

Removing Barriers to Access:

Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials

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Abstract

The Supporting Parents in Early Literacy through Libraries (SPELL) research revealed that library fines and fees for overdue, damaged, and lost materials are barriers that prevent low-income parents and caregivers of young children from using public libraries. After reviewing the academic and professional literature regarding library fines and fees, including qualitative research, quantitative studies, and editorial pieces, as well as using finding from the two studies with parents and public libraries in Colorado, the Colorado State Library (CSL) recommends public libraries eliminate fines and fees on children's materials. The scant research on the value and impact of library fines and fees does not indicate a clear benefit of administering these policies, and they may be costly to enforce. Library governing authorities that develop policies to remove fines and fees on juvenile material find it effective in building a positive relationship with families with young children.

Conclusion and Position

The Colorado State Library recommends public library administrators and governing bodies eliminate library fines, and reconsider fees for lost or damaged items, on children's materials, and other items as deemed appropriate for local service. Fines are punitive, not educational incentives. Damaged and lost material is an inevitable aspect of library use, particularly with very young children, and needs to be considered the cost of doing business with the library's young patrons.

The profession has little empirical evidence that charging fines results in greater circulation of library materials, or indeed the return of items in a timely manner. The administrative costs, including equipment rental, collection contracts, and staff time associated with collecting funds from patrons, often equals or exceeds the revenue earned from library fines and fees. At a time when libraries struggle to remain relevant and increase library use, it may be counterproductive to enforce policies that are punitive in nature and further the stereotype of libraries as authoritarian institutions to be feared.

Librarians have an opportunity to play a meaningful role in the lives of children and families in their communities. By eliminating library fines and fees, particularly on children's materials, public libraries become more welcoming to

children and families. Early literacy skills are crucial to school readiness, so it is important that parents and caregivers from all income-levels in our society have access to materials they can use daily in the home to practice reading, singing, talking, writing, and playing with their children. Children's librarians are thrilled when they see families checking out a stack of picture books, and families should be encouraged to do so, rather than be fearful of the late fines and book damage fees that might accrue. Based on the research, these user-friendly policies will bring more community members into the library, especially the low-income populations who need libraries the most.