Opening access to public libraries for children with special needs and their families.

> Public libraries are safe and trusted public spaces where everyone is welcome... (Australian Library and Information Association Public Libraries Advisory Committee 2012, p.5).

Unfortunately, this is not always the experience of children with special needs and their families.

> People with autism are often loud. They may feel the need to touch, pull out or even mouth books. They may have a hard time if a book or video they want to borrow is out on loan. . . . librarians in general have no training in helping patrons with developmental challenges. As a result, they often respond negatively to disruptive behaviour. . . (Rudy 2011, para.1-2).

Within the library profession there is widespread support for access to libraries for people with disabilities. This is reflected in library and information science literature, as well as in library professional body documents; for example, *Guidelines on Library Standards for People with Disabilities* (ALIA, 1998).

Literature on the topic of access to public libraries for people with disabilities is dominated by the study of adults with sensory disabilities. There is also a preponderance of studies that focus on technology and disability access (Hill, 2013, pp. 137-138). There are few studies that research the broader range of disabilities, including psychiatric and intellectual when considering the topic of library access (Hill, 2013, p. 140). Research into children with special needs and public libraries is even more limited.

In 2014 the author of this paper undertook ethics approved research in the United States and Canada. Twenty public libraries and two cultural institutions focussing on access for children with special needs and their families were visited.

The purpose of the research was to investigate factors influencing access to public libraries for children with special needs and their families. The research used a mixed method approach. One-on-one semi-structured interview research tool was applied. The interview consisted of 41 items, focussed on the questions:

- What are public libraries currently doing to improve access for children with special needs and their families?
- What are the barriers to access from the perspective of the public librarian?

Key findings of the research included:

- Library staff attitudes and sensitivities were considered to be the greatest barrier to access for children with special needs and their families.
- Lack of knowledge on how to address access issues for children with special needs was listed as the greatest barrier for libraries.
- Libraries had attempted to address the issue of inclusive programs above all other barriers to access for this group.
- Staff training in disability was listed as having the greatest impact on increasing access.

There were discrepancies in what public librarians considered to be barriers and what they were addressing.

This study is part one of a greater research project. Study two involves public librarians with little experience in access for children with special needs. Study three involves families of children with special needs. These three studies will give a greater understanding of the topic.

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