More and more local libraries are working with their Parks & Recreation departments to support healthy play, fitness, and access to nature.

According to the American Public Health Association, the fourth most read public health news story in their newsletter during 2018 was the article “Libraries, public health work together on community health.” There is also increasing evidence that public libraries are partnering with parks and recreation agencies to support healthy play, fitness, and access to nature. One of the hottest trends in public libraries today are StoryWalks, which consist of deconstructed children’s storybooks posted along a walking trail in a park to support reading, exercise, and family bonding in nature.

According to the Kellogg-Hubbard Public Library in Montpelier, Vermont, where the StoryWalk idea emerged in 2007, “StoryWalks have been installed in 50 states and 12 countries.” In my research through the University on this trend, I have found that StoryWalks almost always involve public libraries partnering with parks and recreation agencies. Indeed, this trend has become so established that two library vendors now sell the equipment needed to construct permanent StoryWalk installations in parks: Curious City and Barking Dog. My research also suggests that these programs work best when librarians curate the stories and related programming, and parks and recreation agencies.

StoryWalk® is an innovative and fun way for children and adults to enjoy reading and the outdoors at the same time. Laminated pages from a children’s book are attached to some sort of signage or display, which are installed along an outdoor path. As you stroll down the trail, you’re directed to the next page in the story. StoryWalks have been installed in all 50 states and 12 many countries. StoryWalk was created by Anne Ferguson of Montpelier, VT and has developed with the help of Rachel Senechal, Kellogg-Hubbard Library. For more information about StoryWalk go to: https://www.kellogghubbard.org/storywalk
agencies curate the installations and related landscape architecture.”

There are many more ways that parks and recreation agencies and public libraries can work together to support community health. In a survey of 1,157 public libraries in the U.S. and Canada, I found many instances of parks and recreation agencies working with public libraries:

- To offer special fitness classes for adults and senior citizens in order to expose patrons to healthy habits (http://letsmoveliibraries.org)
- For creative cross-overs like the roll-n-read program at a recreation center in Wood River, Illinois, in which the librarian shares stories and recreation center staff get kids engaging in introductory gymnastic activities (http://programminglibrarian.org/programs/roll-n-read)
- To make available recreation equipment, like frisbees and snowshoes, that can be checked out from the library to be used in local parks (http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2018/08/fitting-health-into-library-programming/)
- And so much more.

Another example of libraries and parks working well together is in Dover, Delaware. Margie Cyr, director of the Dover Public Library, said her department is working hand-in-hand with parks and rec to offer a multitude of recreational and educational programs this summer. Ms. Cyr said the city is bringing back its “Tuesday in the Park” offerings for the second-consecutive summer.

“We started last summer, our first program was the Tuesday in the Park program, which Sherwanda (Rachal-Speaks, the city’s recreation specialist) and I worked on jointly,” Ms. Cyr said. “It was a joint project between the Dover Public Library and the city’s Parks and Recreation Department because we recognized the fact that we needed not only the Parks Department, but also the library needs to be able to take our services out into the community to reach those people who have no way to connect to either of our existing facilities.

“So, on Tuesday mornings last summer, park staff and library staff went into four different parks and we had a program for families, and we named it Tuesday in the Park. There were three elements to each Tuesday in the Park. One was a literary enrichment; another was a physical activity; and then we served free lunches...” Ms. Cyr said. “This year we actually wanted to be able to allow them to check out books so we’re partnering with the Kent County Public Library and their bookmobile ‘Linus’ is going to be come to all the ‘Tuesday in the Parks,’ so that people actually check out books directly from the library.”

I’ve also found that public librarians increasingly want to work with parks and recreation agencies, and that public librarians want to do more to support community health. For instance, a session at the 2017 meeting of the North Carolina Library Association Conference was “The True Story of Tammy and Ron: How Libraries and Parks and Rec Can Have a Healthy Relationship,” and it featured representatives from the Union County Public Library and Union County Parks and Recreation Agency talking about how they’ve worked together over the years for everything from StoryWalks to Little Free Libraries and more. Based on interviews I conducted with staff from half of the public libraries in North Carolina, I am able to
confirm that this trend is taking place throughout the state, and I believe throughout the country. The major take-away from this research is that these partnerships start with relationships. If public librarians don’t know and aren’t engaged with parks and recreation staff, then nothing is possible. Where these relationships exist, amazing things can happen.

Learn more about this topic at the American Library Association, and in my peer reviewed research.

About the Author
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References:


Tuesday in the Parks Program

StoryWalk®
https://www.kellogghubbard.org/storywalk