

Ordering Take-Out

Establishing Best Practices for Take-Home Crafts and Kits

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In the past, take-home crafts were seen as a bonus service. During the pandemic, they became an expected offering. That's true even now, when in-person events are becoming possible again.

However, there are not many accepted guidelines for creating and distributing take-home crafts. As I've worked to provide consistent, high-quality take-home kits, I've come up with a list of best practices about what projects to choose and how to execute them. I share them here as a starting place for your own discussion of best practices as take-home kits become a permanent fixture in libraries. These guidelines address general methods for producing successful take-home kits. Specific crafts and skills are outside my scope, but I will recommend sources for these ideas.

Offer Something Extra

Make sure your kits include something patrons won't find just anywhere. Simple take-home craft kits for our youngest



Child sketching the design for a tin ornament

patrons are sometimes little more than a coloring page or cut-out construction paper shapes. This is completely appropriate for this age group, since very young children are easy to please, and parents are looking for easy activities to do at home.

For kids older than five, though, I recommend including an item in your kits that makes them a little more special. Some examples:

A small tin in a mini diorama kit

A battery-operated tea light in a paper lantern kit

A jar and label to decorate in a kit for folded stars

These are things parents may not have at home, but that you will be able to obtain in bulk for a modest price. My most frequent sources are large online retailers, especially those that offer frequent discounts and loyalty programs.

Don't Ask the Patron to Spend a Lot of Money

Anything you need them to supply should already be in the house, or available at the grocery store.

When you create a take-home kit, keep in mind what you are asking the patron to provide. I make it a point never to require



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anything more than these standard items: scissors, white glue, and markers, either water soluble or permanent.

If you have it in your budget, consider a yearly giveaway of standard craft materials that patrons can use on your craft kits and anything else they choose throughout the year. It could include the above items with the addition of watercolor paints and a pad of paper.

Make Sure the Skills Required Are Appropriate

Take-home kits are for fun and, although they can involve some time or challenge, they should not feel impossible.

Some kits may involve nothing more than a little gluing or coloring, especially for younger ages. We did an insect mobile for summer where kids colored in eight different insects, and then tied string to the insects and the mobile frame, probably with parental help. The kit combined a familiar skill, coloring, with something more challenging that might require an adult.

For older groups, presenting a bit of a challenge can add interest to a take-home kit. Kumihimo braiding discs made out of cardboard have been popular with us. These may already be familiar to some patrons, but will introduce a new skill to others.

It's always a judgment call how complex to make a kit. I've presented kits that I've felt later may have asked too much of patrons, but there is usually a range of ways a kit can be used that allows wiggle room for the user to get creative.

Last spring, I created a coffee filter flower kit that involved coloring the coffee filter and then putting it in a small cup of water so that capillary action would draw the water up the filter and spread the color. This process was a little fussy, and I worried that it would be too complicated. But I knew that as long as the filters got colored and then got wet somehow, the same effect would be achieved—one way or the other, the kits were likely to be used effectively. I try not to make kits that can only be used in one way that's complicated to convey in a set of instructions; otherwise, the kit will be useless if the patron doesn't understand or can't make it work.

Don't Reinvent the Wheel

Make ample use of resources that will guide you in creating projects, and recycle your ideas with new themes.

Pinterest is a tried-and-true resource for crafts of all kinds, but it isn't without its problems. Links can lead you to content that's not what you need, or even go to outdated or missing content.

Pinterest can also become overwhelming when you're just looking for the one project you need. Develop a few additional sources of library- or child-oriented sites with vetted ideas. I also recommend keeping your own Pinterest board of ideas you like for future reference.

Once you have a good idea, don't give it up. Crafts can be reused over and over again by changing themes or details. Since offering a winter scene mini diorama in a tin, I've continued a seasonal theme with a summer garden tin and a Halloween haunted house tin. Instead of finding this repetitive, patrons enjoy building a collection of tins.

Alternatively, one supply can provide inspiration for multiple kits. I've used Kumihimo discs in the past at Valentine's Day for "love" or "anti-love" bracelets. I could use them again with another theme. Coffee filter "watercolors" worked for both spring flowers and Halloween bats. If you find that woven pony bead animals are a popular kit, you can create a new one for each month of the year. If one idea or supply is worth using once, it's probably worth using again in a different way.



Bird puppet



Mini sensory bottle

Keep Trends in Mind

Crafts begin hot and gradually become tired. Make sure to catch them while they're still popular, or reinterpret them to make them fresh.

Finding ideas for our take-home kits online has a major advantage for tween and teen librarians; we can catch trends on the rise and engage our patrons with the newest thing. Of course, some trends don't translate well to a take-home craft. Acrylic paint pouring, for example, is one I would be reluctant to recreate for my patrons.

Trends also rise and fall in a predictable pattern. I began offering tween slime crafts a little too late, and they never took off for us. For a younger age group, though, slime has become a perennial favorite; it's transcended the trend cycle and become timeless.

For an older age group, giving older trends a twist can be a great way to re-engage teens. Miniature versions of childhood favorites, like a sensory bottle pendant, can inspire nostalgia in kids too "grown up" for old childhood favorites.

Get Creative with the Form

Consider options like hybrid in person/passive programming, and additional types of kits.

In summer 2021, our library made a quick pivot from all virtual programming to outdoor in-person events. I had a summer of take-home crafts ready to go, but nothing ready for in person. We decided to do these crafts in person and then put out anything left over as previously planned. This ended up giving us the best of both worlds. We were able to do outdoor programming easily because the kits were pre-packaged (the only problem we encountered: a project that involved tissue paper squares that quickly got carried away by the wind). We also offered our take-home kits as planned.

Creating a hybrid program allowed us a great deal of flexibility, and we've carried on this practice. At a smaller branch library, no one showing up to a tween/teen program is not uncommon. Having the whole thing convertible into a take-home offering saves librarians from wasted effort.

Once you're in the groove of producing take-home kits on a regular basis, consider branching out. In addition to regular take-home kits, our library also offers seasonal cross stitch kits for beginners, complete with embroidery floss and needle.

Manage Your Budget and Establish Value

If most of your projects are inexpensive, you can make room in your budget for a few seasonal splurges throughout the year.

At our branch, most take-home kits cost less than three dollars per patron, with the bulk falling between one and two dollars. A few kits a year will cost nothing above our normal operating budget because we use supplies we already have. Most will involve the purchase of some supplies from our Friends budget. A few times a year we will spend more per patron for a kit related to a holiday, summer reading, or just because. Over the course of a year, the aim is to balance these costs appropriately.

Take into consideration the price differential between your supply choices. Is it better to buy a tiny ball of yarn for each kit or buy two huge balls of yarn and make smaller balls out of

them? I've personally agonized over this very decision before concluding that rolling my own homely balls of yarn saves too much money to ignore, even though the individual tiny balls are more aesthetically pleasing.

Make sure that your library recognizes the value of this service to your patrons.

Every library seems to record passive programs differently. Hopefully your library recognizes that take-home kits involve substantial work from staff and have a positive impact on patrons' library experience.

Don't Expect Too Much of Yourself

Your users will likely love what you offer them, and if something doesn't work out the way you wanted it to, there's always another chance to get it right.

Creating take-home kits is an enormous amount of work. Get as much help as possible in getting inspiration and executing the program. Teen volunteers can help prep and test-drive kits.

Give yourself as much lead time as possible to plan and create kits; some ideas will not work out as planned. There will even be kits you make and distribute that you will see as failures.

I was very excited about a foam stamp kit for tweens, but when demonstrating the kit with a family, I saw that transferring the patterns did not work as I'd thought it would. We made it work in person, but I anticipated that at home the kits would be nearly useless. I felt awful that I was sending home a less than ideal kit. The stamp kit was not as popular as others I did at the same time, but I did hear from some families that they enjoyed it and didn't have any problem.

This experience reminded me that patrons are (almost) always slower to judge than we are. If we put our best effort into something, it's rare that it will completely fail. Every instance of things not working out as planned is a lesson learned for the next time. And with take-home crafts, we know there will always be a next time. Take-home crafts are here to stay, and deciding on your library's own set of best practices will help produce the best results possible. &