

Heroes, Hospitals, [No] Hugs, and Handwashing

Bibliotherapy in the Age of a Pandemic

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In a crisis, people mobilize to deliver services and resources where they are needed most. That's exactly what happened in the library world. From pandemic virtual programming to compiling booklists, librarians around the globe sought to educate adults and children during a time of uncertainty.

For me and my colleagues at the New York City School Library System (NYCSLS), that meant quickly compiling a bibliography of the picture-books that seemed to crop up daily about COVID-19 and associated topics.

The books were written by people from all walks of life. The books, both fiction and nonfiction from around the globe, addressed big feelings like anxiety, boredom, worry, and fear as well as issues such as kindness, love, compassion, gratitude, and staying positive, safe, and healthy. The books discuss helpers, heroes, handwashing, hospitalization, and the inability to hug those we love like grandparents who live separate from the child's immediate family.

Children were also introduced to many pandemic-specific terms such as droplet transmission, antibodies, social distancing, herd immunity, epidemiology, incubation period, flattening the curve, rapid testing, quarantine, and sheltering-in-place.

Compiling COVID

Five coordinators (including me), one for each of the five boroughs of New York City, all work under NYCSLS Director Melissa Jacobs. In our roles, we bolster and strengthen school library programs by offering professional development workshops, mini-grants, and other resources.

Among these are our libguides, where we have information about how to use the Destiny Library Automation, as well as our grant applications, and our professional learning calendar. Our libguides, sometimes receiving up to one thousand hits a day, along with our electronic mailing list, NYCSLIST (the New York City School Librarians' Information Sharing Tool), are our main ways of getting information to the field. When the pandemic crisis hit, and New York City schools closed, we turned to both our libguides and our electronic mailing list to communicate our continued support.

We created our Translation of Practice (the brainchild of our director) in which we aligned in-school practices with remote practices. We sensed that some of our school librarians were floundering from postings on the electronic mailing list.

How could we help our librarians translate their practices to remote learning? To help them put this into perspective, this document, aligned with the School Library Media Program Evaluation Rubric from New York State, ended up being so helpful and beneficial that the New York State Education Department adopted it for its own website (www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/slssap).



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Another problem librarians had everywhere was the lack of print books to put into students' hands. The last day of school in NYC was Friday, March 13. No one could predict that in just two more days, the mayor would close schools, and students would not return. That meant that whatever was left in libraries, classrooms, and school lockers were to stay there. Students would not be able to access their textbooks, notebooks, or any library books they might have left in their lockers. All we had access to were e-books to offer our students—some school libraries had e-book collections, and some did not.

The three public library systems of New York City, Queens, Brooklyn, and New York (serving the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island), immediately offered e-card applications so that people could still access e-books. We linked to all three applications on our libguide. We also told librarians to link to these applications on their sites to tell their students where they could access reading material. Suddenly e-books, never as popular as print books, became hot.

On April 8, 2020, I saw a posting from the UK electronic mailing list, SLN, about a book called *Coronavirus: A Book for Children*, that was being offered as a free download from Nosy Crow Press in London. I shared this on NYCSLIST as well as the ALSC electronic mailing list. It is a gorgeously produced book illustrated by Axel Sheffler, illustrator of Julia Donaldson's *The Gruffalo*. A few days later, another librarian on another electronic mailing list shared two additional books, *My Hero Is You: How Kids Can Fight COVID-19*, published by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, and *Alicia y el Coronavirus*, being offered also free by the publisher, Editorial Flamboyant, in Spain.

I then found more and kept sharing. I finally decided to set up a Google alert and created (coronavirus OR COVID) ("children's book" OR "picture book"). I also created one in Spanish: (coronavirus OR COVID OR pandemia) ("libro para niños" OR "cuento infantil").

Daily, articles began to pour into my inbox about more free books being distributed. My supervisor suggested I put all of these books into one place on our libguide. So that same day I created the "Free Ebooks about the Coronavirus/COVID-19" page (<https://nycdoe.libguides.com/COVID-19ebooks/free>).

Once built, I shared the guide on several electronic mailing lists, including our own, and the page went viral. As I write this, one month since I created it, we have had more than 23,000 views, and our list is linked to from places as far away as New Zealand. We gave permission to librarians from around the globe to post our guide to their websites. And the New York State Education Department asked if they could link to yet another one of our pages. We were delighted they deemed it worthy enough to share!

For example, mother and licensed clinical social worker Meredith Polsky, who specifically works in the field of special education, has written a total of nine "picture-stories" about life during the coronavirus. One of them is a book about not being able to go out and play in *Can We Play Now?* It is part of a series specifically geared toward children with special needs (www.meredithpolsky.com/picture-stories). She is also the coauthor, with fellow social worker Arlen Grad Gaines, of the I Have a Question series. The two have written a book called *I Have a Question about Coronavirus: Clear Answers for All Kids* that is available on their website (www.ihaveaquestionbook.com).

The changes wrought by this pandemic are great, from job loss to school closures to death.

These emerging issues requiring explanation to children are things adults must deal with now, and many of these books serve as bibliotherapy—books for adults to share with the children in their lives. &

Editor's Note: A selected bibliography of online books about COVID-19 appeared in the Summer 2020 issue of Children & Libraries.