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Always Feed the Clowns

And Other Tips for Building Better Partnerships between School Librarians and Providers of Educational Programs

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First of all, thank you, school librarians. I love performing educational enrichment programs for you and your students. I liken it to being a grandparent: I get to come and have fun with the kids but then ride off into the sunset before there is any diaper-changing to do. As such, I am grateful to the multitudes of librarians whose patronage, support, and advice have helped me develop and enhance my slate of programs. Now, in return, let me share some tips I have gleaned that may help you make your librarian/producer partnerships function more smoothly.

Three of the important elements for developing a good librarian/programmer partnership are the same as those for building any good relationship: *communication, preparation, and cooperation.*

Communication

I began my career in library program development at the behest of my publisher, who encouraged (prodded) me to perform at schools and libraries to promote my first published work, *Will Allen and the Great Monster Detective* (Rogue Bear Press 2007). My publisher found many librarians who were willing partners, but my challenge was to produce a program that met the needs of my book's tween-age audience and those of my constituent librarians.

The solution was simple: *I listened.*

I listened to children and discovered (shockingly) that tweens did NOT want to be read to or sit and watch a show. They wanted to have an adventure.

Then I listened to school librarians. Many expressed that, due to cutbacks and curriculum changes, they had far less time with students but more that they were required to teach them. In particular, they were frustrated about being short on time for one of their primary functions: teaching how the library is organized and how to locate books on different subjects.

In response to those needs, and keeping in mind my philosophy that kids learn by doing, I created my Monster Hunt Library Skills-Building Adventure Program, in which kids have a grand adventure, but unknowingly learn library research skills at the same time. In this program participants must locate books in the library that contain hidden clues that will help them track down and

capture a lurking monster! Each child has a separate set of clues to find and learns how to find books in the fiction, nonfiction, and biography sections at the student's own pace. This program has been so overwhelmingly popular that I have now performed it at over one hundred schools and libraries across the nation. Kids love the Monster Hunt because it is tons of fun, and school librarians love it because it teaches vital library skills in a single session—a big boon to many time-strapped librarians.

But if effective communication from my perspective means listening and responding to my constituents' needs, the flip side is that librarians must be able express those needs. To do so requires another key element of a good partnership: preparation.

Preparation

Any educator will agree that there is no substitute for doing your homework. A librarian's homework for facilitating good educational-program partnerships primarily involves determining students' needs and researching providers who will meet those needs. Ask yourself the following questions.

Who is the program for and what are their needs?

The audience for an educational program is a prime determinant for what program is appropriate. After all, the academic, social (and, yes, entertainment) needs of children vary wildly. As such, most enrichment programs have a specified target audience.

What should be the primary learning goal?

Entertaining children is wonderful, but kids can get entertainment virtually anywhere. School and library enrichment programs



should be educational as well. But determining educational objectives depends upon the needs of each audience. What programs are age-appropriate? What curriculum objectives might be supported? What academic deficiencies could be remediated? Answer these questions to know what kind of program to seek out.

Who is the right partner?

Once the educational objective has been identified, it is time to do some research. You can review program information by going to trade shows, asking around, or searching the Web, but regardless of where you find answers, the questions remain the same: Is a program out there that meets my

students' needs? How much will it cost? Is the performer engaging, reliable, and willing to work with you to meet students' needs? Are you comfortable working with this person?

This last point is particularly thorny. Know yourself (and your administrators), and get a feel for the character of your performer. In my case, if potential hosts are not comfortable with a bit of mayhem, my programs are not a good fit. Although I modify my content to suit the needs of different audiences, a performer cannot please everyone. Talk extensively to performers and involved parties, and find a good match. The effort can save you a lot of grief later.

The process of seeking program information is up to you. In my experience, a great number of librarians contact me as a result of recommendations from fellow librarians. On the other hand, many of the librarians I work with didn't even know my programs existed until they researched programs online. Until you begin your search, you never know what you may find—or where.

Cooperation

Preparation for the program need not fall entirely on your shoulders. Classroom teachers and the appropriate specialist should be involved in integrating the program into the broader curriculum. (A writing workshop? Involve the composition teacher!) And asking the performer to brief teachers, provide supplemental materials such as lesson plans or teachers' guides, or communicate with program sponsors is not outrageous. As I mentioned earlier, a lot of program bookings come as a result of referrals, so performers like me have a great deal invested in making the program a

success. Therefore, most of us will go to surprising lengths to help prepare you and your school. If we can do something to help, don't be afraid to (politely) ask. Conversely, don't act put off if performers have any (reasonable) requests—say, for a water bottle or a couple of saltines. As busy as all school librarians are, if you want to build good partnerships with program providers it is well worth your while to spare a few moments to develop a rapport with the performer.

After all, even P. T. Barnum, whose life depended upon keeping his man-eating lions well fed, always made time to feed the clowns, too.

Jason Edwards is an award-winning author/ "edutainer" with over thirty years of experience developing innovative ways to entertain, instruct, and inspire children. Even his *Chronicles of the Monster Detective Agency* books are more than just frightfully funny adventure stories; they are designed to help children confront their fears and to model ways to control anxieties. Jason's deft touch at addressing children's issues in a nonthreatening manner has earned him the Mom's Choice Award for family-friendly media and an endorsement from the Anxiety Disorders Association of America (now known as the Anxiety and Depression Association of America). In addition to writing, Jason travels to schools and libraries across the nation performing his *Monster Hunt Library Skills-Building Adventure* program and his *Destination: Inspiration InterACTIVE StoryCrafting Workshops*. Jason lives in New York with his wife, daughters, and a rabbit named Bunniford who never comes when called. Learn more about Jason at his website <<http://j81502.wix.com/MonsterAuthor>>.

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