Stealthy Literacy Strategies

Kathleen McBroom

Kids have always flocked to libraries, reveling in opportunities to explore new titles, authors, and genres. Children look to librarians to help find answers to questions, get through school assignments, and make great suggestions for leisure reading. Research confirms the crucial importance of readers' advisory services, and library professionals should always be open to new ways of enhancing and extending their efforts.

Luckily, there are several practical and stealthy ways for children's librarians to sneak in literacy enhancement strategies as part of their established routines, whether through daily interactions, passive programming, or special events. All these suggestions are easy to implement, involve little or no expense, and keep things light and lively while simultaneously promoting reading skills, leading to increased engagement, deeper comprehension, and better readers.

A Diverse Array and Displays

Possibly the most crucial strategy is to offer and promote a diverse array of reading material. It's critical that readers have access to materials that reflect circumstances, views, and ways of life beyond their personal experiences.

Libraries are wonderful places for kids to explore and experiment with new genres and formats, extending their reading interests beyond familiar authors, comfortable series, and popular peer recommendations. Librarians should always be open to helping readers find these kinds of selections and never be afraid to encourage kids to push their limits.

In addition to promoting titles from resources such as MISElf in Books and We Need Diverse Books, consider suggesting more off-the-beaten-path titles, paired fiction and nonfiction complements, and resources that fall on the edges of perennially popular subject areas. And while librarian guidance is certainly appreciated, it's equally important to offer opportunities for kids to discover hidden gems on their own.

The theme for the 2027 Collaborative Summer Reading Program is "Mysteries Await at Your Library." There are myriad picture books and middle-grade stories starring a dizzying array of sleuths, and many collections routinely catalog mysteries as a separate genre displayed on special shelves. A very simple, powerful way of highlighting these sections is to take a merchandising ploy from bookstores and employ dynamic shelving, a proven practice that involves turning out chosen titles so that the full cover shows. Be sure to choose vivid, vibrant illustrations, and be prepared to continually turn out additional selections because experience indicates that these highlighted titles go fast—a little advertising never hurts!

An additional avenue for promoting titles that offer diverse elements is by making the most of passive programming tools, such as book displays, recommended reading lists, bookmarks, bulletin boards, web pages, and so on.

Touting Nonfiction

Never forget nonfiction enthusiasts! Highlight selections that reflect an array of real-life applications. Art heists have been a time-honored theme in children's mystery fiction, going all the way back to E. L. Konigsburg's 1967 Newbery Award winner *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler.* Many kids may enjoy reading about real-world art-related mysteries, such as *History's Infamous Unsolved Crimes* by Grace Hansen or Leisa Stewart-Sharpe's *The Treasure Hunt: True Stories of Treasures Lost, Stolen, and Found*.

Another way to get readers thinking about real-world connections is to consider associated science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)/science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) areas. Other options include forensics (*Floating Skeletons: A Small Town Is Awash in Bones* by Danielle Denega ought to get some attention) and code-breaking (pair the nonfiction selection *The Enigma Girls: How Ten Teenagers Broke Ciphers, Kept Secrets, and Helped Win World War II* by Candace



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Fleming with a contemporary historical fiction companion, *The Bletchley Riddle* by Ruta Sepetys and Steve Sheinkin).

There are biographies, whether about people who wrote mysteries (*A Mind of Her Own: The Story of Mystery Writer Agatha Christie* by Robyn McGrath or *Arthur Who Wrote Sherlock* by Linda Bailey) or people who were mysteries themselves (*Houdini's Library: How Books Created the World's Greatest Magician* by Barb Rosenstock). Don't forget about lesser-known but equally fascinating notables (*Vanished: Seven Women Magicians Who Simply Disappeared* by Anna Hays) or individuals in extended careers, such as mathematicians (*Grasping Mysteries: Girls Who Loved Math* by Jeannine Atkins), crime-solvers (*Hiding in Plain Sight: Kate Warne and the Race to Save Abraham Lincoln* by Beth Anderson), or even geologists (Cindy Jenson-Elliott's *The Doomsday Detectives: How Walter and Luis Alvarez Solved the Mystery of Dinosaur Extinction*). Real-life mysteries offer additional choices, whether historical (*Trapped in Terror Bay: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Franklin Expedition* by Sigmund Brouwer), natural (*Spooky Lakes: Twenty-Five Strange and Mysterious Lakes That Dot Our Planet* by Geo Rutherford), or supernatural (*Catching Cryptids: The Scientific Search for Mysterious Creatures* by Kim Long).

In short, be as inclusive and as creative as possible. Don't hesitate to suggest quirky, one-of-a-kind, offbeat selections, like Lemony Snicket's *Poison for Breakfast* or Hilde Kate Lysiak's *Hilde on the Record: Memoir of a Kid Crime Reporter*. Never be afraid to plumb the depths of shelves and the far corners of collections. Get creative, make connections, and when making recommendations, try to represent and respect all kids' reading choices. You never know what magic title might turn a child into a lifelong reader.

Question the Kids

Reflection and retention are two crucial literacy skills that can be reinforced by simply asking kids questions about what they've read. Try posing prompts that go beyond simple yes/no or one-word, factual answers. Instead, ask questions that require personal input, comparing and contrasting efforts, or multiple justifications.

Post deep-thinking queries near stacks or check-out counters, or try dropping prompts into informal conversations or formal presentations. Pose questions like, *When did you figure out the mystery? How is this book different from other mysteries you've read?* Consider open-ended questions, such as, *Did you read anything that surprised you?* Never fear about needing to follow up or evaluate responses because there are never really any right or wrong answers. We're looking for opinions from critical audiences and hopefully developing readers.

The conversations should be freewheeling; the audience can be just about anyone, or anything, for that matter: a stuffed animal, a pet. These audiences do not need to be familiar with the books under discussion; they just need to be empathetic, engaged listeners.

A children's librarian is always great, but so is a teenage page, a clerk at the circulation desk, a volunteer (think senior citizens or other potential community partners), a sibling, or a peer. All these listeners need to do is provide empathetic attention and encouragement: *That's interesting! Tell me more. And then what happened? And? And? And?*

Opportunities for these talkbacks can be offered at specified times, either in conjunction with or independent of established programming. They could last anywhere from a thirty-minute lunch period to an hour or two. Participants can be encouraged to come in and pick up new titles and share what they've just finished reading. An approach for group settings to encourage peer interactions might be to have participants find a partner and spend five minutes telling each other about the best mystery they've ever read. Just make sure to include reminders about how to be good listeners and take turns for young participants, and be sure to identify parameters, explanations, and justifications in any accompanying adult-intended publicity.

Kids can usually talk about more sophisticated imagery than they can write about, and they tend to share more nuanced emotional reactions in conversation. Keep things reflective, personal, and nonjudgmental—just open-ended sharing.

One final but pivotal consideration: Try to limit sorting of reading recommendations by reading level. Kids need to be free to explore and decide what's best for themselves. It's true that many school districts swear by leveled reading, and many grown-ups request leveled material, but there are literacy experts who maintain that leveled readers level lives. There is also plentiful research, mounting evidence, and strong opinion that refute the notion that children always prefer easygoing books. Never stand in the way of a determined reader!

Hopefully, public librarians can find seamless ways of integrating these kinds of literacy strategies (encouraging experimentation, prompting thoughtful reflection, and providing opportunities for conversation) into existing programming. We already know that our efforts are appreciated and our programs are crowd-pleasers. Why not sneak in a little literacy reinforcement, too? Happy reading!&