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# Rethinking Shelving:

## Making Your Children's Collections User-Friendly

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STEVEN ENGELFRIED

Steven has been a Youth Services Librarian for just over 30 years, including the last six with the Wilsonville Public Library. His favorite youth services activities include puppet shows, collection development, and reading all those great books and talking with kids about them. He recently became Library Services Manager, which means working with programs and collections for adults, as well as kids and teens.

It was the princesses that did it. About five years ago it seemed like every day a different little girl would come up to the children's desk and want help finding picture books about princesses. I could do pretty well with trucks and trains because I knew enough books by author and could jump from Barton to Crews to McMullen until I found one. But I only knew a few princess books, and they were always checked out. And that was the final straw that led us to create our "Picture Book Topics" section. Soon we had a new "Pink" section filled with princesses, mermaids, and stories about girls who like sparkly things. It became and remains one of the most heavily used collections in the library.

We've added other new sections to our children's collection in the past five years, including leveled early readers, a "Non-Fiction Series" area, and fiction staff picks by grade level and genre. All of the changes were spurred by asking a few basic questions about what happens at the Children's Desk:

- How do kids (and sometimes their grown-ups) describe the books they want?
- Do we arrange the collection in ways that match those descriptions?
- If our collection arrangement doesn't match a user's questions, can we change it?

### **Picture Book Topics**

Picture Book Topics was our first big response to these questions. Along with princess-related topics, we identified transportation, dinosaurs, and construction as other frequent picture book subject requests. We decided to start with those four. We weeded and shifted to create some space just before the "A" authors. Rather than re-cataloging and re-labeling existing copies, we purchased new copies for each section, averaging 60–80 copies as a start-up collection. All four were instantly popular, with "Pink" leading the way. They definitely solved my own princess picture book problem noted above. Equally importantly, they gave kids as young as two or three a starting





Picture Book Topics

We also learned that the Picture Book Topics section could support our efforts to share early literacy information with adults. When we talk about the value of singing to kids or vocabulary-building that happens when children tell stories, we also guide them to our topical sections featuring “Songs and Rhymes” and “Wordless Books.” Sections on “First Experiences” and “Behavior” address some of the challenging phases of childhood (and parenthood). Soon we will also add simple non-fiction titles to selected topics.

Books in the Picture Book Topics collection now circulate almost 40 percent more frequently than books in the regular section. About 35 percent of picture books are in the new section, and that will grow to 40–50 percent over time. The circulation statistics are fine, but we’re more excited about the way that Picture Book Topics have actually changed the way kids and grownups select books.

### Early Reader Levels

Leveling our Early Reader collection was a more straightforward process, but equally important when it comes to what our patrons want from these books. Five years ago this collection was one continuous run of books, alphabetical by author. A true beginning reader like *Hop on Pop* by Seuss might sit next to Erica Silverman’s *Cowgirl Kate and Cocoa*, a much more challenging title. The books had number labels on the spine to suggest a reading level, but that wasn’t enough: We decided to break up the collection into four leveled sections.

Assigning levels to the 2,500+ titles seemed daunting at first, but turned out to be quite manageable. We paid no attention to the levels publishers put on their books since those clearly vary wildly. We disregarded mechanical approaches like word counts and Lexile numbers. Instead, we created simple guidelines and, most importantly, didn’t worry too

place where they would find “their” kind of books. Watching a four-year-old eagerly pull out one dinosaur story after another, then walk away with five or six, all chosen on his own was something we were not used to seeing.

Over the next few years, we added more topics. We always kept children in mind as the main audience, but we realized that the topics have strong parent-appeal too. No child has ever asked for a “classic,” but parents looking for a good old reliable book to share with their young one really appreciate having them grouped together. “Bedtime” and “ABC/123” are other topics that draw the grownups.



Leveled Early Readers

much about it. The “don’t worry” part goes against all of our cataloging training, but in this case, we just had to let that go. So what if we assign a “3” to a book that probably should be a “4?” That’s fine. We want a few more challenging books among all the other “3s”; we also probably want a few high “2s” in there for readers who have just moved up to that level.

Dividing the books into levels makes choices more efficient and more interest-based. If a young reader doesn’t have to worry so much about reading level, he can focus more on interest and appeal. The child browsing the “2s,” for example, can look at *Super Fly Guy*, *Hop on Pop*, and *This is Spider-Man* and feel confident that the one he wants to read will also be one he can read.

We received strong positive feedback from kids, parents, and teachers about the leveled early readers, and we value that over circulation. With a collection like Early Readers, in fact, tracking check-outs may be a misleading measure of the user experience. Without separated levels, a patron looking for five good books may wind up checking out ten or fifteen, assuming that many of them won’t be right for the reader. Effective grouping, however, can lead readers directly to the books that are right for them, which could mean they actually check out fewer items at each visit.

### Fiction Staff Picks

The success of levels in Early Readers led us to rethink Children’s Fiction, though we had to get past some personal barriers for our next step. The idea of dividing children’s books by age level goes against everything we learned in library school. ALA even has a position







Fiction Staff Picks by Grade Level

paper on the perils of labeling books with reading levels. On the other hand, we knew from observation that the user experience for kids is impacted, at least partially, by their age.

When we do reader's advisory with children, one of our first questions is typically "what grade are you in?" It's not the *only* thing we want to know, and we recognize that fourth graders vary widely in their abilities and interests, but it's still a key piece of information. So why not put a bunch of fourth-grade books together in one location? Not all books at the fourth-grade level, but a big enough handful to serve as a starting point.

We created five simple "Staff Picks by Grade Level" shelves: one for each grade from three to seven. Children's staff members keep the shelves full by adding personal favorites and popular titles. Copies are not permanently assigned to these shelves but rotate on and off. And once again, when it comes to deciding which shelf a particular title should go on, we play it very loosely. *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate has spent time on the 4th, 5th, and 6th-grade shelves, for example, and it appeals to that wide range of readers in different ways.

Our "Staff Picks by Genre" section was also inspired by reader's advisory transactions. Along with grade level, we also usually ask some sort of "what kind of book do you like?" question. We've all utilized printed booklists, genre spine labels, and online resources, but why not pre-select a bunch of good mystery books, put them in one spot, and go there first when the answer is "I like mysteries." Our genre staff picks sit right next to the grade level shelves at the beginning of juvenile fiction. As with the grade level section, children's librarians select the titles and keep the shelves filled. This means the books chosen usually have high appeal and are likely to be checked out. At the same time, staff members improve their knowledge of the collection during the process of selecting and anticipating what readers might go for.

I'm not sure whether staff or patrons benefit most from having our staff picks shelves. Either way, the grade level and genre sections make a great starting point for the fiction reader who doesn't have a particular author or title in mind but just wants a good book.



### Non-Fiction Series

We initially struggled to find effective ways to feature non-fiction children's until we went back to that key question: "How do kids ask for books?" With non-fiction, the Dewey Decimal system often provides the answer: "Where are the dinosaur books?" and "Do you have poetry" are no problem. But what about the readers who love "Dragonology" (J398s) and "Egyptology" (J960s), not because of the subject, but because of the format? Or the kids who want to read every single one of the "Who Was?" biographies? Yes, they're all in the J920s, but why make them peruse dozens of shelves when they can all fit on one?

Our response was to create a "Non-Fiction Series" section. We selected several popular series ranging from old favorites like "Eyewitness Books" to "Basher Science" and other more recent sets. Following the strategy used with Picture Book Topics, we opted to add new copies rather than reassign books from the regular Dewey range to this new section. We still wanted readers to find "Fly Guy Presents—Insects" along with the other insect titles in the J595s, but also find that same title next to a bunch more books in that high-interest series.

After starting small with just eight series, we currently have over twenty-two series on these featured shelves. Books in this section have a turnover rate almost three times higher than regular non-fiction. It has high appeal for browsers who are interested in facts and information but don't have a particular topic in mind. We've also seen an unanticipated benefit in helping readers who may struggle with reading non-fiction. Reading non-fiction books can be challenging for many readers, since books vary not only in reading level but in format and structure. A less confident reader who manages one National Geographic Reader or Gail Gibbons book knows that the next in the series will be equally accessible, so grouping them together provides some kind of leveled reading access for non-fiction.

### One Approach Doesn't Fit All

The changes we've made to our children's collection happened over time. In every case, we started small, watched how people responded, and adjusted accordingly. Not every idea worked out, but we gave ourselves the freedom to try things out and switch directions if needed. We're not sure yet what future shifts we will make for child readers, and we're in the process of considering similar, but different changes to adult collections. Whatever comes next, we'll keep using the same basic strategy of observing what our users want and how they ask for it, then try to figure out a way that our collection arrangement can match the way they're thinking about books. 