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# Serving Neurodiverse Needs in the Library

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jan 08, 2024

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Novelist George Eliot once asked, “What are we here for if not to make life less difficult for each other?” While Eliot was presumably asking about people at large, she could have easily been reciting the motto of every public and school librarian, particularly those working with neurodiverse students. *PW* spoke with three librarians about the ways they are making life less difficult for kids with learning differences and creating spaces that are truly welcoming for all.

An elementary school media specialist turned high school media specialist at Topeka High School in Topeka, Kans., **Tonya Foster** welcomed a suggestion from a student on the autism spectrum, Elizabeth (not her real name), when she wanted to start a Spectrum and Friends Club at her school. “The members are on the autism spectrum or are friends of these kids,” Foster said. “They meet once a month to get to know each other, advocate for one another—and as Elizabeth also suggested, ‘it would also be a good idea to have a craft or some activity, too.’ ”

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These activities include relaxing with coloring pages or making crafts using items from the library’s maker space. As for advocacy, Elizabeth poses questions to members to think about and discuss, such as, “What would make



© Jewelia Oswald

Tonya Foster in her library.

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things better for you at school—and how can we do this?” Foster and Elizabeth also lined up professional speakers and experts to talk to the students and their families about living on the spectrum, and to offer additional resources that are available to them on the state level.

In addition to the Spectrum and Friends Club, Foster is continually working on making the school’s historic library, with its stained-glass windows and fireplace, a little more student friendly for any and all. Her hope is that it will be a go-to space for kids, whether they are looking for books and/or other resources, or are

in need of a break from class or the cafeteria, a space to decompress from high school stressors, or just some company.

She has done this by offering a range of activities, including library tables covered in paper to color and doodle on, coloring pages, and popular pop-up craft times (e.g. embroidery, decorating cookies, etc.) available during students’ homeroom periods. “Once our kids learn about these resources and activities in the library, more and more are seeking them out to fill their own needs.”

Foster has found that the pop-ups especially are allowing more kids the opportunity to shine, and build a more inclusive community. “We find that they’re putting down their phones, and actually mixing and talking with other students from different classes, and getting to know kids they didn’t know before.”

These shared experiences and positive responses have confirmed what Foster has long known and felt about the high school students who come into her library today. “I feel that most kids have some kind of special need, whether it’s identified or not. Even if you’re a strong academic student, there’s always something that you struggle with,” she said. “With some kids, it’s more obvious than others. So we’re just trying to help them meet whatever needs they have and offer a safe place to do this.”

**Jackie Quinn** is a youth service librarian at the Teaneck Library in Teaneck, N.J., where her focus is the SEL needs of her younger patrons. This begins with curating a collection of books that address a variety of critical issues and making it accessible to them and their parents or caregivers.

“Our collection development and accessibility are essential because kids are not going to be looking for these titles, and their parents and/or caregivers may not know what SEL resources they are looking for,” Quinn said. “So we create these lists of topics and books to make these titles easier to find.”

Quinn said that making these choices happens rather organically. “It all depends on the needs of our community and our 10+ years of experience knowing what our families need, what’s going on in the world, and the impact these books make on kids.”

The titles for her programs explore specific SEL issues such as empathy and self-regulating strategies. The goal is to introduce the right books at the right time. When this happens, she often hears young readers say, “Oh yeah, I feel like that sometimes, too!”

Quinn has noticed an increase in the number of—and interest in—titles on emotions that are often hard to express, and societal issues that can be difficult for parents to address and explain. With this in mind, Quinn recently completed a course sponsored by LibraryLinkNJ called Mental Health First Aid for Youth. “Having this coursework has helped me to acknowledge where I can help, and when I need to stop and call a professional or a parent.”



© Vi Kwartler

Jackie Quinn making Swiftie bracelets with teens.

Together, Quinn and her staff enlisted the help of a Betta fish named Strawberry to help engage younger patrons at the reference desk when it had been turned around during the pandemic and Plexiglass was put up. “By adding a fish, a fish tank, and a step stool, kids were able to see Strawberry, see us, and say ‘hi!’ ” Quinn said. “Strawberry helped us get back to our kids.”

Sadly, Strawberry’s recent death taught the students about dealing with the loss of a beloved pet. The library made a public announcement, Quinn wrote an obituary, and the staff chose to place a picture of Strawberry on her former perch along with a list of books about pet loss. “This just felt right,” Quinn said, “because so many people came specifically for Strawberry that we needed to actually announce it.”



© Jackie Quinn

The obituary and book list for Strawberry the goldfish.

At first, discussing Strawberry’s death with the kids was hard for Quinn, who was afraid that she would get emotional. But then she remembered what author Mo Willems said when she relayed that she didn’t like reading his *Knuffle Bunny Free* to kids because she didn’t like to cry in front of them. “He reminded me that kids need to see all the emotions because they need to know how to identify what they are when they feel them,” Quinn said. “I’ve learned that when they see emotions being expressed, instead of being hidden or bottled up, this helps kids know that it’s okay for them to express themselves.”

At the Union City Library, a branch of Alameda County Library in California, children’s services librarian **Polina Rubanova** is passionate about offering a variety of inclusive programs for her neurodivergent readers and their parents/caregivers. From sensory playgroups to adaptive art and music therapy, these programs trace their roots back to 2018 when a parent volunteer, Sameena Ishaq, wanted to create library opportunities for her neurodiverse son. This same desire to meet community needs is also the impetus behind the library’s latest effort, entitled Storytime with AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication). The storytime is a collaboration between Project LISTEN with AAC at Cal State East Bay, Rubanova, and the mother-daughter volunteer team Sabena D’souza and Himani Hitendra.

Rubanova said that the storytime’s participants may be non-speaking and have AAC as their primary method of communication. Participants are also often either exploring AAC or using tools like an iPad with an AAC application or a dedicated speech-generating device. “Children might have these devices, but you wouldn’t expect them to know how to use them just because they have them,” Rubanova said. “It’s really caregivers who have to become fluent in using them to demonstrate what is possible for their children. There has to be a supportive environment to have the greatest impact—and the earlier the families are supported the better!”

Himani is both a fluent AAC user and advocate at age 14. Today, she volunteers for Storytime with AAC along with her mother, who is a coordinator for this bi-monthly program. Rubanova said that seeing AAC families like D’souza and Hitendra communicate allows beginning AAC users to observe what is possible—and gives them hope for the road ahead. Finding themselves represented in stories does this, too.



© Marlyn Bui

A recent storytime with the picture book *A Day with* Polina Rubanova with young readers.

*No Words* by Tiffany Hammond, illustrated by Kate

Cosgrove, features a non-speaking child using AAC. “Our AAC users relate to this story so much—no matter their age,” Rubanova said. “It has a good theme, promotes self-expression, is beautifully illustrated, and has a deep message of empathy,” she added. According to Rubanova, these are must-have elements that allow the AAC users to learn new words as their caregivers demonstrate them on the devices, and to build vocabulary and language skills. They also help facilitate comments and discussion on how they relate to the story and the characters.

“We want to encourage a full range of expression for AAC users. They can use their device not only to ask for something but they can comment and say how they feel,” Rubanova said. “Another important part of this is encouraging use in multiple settings, like the library. This helps normalize AAC as a mode of communication and build their skills using the devices.”

By finding community and normalcy in the library, AAC users and caregivers can see a clear path forward. “Leaning on each other, the AAC users and the caregivers can get a fuller sense of possibility and where they can go with their devices and their AAC journeys.”

Rubanova feels joy in seeing the kids discover their voices, and the caregivers gain a sense of empowerment for greater advocacy—and to ask for more for their children.

“We say that libraries are for everyone,” Rubanova said, “but it takes more than words. It comes down to passion, hard-working volunteers, community connections, and the library listening to community members and their needs to make libraries more welcoming and inclusive for all.”

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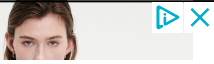


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