

From Random to Ready-to-Find

Reaping the Rewards of Board Book Organization

SHARON MCCLINTOCK

Do you get a sense of dread when a parent seeks a very specific board book—and you have to locate it amid the often unorganized or random collection at your library?

I don't anymore, since my library reorganized and labeled our board book collection about a year ago, and our community and staff have been enjoying the benefits ever since. As in many libraries these days, our board book collection is very popular and vital to our community. It includes more than five thousand books between our one central library and our bookmobile and is one of the most heavily utilized of all our collections.

Our parenting programs and storytimes for infants and toddlers draw large audiences, and the parents are engaged and interested in their babies' healthy social, emotional, and intellectual development. We had many reasons for reorganizing and labeling our board book collection, but the most essential was to make it easier for parents and caregivers to browse and find a book they can't wait to read to their baby.

Board books are a wonderfully diverse collection that provides a wealth of content to babies and toddlers at a time when books couldn't be more critical to their healthy development. Not only are board books sturdy teaching tools, they are also snuggling opportunities—making a strong, loving connection between parent and child and between child and book. These connections have lifelong positive consequences.

For libraries, however, board books present challenges. Besides having vigorous weeding practices, how do you deal with books that get chomped on regularly? Oral exploration



An example of spine labeling on board books.

is an important developmental stage, and infants experience books through all their senses, including, of course, taste. But does this mean that we should treat this collection like chew toys and toss them into a basket as though each one is the same as the next?

Though many libraries keep board books in baskets with minimal order, we have implemented another option that our community has responded to enthusiastically. It helps us abide by the Laws of Babies' and Toddlers' Librarianship, especially that "Children's librarians provide the right book or information for the right child at the right time in the right place."¹

For a long time, the public and our staff asked that the board books be put in a searchable, logical order. Many parents want to read specific books or types of books to their babies. They come to the reference desk asking for board books to share nonfiction topics with their baby, touch-and-feel books



Sharon McClintock is a Youth Services Librarian at Mountain View (CA) Public Library.

for their child to explore, or board books featuring a favorite character such as Peppa Pig or Daniel Tiger.

They ask for board books to help teach concepts, like sign language, the alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes, and opposites. They look for board books featuring nursery rhymes or songs, or they look for books by a particular beloved author. As research shows us increasingly that not all books are created equal when it comes to young children and early literacy, we fulfill our mission to provide the right book for the right child at the right time by organizing and labeling collections such as board books. Since all infants are unique, we do well to help parents find books that interest their child during the child's specific stage of development.

For years, we only had a few board book categories collected into discrete, labeled sections—those included ABCs, 123s, Holidays, and Vehicles. These categories were made possible through commercially made labels. But the rest of the collection was in no reliable order. This was frustrating for staff and the public alike as staff spent a lot of time helping patrons track down specific books or topics.

After much thought and discussion, we came up with additional categories for our board books, labeling them graphically so that patrons could easily identify the category. We organize them in groups, spine-out on shelves, so they can be readily found.

This project was possible because of the creativity and hard work of our support services team. They created original labels using clip art. Each book has a label that designates its category and a call number in the catalog. For instance, *Alphabet Family Band* by Sarah Jones has the call number J BOARD ABC. We designed a legend to help staff and the public identify the labels that correspond with the category listed in the catalog. The legend is on display in several spots in the board book shelving area.

As I sit with my Mr. Rogers mug beside me, I realize I would be remiss if I didn't mention the special importance of our category named Growing. Fred Rogers helped children understand their feelings on his iconic television series, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

For instance, his song "What Do You Do with the Mad That You Feel?" helped children recognize and manage their angry impulses. And, of course, books can do the same. The growing category covers many aspects of a child's social/emotional development, including managing feelings in constructive ways, with books such as *Teeth Are Not for Biting* by Elizabeth Verdick and Todd Parr's *The Feelings Book*. This category includes the topic of a new baby in the family and developmental tasks such as potty training. We chose an image of a

Where to Find It

Our library uses the following categories for board books.

- ABCs
- 123s
- Character
- Concept (C for color, S for shape, O for opposites)
- Growing (social/emotional and developmental issues)
- Holidays
- Real World (nonfiction, usually with photographs)
- Sign Language
- Touch & Feel (and lift the flap)
- Song & Rhyme (traditional nursery rhymes and folk songs)
- Vehicles

young child standing in front of a growth chart to depict this category.

Everything that doesn't fall into a category is given an "alpha by author" label and rough sorted by author's name. About 50 percent of the collection at this point is alphabetical by author. As we find the need for new categories, we can add them.

It was a long and creative process to develop the categories, design the labels, and catalog and label all the books under our new system. It took about a year to fully implement and involved many departments and staff members.

But we have found the benefits to be countless. When it's time to put out books for storytime, it is much quicker to find books on a special theme or by a specific author. Parents and caregivers comment frequently that they appreciate being able to find their child's favorite character all in one spot or all the touch-and-feel books together. We get fewer questions about where a book is located, freeing us up for more in-depth readers advisory and reference questions. And it gives us more time for the vital task of looking into the eyes of our youngest patrons and their parents and caregivers and warmly welcoming them to the library. ↻

Reference

1. Debra Knoll, *Engaging Babies in the Library: Putting Theory into Practice* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2016), 91.