Low Barrier, High Joy: Designing Youth Programs for Access, Engagement, and Belonging in Public Libraries

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Abstract

Public library youth programs are often evaluated through attendance counts and participation totals, yet these metrics can obscure the structural conditions that make programs accessible, welcoming, and sustaining for families with varied needs. This conceptual framework, grounded in practitioner experience, introduces Low Barrier, High Joy (LBHJ): a design approach that intentionally reduces participation friction while strengthening autonomy, competence, connection, and belonging. Drawing on research in informal learning, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Self-Determination Theory, and belonging, LBHJ reframes joy not as spectacle, but as an indicator of equitable design. The framework is illustrated through two practitioner mini-cases, a process-art program (Let's Create) and a modular STEAM program (STEAM Fridays). The paper concludes with practical evaluation strategies that move beyond attendance metrics to document participation quality and sustained engagement.

Keywords: Youth Services, Public Libraries, Program Design, Informal Learning, Universal Design for Learning, Participation Barriers, Program Evaluation

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Introduction

Public libraries often describe youth programming as accessible: programs are free, doors are open, families are invited. Yet access is more complicated than cost or entry.

Access is shaped by structure: whether participation requires arriving at a precise start time, whether materials feel limited, whether there is a single correct outcome, whether children must speak publicly to engage, and whether caregivers feel confident navigating the space. These elements --often invisible in planning documents -- influence who begins, who continues, and who returns.

Despite widespread commitment to access and inclusion, youth services discourse often treats accessibility as a question of representation, cost, or outreach rather than structural design. Programs are described as inclusive when they are free, when materials reflect diverse identities, or when marketing reaches broader audiences. These efforts are important, yet they do not necessarily address the microstructures that shape participation once families enter the room.

Attendance data, while necessary for reporting and funding justification, can further obfuscate this distinction. High turnout may signal visibility or community interest, but it does not reveal whether participants experienced autonomy, comfort, or sustained engagement, nor does it show who began but did not return.

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As a result, youth programming can unintentionally reproduce friction even within well-intentioned inclusive environments. Rigid sequencing, visible scarcity of materials, public comparison of outcomes, or single-path instructions may narrow participation without being recognized as barriers. Low Barrier, High Joy emerges in response to this gap. It reframes inclusion not as invitation alone, but as structural design.

Low Barrier, High Joy (LBHJ) is a design framework for youth programming that reduces participation friction while increasing autonomy, competence, connection, and belonging. It argues that joy is not incidental to learning environments. Rather, joy emerges when structural barriers are intentionally reduced and participants retain control over how they engage.

This framework emerged from iterative adjustments in ongoing public library programs rather than from a single pilot initiative. The programs discussed in this paper were developed within a suburban, city-funded public library serving a diverse Silicon Valley community. The framework emerged through recurring youth and family programming in mixed-age, drop-in environments where participation patterns could be observed over time. While the specific activities described here reflect one public library context, the structural design principles underlying LBHJ are intended to be adaptable across varied library settings, staffing models, and community demographics.

This framework offers language for youth services librarians to examine how program structures shape participation beyond attendance alone. It is intended not as a prescriptive model, but as a reflective design lens that can support planning, observation, evaluation, and iterative adjustment within everyday programming practice.

Conceptual Framing

Public libraries function as informal learning environments where participation is voluntary and socially mediated. Research on informal learning emphasizes that engagement in such spaces is most sustainable when it is interest-driven, socially supported, and low in evaluative pressure (Falk & Dierking, 2013; National Research Council, 2009). Unlike classrooms, public youth programs must accommodate wide developmental variability within the same physical space.

LBHJ aligns with principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018), which treat variability as the norm rather than the exception. By embedding multiple entry points and forms of engagement, programs can support diverse learners without isolating difference.

The framework is further grounded in Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as innate psychological needs necessary for optimal functioning and sustained intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within this perspective, joy is not spectacle; it emerges when environments support agency, effectiveness, and connection.

Belonging research further suggests that small relational cues can significantly influence whether individuals perceive a space as welcoming (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Greeting participants individually, normalizing experimentation, and reducing public evaluation are therefore structural signals rather than peripheral gestures.

Recent research in library and informal learning contexts further supports the importance of flexible, socially supported participation structures. Tawfik et al. (2023), in a systematic review of informal learning in United States libraries, identify learner agency, low-pressure engagement, and socially mediated exploration as recurring strengths of informal library environments. Similarly, Mitchell et al. (2020) describe public library STEAM learning as most effective when librarians act as “guides on the side” rather than directors of uniform outcomes. Research examining neurodiverse participation in informal STEM learning environments also emphasizes the importance of flexible

engagement structures, layered entry points, and reduced evaluative pressure (Jenson et al., 2024).

Together, these perspectives suggest that accessibility in informal learning environments is not solely a matter of physical access or representation. It is also shaped by how participation itself is structured. LBHJ builds upon this foundation by focusing specifically on participation friction within public library youth programming.

The Low Barrier, High Joy Framework

LBHJ is not a program type, but a way of designing programs. In my experience, participation often decreases when friction is high. Friction can take many forms: unclear instructions, tightly sequenced steps, visible scarcity of materials, public performance, or the sense that there is one correct way to engage. These elements are rarely intentional barriers, but they shape who feels comfortable beginning. Low Barrier programming reduces this friction in advance. It assumes variability. It anticipates hesitation. It embeds entry points rather than announcing them.

High Joy, in this context, is not spectacle or noise. It is visible in how participants move through the space. Children begin quickly. They adjust rather than abandon. Caregivers remain. Families return. The atmosphere is focused but unguarded.

The framework identifies five common domains of participation friction:

- Logistical: rigid timing or narrow entry windows
- Informational: instructions that must be heard, remembered, or interpreted correctly
- Physical and sensory: crowding, bottlenecks, inaccessible materials
- Cognitive: unclear starting points or overly sequenced tasks
- Social: public evaluation, comparison, or scarcity cues

Reducing these barriers does not lower expectations. It shifts responsibility from the participant to the design.

Although illustrated here through two specific programs, the LBHJ framework is not tied to a particular budget size, staffing model, or community demographic. The design principles -- distributed entry, layered differentiation, reduced public risk, and relational welcome-- can be adapted across library contexts. The LBHJ framework's relevance lies not in a specific activity type, but in the structural questions it prompts.

To make the framework more transferable across library settings, the five domains of participation friction can also function as reflective planning prompts. Before a program, librarians might ask: What could make participation difficult to begin? Where might participants feel uncertain, rushed, watched, or unsuccessful? Which parts of the experience rely heavily on verbal instruction, public performance, or narrowly sequenced steps?

After a program, these same domains can support reflective evaluation. Patterns of hesitation, bottlenecks, abandoned attempts, or repeated staff intervention may indicate forms of structural friction rather than participant disengagement. Conversely, when children begin quickly, move independently between materials, modify activities confidently, or return across multiple sessions, those behaviors may indicate that the environment successfully supported autonomy, competence, connection, and belonging.

The framework is intentionally observational and flexible rather than prescriptive. It is designed to support iterative adjustment within everyday practice rather than standardized assessment. In this way, LBHJ functions less as a fixed program model and more as a structural lens for examining how participation is shaped within informal learning environments.

Table 1: Reflective Questions for Identifying Participation Friction

Friction Domain	Reflective Question	Possible Structural Adjustment	Observable Indicator
Logistical	Can participants join easily at different times?	Use rolling entry and repeated prompts rather than single-start instruction.	Families begin participation without waiting or disruption.
Informational	Do participants need to remember multiple verbal instructions?	Provide visual examples and brief written prompts.	Participants begin independently with minimal clarification.
Physical and Sensory	Are materials and movement pathways accessible?	Distribute supplies across stations and reduce crowding.	Participants navigate the environment comfortably and independently.
Cognitive	Does the activity imply a single correct outcome?	Provide open-ended pathways and optional levels of challenge.	Children experiment, adapt, and persist after mistakes.
Social	Could participants feel publicly evaluated or compared?	Normalize variation and reduce emphasis on correctness.	Participants engage without visible hesitation or withdrawal.

Mini-Case 1: Let's Create - Process Art and the Design of Sufficiency

Let's Create is a recurring drop-in process-art program designed for children and their caregivers. A visual sample and a collection of materials are set out as a starting point, but replication is not required. Participants are told they may use the materials to create anything they choose.

There is no formal start time. Families enter and are welcomed individually. Repeat participants are greeted by name when possible. New families are oriented briefly and without pressure. The sample functions as an invitation rather than a prescription. It answers the question "Where do I begin?" without dictating what the result should look like.

Materials are intentionally displayed in generous quantities. Many are upcycled or donated. Nothing about the setup suggests rationing. When materials feel abundant, children experiment more freely and mistakes carry less weight. There is no single correct outcome. Staff language reinforces this by asking participants to describe what they are making rather than whether it matches the sample. Caregivers are not positioned as instructors but as co-participants. Children begin quickly. Shy participants engage without needing to speak publicly. Families return. Caregivers often comment that they are enjoying the experience alongside their children. By reducing instructional load, eliminating scarcity cues, and protecting participant dignity, Let's Create lowers participation friction. Joy emerges as sustained engagement rather than spectacle.

Over time, several observable participation patterns emerged consistently within the program. Children typically began creating within moments of arriving rather than waiting for direct instruction. Participants frequently modified projects midstream or incorporated unexpected materials without seeking permission. Caregivers often remained engaged alongside children rather than stepping back into supervisory roles alone. Return participation across sessions was common, and families regularly referenced previous creations or experiences when returning to the program space. These indicators suggested that reducing participation friction supported sustained engagement and participant confidence.

Mini-Case 2: STEAM Fridays - Themed Exploration and Layered Entry

STEAM Fridays is a recurring summer program organized around a weekly STEAM theme. Each session includes three to five stations that remain constant throughout the program window. Each station offers a clear starting action. A demonstration or visible model shows what happens there, but extended explanation is optional.

Differentiation is embedded rather than announced. Within a single station, a younger child may be captivated by visible reactions,

while an older child begins asking why it works. Some stations are straightforward; others invite deeper investigation.

Engagement is self-directed rather than publicly demonstrated. If a structure collapses or an experiment fails, it does so quietly. Children reset and try again. Environments that normalize error and reduce public exposure tend to increase experimentation and persistence (Edmondson, 2018).

Because stations remained available throughout the program window, participants could observe before engaging, revisit activities multiple times, or move between levels of complexity at their own pace. Younger children often engaged through sensory exploration or visible reactions, while older participants extended the experience through prediction, troubleshooting, or experimentation. Staff observations showed that participants were more willing to retry failed attempts when experimentation occurred within low-risk, self-directed environments rather than through public demonstration.

By distributing entry points and lowering public risk, STEAM Fridays reduces participation friction while maintaining intellectual depth.

Evaluating Low Barrier, High Joy

Public youth services increasingly operate within accountability systems that prioritize quantifiable outcomes. Attendance, completion rates, and standardized experiences are easier to report than belonging, autonomy, or dignity. These measures provide necessary data, yet when metrics become proxies for quality, participation volume can eclipse participation experience. A full room does not guarantee access, just as a completed craft does not guarantee agency. A successful demonstration does not guarantee that experimentation felt safe.

LBHJ supplements traditional metrics. It shifts evaluation from counting presence to observing participation. Instead of asking only how many attended, it asks how quickly participants began, how long they stayed, whether they modified or iterated on their work, and whether they returned.

When friction is low, children begin quickly. They move independently between materials. They return to an activity after adjusting it. Caregivers remain. Families come back. In informal learning spaces, voluntary return may be more meaningful than single-event attendance (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Repeat participation signals that the environment felt accessible, not merely entertaining.

Evaluation is directed toward improving program structures rather than measuring participants. Patterns of hesitation, bottlenecks, or abandonment point to structural friction that can be redesigned. In this way, assessment becomes a tool for protecting dignity and expanding access rather than narrowing it.

Conclusion

LBHJ reframes youth programming as structural design work. Rather than centering activities alone, the framework centers the conditions under which participation becomes possible. Across process art and STEM exploration, the same pattern appears: when friction is reduced, agency increases. When agency increases, engagement deepens. Joy is not an added feature layered onto programming after access has been achieved. It is evidence that participation structures have been designed thoughtfully and equitably.

Many youth services librarians already practice elements of LBHJ intuitively. They notice when a child hesitates before joining, when a caregiver relaxes after being welcomed, or when families return because a program felt easy to enter and comfortable to navigate. Naming these patterns provides language for work that is often invisible within traditional program evaluation.

LBHJ is therefore intended not as a rigid formula, but as a reflective framework that can support planning, staff training, iterative redesign, and advocacy. It can help librarians identify where participation friction may exist within existing

programs and provide a shared vocabulary for discussing how structural choices influence autonomy, competence, connection, and belonging.

By identifying participation friction across multiple domains and articulating observable indicators, the framework offers practitioners a transferable lens for refining program design while preserving flexibility across varied library contexts. In environments increasingly shaped by metrics, efficiency, and standardization, protecting joy is not sentimental work. It is structural work.

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