

Introduction

Libraries are often challenged by individuals and groups concerned about the availability of a wide variety of library materials to everyone.

Addressing these challenges requires a balance of carefully crafted library policy, knowledge and understanding of intellectual freedom principles, and sensitivity to community needs and concerns. It also requires effective communication. This tip sheet has been prepared by the American Library Association (ALA) to help you plan for and deal with such challenges. It can help you educate library staff and trustees, inform the public and work with the media. Some tips are specific to a type of library or service, while others are for general use.

The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom has information and resources to assist you at any stage of a challenge. Established in 1967, the office is charged with implementing ALA policy on free access to libraries and library materials. The goal is to educate librarians and the general public about the importance of intellectual freedom in libraries.

Communicating Effectively

A few simple communication techniques can go a long way toward defusing emotion and clearing up misunderstanding. Make sure your staff is trained in procedures for handling complaints and understands the importance of treating all people with respect. The goal is to resolve complaints informally whenever possible.

One-on-One

- Greet the person with a smile. Communicate your openness to receive inquiries and that you take them seriously. Listen more than you talk.
- Practice “active listening.” Take time to really listen and acknowledge the individual’s concern. This can be as simple as “I’m sorry you’re upset. I understand your concern.”
- Stay calm and courteous. Upset parents are not likely to be impressed by talk about the [First Amendment](#) or the [Library Bill of Rights](#). Talk about freedom of choice, the library’s role in serving all people and the responsibility of parents to supervise their own children’s library use. Avoid library jargon.
- Distribute facts, policy and other background materials in writing to all interested parties. Avoid giving personal opinions.
- Be prepared to give a clear and non-intimidating explanation of the library’s procedure for registering a complaint and be clear about when a decision can be expected.

Dealing with the media

When a challenge occurs, realize this may attract media attention. How effectively you work with the media may well determine how big the story becomes and will help to shape public opinion.

Some suggestions:

- Have one spokesperson for the library. Make sure that reporters, library staff and the members of the board know who this is. Make it clear that no one other than this spokesperson should express opinions on behalf of the library.
- Prepare carefully for any contacts with the media. Know the most important message you want to deliver and be able to deliver it in 25 words or less. You will want to review your library's borrowing and collection development policies and the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights*.
- Practice answering difficult questions and answers out loud. You may wish to invest in a session with a professional media consultant.
- Keep to the high ground—no matter what. Don't mention the other side by name, either personal or corporate. Be careful to speak in neutral terms. Name calling and personalization are great copy for reporters but create barriers to communication.
- Do not let yourself be put on the defensive. Stay upbeat, positive—"Libraries are vital to democracy. We are very proud of the service our library provides." If someone makes a false statement, gently but firmly respond: "That's absolutely incorrect. The truth is the vast majority of parents find the library an extremely friendly, safe place for their children. We receive many more compliments from parents than we do complaints."
- Be prepared to tell stories or quote comments from parents and children about how the library has helped them.
- Be strategic in involving others. For instance, board members, friends of libraries, community leaders, teachers and other supporters can assist by writing letters to the editor or an opinion column and/or meeting with a newspaper editorial board or other members of the media.

More tips

The following tips apply both when dealing with the media and when speaking to other audiences—community groups, trustees, staff:

- Never repeat a negative. Keep your comments upbeat and focused on service.
- Keep it simple. Avoid professional jargon. Try to talk in user-friendly terms your audience can relate to: Freedom of choice—not the *Library Bill of Rights*. "People with concerns" or "concerned parents"—not censors.
- Ask questions. Find out what the approach is, whether there will also be someone with an opposing view present. If you do not feel qualified to address the question or are uncomfortable with the approach, say so. Suggest other angles ("The real issue is freedom of choice. . .")
- Be clear who you represent—yourself or your library.
- Know your audience. Make sure you know which newspaper, radio or TV station you're dealing with and who the audience is—whether they're parents, seniors, teenagers, their ethnic background, religious affiliation and anything else that will help you focus your remarks.
- Anticipate the standard "Who-What-When-Where-and-Why" questions and develop your answers beforehand. Keep your answers brief and to the point. Avoid giving too much information. Let the reporter ask the questions.
- Beware of manipulation. Some reporters may ask leading questions, something like "Isn't it true that . . . ?" Make your own statement.
- Don't rush. Pause to think about what you want to say and the best way to say it. Speak deliberately. It will make you sound more thoughtful and authoritative.
- Don't be afraid to admit you don't know. "I don't know" is a legitimate answer. Reporters do not want incorrect information. Tell them you'll get the information and call back.

- Provide hand-outs with copies of relevant policies, statistics, other helpful information. You also may want to provide a written copy of your statement.
- Never say “No comment.” A simple “I’m sorry I can’t answer that” will suffice.
- Remember, nothing is “off the record.” Assume that anything you say could end up on the front page or leading the news broadcast.

It’s not just what you say

How you look and the tone of your voice can be as important as what you say—especially on radio and TV or before a live audience.

You want to sound and look professional, but also friendly and approachable. Studies have shown audiences are more likely to trust and believe you if they like how you look and sound.

- Smile when you’re introduced, if someone says something funny, if you want to show your enthusiasm for all the good things that your library is doing. On the flip side, be sure not to smile when others are making a serious point.
- Dress and make up appropriately. There are many articles and books on what works for TV and speaking appearances. On radio, use your voice as a tool to express your feelings—concern, enthusiasm, empathy. A smile can be “heard” on the radio.

Don’t panic if you misspeak. Simply say “I’m sorry, I forgot what I was going to say.” Or, “I’m sorry I was confused. The correct number is…” To err is human, and audiences are very forgiving of those who confess—but don’t agonize over—their mistakes.

Sample questions and answers

The following questions provide sample language to use when answering questions from the media and other members of the public. You will want to personalize your remarks for your library and community. Remember, keep it simple. Keep it human.

What is the role of libraries in serving children?: The same as it is for adults. Libraries provide books and other materials that will meet a wide range of ages and interests. Many libraries have special areas for children and teenagers. They also have many special programs, such as preschool storyhour, movies, puppet shows, term paper clinics. In fact, more children participate in summer reading programs at libraries than play Little League baseball!

Why don’t libraries restrict certain materials based on age like movie theaters or video stores?: Movie theaters and video stores are private businesses and can make their own policies. Libraries are public institutions. They cannot limit access on the basis of age or other characteristics. Our library does provide copies of movie reviews and ratings, and we encourage parents to use them in guiding their children’s library use.

How do libraries decide what to buy?: Every library has its own policies, which are approved by its board. Our library has adopted the *Library Bill of Rights*. We also have a mission statement that says our

goal is to serve a broad range of community needs. Librarians are taught as part of their professional education to evaluate books and other materials and to select materials based on library policies.

What is the Library Bill of Rights?: The *Library Bill of Rights* is a policy statement adopted by the American Library Association to protect the right of all library users to choose for themselves what they wish to read or view. The policy is more than 50 years old and has been adopted voluntarily by most libraries as a way of ensuring the highest quality library service to their communities.

Does that mean a child can check out Playboy or other materials intended for adults?: We believe in freedom of choice for all people but we also believe in common sense. It would be extremely unusual for a young child to check out that type of adult material. Most libraries are designed with special areas for children and teenagers. And there are librarians to provide assistance. We also provide suggested reading lists to help them make appropriate choices. Our goal is to provide the best possible service for young people, and we are very proud of what we offer. If you haven't been to our library recently, we encourage you to come and see for yourself!

What should I do if I find something I don't approve of in the library?: Libraries offer a wide range of materials, and not everyone is going to like or approve of everything. If you have a concern, simply ask to speak to a librarian. We do want to know your concerns, and we're confident we have or can get materials that meet your needs. The library also has a formal review process if you wish to put your concern in writing.

What does the library do if someone complains about something in its collection?: We take such concerns very seriously. First, we listen. We also have a formal review process in which we ask you to fill out a special form designed to help us understand your concerns. Anyone who makes a written complaint will receive a response in writing.

What can parents do to protect their children from materials they consider offensive?: Visit the library with your children. If that's not possible, ask to see the materials your children bring home. Set aside a special shelf for library materials. If there are materials on it you don't approve of, talk with your children about why you would rather they not read or view them. Most libraries provide suggested reading lists for various ages. And librarians are always glad to advise children and parents on selecting materials we think they would enjoy and find helpful.

I pay tax dollars to support the library. Why shouldn't I be able to control what my kids are exposed to?: You can control what your children are exposed to simply by going with them to visit the library or supervising what they bring home. The library has a responsibility to serve all taxpayers, including those you may not agree with—or who may not agree with you. We believe parents know what's best for their children, and each parent is responsible for supervising his or her child.

Key messages

When responding to a challenge, you will want to focus on three key points:

- Libraries provide ideas and information across the spectrum of social and political views.
- Libraries are one of our great democratic institutions. They provide freedom of choice for all people.
- Parents are responsible for supervising their own children's library use.

These simple, but sometimes overlooked essentials, are the bulwark against challenges.

Public Libraries

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Make sure all library staff and board members understand the library's policies and procedures for dealing with challenges. Provide customer service and other human relations training that will help staff deal effectively with sensitive matters.

Tips for directors

- Make sure you have an up-to-date selection policy, reviewed regularly by your library board, which includes a request for reconsideration form.
- As a public institution, the library must develop and implement all policies within the legal framework that applies to it. Have your policies reviewed regularly by the library's legal counsel for compliance with federal and state constitutional requirements, federal and state civil rights legislation, other applicable federal and state legislation, including confidentiality legislation and applicable case law.
- Have the request for reconsideration form available at your major service desks and at all your branch facilities.
- Work with your trustees to ensure that they know and understand the library's policies. Institute formal education procedures so all library trustees have the same information.
- Model the behavior you want your staff to practice. When confronted by an individual or representative of an organization that wants an item or items removed or reclassified, listen closely and carefully to what is being said (and what is not). Respect that person's right to have an opinion, and empathize. Keep the lines of communication open to the greatest possible extent.
- Work with your frontline staff (children's librarians, reference librarians, circulation, branch, bookmobile and support staff) to make sure they understand the library's policies. Help them to understand that they are responsible for implementing the library's policy, not their personal beliefs, while they are on duty. Make this a part of customer service training for your staff.
- Have an ongoing public relations program to communicate the many ways your library serves all members of the community, especially families.
- Build a solid working relationship with your local media before controversy arises. Provide them with upbeat, positive stories about what the library is doing, especially in the area of children's services.
- Put key contacts on your library mailing list. The time to build these relationships is before you need them.
- Hit the talk circuit. Every social, fraternal and religious organization that meets regularly needs speakers for its meetings. This is your opportunity to reach leaders and opinion makers in your community and to build a support network.

Tips for trustees

- First, remember your role. As a library trustee, you have a responsibility to speak your mind, and to argue forcibly for your point of view within the forum of the board. Once the board has made a decision, it is your responsibility to support the decision of the majority. If you disagree for whatever reason, do not speak out publicly. If, for reasons of conscience, you feel you cannot be silent, it is best to resign from the board before making your opposition public.
- Work with your library director to ensure that the necessary policies are in place and that they are reviewed regularly and thoroughly. Review and affirm your library's selection policy annually and make sure it is followed carefully.

- Insist that the entire board understands the library's collection policy and that it be involved in reviewing and reaffirming this policy annually.
- Be an effective advocate for the library. Use your contacts in the community to educate and mobilize others in support of the library.
- Bring what you hear back to the library director. Your roots in the community may be much deeper and of longer duration than those of the director. The things that people will tell you that they won't tell a director can provide valuable feedback.
- Be involved with the professional state and national organizations serving library trustees.
- Remember the roots of the word "trustee." The community has placed its trust in you to act as an effective steward for the library. This means representing the interests of the entire community, not just a vocal minority.

Tips for children's and young adult librarians

- Make sure you and your staff are familiar with the library's collection policy and can explain it in a clear, easily understandable way.
- Take time to listen to and empathize with a parent's concern. Explain in a non-defensive way the need to protect the right of all parents to determine their own children's reading.
- Keep your director informed of any concerns expressed, whether you feel they have been successfully resolved or not.
- Join professional organizations to keep abreast of issues and trends in library service to children and families.
- Encourage parents or guardians to participate in choosing library materials for their young people and to make reading aloud a family activity. Host storytelling, book discussion groups and other activities that involve adults and youth.
- Offer "parent education" programs/workshops throughout the year. National Library Week in April, Teen Read Week in October and Children's Book Week in November provide timely opportunities. Suggested topics: how to select books and other materials for youth; how to raise a reader; how books and other materials can help children and teens cope with troubling situations; the importance of parents being involved in their children's reading and library use; concepts of intellectual freedom.
- Reach out to the media. Offer to write a newspaper column or host a radio or TV program discussing good books and other materials for children and teens. Give tips for helping families get the most from libraries.
- Build bridges. Offer to speak to parent and other groups on what's new at the library, good reading for youth, how to motivate children and teens to read, how to make effective use of the library and other topics of special interest.