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Neurodiversity Library Grant Project Begins

On September 30 I sat in as an observer at Delmont Public Library (DPL) to listen to a roundtable conversation about serving patrons on the neurodivergent or autism spectrum, both child and adult. This was the initial step on a project grant-funded earlier this year and featured in the June 12 article for The Magic Library Card!.

The sponsor grant name is “Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Accessible Small and Rural Communities.” It is funded through the American Library Association (ALA), Public Programs Office, to 240 grantees nationwide on various subjects. DPL earned three companion grants elsewhere as well for this brainchild project of Monica Smodic, Library Director. Monica’s underlying purpose is to develop a Public Resource Center for patrons on the autism spectrum to promote and make accessible informed resource guides, books and videos, and to host professionally certified programs around them. My interest in the session was as grant writer.

The purpose of the roundtable was to share ideas about ways to make DPL more welcoming and inclusive of patrons with special needs. A number of suggestions targeted safety and physical facility needs, including: (1) signage about what is meant to be touched and handled and what not; (2) a fenced-in area outside, for programming meant to be experienced in the outdoors; (3) a gender-neutral family bathroom; and (4) a secure sibling space to allow for accompanying but non-autistic children.

Among interesting programming suggestions were: (1) slower-motion bingo to better facilitate learning numbers; (2) using more books with relatable characters; and (3) camp-like drop-offs to simulate what is otherwise difficult in broad-spectrum camps for children.

Autistic patron safety, safety, safety came into just about every aspect of the discussion, including need for: (1) a glossary of safety-minded books; (2) more information about the transition from childhood to independent adulthood; and (3) just using the Library as a preferred place to experience being “out into the community.” All the participants agreed about that last point in particular, that the Library is such an ideal locale for meeting special needs safely.

One parent told a story about an autistic child’s grandmother who gave the child a gift one day when she saw her but not on the following three days when they were together. The autistic child was then angry with her grandmother because she took the absence of a gift to be a withdrawal of love. I myself know of a similar story involving a mother and now-adult son relationship gone cold. It has gone on for years this way with the autistic son’s denial of any contact at all for his mother.

That gives you some idea about how an autistic person tends to see the world – differently -- and you can imagine how difficult that is without the benefit of guiding resources. It can be bewildering if you do not know and cannot find help, which seems to be a common problem.

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So, if that is where you are, please do contact Monica and get the benefit of a “free” public Library to help you chart a course, and share with others trying to do the same. That is what the LTC grant, and three others, are meant to do.

Charles B. Greenberg,
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation