

# Learning across boundaries:

how librarians are bridging  
children's interests

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## The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop investigates the potential of digital media to help children learn and collaborates with educators, media producers, policymakers, and investors to put this research into action. An independent nonprofit organization, the Center addresses issues of digital equity and aims to strengthen connections between formal and informal learning environments. Learn more at [joanganzcooneycenter.org](http://joanganzcooneycenter.org)

A full-text PDF of this report is available as a free download from [joanganzcooneycenter.org](http://joanganzcooneycenter.org).

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# background

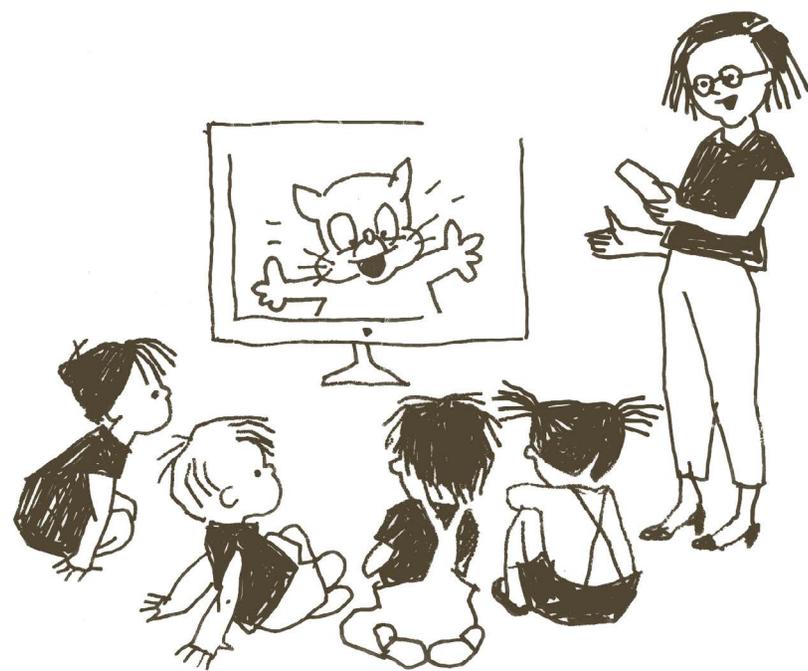
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The aim of the Families Learning Across Boundaries Project (FamLAB) is to create an ecosystem that can enable and encourage young children’s interest-driven learning across settings. With this in mind, we surveyed 407 library professionals serving communities across the United States to ask how libraries fit into this ecosystem and how they are doing so differently than how they might have 50 years ago, given advances in information and communication technologies. This report complements another we recently published on how parents and teachers function within this ecosystem (Takeuchi, Vaala, & Ahn, 2019) and describes the special relationships library professionals have with parents and teachers which allows them to help facilitate home-community and school-community connections.

Libraries have been around for nearly as long as information has taken the written form, with some dating back to 2200 B.C. (Casson, 2002). In ancient times, libraries housed documents of governmental, historical, and cultural importance and, as these documents became duplicable and less costly—thanks to technological advances such as the printing press—libraries began to open their doors to citizens to view and learn from these resources. The institution has since specialized, with public, private, university, and K–12 school libraries being the most common in the United States, alongside digital libraries, some of which hold vastly greater collections of documents than their brick-and-mortar peers. But the American brick-and-mortar library has evolved to be much more than just collections of resources. In many communities, libraries have embraced the digital revolution while maintaining their role as lively spaces, where children can attend story time, students can get homework done, adults can get help on their income taxes or job search, and families can attend movie screenings. Today’s libraries are as much about the people in them—library staff and patrons alike—as the print and digital resources they offer.

Even as mobile phones and the Internet have made it easy to find an answer to virtually any question anytime and anywhere, libraries still see a steady flow of patrons. According to Pew Research Center, 48% of Americans age 16 and older visited a library or bookmobile in 2016, up from 44% in 2015 (Horrigan, 2016). And most Americans say that libraries help them find trustworthy and reliable information, learn new things, and make important decisions (Geiger, 2017). In other words, people visit libraries for human assistance unavailable through a simple Internet search.

We surveyed library professionals, critical actors in and shapers of this learning ecosystem we aspire to create. The survey queried a range of professionals working in libraries—including librarians, media specialists, circulation managers, directors, and outreach managers—about three things: (a) how library professionals are supporting children’s interests, (b) how they are connecting children’s learning across settings, and (c) how libraries are evolving as community learning hubs. We have organized the report according to these three categories. For the sake of brevity, we refer to the full population of respondents as “librarians” throughout the report, but we acknowledge the distinction of various roles within library systems.



## Methods

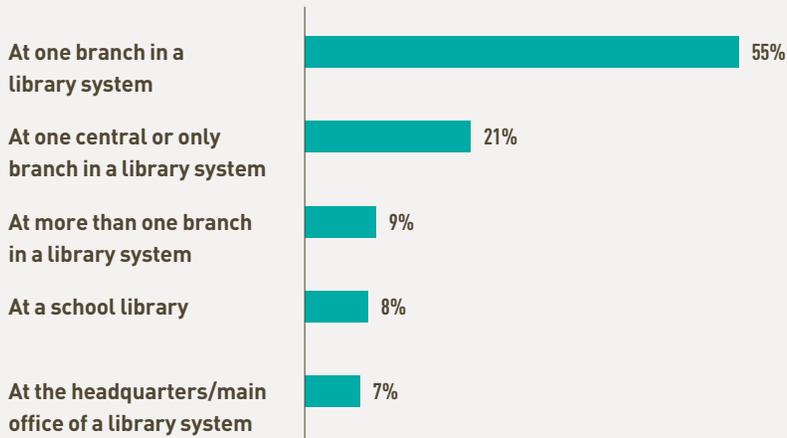
Researchers from the Joan Ganz Cooney Center designed and administered the survey, which targeted individuals in the United States who work at community and school libraries serving children ages 3–12. In addition to demographic questions, the survey comprised 21 multiple-choice questions and nine mainly optional open-ended response questions. The survey took 20–30 minutes to complete. We asked library professionals to answer questions as they pertained to their branch, system, or school library, depending on where they worked.

We fielded the survey between April and June 2019, recruiting through multiple channels. We advertised the survey through the Cooney Center’s social media and newsletter. In parallel, we used snowball sampling through our contacts at libraries and those who work with libraries. In an attempt to reach even more library professionals, we contacted 198 directors, managers, and administrators of library branches across all states via email or through library website contact forms, which we retrieved from an online database of every public library in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, 673 individuals took the survey, with 407 completing the survey in full. We analyzed and report on these 407 responses below. Please see the appendix for details on our qualitative analysis process.

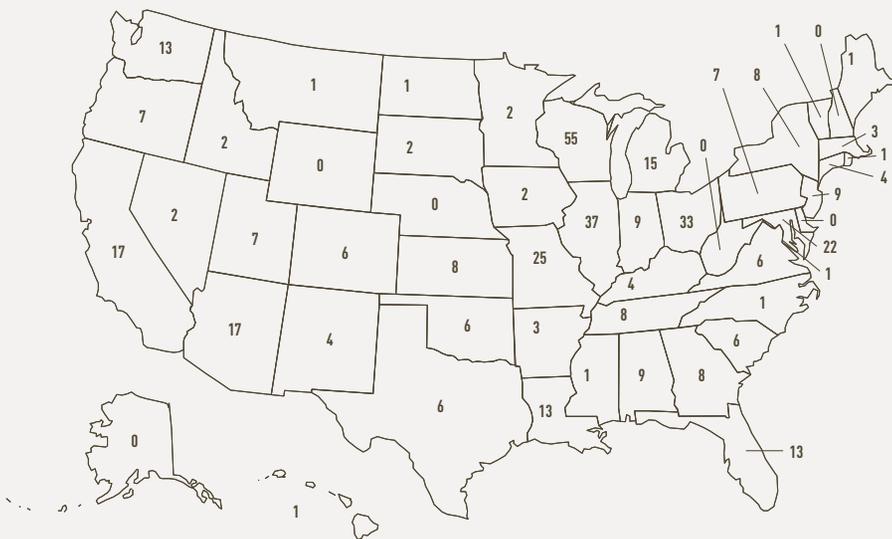
<sup>1</sup> See Library Technology Guides (website), “Public Libraries in the United States,” <https://librarytechnology.org/libraries/uspublic/>

# Participants

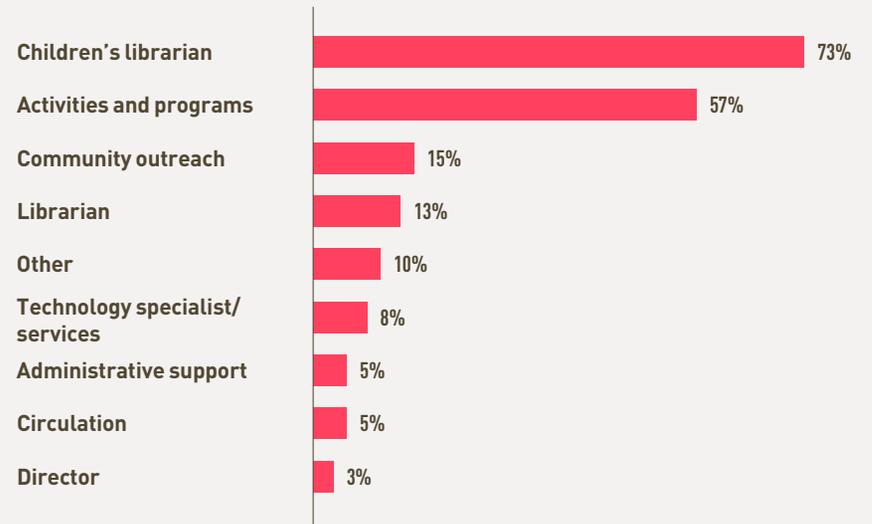
## Where do you work?



## Participant count by state

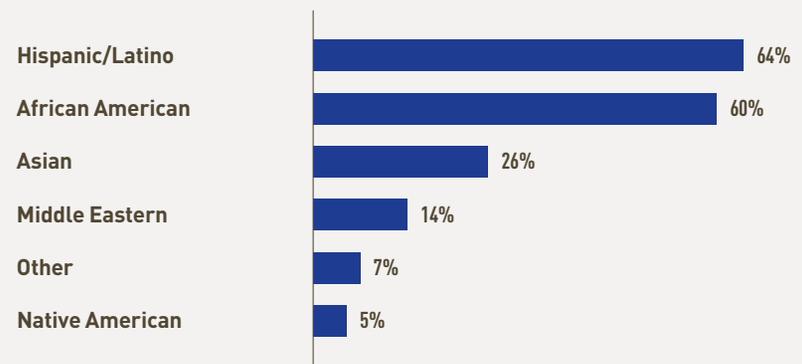


## Primary function you play at the library\*



\* Choose up to 2

## Largest ethnic/racial minority groups served\*

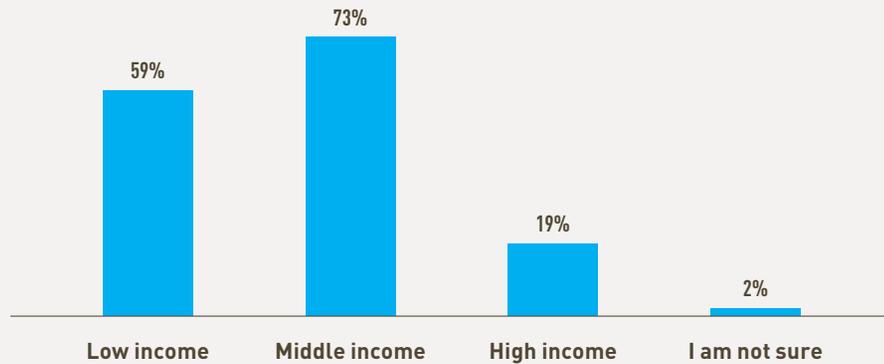


\* Choose up to 2

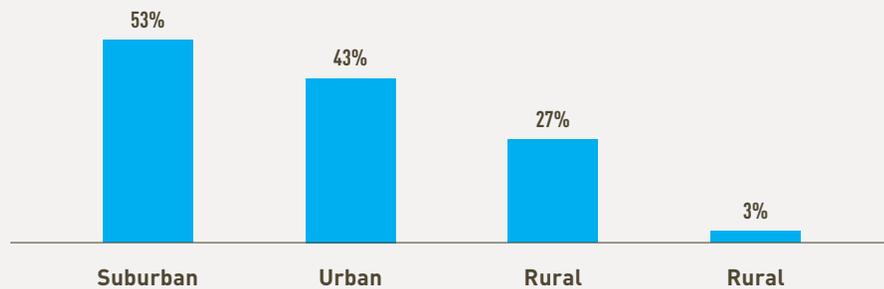
# Participants

## Families served

Income level of families within libraries' service areas; respondents could check up to two\*

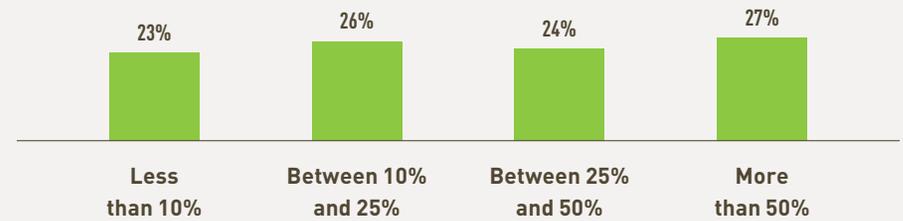


Communities within libraries' service areas; respondents could check up to two\*

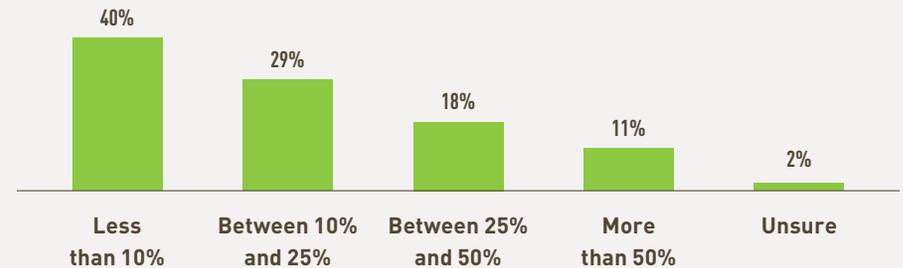


## Children served

Proportion from an ethnic/racial minority group



Proportion who speak a language other than English at home



\* Percentages add up to more than 100% since respondents could select up to two options

# findings

## Supporting children's interests

How do librarians come up with those captivating book displays that draw young patrons in to browse, borrow, and ask for more? How do they know what kinds of workshops families will show up to take part in? It starts with a deep understanding of what children want to see, read, and learn more about. While indisputably clever, librarians aren't mind readers. So we asked them: How do you know what children are interested in these days? (See Figure 1.)

### Quote

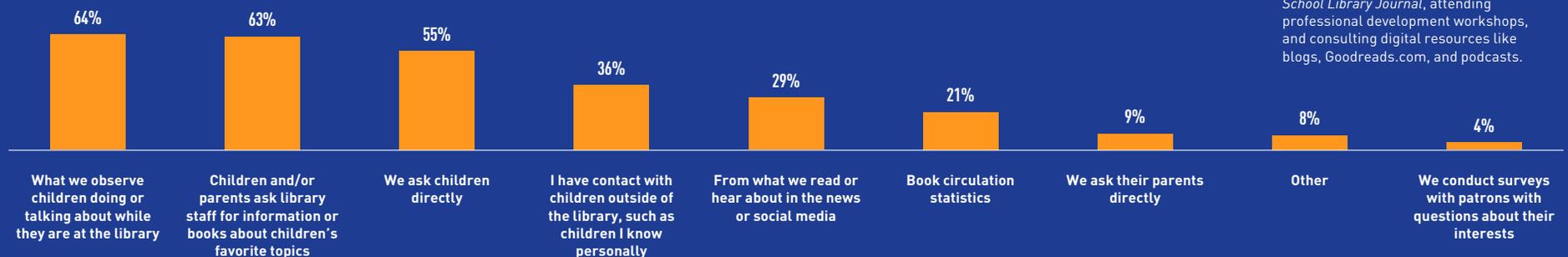
*"I am fortunate to work with kids from 0 to 18 and their families. It starts in baby-toddler story time and then preschool story time, so I see a lot of kids right from the get-go. When I get to work with them from so young, I develop a relationship with them that allows me to converse and get a feel for what they're interested in. But then I'm also the parent of two teenagers. That's another avenue of listening to what they're interested in, talking to their friends, talking to parents, talking to librarians around the country, within the state. I would say it comes in all different forms and it's 24/7. So there's never a time where I say, 'OK, now I'm going to figure out what their interests are.' It's just reading the newspaper or being aware of what's current."*

— Youth services librarian,  
rural Alaska community



Figure 1

How do you know what children are interested in these days?



\* Librarians who selected "Other" listed communicating with local schools/ teachers, checking with other libraries, reading research and publications like *School Library Journal*, attending professional development workshops, and consulting digital resources like blogs, Goodreads.com, and podcasts.

We asked librarians to provide two current interests (e.g., topics, activities, pastimes) of children who visit the library that they also considered to be *good for their learning or development*. This yielded 812 write-in responses, which ranged from Minecraft to sports, making slime to graphic novels. Table 1 illustrates the interests that emerged as the top five most popular among librarians' entries. Gaming—and primarily “sandbox” video games where players can build and explore virtual worlds—surfaced as the top interest of children that librarians considered good for kids' learning and development. Within this category, beyond general terms (e.g., games, video games, computer games, board games), librarians listed Minecraft (N=76), Roblox (N=31), and Fortnite (N=9) in particular.



**Table 1**

### Top five kids' interests that librarians also consider good for children's learning/development

Percent of responses	Interest	Examples
19%	Gaming	Minecraft, Roblox
10%	Reading	Graphic novels, story time
8%	Programming	Coding, robotics
8%	Building/construction	LEGO, building blocks
8%	Sports	Basketball, soccer

N = 812; two entries per respondent (one respondent missing)



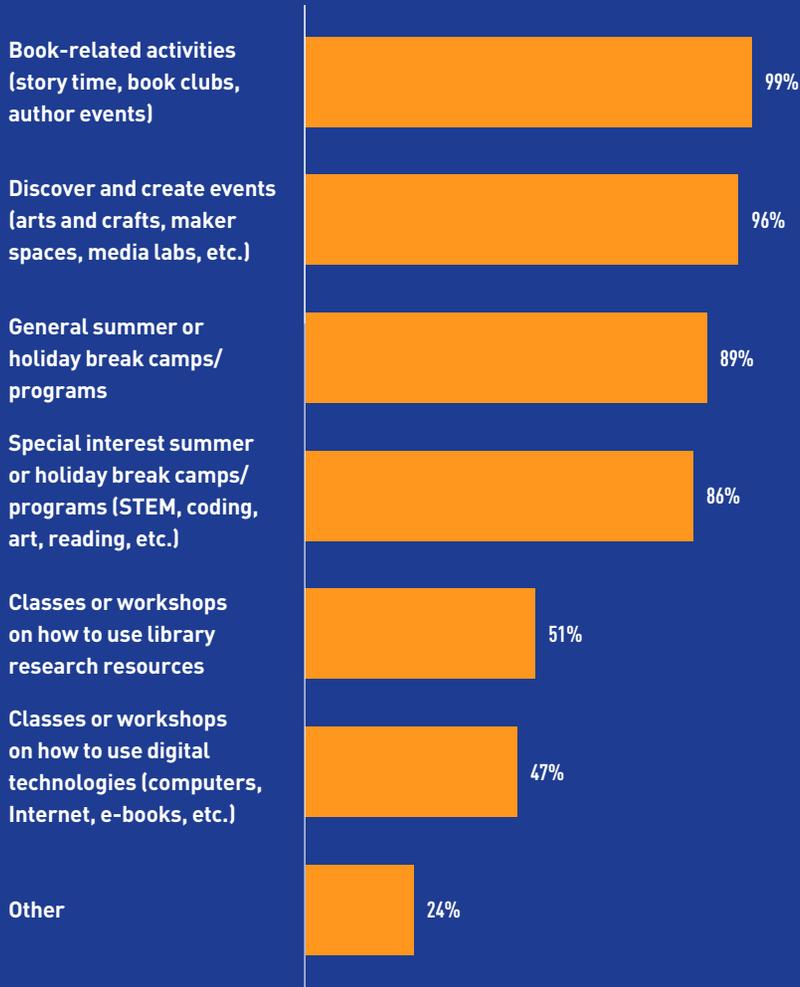
**Quote**

*“It’s very easy to be like, ‘Oh I think this is fun. Come out and do this.’ But then, you know, you’re there by yourself. If no one likes it, they won’t come. Just talking to them really is the best way I have found to see what they’re interested in. And really, kids are interested in people who are interested in them.”*

— Youth services librarian, suburban Kentucky community

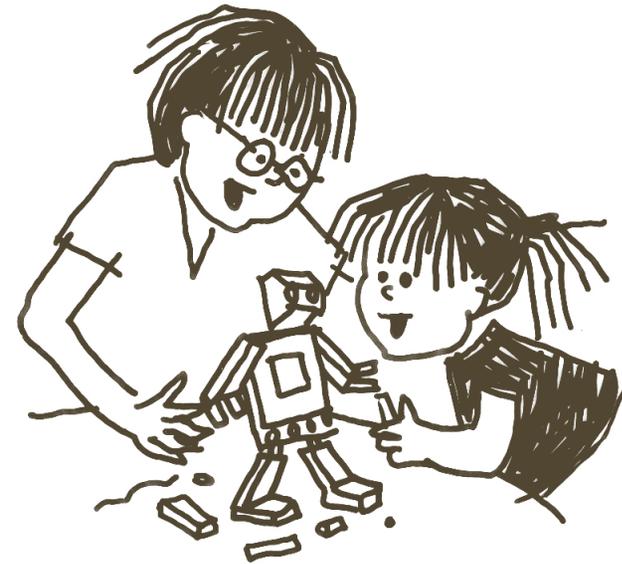
Figure 2

What kinds of programs do you offer families with children ages 3-12 to help extend or deepen children's interests?



N = 407; select all that apply

Libraries offer a variety of services designed to help families extend children's interests, often for free or at very low cost (see Figure 2). It comes as no surprise that book-related activities such as story hour are practically ubiquitous. But nearly as many libraries also offer discover and create events, such as arts and crafts workshops and makerspace activities, and just under half offer workshops on using digital technologies.



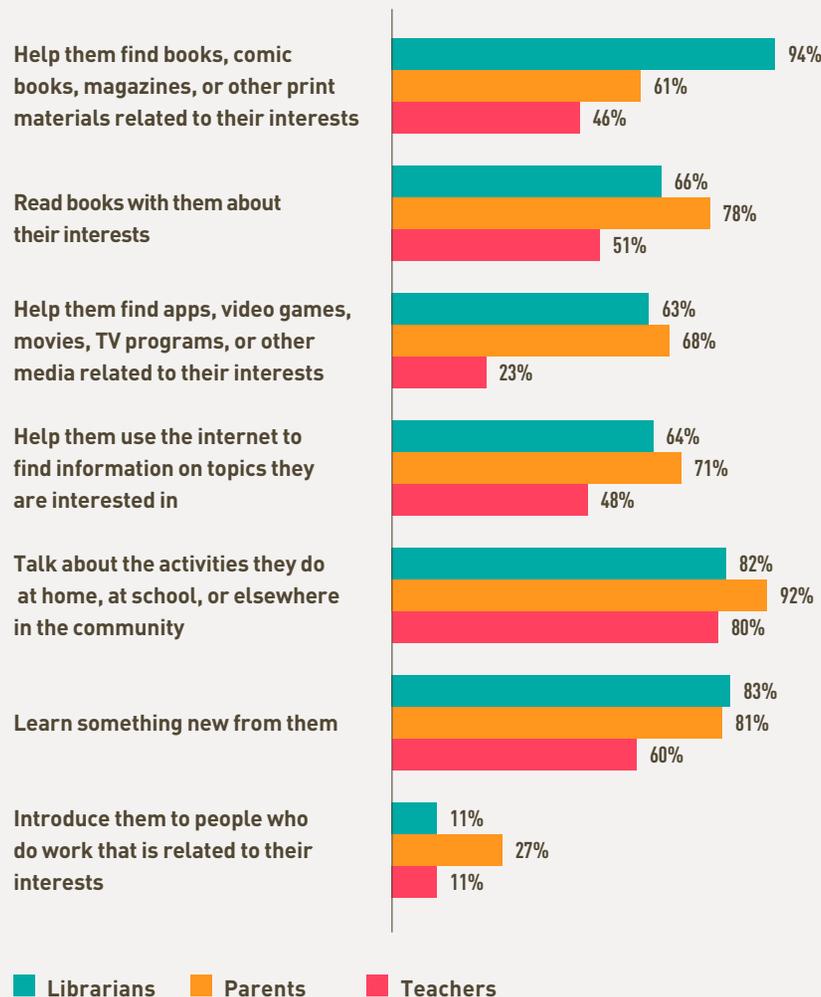


Beyond providing programs and services designed to extend children’s interests, librarians also interact with young patrons on a more informal and personal basis in ways that can influence and inspire their interest-driven learning. The survey presented librarians with a set of such roles and asked them how often they do each with or for the children who visit their library. Shared in Figure 3 is the percentage of librarians who enact each role on *at least a weekly basis*. These results are displayed alongside the responses of the U.S. parents (N=1,550) and teachers (N=600) we queried in parallel surveys.



**Figure 3**

### Roles that librarians, parents, and teachers play in supporting children’s interests



Librarian N = 407, Parent N = 1,550, Teacher N = 600; respondents who enact these roles at least weekly

In an open-ended question, we asked respondents to describe the role they think libraries can play in cultivating children's interests or learning. Responses (N=380) fell into five basic categories:

- 1 Provide books, materials, programming, and/or activities about kids' existing interests

"We curate our collections based on what appeals to kids. This may include traditional print materials as well as curating apps, activity kits, toys, and games."

— Youth services department supervisor, suburban New Jersey community

"To encourage learning, we take something they're already doing (say cooking) and do things like discuss the science behind a recipe or encourage healthy eating habits. We're able to have their interests guide our programming while steering them towards more educational applications."

— Children's librarian, urban New Jersey community

- 2 Provide books, materials, programming, and/or activities for kids to discover new interests

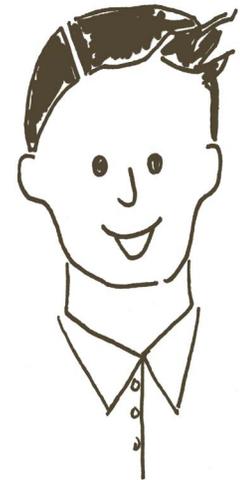
"A huge role—through book discussions, programming, and one-on-one reader's advisory, we have the opportunity to expand their interests, introduce new topics, and encourage participation. Plus, we do this on an even playing field—services are free and available to all."

— Branch associate, rural Iowa community

- 3 Encourage enthusiasm for and/or further exploration of interests

"Libraries create a space where exploring one's own unique interests is given priority and a place, which is key in jump-starting self-directed learning."

— Managing librarian, urban Texas community



#### 4 Offer a safe space

“Libraries can serve as a safe place for learning. A lot of times, children do not have productive places to learn besides school. The library can serve as that place.”

— Library associate, urban Illinois community

“Creating safe and open spaces where they can be exposed to and try something new without traditional barriers (cost, transportation, etc.) and non-traditional barriers (requirement to commit to a certain time frame, academic performance pressure, peer pressure, etc.).”

— Youth services coordinator, suburban Minnesota community

#### 5 Promote fun, playful learning

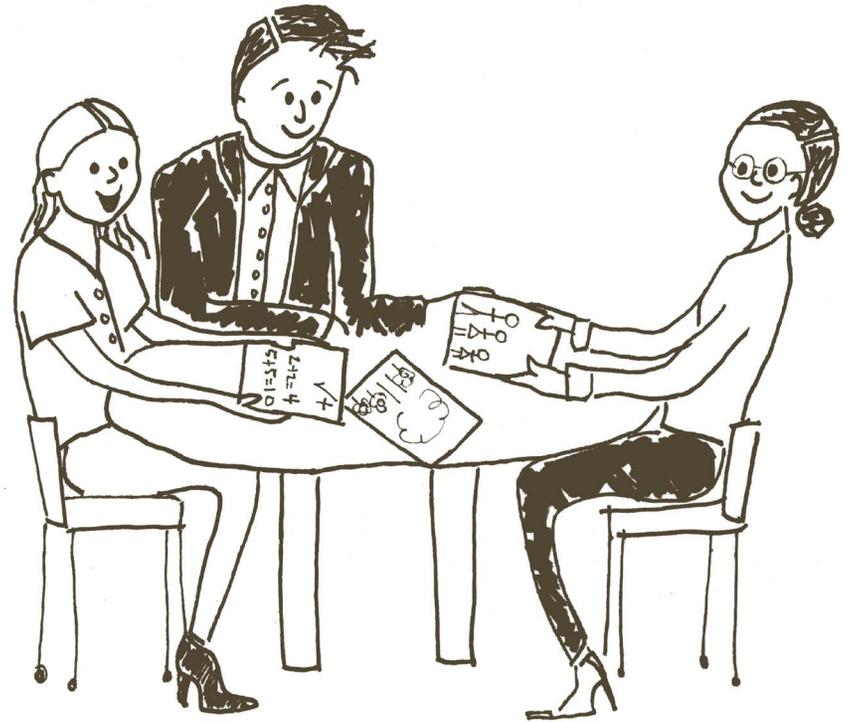
“By providing activities and the space to learn through play or exploration...I want to encourage imagination and stress-free learning so they can experience the joy of learning for fun and not for school.”

— Youth services librarian, suburban Georgia community

“We can focus primarily on the fun aspects of topics to build interest through error-free play and process-focused activities.”

— Early literacy coordinator, suburban Maryland community

Less common responses included (a) enabling kids to learn in a different way than they do at school, with more free choice and without the pressure of standards and exams; (b) removing barriers to access learning opportunities, particularly for lower-resourced families; and (c) validating and taking kids’ interests seriously.



## Connecting learning across settings

Rather than imposing any sort of teaching agenda, libraries provide resources and services intended to support the learning and leisure agendas of their patrons. Libraries are decidedly *not* classrooms; they are places where visitors can explore to their heart's content and discover new interests and learning pathways.

And yet, libraries coexist in communities alongside other institutions of learning, including homes, schools, museums, and community centers. Many libraries opt to play important linking roles between them. We therefore asked survey respondents two questions to gauge the extent to which they participate in these connective activities (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).

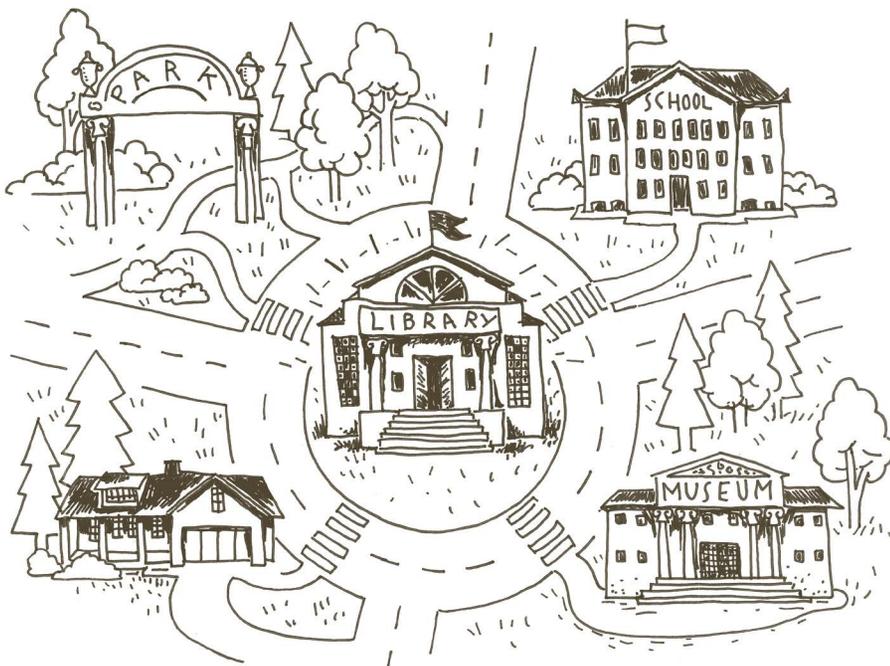


Figure 4

How often do you encourage children to connect their personal interests to their school learning?

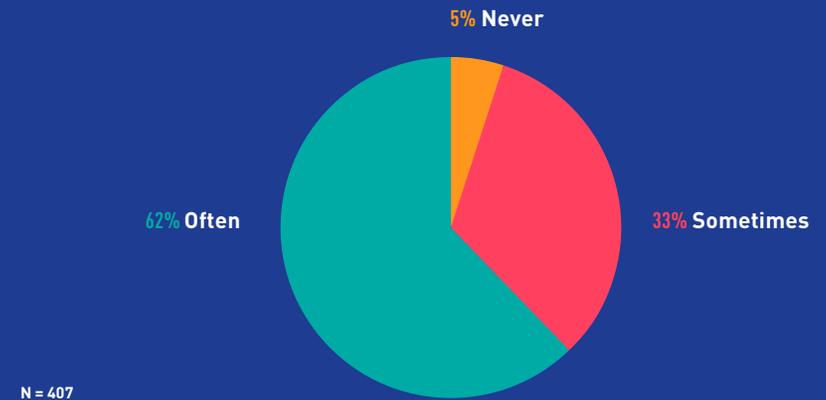
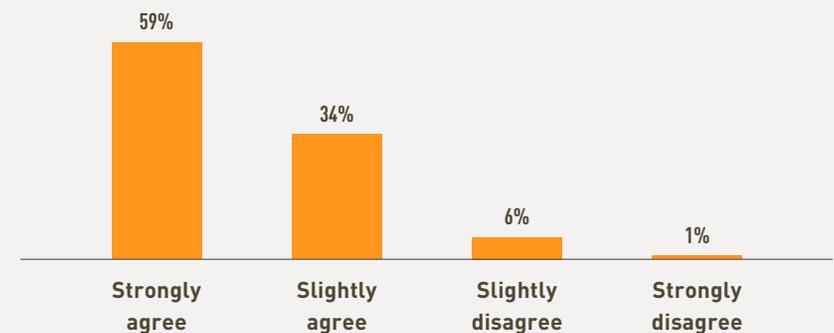
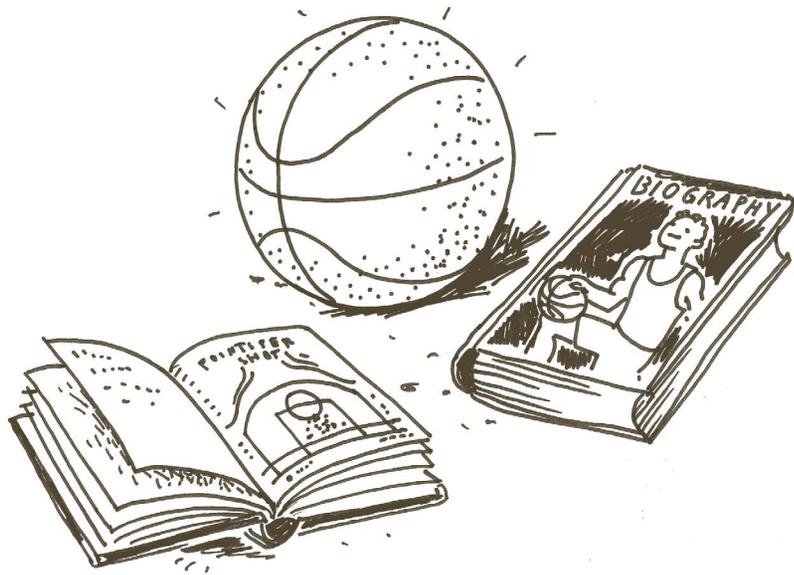


Figure 5

Our library plays a critical link in the community between children's school and home learning.





### Connecting learning across settings: School

We later asked respondents how they help children connect their personal interests to their school learning, and librarians (N = 384) described five common approaches:

- 1 Help kids explore different resources/materials about their interests

“Many times, it’s simply finding out what the child loves as a hobby/interest and finding books/online information that correspond to it.”

— Branch manager, suburban Tennessee community

“If a child expresses interest in a topic, I try to help them find multiple avenues to explore that topic. For example, if a child expresses interest in a sport, I might help them find biographies of an athlete or show them the Sports Science Projects book series.”

— Library associate, suburban Georgia community

- 2 Offer library programs that involve kids’ interests, which may also have goals explicitly or implicitly tied to school learning

“In programming, I always make a point of connecting fun activities to a discipline (‘we’re doing math,’ ‘slime is a polymer, what we’re doing is science’) to make children more aware of the subjects they’re interested in. It’s important to us that children know that... even when they’re having fun—maybe in a less structured environment than they’re used to at school—they’re learning. We want them to connect an activity that they love to an area of study that they might not be aware they enjoy.”

— Children’s librarian, urban New Jersey community

“We have a reading tutoring program that focuses on supporting kids with below grade-level reading skills. The goal of this program is to get kids to read more, and to experience the joy of reading. They get to choose what to read and set goals for themselves, so it’s not an expectation placed on them by an outside source, but growing their skills and enjoyment is a school benefit.”

— Youth services manager, urban Minnesota community

3 Talk to kids directly about their interests, which allows them to point out similarities between their interests and school topics

“By casually highlighting how their interests can help them in school or in the real world, i.e., ‘that game you were working on uses a pretty neat physics engine; have you looked at physics or coding at all? I bet you could really get into it!’”

— Youth services coordinator, rural Michigan community

4 Encourage kids to select topics that interest them as the basis for school assignments

“If a child is working on a school project and needs materials or information for it, we will ask them what they like to do and suggest ways to incorporate that with their school project.”

— Library director, rural Wisconsin community

“Very often when children come in looking for a specific type of item for a school project, I find that they don’t really know what they want or where to begin looking. I take this chance to find out what their interests are and try to get them to talk about what they like to do, like to watch, or like to read about. This is usually the first step towards finding something that gets them excited.”

— Librarian, suburban New Mexico community

“When they come in needing a book for a school assignment, I encourage them to [choose] something related to their interests.”

— Librarian, rural New Jersey community

5 Curate collections and/or create book displays about kids’ interests

“In terms of collection development, we don’t shy away from books about Minecraft or Pokémon or Dog Man—if the kids will read it, we will get it.”

— Children’s librarian, urban New York community

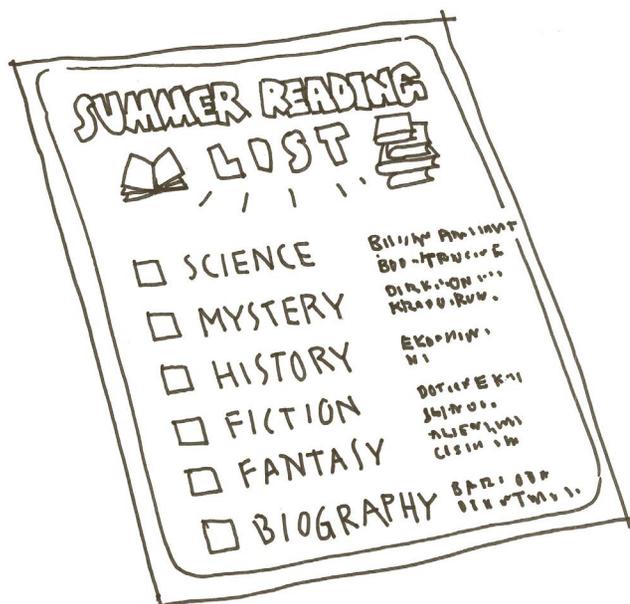
“In my teen and tween advisory groups, I always ask what they are learning and enjoying in school and suggest books related to that for book clubs and/or displays.”

— Librarian, rural New Jersey community



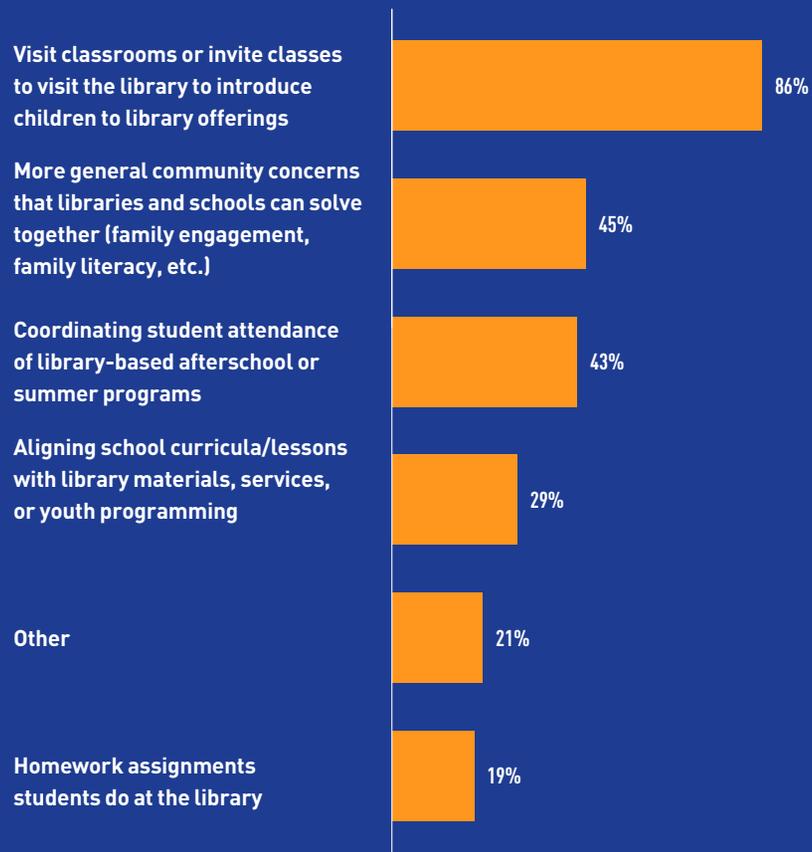
Libraries communicate with local teachers and schools on a variety of issues, as indicated in Figure 6. While much of this communication is purely logistical—such as coordinating visits with students—45% of respondents say they are liaising with schools to raise family engagement in children’s learning, family literacy practices, and other issues of broader concern within the community.

A fifth of survey respondents wrote in additional reasons why they communicate with local schools, with most of them falling into the categories of coordinating summer reading lists, running programs together (e.g., Battle of the Books), promoting events for one another, and setting children up with library cards.



**Figure 6**

What does your library communicate with local schools or teachers about?



## Quotes

*“Assignments! I wish educators would reach out to the library about projects an entire grade is working on so we can buy more materials to ensure we are able to meet the demand!”*

— Youth services department supervisor, suburban New Jersey community

*“I think public libraries need to do a better job of supporting school curricula, and that we should reach out regularly to schools in our service area to find out what they are learning about at any given time of the year, so that we can be ready to provide resources and information about that topic.”*

— Youth services information services specialist, urban Ohio community

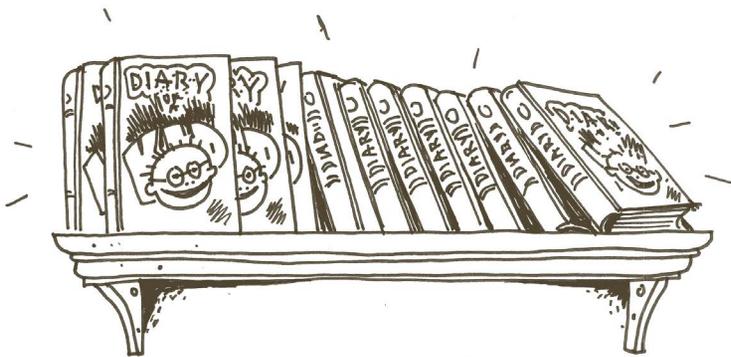
*“Schools should inform close libraries about upcoming projects. At times we have an entire class of kids being sent to the library to get materials on the same subject when we might only have five or ten books on a given subject and the first two kids take them all.”*

— Branch manager, urban Illinois community

*“Teachers frequently don’t understand the resources available at the public library or have an inflated idea of what is actually available. Librarians don’t know much about curriculum needs.”*

— Children’s librarian, suburban Kentucky community

Indeed, libraries are already doing a lot to connect children’s learning across home and school. But 69% of librarians surveyed said they want to have *more* communication with schools and teachers. The survey provided space for respondents (N=327) to share in their own words what they believe libraries and schools need to do a better job communicating with one another about.



Librarians consistently indicated that libraries and schools need to discuss (a) collaborating; (b) how libraries can support schools, especially through their extensive resources (books, programs, online databases); (c) what specifically the schools need help with; and (d) the programs/services each offers. Yet, the number one topic librarians want to discuss with schools is *school assignments*, including homework, projects, book reports, and reading programs. Librarians emphasized that if they know what students are learning and doing at school ahead of time, they can curate books and other resources that would better meet students’ needs. Some of these librarians said that they don’t have the materials students come looking for otherwise.

## Connecting learning across settings: Home

Caregivers often consult teachers to discover how they can support their child's education at home. But they also consult librarians for advice on their child's learning and development, too. In fact, 91% of survey respondents receive inquiries of this nature at least a few times a year, with 48% saying they do on at least a weekly basis (see Figure 7). If parents do seek advice on their child's learning or development, what kinds of questions do they ask?

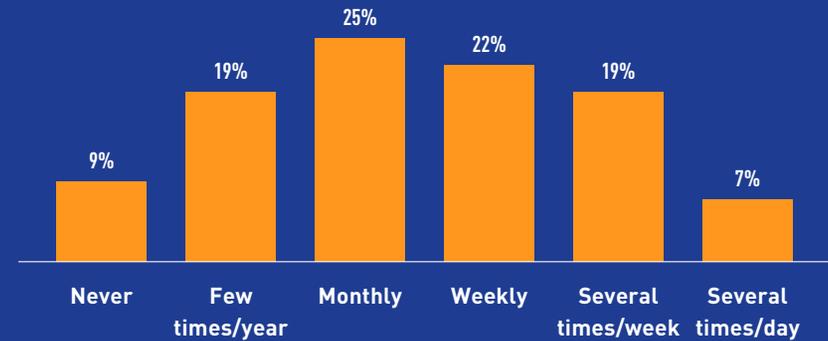
Based on librarians' write-in responses (N=318), parents most often ask about children's learning and developmental milestones and how to support or improve learning and development. The most common parent questions relate to reading and literacy, including whether these skills are on track and how to teach children to read or otherwise support/improve their kids' literacy skills (i.e., generally, with suggested resources, or through book suggestions). Parents also consistently inquire about reluctant readers, including how to get their kids interested in reading, and consult librarians on reading level(s) (e.g., Accelerated Reader/AR, Lexile, grade level reading, or simply reading level), whether that be, for example, seeking suggestions for books at the appropriate level for their children or expressing concerns that their kids are not reading at the expected level.

Additionally, parents ask about speech and language development, disability/delays, math skills, social-emotional skills, behavioral issues, and toilet training. School is another topic of parental inquiry, including information about pre-K and kindergarten, school preparation, school choices, and homeschool resources. Librarians also field questions—though less frequently—dealing with social issues, such as death/grief, divorce, adding a sibling to the family, bullying.



Figure 7

How often are you asked by individual parents about their child's learning or development?



N = 407



## Quote

*"How can I help my child to \_\_\_? (Fill in the blank with any of the following and more: learn to read, improve their reading, do better in math, do their science fair project, improve their writing, do better on standardized tests, etc.) My child has been identified with a learning disability or other special need. What resources do you have for me to understand this diagnosis? What can I do to help my baby/toddler/preschooler be ready for school? My child is having trouble with bullies and the school isn't doing anything about it. Can you recommend some books that could help but aren't directly about bullying?"*

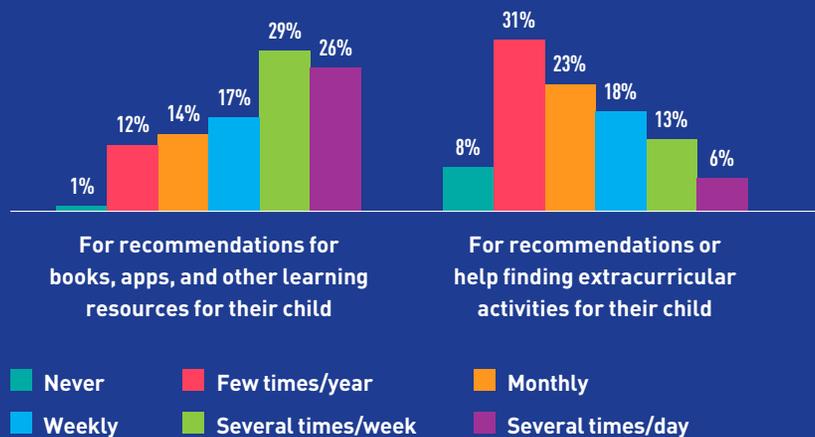
— Children's librarian, urban Illinois community

Libraries also provide resources that caregivers can use to support learning and healthy development at home and in other out-of-school contexts. More than a quarter of the librarians we surveyed say that parents ask them to recommend print or electronic resources for their child's learning on a daily basis (see Figure 8).

Respondents are less likely to receive requests from parents to locate extracurricular activities for their child, with 31% saying they receive inquiries of this type just a few times in a year. These data mirror what we found in our survey of parents of 3–12-year-olds (Takeuchi et al., 2019), where only 24% of parents regularly seek help from libraries in locating out-of-school activities, compared to the 41% who seek help from teachers and 32% who seek help from social media (see Figure 9).

**Figure 8**

Please indicate how often you are asked by individual parents...

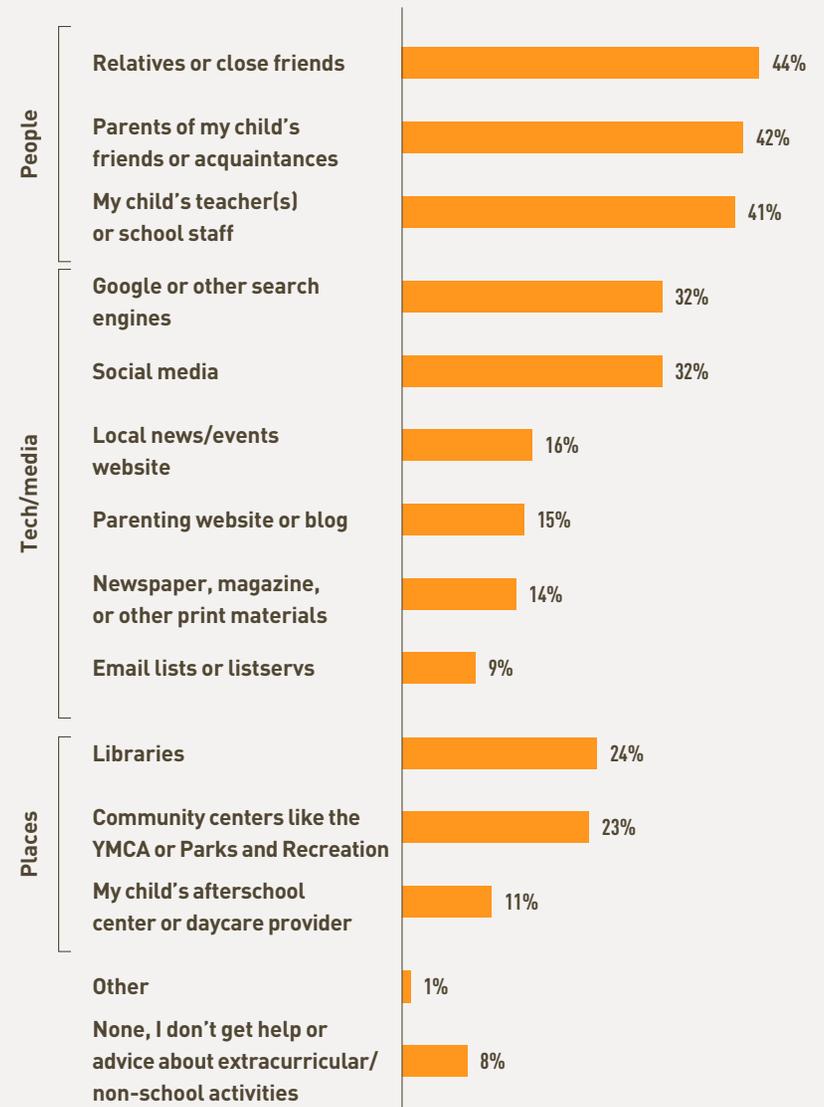


N = 407



**Figure 9**

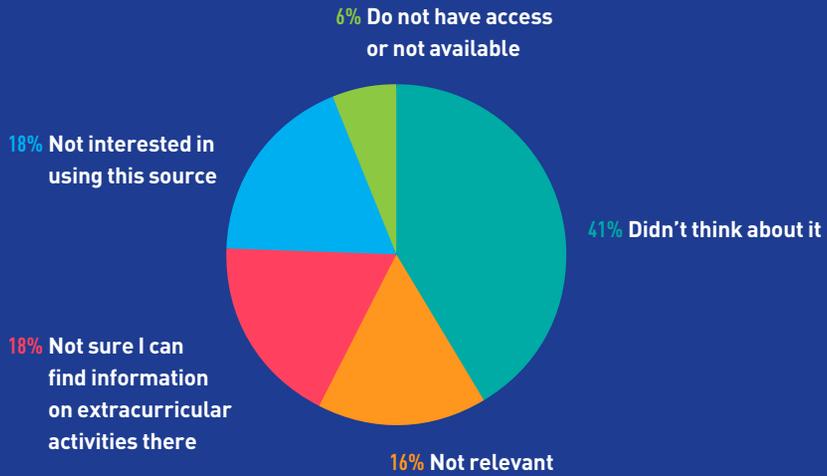
Where parents of 3–12-year-olds regularly get help or advice finding and selecting extracurricular or non-school activities for their child



N = 1,254; parents whose children participated in an extracurricular activity in the past year; select all that apply

**Figure 10**

## Why parents don't consult libraries to help find or select extracurricular activities



When asked why they don't seek help from libraries, 41% of parents said that it didn't occur to them to look for information on out-of-school activities for their child there, compared to just 18% who didn't think that libraries would have the information they needed (see Figure 10).



## Connecting learning across settings: Community

The survey asked respondents about the type of information their library shares with the community and their methods for doing so. As illustrated in Figure 11, nearly all (99%) libraries share information about events that take place at the library. Slightly fewer share recommendations for learning resources (94%) or promote events or activities elsewhere in the community (95%). A majority of libraries are getting all three categories of information out to patrons or into the broader community on at least a monthly basis.

Libraries employ a mix of print and digital strategies to share information with their communities. In addition to the channels shown in Figure 12, respondents also advertise in local newspapers, post fliers at institutions around the community (e.g., rec centers, retail stores); display information on digital billboards at the library and around town; and partner with schools to distribute via PTA newsletters, students' take-home folders, and school social media channels, according to their "Other" write-in responses.



Figure 11

How often does your library publish, post, or distribute information for families about...

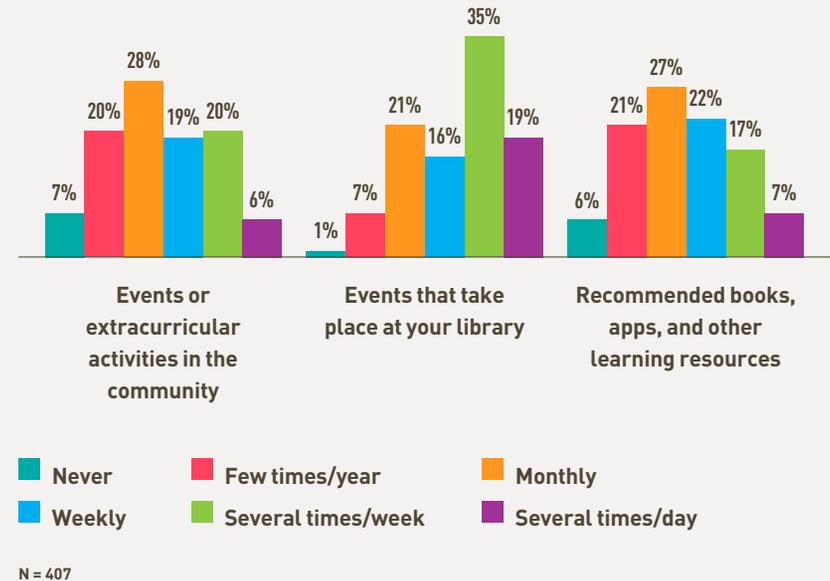
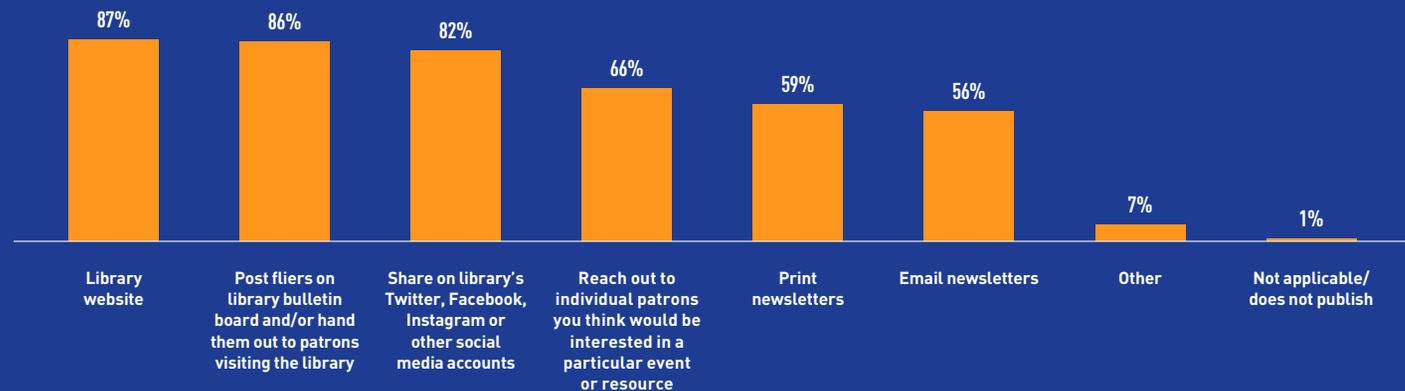


Figure 12

Which channels do you use to publish, post, or distribute information about events and/or recommended resources?

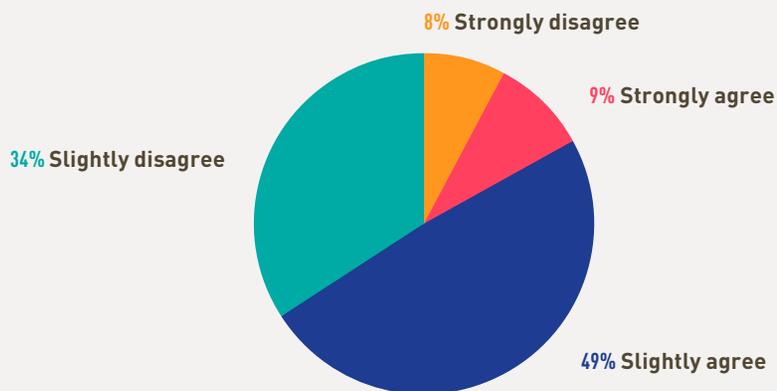


N = 407; select all that apply

Despite their efforts in sharing information with their community, a sizeable proportion of the librarians we surveyed acknowledge a disconnect, with 42% disagreeing with the statement, “Community members are aware of the range of the programs and services our library offers.” The survey asked respondents who disagreed either strongly or slightly with this statement why they think community members aren’t aware of their libraries’ offerings. Below, we summarize their reasons and opinions (N=171), which fell into four major categories that intersect and influence one another:

**Figure 13**

Community members are aware of the range of the programs and services our library offers



N = 407

## 1 The community doesn't use or visit the library.

Community members don't believe they need the library, utilize other resources instead of the library, or don't even know their library exists. Some respondents described characteristics that impact the community's knowledge about (and therefore, use of) the library, such as not speaking English or not having access to computers or the Internet.

“Libraries struggle with ways to reach and market audiences who are not library users. There are populations who don't think they need the library and don't use the library, so they don't see what is being offered.”

— Library assistant, suburban Illinois community

## 2 The community has preconceived notions of what a library is or does.

The community has misconceptions about the library, particularly that it only offers books and no other programs or services.

“Many communities do not see their local library as a hub of technology or as up-to-date with resources. There is still a mental image of libraries as quiet, dusty places full of books.”

— Assistant youth services department manager, rural Missouri community

### 3 The library has issues with advertising/promotion.

The library needs to better advertise its offerings, produce more advertising, and better promote itself, which may include improving its online presence. At the same time, the community currently isn't seeing the advertising that does exist, either via social media, flyers, newsletters, newspapers, or library websites. Related to reasons (1) and (2), the library needs to better reach non-patrons and community members from underserved populations.

“Our website is horrible to navigate. We don't effectively market the idea that libraries are more than books and shushing old ladies.”

— Senior library assistant, rural New Mexico community

“The channels that we use to publish information about the library (email blasts, library website, social media) do not always reach the patrons who would benefit most from them (largely because these patrons do not have convenient computer/internet access). I would suggest more paper fliers be posted in clinics, local shelters, food banks, and community centers.”

— Youth services information services specialist, urban Ohio community

### 4 The library has specific qualities that make it difficult to serve the community.

The library encounters barriers to promoting its offerings to community members, such as insufficient funds, shortage of time, not enough staff, a hard-to-reach or hard-to-find location, and lack of administrative or leadership support.

“It is hard to reach people who don't use the library. It takes staff time and money to do so, which we are in short supply of.”

— Youth services manager, suburban Ohio community

“Our location seems to be discreet. We often have folks come in who did not realize that we are here...even after 15 years at our location. Our location also does not allow for folks to walk to our branch very easily.”

— Youth services specialist, suburban Louisiana community

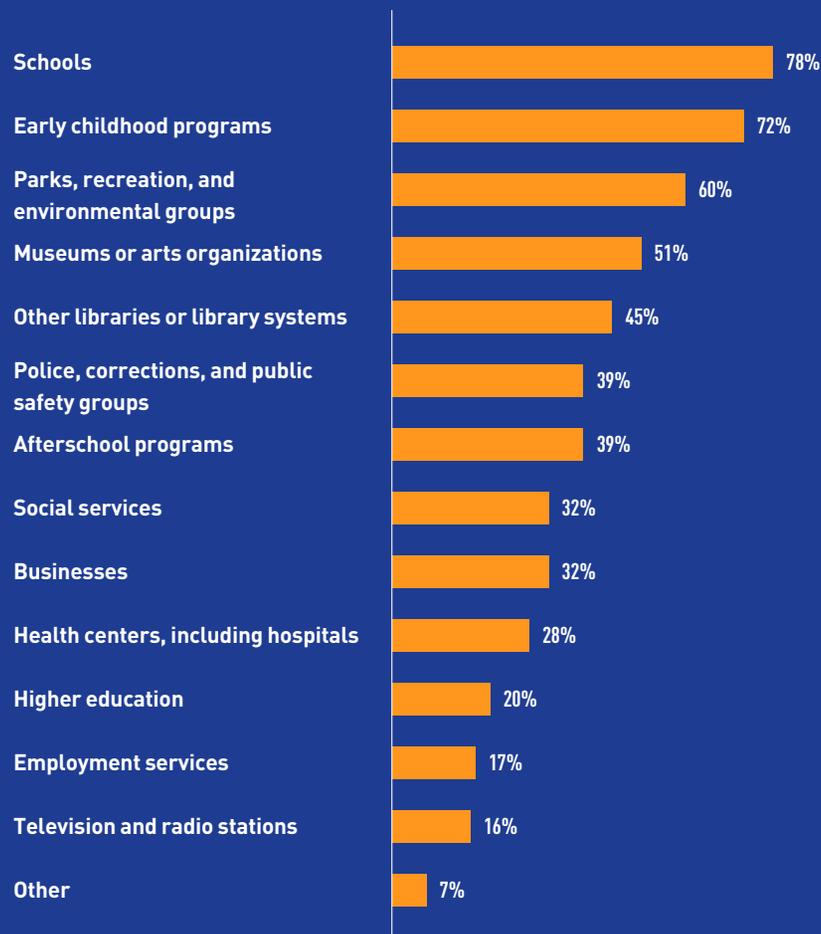


Libraries work closely with various institutions in the community to serve families in ways that are relevant, convenient, and useful. For instance, the San Francisco Public Library and the National Park Service provide free community shuttles from branch libraries to park sites in the Bay Area to encourage families to enjoy this resource. And we're seeing a growing number of libraries nationwide providing laundromats with print books so that families can spend time together reading during their wash and dry cycles.

In addition to the partners listed in Figure 14, survey respondents listed several additional institutions in the "Other" field, including farmers markets, food banks, transportation services, parenting groups, affordable housing complexes, and American service clubs (e.g., Kiwanis, Lions, VFW). It is worth noting, however, that not all libraries have access to partnership opportunities. As one respondent noted in this space, "We are a branch in a very rural area. We don't have all those options to make library partners with."



**Figure 14**  
Which organizations does your library partner with to enhance library programs and services for children and families?



N = 407; select all that apply

Librarians acknowledge and embrace their role as sources of inspiration for children’s interests and connectors of their learning. As such, they are privy to the challenges of promoting children’s learning seamlessly across home, school, and community settings. We therefore asked survey respondents a two-part, open-ended question to garner their insights: (a) What do you see as the greatest challenge and/or barrier to children learning seamlessly across settings? And (b) What role can libraries play in addressing this challenge? Responses (N=323) for each question fell into a number of more general categories:

*What do you see as the greatest challenge and/or barrier to children learning seamlessly across settings?*

+ *Issues related to family hardship and marginalization, such as inequity, inequality, and inaccessibility*

Topics mentioned included poverty, lack of access to technology and other learning resources, insufficient transportation to libraries, homelessness and home instability, hunger and food inconsistency, language barriers, racial inequality, parent education level, and issues related to specific populations (e.g., immigrants, rural families).

+ *Parent and/or family lack of involvement*

Some attributed families not being involved in their children’s learning to stress and lack of time, while others emphasized community/parent “disinterest” and ambivalent or negative views of education, learning, and literacy.

+ *Lack of collaboration and consistency across settings*

Each setting (e.g., library, school, home) may have different priorities and perspectives, and communication and collaboration between settings are difficult.

+ *Library issues*

Topics emphasized were underfunding, harsh library policies (e.g., late fees), librarian lack of time, and the difficulty of getting the word out about what libraries offer.

+ *School issues*

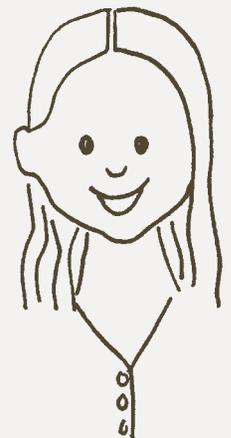
Librarians discussed how the culture of schools—which, many explained, doesn’t always support more interest-driven learning and instead focuses on test scores and standardization—plus the absence of support from schools in facilitating learning across settings act as the main barriers.



**Quote**

*“In my community specifically, education does not have a strong value placed on it. It’s an uphill battle to offer so many resources and programs to only have them largely ignored or dismissed as important. There’s a very clear line of ‘school is required and that’s it’—there doesn’t seem to be a desire to educate beyond that or even excel at learning or obtaining knowledge.”*

— Branch manager, rural Oklahoma community



### What role can libraries play in addressing this challenge?

Librarians presented fewer ideas for how libraries might address the challenges and barriers they shared in part 1 of the question. They suggested that libraries focus on four areas:

#### + Forge stronger connections with the community, including families

There are opportunities to perform community outreach, implement better communication with parents, provide supportive programming for parents and families, connect families with assistance/resources, and otherwise be a community growth center.

#### + Connect with other organizations/settings

Libraries must connect, communicate, and cooperate with other organizations and institutions, especially schools.

#### + Encourage children's interest-driven learning and literacy, especially through free, accessible opportunities and resources

Librarians can encourage and teach basic literacy and reading skills, provide access to information, and provide digital resources and technology to kids. They can also offer diverse resources, activities, and programming.

#### + Provide a stable, safe space

A large portion agreed the library's main role is to be a stable, safe space that consistently supports children and families.



### Quotes

*"Families that face barriers are more concerned about getting by day to day. Actively involving their kids in learning opportunities is not as high a priority as working multiple jobs, paying bills, sharing child care, getting food on the table, and avoiding deportation. Survival is the priority. In that case, the library providing free access to services and materials is of peripheral help for those parents seeking low-cost/free activities for their kids."*

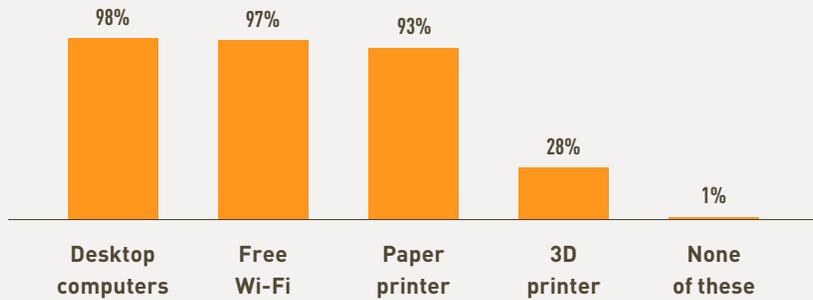
— Librarian, urban Washington community

*"I think the greatest barrier is communication: between the institutions themselves and communication between the institutions and children. If the institutions can stay on the same page about goals, there will be a greater consistency in what children experience. If institutions can take more time to pay attention to children and nurture them as individuals, I believe this will encourage self-esteem and confidence. I think libraries have a role in this by offering a safe space for communities, organizations, and parents to come together. I think they also have the unique ability to offer programming that can foster self-driven learning that focuses on the child and not on a grade."*

— Youth supervisor, library associate, urban Virginia community

Figure 15

Which of the following types of technologies and devices does your library provide patrons access to on-site?



N = 407

## Evolving as community learning hubs

As the world goes digital, what role do libraries—originally created to be repositories of physical books and periodicals—play as hubs of community learning? According to the survey, librarians see themselves as critical stewards in the digital age and as active as ever in empowering citizens to be informed and educated. For instance, 52% of those surveyed believe it’s important and 43% believe it’s very important for librarians to be experts on digital media and technology use.

They *need* to be experts on technology, as libraries are one of the few institutions in the community providing free access to computers and the Internet. In fact, just 1% of survey respondents say their library does not make these tools available to patrons (see Figure 15); nearly all provide desktop computers and free Wi-Fi.

Librarians also acknowledge the importance of technology in children’s lives, tools that can inspire their interests in ways that physical books cannot (see Figure 16a). In fact, librarians believe it as much their role to foster children’s new media literacy skills as their traditional literacy skills (see Figure 16b).

Figure 16

Librarian attitudes toward technology

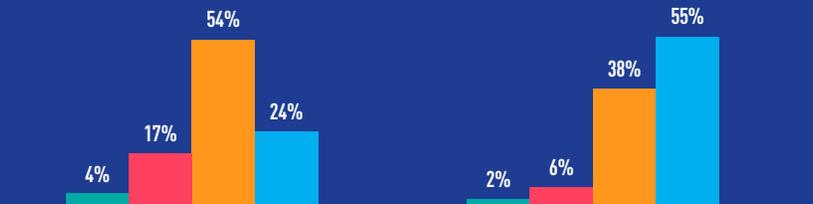


Figure 16a

Technology can inspire and cultivate children’s interests in new ways that physical books cannot.

Figure 16b

Libraries should aim to foster children’s new media literacy skills as much as their traditional literacy skills

- Strongly disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Strongly agree

N = 407

Children play digital games (83%) at libraries more often than any other tech-based activity, followed by watching online videos like YouTube (78%) and doing homework (73%) (see Figure 17). They are less likely to engage in activities considered most “library-like,” such as searching the Internet (52%) or reading e-books (5%). In fact, 56% of librarians say that children are more drawn to the technology-based offerings at the library than physical books.

Indeed, while patrons may visit libraries as much for their technology offerings as their print offerings, survey respondents, for the most part, still see a strong and steady role for libraries in the community:

*Our library is a thriving center of activity for the community.*

**90% agree**  
50% strongly, 41% slightly\*

**10% disagree**  
3% strongly, 7% slightly

*Our library offers programs and services specifically designed to meet the needs of the local community.*

**93% agree**  
52% strongly, 41% slightly

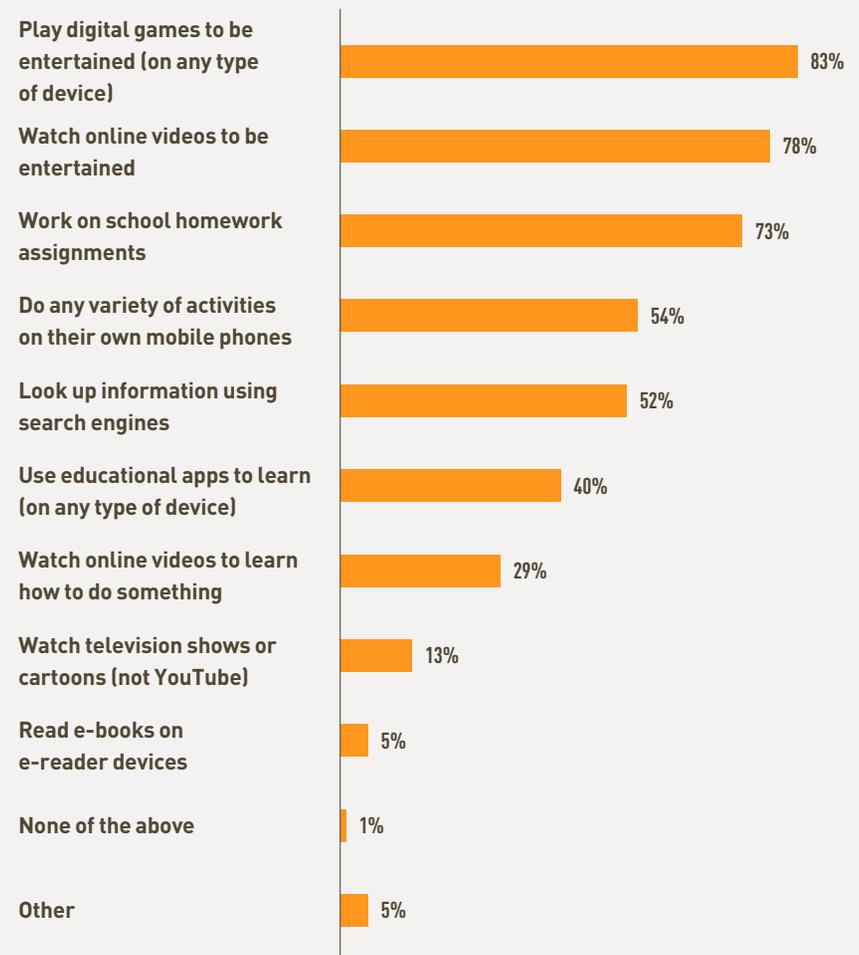
**7% disagree**  
1% strongly, 6% slightly

\* Figures do not add up to 100% due to rounding.



**Figure 17**

Which tech-based activities do children do most often at your library?



N = 407; select up to 5

Despite librarians' positive attitudes about their role in the community, many still acknowledge the challenges modern libraries face:

*The patronage rate of our library is lower than I'd like it to be.*

**65%** **agree**  
26% strongly, 39% slightly

**35%** **disagree**  
14% strongly, 20% slightly\*

*Lack of funding makes it difficult to offer programs or services that meet the needs of the local community.*

**62%** **agree**  
23% strongly, 39% slightly

**38%** **disagree**  
13% strongly, 25% slightly



\* Figures do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

## Key findings

Findings from our survey of 407 library professionals in the United States reflect and build upon much of the research conducted to date on the roles libraries play in supporting connected (see Hoffman et al., 2016) and interest-driven learning (e.g., Quinn, 1999), which has tended to focus on adolescent learners. The FamLAB research contributes to this body of work by inquiring about children ages 3 through 12. We synthesize our key findings in five points:



- + Librarians actively seek to understand what their young patrons are interested in by observing what they do, listening in on their conversations, and asking them directly what they like. They also talk to parents, teachers, and staff at other libraries and study up on trends in youth culture. Librarians then craft and customize their programming and collections to help children extend and/or deepen these interests. This curation process is deliberate, thoughtful, and responsive to local needs and values.
- + Librarians operate libraries as more than just repositories of books or hubs of literacy learning. While maintaining these still-critical roles in the community, libraries also provide resources for kids and families in many other formats and domains, such as STEM summer camps, family movie nights, job search workshops, afterschool makerspaces, computer labs, and Wi-Fi hotspot lenders, among many other things. Librarians also see libraries as safe spaces—  
outside of home or school—where children can learn, explore, play, or just hang out.
- + Librarians acknowledge the importance of technology for young children, new tools that can inspire their interests in ways that physical books cannot. They believe it to be as much their role to foster children’s new media literacy skills as their traditional literacy skills, providing access not only to the tools but also to the opportunities to use them in empowering and personally meaningful ways, such as through makerspaces and coding camps.
- + While a majority of librarians see themselves as connectors of learning across home, school, and community settings, fewer feel obligated to offer activities or actions that directly align with school curricula. These respondents consider the enrichment that libraries provide as distinct and complementary to children’s academic learning, such as

free exploration and play, and encouraging the pursuit of individual curiosities. However, most librarians feel a lack of communication with schools, with many wishing to hear more from teachers on which topics they should procure books and resources for in anticipation of student requests.

- + Librarians are confident in the role that libraries play in the local learning ecosystem, with 9 out of 10 reporting that their own library is a thriving center of activity in the community. Yet many of these same respondents acknowledge real threats to their existence, including lack of funding to support needed programs and lower-than-desired patronage rates. They attribute the latter to a lack of public awareness and understanding of what libraries have to offer, despite frequent and multi-channeled efforts to promote their libraries' various offerings.

The FrameWorks Institute ([Levay, Volmert, & Kendall-Taylor, 2018](#)) conducted interviews with Americans on where children learn and how learning flows (or doesn't) across settings. Four “cultural models” emerged through this research (see box at right), which further unpack why the public—including parents and teachers—may overlook libraries as robust learning institutions in and of themselves and explain the lower patronage rates.



#### Cultural models about where children learn

From [Crossing the Boundaries: Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Bridging STEM Learning Environments](#) (Levay, Volmert, and Kendall-Taylor, 2018)

- + **The Libraries as Book Storage Cultural Model:** Participants largely understood libraries as depositories for physical informational resources, namely books and newspapers, and, thus, to have little value in contemporary society, given technological advances.
- + **The People Not Places Cultural Model:** When thinking about where children learn, people focus most readily and, in some cases, exclusively on people, rather than physical environments, or non-human resources.
- + **The Home and School Cultural Model:** To the extent that members of the public consider actual physical environments, there is a heavy focus on two locations—home and school. These two environments are assumed to be more important than any other for children's learning.
- + **The Extra Dose Cultural Model:** There is a dominant assumption that the role of out-of-school environments—typically home—is to give kids an “extra dose” of whatever they are learning in school. In this model, connecting learning is seen to be initiated and directed by schools, which provide guidance, usually to parents, about how they can reinforce school lessons in other contexts. (pp. 16–18)

Our survey with librarians and FrameWorks’s interviews with members of the public together suggest that in order for libraries to play their connective roles within the ecosystem of children’s learning, we first need to shift public perception about libraries and their offerings. Changing the way people think about libraries is a task that library professionals supporting agencies such as the [Institute for Museum and Library Services](#) and the [American Library Association](#), and research-based efforts such as the [Connected Learning Alliance](#) and the [Global Family Research Project](#) have made central to their missions through this transition from analog to digital times.

But to change how the public thinks about the roles that libraries can and should play in children’s learning will require the support and communication prowess of institutions with even further reach into homes, schools, and even adult workplaces, including mass media outlets, government agencies, medical professionals (e.g., pediatricians), technology providers, retail and consumer products companies, and so on. How can we creatively convince these less obvious influencers to participate in a PR campaign for libraries? What, exactly, might we ask them to do? And how would they, in turn, benefit from participating?

The strategic communications tactic described here is one of many possible tactics that can help engage even more children and families with all that libraries have to offer and, in doing so, extend children’s learning across home, school, and community settings. We invite library professionals, researchers, educators, community leaders, and representatives from philanthropy, industry, and government to offer reactions to the findings shared in this report. What insights and suggestions do you have to share?

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# appendix

## Open-ended response coding methods

We examined all open-ended responses thematically, using an iterative joint inductive-deductive approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Initially, one researcher coded the first 10% of responses to build an initial codebook for each question. Then she and another researcher coded the remaining 90% of entries with this codebook, which they added to, condensed, and iterated on over time and through discussions. They then reviewed each other's codes, noting disagreements and continuing to make changes to the codebook until they reached consensus. In this report, we describe the most common themes in survey participants' responses.

For the 812 child interests reported by librarians (N=406), one researcher coded very similar interests into a single descriptor (e.g., "LEGO," "LEGOs," "LEGO building," and "LEGO building/creation" were all coded as "LEGO"). She then categorized these coded entries according to the interest coding methods of Takeuchi et al. (2019), who conducted a parallel analysis of the interests that parents of 3–12-year-olds considered good for their kids' learning or development (e.g., LEGO was coded to the "Building/construction" category). See the appendix of Takeuchi et al. (2019) for the details on their coding methods.

### *About the authors*

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