

Removing Barriers to Access: Examining Library Fines for Children

Public libraries play an important role in the formation of early literacy skills for its communities and the families that live in them. Today more libraries are looking at ways to remove barriers to library access for its young patrons. One of the ways is to eliminate fines for children's books, making access to them easier. We want to encourage people to continue to read books at home with their children and for children to be encouraged to read books.

According to researcher D. Zhang (2013), looming fines for overdue books can make some people uncomfortable about checking out books and materials and can keep low-income families away from the libraries or from checking out books to take home.

Libraries have been discussing the impact and return rate of materials for years. To date, there is no evidence that fines positively influence return rates on materials. However, there have been studies that found that circulation rates are lower among low-income families due to the presence of library fines and fees (De Priest). Many libraries still believe that fines encourage responsible lending practices and are a necessary part of public libraries. While both sides of this argument have valid points, our question is, "What works in the best interest of our community's children and their use of the library?"

Earlier this year, Los Angeles County Library stopped accrual of fines for children going forward and created a Read Away program for children to read and "pay down" past fines. Los Angeles County libraries surround Commerce such as, Bell Gardens, Montebello, and Pico Rivera. Libraries share patrons and Commerce is no exception. Today many of our patrons have the choice to borrow from county libraries or come to the Commerce Library.

Why Look at This Now?

- Public libraries in the California and nationwide are looking at eliminating fines for its patrons including LA County libraries with locations in our neighboring cities.
- Eliminate the stress for parents concerned about accruing fines which can prevent parents and children from checking out children's books to take home.
- Fines can be an economic burden on families, especially with multiple children

Current Practice in Commerce Libraries

The library policy is that children's books accrue a fine of .15 a day and a maximum fine of \$15 for children's books.

Currently, the total amount owed for fines for card holders 0-17 years of age is \$57,606. The average amount owed is \$20. That equates to 2,880 patrons in this age range that cannot checkout books because of fines over the \$10 threshold barring them from using the card to check out materials.

This dollar amount may look staggering, however, this includes materials that were turned in, but the fines remained. Also, it can also include materials besides books that were borrowed, CDs, DVD, etc. This number of patrons can include people that no longer use this library, some for many years.

Consideration Options to Eliminate Fines for Category J-Children's Books only

- No late fees would be accrued up to 30 days after due date. On the 31st day, the item is considered lost and a replacement fee is added to the patron's record
- Develop a plan for children to eliminate past fines such as the Read Away program implemented by L.A. County Library.

Resources:

DePriest, M.J. Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials. *State Library of Colorado*.

Zhang, D. (2013). SPELL research methodology and findings. Retrieved from http://spellproject.weebly.com/uploads/1/5/3/3/15331602spell_research_metholdology_and_findings.pdf.