

# Librarians as Media Advocates

## Public Library Website Advice for Parents

NICHOLAS M. CRAGG, DENISE E. AGOSTO, JUNE ABBAS, AND ANNA HERNANDEZ

**W**ith the proliferation of technology and technological resources, there has been much debate about screen time and how the use of electronic media might affect children. Parents are often left without clear ideas of how best to guide their children's use of these tools.

People have historically turned to libraries for answers and recommended resources, and libraries continue to be driven by the information needs of their users. Librarians, specifically those working with children, are in a unique position to help guide families' use of media, thereby enabling them to make responsible media decisions.

Limited research has examined how libraries are equipping parents with the tools necessary to guide their children or the roles that libraries can play in preparing families to engage in conversations about media use. This article presents an analysis of US public library websites to examine the types of advice and resources provided for parents and other caregivers interested in guiding their children's use of digital media.<sup>1</sup> It is part of a larger study, "Navigating Screens: Libraries as Community Hubs for Teaching Positive Screen Media Practices," funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).<sup>2</sup> It's a three-year joint research

project of the University of Wisconsin, Drexel University, and the University of Oklahoma. It seeks to understand how media use and media guidance play out in US families with children ages five to eleven, and ways that libraries and other community organizations can best help parents guide their children's use of digital media.

### Parents, Children, and Digital Media

Many parents are concerned about both the frequency of their children's technology use and the number of hours per day they spend in front of screens. Parents seeking advice for how to guide their children's media use typically turn to peers and family, often talking to others on social media.

In fact, in the US, 75 percent of parents who use social media turn to social media for parenting-related information and social support.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a number of organizations provide information about responsible screen time use, including the Mayo Clinic, Cable News Network (CNN), Healthline, National Public Radio (NPR), Forbes, the American Psychological Association (APA), the Joan Ganz Cooney Center, and Common Sense Media.



**Nicholas Cragg** is a school librarian at St. Gabriel Catholic School in Philadelphia, working with children pre-K-8. He earned his MLIS from Drexel University. **Denise E. Agosto, PhD,** is Professor in the College of Computing & Informatics at Drexel University and Director of the Masters of Library & Information Science Program. Her most recent book is *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News (Libraries Unlimited, 2018)*. **June Abbas, PhD,** is a Professor in the School of Library and

Information Studies at the University of Oklahoma. She is a co-PI on the Navigating Screens IMLS funded grant project that is exploring family media practices for youth ages 5-11 and how youth services staff support family media use. **Anna Hernandez** is Senior Library Specialist for Technical Services in Brown University's library system. She earned her MLIS at the University of Oklahoma.

Nonetheless, questions remain as to how parents should guide their children's media use, what resources they can use to obtain information about this subject, and how librarians might play the role of media advocate, assisting parents with guiding their children's use of digital media.

### Roles for Youth Librarians: Media Mentorship and Media Advocacy

According to Claudia Haines, youth services librarian at the Homer (AK) Public Library and coauthor of *Becoming a Media Mentor: A Guide for Working with Children and Families*, the media mentor is a content expert who relies on the context of the interaction and the individual child to help inform families' healthy media decisions.<sup>4</sup> Media mentorship suggests that a core role of children's librarians is to provide educational and leisure opportunities for helping children become better informed and more skilled consumers and creators of media of all types.

A growing number of library instruction programs, such as the University of Washington's iSchool, Drexel University's College of Computing and Informatics, Wayne State University's School of Library and Information Science, and San Jose State University's School of Library and Information Science, have recognized the importance of training and developing professionals capable of acting as media mentors.<sup>5</sup> The classes offered in these programs (which include Youth Development and Information Behavior in a Digital Age, Programming and Services for Children and Young Adults, Early Childhood Literacy, and Issues in Information Literacy) are all reflective of the growing professional acknowledgment of the librarian's responsibility to connect children to the full range of available resources, including print and digital media.<sup>6</sup> They reflect the increasing realization that librarians are no longer the experts on a single format—books, they are now the connectors, the link between patrons and information in multiple formats.<sup>7</sup>

A review of the existing literature provides suggestions of how librarians might refocus their roles more toward media mentorship and on assisting parents in becoming more effective media mentors. For example, in the article "Ten Ways to Help Parents Navigate Technology with Children," Clara Hendricks, a member of the Association for Library Service to Children's (ALSC) Children and Technology Committee, suggests ten ways librarians can assist parents as media mentors:

1. Provide parents and children access to various types of technology in the library.
2. Provide opportunities for parent-child engagement with technology.
3. Build up parenting collections with books on topics related to technology and children.
4. Monitor the ongoing dialogue in libraries and beyond about children and technology.

### Choosing High-Quality Apps

- Explore new apps on your own before exploring them with children.
- Look for apps that incorporate ECRR2 skills: reading, writing, talking, singing, and playing.
- Consider your individual child, the content of the media, and how, when, why, and with whom your child will use the media.
- Seek out high-quality story and book (or toy and game) apps that have
  - meaningful interactive elements that add to, and don't distract from, the story;
  - a great story with high-quality images;
  - plain, readable text;
  - intuitive wayfinding;
  - read-to-me, read-to-myself, and voice record options;
  - settings for turning music and sounds effects on and off;
  - clean, uncluttered display; and
  - no technical glitches.

5. Treat technological tools and new media like any other material in the library.
6. Encourage parents to allow children to be their teachers.
7. Encourage them to learn together and assure them that this is beneficial for both of them.
8. Stay connected with local schools and keep up to date on their use of technology.
9. Market yourself as a media mentor.
10. Promote the library as a technological hub.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, both the ALSC white paper "Media Mentorship in Libraries Serving Youth" and Haines and Campbell's *Becoming a Media Mentor: A Guide for Working with Children and Families* stress the importance of actively supporting children's digital media use.<sup>9</sup> It is not enough to simply

provide children with opportunities to engage with technology, children require mediated and guided experiences with digital media for the experiences to translate into positive and productive digital literacy skills; this requirement holds true across a wide age range of youth.<sup>10</sup>

Lisa Guernsey, director of the Learning Technologies Project at New America, also emphasizes that discussions of children’s media use must include consideration of media content, the context of use, and individual needs and developmental levels of the individual child.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, authors Tamara Clegg and Mega Subramaniam, associate professors in the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland, identify crucial ways librarians can support young people’s digital media use. Most notably, these include fostering digital skills development and supporting connected learning.<sup>12</sup> The authors further explain that librarians must be comfortable taking on a variety of roles in the learning experience, be able to navigate the tensions they face when taking on these diverse roles, and reflect on specific ways to promote equity and diversity in their learning context or community.<sup>13</sup>

Little research has focused on librarians’ attitudes toward taking on the role of media mentor. Researchers Ely, Willett, Abbas, and Agosto reported that recent studies found that children’s librarians lack confidence when taking on the role of media mentor, they felt they lacked experience with technologies and serving as mentors in maker programs, and they needed additional training and professional guidelines.<sup>14</sup> These authors propose an alternate role that children’s librarians play, that of media advocate.

The term media advocate is related to the concept of media mentor. Media advocacy builds on existing roles of librarians as information experts who connect users to information and resources, often in the form of a reference interview or other personal guidance. It builds on skills librarians already have and the role they already play including, for example, providing guidance about all formats of media to parents through a media advisory reference interview, curating media for their collections, providing handouts to parents or making suggestions of media to use during story times. As media advocates, librarians work with parents and children to find the media that satisfies their information needs, regardless of format.

Media advocacy emphasizes two significant concepts that also form a part of media mentorship. First, collaborative communication is key. Whether it is between parent/caregiver and child, parent/caregiver and librarian, or librarian and child, creating and maintaining open dialogues is a vital first step in the media mentorship process. Second, there is the subjective nature of the effects of screen time. It is important to keep in mind that each child and family is different. Therefore, their screen time and media needs may be unique, and their screen time practices may need to be individualized.

In the media mentorship framework, the emphasis is on the role of the librarian as mentor for parents and children. Media advocacy shares this emphasis on the role of the librarian and also seeks to empower parents as advocates for their children’s use of digital media.

## Website Analysis Methods

All of these ideas come together to make a strong argument of the need for librarians to serve as media advocates. With the goal of understanding the types of guidance related to children and media that US public libraries are providing online for parents and other caregivers, we undertook a content analysis of a representative sample of five hundred US public library websites. We examined each site to determine

1. whether advice (broad guidelines, links to other websites and resources, ideas for co-participation, skill-building lessons or activities, internet safety information, or guidelines for resource evaluation and decision-making) was provided;
2. the location on the library’s website (children’s page, parent’s page, etc.) any advice could be found;
3. the specific types of advice provided (e.g., internet safety recommendations, app evaluation guidelines, etc.); and
4. the availability of media mentoring-advocacy or media use-related library programs for parents or families.

## Identifying the Sample Websites

We used stratified random sampling, which involves the division of a population into smaller groups known as strata, to identify a representative set of five hundred US public library websites. In stratified random sampling, the strata are formed based on shared characteristics, in our case, libraries belonging to a specific service population by the number of people served.

This method enabled us to identify representative libraries from each of the eleven IMLS Public Library Survey’s service population categories, ranging from small public libraries serving communities of one thousand or fewer up to large urban libraries serving populations over one million.<sup>15</sup> The resulting sample included five hundred US public libraries

Table 1. Summary of Analysis of Public Library Websites

Libraries with...	N	%
Media Advice Available	39	7.8
Suggestions for Parents	41	8.2
Media Advice Programs	7	1.4

from all fifty US states and 11 service population categories, or roughly 5.4 percent of the 9,200 and thirty-five total US public libraries profiled in the Public Library Survey.

## Results

As summarized in table 1, the analysis revealed that just 7.8 percent, or thirty-nine of the five hundred libraries, offered advice about children and media directed at parents available on their websites. Advice was located in a number of sections within the broader library sites, with page titles such as Children, Public Resources, Online Resources, Children and Teens, Web Links, Parents, Information, Research, Events, Virtual Library, Blog, and Early Learning. The types of advice provided included internet safety and privacy tips, website and app evaluation, media reviews, and screen time guidelines and limits.

The percentage of websites recommending other websites offering related advice was slightly higher, 8.2 percent, or forty-one of the five hundred total websites examined. Those offering digital media and parenting advice programs (such as social media workshops, coding clubs, or STEAM programs) was notably lower, just 1.4 percent, or seven of the five hundred websites.

Only a small minority of the five hundred randomly selected US public libraries we examined offer any media advice or digital media programming information for parents on their websites. This finding might indicate lost opportunities for librarians wishing to serve as active media advocates within their communities. A library's website can serve as a point of first contact for existing users as well as nonusers starting to explore the possibility of using the library. Making the youth services staff role of media advocate visible on the website tells the public that media advocacy is a core library goal and identifies staff as media guidance resources.

These numbers, however, might not indicate that the majority of the libraries examined offer no media advocacy services at all. This analysis only identified programs, services, and resources mentioned on the library websites. Some or even all of the libraries might offer relevant programs and resources not included on their websites in person or via social media, blogs, or other online platforms. Libraries with limited staff and resources might not have been able to update their websites frequently enough to fully reflect these services.

## Learning from Others: A Model Public Library Website

The omission of media advocacy content on the overwhelming majority of the websites examined stands in stark contrast to model websites such as that of the Homer (AK) Public Library (HPL). Managed by Haines, it serves as a community go-to for parents seeking advice about children and digital media. HPL serves a community of roughly 12,000 people. It offers

### Digital Media and Kids

- Explore digital media together with young children just as you would play or read a paper book with them.
- Model positive digital media use.
- Make intentional decisions about digital media use with kids.
- Create a family digital media plan. Limit use by time, activity, location, or other family rules.
- Let apps inspire real-world play.
- Content matters. Choose high-quality, age-appropriate media.
- Free exploration is an important part of learning. The first time kids use an app, let them navigate at their own pace rather than “teaching” them how to use it.

a collection of 45,000 physical and digital materials, several public-access computers, meeting rooms, study spaces, and active interlibrary loan services.

The Digital Media and Kids section of the library website is easy to navigate, contains frequently updated information, and offers practical advice for parents, including suggestions for high-quality apps and other digital resources. It contains ideas for media co-participation, digital skills-building lessons and activities, internet safety information, and guidelines for resource evaluation and decision-making. In addition, the page includes links to *Horn Book*, *School Library Journal*, *Common Sense Media*, and other publications, connecting parents to other websites, journals, and organizations that may be useful when trying to select appropriate media for their children.

## Conclusion

This analysis shows that few libraries are harnessing the potential of their websites as sources for media advocacy content. Parents often express concern about their children's use of digital media as well as the amount of time they spend in front of screens. Librarians can help them form more balanced views of screen media and understand that there are many different ways children use media, including passive viewing and interactive engagement, and help them to become active advocates for their children's particular media needs.

Libraries are information centers as well as places in where families can interact with media. Furthermore, due to their in-depth understanding of how information is created and shared, librarians are uniquely qualified to serve as media advocates in their communities. It is important to understand individual community needs and habits and to meet users where they already are, whether that is in the library, on the web, or elsewhere.

Effective media advocacy incorporates collaboration with organizations and professionals outside the library to design and deliver effective programs and services. Examples of relevant community organizations include community health centers, schools, and technology consultants, all of which employ professionals with expert relevant knowledge. Knowledge-sharing among professionals and organizations can spread awareness of the importance of media advocacy and help libraries transform into fully realized community information and education hubs. &

## References and Notes

1. The term “parents” is used here as shorthand for the wide range of adults with significant childcare duties in families, including parents, grandparents, guardians, and other adults with regularly recurring childcare duties.
2. This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, IMLS grant #LG-96-17-0220-17.
3. Maeve Duggan et al., “Parents and Social Media.” *Pew Research Center*, July 2015, [www.pewinternet.org/2015/07/16/parents-and-social-media](http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/07/16/parents-and-social-media).
4. Claudia Haines and Cen Campbell, *Becoming A Media Mentor: A Guide for Working with Children and Families* (Chicago: ALA, 2016).
5. Haines and Campbell, *Becoming a Media Mentor*.
6. Haines and Campbell, *Becoming a Media Mentor*.
7. Haines and Campbell, *Becoming a Media Mentor*.
8. Clara Hendricks, “Children and Technology: Ten Ways to Help Parents Navigate Technology with Children,” *Children and Libraries* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 36, <https://doi.org/10.5860/cal.13n2.36>.
9. Cen Campbell et al., “Media Mentorship in Libraries Serving Youth,” white paper, Association for Library Service to Children, American Library Association, 2015.
10. Campbell et al., “Media Mentorship in Libraries Serving Youth.”
11. Lisa Guernsey and Michael H. Levine, *Tap, Click, Read: Growing Readers in a World of Screens* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

## Recommended Professional Resources

For more information on media advocacy and ideas for providing library services relating to families and digital media, check out the following resources:

- **Navigating Screens:** <https://navigatingscreens.wordpress.com>. Free tutorials based on the Navigating Screens project are available at <https://my.nicheacademy.com/navigatingscreens>. These tutorials include (1) Flipping the Script: Changing the Narrative about Children and Media, (2) Can You Help Me: A Media Advisory Interview Guide, and (3) Guiding Family Media Use: Every Family and Every Community is Different.
  - The **American Library Association (ALA)** also recommends several webinars that address concepts related to media advocacy, such as “Media Mentorship in Libraries Serving Youth: A Primer, Best Practices for Apps in Storytimes,” and “Young Children & Media: Libraries in the Multi-Screen, Multi-Touch Digital World.” In addition, print resources such as “Media Mentorship in Libraries Serving Youth,” a white paper adopted by ALSC; the book *Becoming a Media Mentor: A Guide for Working with Children and Families* by Claudia Haines, Cen Campbell, and the Association for Library Service to Children (Chicago: ALA, 2016); and “Redefining Mentorship in Facilitating Interest-Driven Learning in Libraries” (in *Reconceptualizing Libraries*) may also be helpful.
12. Tamara Clegg and Mega Subramaniam, “Redefining Mentorship in Facilitating Interest-Driven Learning in Libraries,” in *Reconceptualizing Libraries*, ed. Victor R. Lee and Abigail L. Phillips (Milton Park, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2018), 140–57, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315143422-9>.
  13. Clegg and Subramaniam, “Redefining Mentorship.”
  14. Eric Ely et al., “Library Guidance for Families’ Media Uses: An Analysis of Screen Media Advice Available on Public Library Websites,” *Library Quarterly* (in press).
  15. “About the Public Libraries Survey,” IMLS, [www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/public-libraries-survey/explore-pls-data/about](http://www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/public-libraries-survey/explore-pls-data/about).