

Programming for Adults with Special Needs: VLA 2017
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Presenter self-introductions

- Jill is the library director. She said “yes” and defended the program to naysayers.
- Donna is the former trustee and volunteer. She was with the program from the beginning.
- Biases: Everyone has innate value. Discomfort is not an excuse to avoid action.

Program Development Overview

- Spring 2014: Adults begin attending preschool Story Time Crafts.
- Slowly added more for adults or special events. Moved to meeting room. Story Time family attendance always low, now rarely anyone. Staff focus on adults.
- July 12, 2016: Created older story time - second grade and up welcome, but primarily for adults (Exploring Books). Story Time Crafts (preschool) cancelled due to lack of attendance.
- July 2017: Began chapter book. Well received, but staff not consistent in reading.
- August 2017: Began asking group for topic and activity ideas.

Potential Objections & Concerns

- Library staff aren't trained to work with this population.
 - Neither are we. Treat people with respect and as individuals and you'll be fine.
 - Their expectations are almost non-existent. Anything done in kindness is accepted and received.
- To segregate or not? Does the adult, child, or youth librarian take this on?
 - JLHPL library philosophy is that we serve people according to ability and actionable age, not chronological age. We do not segregate based on what is comfortable, only by interest levels and safety considerations. Children will meet adults with varying abilities as they go through life, therefore, there is no reason they should not be in the same program as people with differing abilities. These kinds of interactions can help teach children not to be afraid of people who are different.
 - Whoever has the time and inclination should run the program. This population does require someone who can be patient without becoming patronizing.
 - Be creative and diverse with offerings. This population is simple and the program should be, too. Whoever is leading the program will be disappointed if they spend a great deal of time, energy, and resources only to find this population regarding the efforts (i.e. a take home project) no differently than a coloring page.
- Staff and patrons are uncomfortable around this demographic.
 - Tough. People, by their very existence, are deserving of respect and as high a quality of life as possible. Removing a normal part of life, even if it makes us uncomfortable, is cowardly and unkind. Treat others as you want to be treated. Act as if something is normal and acceptable and people will get used to it.

- Blending populations is enriching to everyone involved. As long as the program is enriching the population that is targeted without undermining an existing program, resistance from the hard-hearted should be withstood.

History of Program

- Staff were matter of fact about the inclusion. No special announcements were made. Children were curious, but quickly accepted the adults' presence. Children worked at one table and adults at another - parallel play. There was almost no interaction between the two groups.
- Most parents had no problem with the adults being in the same program. They saw it as a positive opportunity for their children to become comfortable being around people with disabilities.
- A few parents complained. Jill explained the library philosophy and those parents decided to stop attending Story Time.
- The program was faithful to its intent. Unfortunate for those children pulled out due to parent's ignorance.

History of Program

- Began with allowing adults to attend Story Time Crafts. They did what the preschoolers did: listen to a story, make a craft. It was a seamless inclusion process.
- Preschoolers sometimes had more skills than adults. Adults often needed one on one help where preschoolers could do things on their own.
- It's important for library staff to encourage counselors to help the adults in the same way library staff encourage parents to help their preschoolers. Be prepared to direct and guide them as well. (Remembering that most of the time they are in survival mode, but now have opportunity to assist the individuals in play with support of library staff.) They may tend to sit back rather than engage in the activities. It would be best to establish that in the beginning of a new program; it is not respite for them, but a different opportunity to serve the individuals.
- Library staff naturally began to consider how to keep programs simple enough for the adults to enjoy without being too childish. Staff began to include more or less complex activities for the adults.
- At Donna's suggestion, a new program was made for the adults.

Exploring Books Sample Program

- Welcome group as they arrive.
- Speak to each person and use their name. Look them in the eye unless you know it makes them uncomfortable. Ask about things you know they are interested in. Speak to people even if they are incapable of speaking back.
- Ask the group about what they've done since the last meeting.
- Introduce the day's topic.
- Read a picture book and talk about it.
- Have a group activity (e.g. pass the page dot-to-dot, table football, simple craft)*
- Have a solo coloring page*

- While coloring, summarize the chapters already read and read a chapter from the chapter book*
- Ask for ideas for next meeting and give any general announcements
- Say goodbye to group and individuals
- * Alternately, have a more involved activity, like taking a walk and blowing bubbles, a scavenger hunt, or making a more complex craft and skip the solo coloring and chapter book time.
- Recognize the different ability of each individual. Look for an opportunity for them to grow and be challenged.

Things to Consider

- Adults need adult-sized tables and chairs.
- Participants should be spoken to as someone capable of understanding, not as simpletons.
- Speak to the person, not about them. Do not talk about them as if they were not there.
- For crafts, have all fine-motor skill or dangerous elements completed ahead of time. Color, simple cut, and glue is good. Glue gun, feathers, small pieces to glue or cut, detailed cutting lines, or following multiple steps is harder.
- Give people tasks. They can hand out supplies or clean up afterwards.
- The process is more important than the outcome.
- Rolling chairs may be hard for some participants. Have options ready.
- Use washable tables and chairs.
- Push expectations. You might be surprised by what they can do. It's ok to have a day where you end up doing most of the work, as long as you use that to inform your next activities so that they can do most of the work.
- Try not to have every program be a coloring page day.
- Try to have activities that can be adjusted based on the person's skill or interest. We try to have a simple coloring page (preschool) and a more complex one (elementary school).
- Sometimes people have off days or simply don't want to participate. It's ok. Let the library be a place where they can make their own decisions. All day long, they have someone telling them where to go and what to do, having to ask permission to even use the restroom. Let them have an hour where they have some control over their lives. If one person doesn't want to do something, that's fine, as long as they aren't disruptive (adjust your expectations of what qualifies as disruptive).
- Look for ways to help the person be more independent. Their caregivers may be so used to the routine, that they miss something. Always be respectful; it's not your job to fix people and you don't have all the background on a person, but feel free to ask if you want to try something different. (We provide a clipboard to one participant with cerebral palsy so that she can participate even when she can't reach the table. The caregivers hold her hand to color. Library staff let her point to the crayon she wants and put it in her hand so she can color by herself. The caregiver way results in a prettier picture, but the library way gives her more independence.)

Successful Activities

- Fire truck visit
- Walk a few blocks and blow bubbles at town square
- Corn hole (active games with beanie babies)
- Nature walk and scavenger hunt
- Pin button machine
- Movies
- Making applesauce or cookies (Cooking classes, simple things so each can be involved)
- Bingo
- Dancing
- Using music for a bit of variation (Our group loves percussion instruments. Some participants who rarely engage are enthralled when the instruments come out.)
- Rock balancing

Less Successful Events

- Egg carton turkeys
- Acorn cap owls
- Greeting cards with writing
- Kids' SRP programs (e.g. magician). Some of the adults become overwhelmed by all the activity. Let counselors decide what is appropriate.

Conclusion

- Treat all people with respect and dignity, considering them of great value, and you'll be fine.
- This is an opportunity to give these people something that they rarely are offered: recognition and acceptance.