Keyboarding Kids

Skill Building in the Public Library

MARYBETH KOZIKOWSKI

We did it!

One of our library's programs, Keyboarding Kids, started a few years ago in hopes that the library could fill the gap when schools do not or cannot offer programs to provide children with the skills they need for personal and academic success.

I knew keyboarding was one of those skills. Over the past year, several parents inquired if we offered computer keyboarding instruction for children; the local school district only teaches it at the high school level. And our department statistics noted increased use of our public computers by upper elementary students to type reports and homework. Opportunity was knocking!

I posted a request to a national children's and YA librarian discussion list asking for input if anyone had conducted a similar class for fourth and fifth graders. No responses. Not one. I figured either I was onto something or this was the worst idea I had ever had.

Undaunted, I sought help from my library's teen department, which had previously offered computer keyboarding for sixth to ninth graders. They shared their program plans; they used *Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing Platinum 25th Anniversary Edition* software.

I next enlisted the help of our IT staff, who demonstrated how to utilize the software's "import your own text" feature to create custom lessons limited to the keys, letters, and words I specified. Thanks to the willingness of coworkers to share their expertise and faith in the idea, Keyboarding Kids finally got the green light from my department head.

Our first program was initially offered as three forty-five-minute sessions, but it was soon evident that we needed an additional session. We cover all the letters of the alphabet and a few basic punctuation keys, but there isn't enough time to teach numbers.

Registration is limited to fourth and fifth graders. Online research in several journals suggested that the hands of children younger than those in upper elementary grades are generally too small to comfortably span a full-sized keyboard; motor skills and eye-hand coordination are still developing as well.

Keyboarding Kids is conducted on our public computers in the center of our program room. While we have twelve computers, registration is limited to ten children to keep two computers available for patron use. A librarian keeps the program on track time-wise and talks with the children—encouraging them, reinforcing home keys, and helping them navigate between Microsoft Word and *Mavis Beacon*. I have found that the kids catch on pretty quickly. Ideally another staff member assists during the program, helping keep the children focused and answering their questions.

At the end of each session, children receive a handout recapping the keys they learned that day, a chart showing home keys and proper hand placement, and a list of words to practice typing at home (if they have a keyboard available).

Marybeth Kozikowski *is a children's services librarian at Sachem Public Library in Holbrook, New York. She is a member of the 2015 May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture Committee.*

Full-word typing game

Single-letter typing game

Practicing new keys

The "cover your hands" challenge

At the end of the last session, children receive a certificate of completion; on the back is a list of recommended *Mavis Beacon* games and instructions on how to access the same practice lessons and games used in the program.

Since its inception in 2011, Keyboarding Kids has been offered eight times and working with the children has produced significant improvements.

To encourage children to look at the screen rather than the keyboard, their hands are covered with a felt rectangle or piece of paper while they are typing. To hold children's attention during the last five minutes of the program, they open Microsoft Word and type words I call out, made up of only the letters and keys they have learned so far. In the most recent session, it was pure magic when the children started calling out their own challenge words!

Keyboarding Kids is not a costly program; the software costs about $300 ($30 per license for ten computers). Printing costs for handouts and completion certificates is minimal. The program is usually scheduled once a week after school but has also been very successful offered on consecutive days in a single week when school is not in session.

At the end of our 2013 session, parents and children completed a survey. Among the responses were:

- "I did not know what to expect, but I did enjoy learning the correct key positions."

- "This class was really helpful for my daughter. If I could change anything, I would make the class one hour long and maybe add a week or two."

- "Maybe some more advanced sessions after the beginner session."

- "I thought the instruction was right on pace, and introducing the home keys was great."

Keyboarding Kids fills an important skill gap in a way that's fun for children, demonstrates library responsiveness to our community, is cost-effective, and once established, is easy to run. &