Ten Ways to Help Parents Navigate Technology with Children

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As children's librarians, we spend a great deal of time working with and advising not only children but also their parents. We provide tips on early literacy, advice about emerging readers, book recommendations for reluctant readers, and more. As technology becomes more prevalent in the lives of children, we must also serve as a resource for parents in this area. Here are ten ways children's librarians can ensure that they can adequately help parents become confident about the role that technology plays in the lives of their children.

1. **Provide parents and children access to various types of technology in your library**. Nearly all libraries already do this to some extent by offering public access computers, but now we must expand. This is essential for closing the digital divide and providing access to all. This benefits both the parents, enabling them to become more comfortable and confident with technology, and the children who are growing up in a world where skills in technology and digital literacy are essential. Providing access can include hosting technology events where families can try out a variety of tablets and e-readers, having wall- or table-mounted tablets that are used similarly to public access computers, and lending out e-readers or tablets either for in-library use or regular circulation. You can get even more creative by lending out or providing in-house access to STEM tools such as MaKey MaKeys, LEGO or other robotics kits, circuitry tools, and an ever-growing list of other fun tools and toys.

2. **Provide opportunities for parent-child engagement with technology**. Offer digital storytimes where parents can engage with their children in viewing and interacting with new media. Providing table-mounted or wall-mounted tablets (at an appropriate height for joint engagement) with headphone splitters can also foster this engagement.

For older children, host classes for parents and children to attend together where they can learn about library services, such as e-book and audiobook lending, digital music and movie streaming services, and more. Expand children's technology classes on Scratch, coding, robotics, and other topics to include parents. These classes offer parents and children the opportunity to work and learn together, develop new skills, problem solve, and communicate about technology.

3. **Leave your personal opinions at the door**. Be open and nonjudgmental with parents; it is their decision how they choose to use (or not use) technology with their children. Still, be sure to familiarize yourself with the current research and recommendations about the topic, and be willing and able to explain them, if asked. See sidebar for some current research recommendations. This may also involve justifying the place of technology in the library to either concerned parents or other library staff.

4. **Build up your parenting collection with books on topics related to technology and children**. Provide resources on your library's website about technology and children, including recent articles and useful review sites.

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Current Research about Children and Technology

Johnson, Larry, Samantha Adams Becker, Victoria Estrada, and Alex Freeman. "NMC Horizon Report: 2014 K–12 Edition." Austin, Texas: The New Media Consortium, 2014. Accessed Jan. 31, 2015, www.nmc.org/publication/nmc-horizon-report-2014-k-12-edition.

Koester, Amy, ed. *Young Children, New Media, and Libraries: A Guide for Incorporating New Media into Library Collections, Services, and Programs for Families and Children Ages 0–5.* LittleeLit, 2014–15. Accessed Jan. 31, 2015, http://littleelit.com/book.

Lerner, Claire, and Rachel Barr. "Screen Sense: Setting the Record Straight: Research-Based Guidelines for Screen Use for Children Under 3 Years Old." *Zero to Three.* 2014. Accessed Jan. 31, 2015, www.zerotothree.org/parenting-resources/screen-sense.

Rideout, Victoria. "Zero to Eight: Children's Media Use in America 2013." Washington, D.C.: Common Sense Media, 2013. Accessed Jan. 31, 2015, www.commonsensemedia.org/research/zero-to-eight-childrens-media-use-in-america-2013.

Schomburg, Roberta, and Chip Donohue. "Technology and Interactive Media as Tools in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8." Washington D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children & Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media, 2012. Accessed Jan. 31, 2015, www.naeyc.org/content/technology-and-young-children.

5. **Monitor the ongoing dialogue in libraries and beyond about children and technology**. Read blogs and articles about the topic, be inspired by what other libraries are doing, and, if possible, attend conferences to fully immerse yourself. You can learn a lot from other fields, including what early childhood educators are doing with technology, so be sure to broaden your reach beyond the library field.

6. **Treat technological tools and new media like any other material in your library**. This means advocating for money for collection development and equipment, devoting time to reading lists and reviews, and developing a well-rounded collection of apps, e-books, games, or whatever media you have chosen to focus on. In addition to many great non-library review sites, many library journals have begun to review apps as well. Having access to content will further allow you to provide solid recommendations to parents based on concrete evidence and experience. Remember that what you are recommending is the content, not necessarily the device. Think of the device like the physical pages of a book, and the content is the words within.

7. **Encourage parents to allow children to be their teachers**. Although some parents are very tech-savvy, we cannot and should not assume that parents know everything about technology. Sometimes parents feel as though they must be experts before they give their children access. It is our responsibility to communicate to parents that their child may already, and will certainly in the future, be able to do more than them; it is inevitable! Encourage them to learn together, and assure them that this is beneficial for both of them. If children have questions, encourage parents to admit if they do not know and to figure out the answer together.

8. **Stay connected with local schools and keep up to date on their use of technology**. Many schools are moving toward one-to-one programs where each student has a tablet or similar device. Parents may have questions about the devices and their further use outside of the school setting. The schools themselves might need further support in app recommendations and more. Make sure the lines of communication are open and that you are working together in the most beneficial way for the students.

9. **Market yourself as a media mentor**. Many parents may not think of their local librarian as a person to ask for advice or recommendations about using technology with their children. Parents may be pleasantly surprised that this is yet another resource and area of expertise they can tale advantage of for free at their neighborhood library. Offering classes or trainings aimed at parents about using technology with children is one way to share your expertise and solidify your role as a media mentor. These conversations can also happen casually at the reference desk or passively through handouts.

10. **Promote the library as a technological hub.** When you implement any of the above programs, collections, or technological equipment and tools, publicize this through your website, local press, social media, and signs within your library. This brings more people into the library to utilize these resources, including new library users, and reaffirms to parents and the general community that the library remains a valuable resource as technology continues to evolve.

Additional resources for librarians about children and technology include:

Children's Technology Review, http://childrenstech.com
Digital Storytime, http://digital-storytime.com
Early Connections: A Parent Education Toolkit for Early Childhood Providers, www.commonsensemedia.org/educators/early-connections
The Joan Ganz Cooney Center, www.joanganzcooneycenter.org
Little eLit, http://littleelit.com
Technology in Early Childhood (TEC) Center at the Erikson Institute, http://teccenter.erikson.edu