



# How To... Turn a Bookshop into a Bridge

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Ideas for parent involvement.

We all know that books are magic; but we can work a little magic with bookshops too.

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Parental involvement and, now, parental participation are widely discussed ideas. They are both easier to talk about than achieve. A school bookshop can provide a genuine meeting point for home and school as The Bookworm's Hideout at Oakdale County Primary School in Peterborough shows.

The school, in the outskirts of Peterborough, serves an estate of private housing built between 1960 and 1975. It has 167 children (infant and junior) on roll. The Bookworm's Hideout opened in April 1979.

We asked **Dot Byron-Evans**, a teacher, and **Anne Barber**, a parent, to tell us how it works.

In any school bookselling project, the parent provides both the child who is the bookshop's potential customer and the cash, which is the bookshop's purchasing power. The enthusiasm or otherwise with which a book purchase is made will be determined by three vital factors involving the parent. First the way the parent reacts to the bookshop's sales policy, secondly the way in which the child greets the parent with the book purchased, and thirdly the way the parent receives the child with the purchased book. Hence the school bookshop needs a continuous public relations exercise, not only with the children but also their parents. It is essential to have parents on an organising committee, and to involve them in the week by week running of the bookshop. Generally, parents have more informal and frequent contact with other parents of children in the school than the teachers do, and are thus able to encourage interest in the bookshop activities and reply to any queries from other parents.

The role of our bookshop committee, consisting of both parents and teachers, is to promote not primarily the *sale* of books but the pleasure, satisfaction and practical information which can be derived from books. Not every child will be attracted to every kind of book, so a wide spectrum of titles is required in the bookshop stock. Once the children are drawn to the books on the shelves and parental cooperation is gained, the books will *sell themselves*.

Committee members at browsing and selling sessions are responsible for ensuring that books selected by a child match not only his pocket but also his personality and reading performance. With a little guidance, middle juniors and upwards are mostly capable of choosing wisely for themselves, but within the infant/lower junior age range we must aim to ensure that the book sold to a particular child is suitable in theme, readability, vocabulary, size of print, ratio of illustrations to print, and style of illustrations and print. To achieve this we must know our children and know our books in stock.

We get to know the books by reading them. There are shortcomings in reviewing bookshop titles in this way - our reviews are necessarily subjective, and we tend to assess the book's appeal to children by the reaction of children best known to us. Where several longer novels by the same author are on the shelves, we may read them all or perhaps only one or two thoroughly, then browse through the others. It is useful to compare other people's reviews with your own by talking to them and by reading reviews in journals and magazines. I have learned to beware of publishers' blurbs.

Oakdale is a small school so getting to know our children and their literary likes and dislikes as their reading skills develop is not a daunting task. The teachers on the committee know the pupils in their teaching situation and the five parent members all help in school regularly, quite apart from their school bookshop interests, and so become well acquainted with our 'book worms'.

### **Anne Barber**

When it opened 10 years ago the school was the social focal point of the new estate and, because of this, has a very vigorous parent association and a strong tradition of many-sided parental involvement within normal school activities - craft, library, infant water play, cooking, etc. In a sense, therefore, parental involvement in the running of a bookshop seemed very natural - and as the Parents' Association was financing the whole scheme it also seemed a very good idea!

In consultation with the headmaster, Mr Ron Holgate, it was decided to have a bookshop committee with parent and teacher membership. Mr Holgate envisaged that this would create a new style of parental involvement in the school:

'I particularly welcome the involvement of parents in the bookshop because it allows the school to stretch "parental help" into the difficult but more rewarding area of "parent participation". If we take participation to mean cooperation in the making of decisions in the pursuit of a common purpose, then the parent members of the bookshop committee are in the truest sense of the word participants. They are in effect being offered the opportunity to be architects in an aspect of the children's school-based education. A secondary, but no less valuable benefit is that the very necessary but often laborious and time-consuming routine administration can be done by parents, allowing the teachers freedom to evolve and develop the educational and creative ethos of the bookshop.'

At our first committee meeting we planned our opening week and drafted our initial letter. The teachers were involved mainly in placing the orders for the books and the parents in organising the stock-control and selling once the books arrived. This pattern has remained constant but we have plans to involve other members of staff and other parents in ordering and reviewing books in the near future. Apart from actual committee members about 20 other mums helped out during opening week. Our committee now consists of 5 parents and 3 teachers.

Parental involvement in the bookshop has grown tremendously since this time. As the bookshop grew parents have taken over various absolutely vital aspects of its expansion, for instance the selling of savings stamps. Every Tuesday the same parent committee member goes round the infant classes to do this - the children call her 'The Book Lady'. Her expertise is such that every bottom and middle infant child can find its own card from the filing system! Each Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday during morning playtime we sell stamps to the juniors and, because of the complications of playground duties, this rota is basically parent-run.

On the stock-control and finance side, our treasurer (a parent) puts new books into our card index scheme. She is also usually present during a selling session. All the parents on the committee help at selling sessions.

As the bookshop has grown, so has wider parental commitment to it - and I feel that this is due largely to the magnificent and constant public relations exercise the parent committee members sustain throughout the school year. In our first year of operation we have weathered three price rises and a falling roll. Indeed, to stay just as we are, with the decrease in numbers, we have to keep improving - and the fact that we have actually expanded our operation says much for the value of parental involvement in this venture.

### **Dot Byron-Evans**

## Blueprint for SUCCESS

In primary schools, gaining the support of parents is (from the evidence of Oakdale and a lot of other school bookshops) an essential factor in determining success. In secondary schools it can be a useful bonus.

### How do you get it?

#### Keep parents informed and involved

1. Tell them in advance why you want to start a bookshop and how it will run.
2. Invite them to help in the planning and running of it.
3. Recruit a small group of enthusiastic parents who will act as good ambassadors for the bookshop.
4. Provide an opportunity for parents to see the books, ask questions, contribute ideas and comments.
5. Run a savings scheme - it helps to make buying as painless as possible and keeps the bookshop in mind between purchases.
6. Where parents of younger children can't be present at selling times, send home a note with details of the book they want to buy, its price, their current credit on the savings scheme, for approval.
7. Make the bookshop a source of information. Display and/or have for sale books for parents, magazines about children and books. Put up cuttings from newspapers and magazines about schools, children, parents and books.
8. Put on an event or exhibition specially for *parents*. Why not hire an exhibition from the National Book League? There are four called **Reading for Enjoyment**. Each one consists of books chosen for a particular age range. Choose from 2-5 (selected by Elaine Moss), 6-8 (Joan and Alan Tucker), 8-11 (Janet Hill) and 11+ (Aidan Chambers). A good selection to get people talking is **Humorous Books for Children** - only just revised and updated.

Each exhibition includes about 100 books. Annotated lists of the books in each exhibition are available for sale. Have some of the books in the exhibition available in the bookshop so they can be bought on the spot - and stand by to take orders.

These exhibitions cost £14.50 (£10.50 to members of the NBL) each to hire. (Warning: these charges may be going up later this year.)

Details from the NBL (address on page 2).

A combination of all or some of these points should make for good bridge building. Let us know what happens in *your* school.

The first letter home about the bookshop is all important. We think something like this (adapted from the one sent out by the bookshop committee of Oakdale School) should do the trick.

Dear Parents,

As you may have heard from the children we are planning to open a bookshop at the end of this term on the school premises. The Parents' Association is financing this, a group of teachers and parents is running it and there are two main reasons for us deciding to do this:

- a) There are no bookshops for children in our area.
- b) With teachers and parents involved, it means that books can be fitted to individual children in the same way as shoes can be individually fitted to their feet.

We are very anxious that you should know as much as possible about the books we hope you will let your children buy and so during opening week, as well as organising special events for the children, we have arranged a wine and cheese evening so that you will be able to look at the stock of books before we begin selling to the children. This social evening will be on ... and we enclose a ticket for you to come along. As well as looking at the books we hope you will enjoy listening to our guest speaker who is .... There is also a quiz and prize and a raffle so come and pit your wits and try your luck) All of us who are running the bookshop will be happy to answer any questions about our plans, prices of books and savings schemes available either at the social evening or at any time before or after this event.

We include a list of activities planned for the children during our opening week and there is an open invitation for all parents to come into school on each day from 3.00 p.m. to meet our visitors. From 3.30-4.15 p.m. we will be serving tea and biscuits. We shall start selling the books to parents and children on the Friday.

Looking forward to seeing you

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