, I just happened to talk to the woman in charge of ordering. She said they had been looking in books in print trying to find books homeschooler would be interested in and that my notebooks were an excellent resource for the librarians too. I wanted to laugh at the thought that homeschoolers only read one kind of book. :) They contacted

me later, and when I went back in with a few more suggestions, they were making copies of the OK laws pertaining to homeschooling, and my notebooks were spread across a desk. They had a file of info they had gotten from the web, a list of homeschooling terms (to be put into the computer system) and several of the suggested books from the notebooks on their desk. I spent an hour talking to the director, the children's librarian and her assistant. They were full of questions, asked me to sit on their panel in April, and if I would be interested in setting an appointment to talk to them more at a later time They have ordered lots of the books I suggested and are waiting for them to come in. They told me they are saturating themselves in homeschooling information, so they will be more knowledgeable and better able to serve homeschoolers.

My one small positive action has done more for me in terms of making the library a better place for homeschoolers than I feel my negative (complaining) action would have.

Julie Miller
Hero of Oklahoma

TIM BANDY wrote:

A very likely scenario is that the donated home school reference books are sold at the next library book sale!

LESLIE MOYER responded:

Ouch!! What a pessimist! Our Tulsa City-County Library system is VERY homeschool friendly. Julie Miller mentioned that our statewide Library Assn. is having their annual meeting soon on the topic of "assisting homeschoolers."

There is a great book for librarians called "A Guide to Homeschooling For Librarians (or Libraries?)" that was written using the Tulsa system as a model. It's ISBN is: 026.64968 B794g 1995. You might request your library order it. I found it to be a very thorough and balanced book.

I don't donate books, but I fill out "request to purchase" forms here all the time (asking the library to purchase materials) and have NEVER requested a book here that the library hasn't purchased. I find them very open and friendly.

HERO of Oklahoma donated many books, catalogs, and magazines to the Norman, OK library a couple years ago. The librarians there were thrilled to have them and set up a special area as a "homeschooling resource center" from the donated books. The books have NOT found there way to the trash bin.....they are still being loaned.

My local librarians even call me about community events that they think me or my family might be interested in--these are things that don't have anything to do with the library!

Anyway, Tim, I would encourage you not to stereotype based on your local library model. The climate here is obviously very different.

From: Valerie Berg added:

Well, my library will sell donated books at the next book sale, too. And if a subscription is donated,

they will put the current issue on the shelf, then toss it then the next one comes in.

On the other hand, they carry HEM, have several homeschooling books and have homeschooling programs once a month. They have a homeschool advisory board that doesn't do a lot, but it *is* there.

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Susan Frederick saw this and responded:

<<many of our public libraries. A very likely scenario is that the donated home school reference books are sold at the next library book sale!>>

This is exactly correct. I've seen several donated copies of "Homeschooling for Excellence" by the Colfaxes go through our local library book sales. And our library is very homeschool friendly. What happens with these book donations is they will decide if they can make money on the books or not before they show up on the shelves.

I would talk to them first. No point in spending the money on books only to have them wind up in somebody's home. Especially since at library sales, the books are sold at a discount.

Susan Frederick added:

So is ours, [very homeschool friendly] but it still happens. I think Tim is being very realistic. The libraries depend upon these book sales. About two years ago our local support group donated about 10 homeschooling books but I don't think many of them actually made it to our shelves.

Before you make any donations, check with the library and find out where they would go. Our local library is part of a 5 branch library system in various towns nearby. But even though our library circulates five times as many books at the other libraries, it is not the "main" library so when donations are made they first go to the "main" library of the branch and may never make it down to our town. Our children's librarian estimates that our branch of the library has about 1,000 homeschoolers checking out books from their system. But because of how they have it set-up, we can't specify that a book go to our branch. So chances are good that donated books will end up in the local library sale or will be at the town that is 15 miles away from us. Very frustrating and really makes some people not want to donate because our town won't get the books.

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