

WESTCHESTER PUBLIC LIBRARY

PROBLEM PATRON MANUAL

INTRODUCTION

Every staff member has the responsibility of keeping the library as pleasant an environment for the public as possible. This includes discouraging disruptive behavior on the library premises.

Problems arise because, ironically, our efforts to create a pleasant atmosphere sometimes attract people who jeopardize that pleasant atmosphere. Because of social trends, libraries and other public institutions will be facing more, not fewer, incidents with problem patrons. It is important that the staff learn to deal with these incidents in a firm but fair manner.

This handbook is designed to provide guidelines for staff in deciding when a patron is creating a problem and in dealing with problem patrons.

REPORTING

Report all incidents in with challenging patrons in writing on an Incident/Accident Report Sheet.

CRISIS PREVENTION

When dealing with difficult patrons and their problem behavior, library staff members should work to correct the problem behavior but should be cautious not to act in a manner that would escalate the problem. The following are "Tips for Crisis Prevention," from the National Crisis Prevention Institute for dealing with difficult persons:

1. Be empathic (try to show respect and not be judgmental).
2. Clarify messages (make sure you understand what is being said).
3. Respect personal space (don't stand too close for comfort).
4. Be aware of body position (don't stand straight in front of him or her or appear to block his or her avenue of escape).
5. Permit verbal venting where possible (let him or her blow off steam).
6. Set and enforce reasonable limits (state what you will permit).
7. Avoid overreacting (strive to remain calm, rational, and professional).
8. Avoid physical techniques (do not push, grab, or otherwise touch the person).
9. Ignore challenge questions (do not respond to challenges to your authority, training, intelligence, policy, etc.).

10. Keep your nonverbal cues non-threatening (the more an individual loses control, the less he or she listens to your actual words).

COMMUNICATION

When communicating with problems patrons consider the following guidelines from the Library Security and Safety Handbook by Bruce A. Shuman:

1. Listen carefully to the person's words; ensure that he or she knows you're paying attention.
2. Use firm, assertive (but not aggressive) language.
3. Avoid a tone of voice or the use of phrases that might be considered judgmental, moralizing, or condescending.
4. Respond in a calm, reasonable, and friendly manner.
5. Use common sense in dealing with the problem situation.
6. Try not to show anger, fear, disapproval or disgust.
7. Explain your position and that of the library in a calm tone of voice.
8. Stress your responsibility to the collection and to other patrons.
9. Do not allow yourself to be sidetracked or angered by personal insults or threats.
10. Repeat your position as often as necessary.
11. Suggest realistic alternative – provide the patron with choices, if at all possible.
12. If the patron demands to see someone "higher up," comply, but first insist on having the time to explain the situation to the supervisor in realistic terms and in a calm manner.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Here are some additional guidelines to consider:

1. Assess each situation: Problem patrons will generally provide clues about their likely course of behavior. Take time to evaluate a situation before reacting, so that you don't over-react. In all cases, it is important to assess the seriousness of the situation as quickly as possible. The course you pursue will depend upon the accuracy of your assessment.
2. Take immediate action when you understand the problem. Ignoring a problem does not make it go away. On the contrary, it will become greater.

3. Maintain a calm, nonjudgmental manner: Remember that the problem behavior is not directed at you personally. Staying calm will often help defuse an unpleasant situation and will allow you to exercise better judgment. Avoid a loud tone of voice or phrases that might be considered moralizing or condescending.
4. Explain your position in clear, firm language. It is important that problem causers see you taking charge. Don't argue or bargain with them; it may lead to confrontation. Don't be hesitant or appear unsure of yourself. Don't allow yourself to be sidetracked. Simply repeat your position firmly, if necessary.
5. Present suitable alternatives, if possible.
6. Give sanctions: Let the problem patron know clearly what will happen if the behavior persists. Example: "You will have to leave the library." Never touch a problem patron, such as taking his arm to escort him from the library.
7. Use teamwork: No one should feel alone on the front line. Call on another staff member to back you up and go to the aid of a staff member when necessary. Often, two staff members will be enough to convince a problem patron to change or leave. Support is especially important if you have any suspicion that the person may become violent.
8. Call outside help if necessary: If you have warned a problem patron with no result, call the Director and relate the situation to him. In case of an obvious emergency, you should call the police.
9. Fill out an Incident Report: Whenever you have a problem, fill out an Incident Report as completely as possible including the names and addresses of all staff, witnesses, and patrons involved; and give it to the Director at your earliest opportunity.

GUIDELINES FOR SOME SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

CHATTY PATRONS

We sometimes have lonely people or those whose need for attention is great. We should be patient with these people but at the same time should not allow them to take up large amounts of our time.

Politely but firmly discourage long, irrelevant conversations. If a patron persists, remind them politely that you have to return to work or to help another patron.

DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT

Disruptive conduct is any behavior that disrupts the normal functioning of the library. This would include, but not be limited to, loud talking and laughing, fighting, throwing objects, and boisterous behavior.

Loud Talking and Laughing: Since it is difficult to maintain a consistent noise or quiet level, and sensitivity to noise varies from one person or group to another, the focus will be on whether one person or group is heard above the general noise level in the library at a

particular time. People conversing in louder tones than the general noise level of the library should be requested to lower their voices. ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

Fighting: whether real or pretend, NO WARNING - REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

Throwing Objects: This would include wadded up papers, paper airplanes, and other small objects. ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

With larger objects or anything that could cause; injury, such as dropping a book over the balcony, NO WARNING - REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

Boisterous Behavior: This would include running in and out, running up and down the stairs, wandering from group to group making noise, horseplay and annoying other patrons. ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

USING OBSCENE LANGUAGE

This is a hard one to pin down because "obscene" is defined as anything "grossly repugnant to the generally accepted notions of what is appropriate." A word may be obscene to one staff member and not to another. For purposes of our policy, obscenity may be defined as language or gestures that convey a sexually explicit message or describe intimate bodily functions in a coarse or crude manner. ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

No staff member should be subjected to verbal abuse, whether obscenity is involved or not. Interrupt the patron and say, "Your language and behavior are inappropriate. You must either stop or come back when you are calmer." If the patron persists, notify the patron that he or she may consult with the Director. Above all, don't argue with the patron or respond with verbal abuse in kind. REPORT ALL INCIDENTS TO THE DIRECTOR IN WRITING.

VIEWING SEXUALLY EXPLICIT IMAGES ON LIBRARY COMPUTERS

Viewing sexually explicit images on library computers where other patrons and staff members can also see the images is prohibited. ONE WARNING (put notes on patron's Computer User Card) AND IF THERE IS A REPEAT INCIDENT, BLOCK THE CARD AND NOTIFY THE DIRECTOR.

SOLICITATION

This includes selling anything, such as raffle tickets or candy, for personal gain or for a charitable cause or begging, panhandling or circulating petitions. ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

EATING AND DRINKING

These activities may be carried out in designated areas only and are not appropriate to the library as a whole. If a patron violates this rule, it may be that he or she is unaware of it. Remind them of the policy and if they don't comply, ask them to leave. ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

SMOKING

Smoking is prohibited in the library. If you see anyone smoking, ask him or her to stop immediately or leave the library. ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

SLEEPING

Sleeping is not allowed in the library. However, a patron may become drowsy and doze off momentarily while studying. This regulation pertains to the habitual sleepers or those who are noisy, sprawled out on the furniture, or generally disturbing other patrons. Awaken them by speaking to them but do not touch or shake them. They should be asked to stay awake. ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

LOITERING

Loitering is defined as remaining or wandering in a public place without any apparent legitimate reason. Anyone who mills about or sits doing nothing for an extended period of time, and who is not using library materials or waiting for someone should be considered loitering. During periods of extreme heat and extreme cold however, some patrons may be using the library as a cooling/warming station. Ask them if this is their purpose and if so, invite them to stay. ONE WARNING AND REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

RUNNING AND PLAYING

This is not only distracting to other patrons, but it can be hazardous since accidents are more likely to occur. The degree to which this could be tolerated will depend on the age of the patron. Small children are the most apt to be running and playing; they need to be guided into more appropriate use of the library. If their behavior is creating a problem, parents should be told. Older children who seem to view the library as a playground should be reminded that running and playing are not allowed. ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

PETS

Animals of any kind are not allowed in the library except for guide and assistance animals and those used in library programs. Anyone entering the library with a pet should be asked to leave. NO WARNING - REQUEST THEY LEAVE.

Of course, if they return without the pet, they should be allowed to use the library.

LEAVING PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN UNATTENDED

This creates a special problem for staff that may then have to function as baby-sitters. It can also be a serious situation, as a child may be injured or become ill. Any unattended child should be taken to the Circulation Desk.

The Circulation Staff should try to locate the parents within the building by using the public address system. If they are located, explain firmly that the library cannot be responsible for their child and that staff are much too busy to care for the child.

If parents cannot be located in the building, the Circulation Staff should call the police. A staff member should remain with the child until authorities arrive. Under no circumstances should a staff member drive a child home.

NO SHOES OR SHIRT

Patrons are not permitted in the building without shoes or shirt. Remind the patron of the rule. Of course, if they don't have shoes or shirt with them to put on, they will have to leave at once. **ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.**

FEET ON TABLES OR CHAIRS

Placing feet whether bare or shod, on tables and chairs, is prohibited. A staff member should remind the patron of the rule. **ONE WARNING AND THEN REQUEST THEY LEAVE.**

EJECTION

If you find it necessary to ask a person to leave the library and they appear to ignore your request, summon assistance from the Library Director if available or from the police. Remember, **never touch or grab a patron** whether they be a child or an adult.

ILLEGAL BEHAVIOR

Some behavior is illegal and should be handled by the proper authorities. Examples of illegal behavior follow:

Assault: Intentionally or by reckless conduct cause injury to another person.

Criminal Mischief: Intentionally damages the property of another (includes vandalism and mutilating library materials.)

Drunk and/or Disorderly Conduct: Causes public inconvenience by fighting, unreasonable noises, abusive or obscene language/gesture, threatening behavior, hazardous or physically offensive condition.

Harassment: Threatens or annoys another person by physical contact or abusive or obscene language, or follows a person in or about a public place.

Public Lewdness: Intentionally exposes the private or intimate parts of the body in a lewd manner in a public place.

Theft (Larceny): Wrongfully takes, obtains, or withholds the property of another.

Trespass: Knowingly enters or remains unlawfully in or upon a premise.

If you witness illegal behavior, report it immediately to the Director or Assistant Director. If they can't be reached, report it immediately to the police.

HELP SIGNAL

To signal to other staff that you need immediate assistance from law enforcement authorities without alerting the patron, use the library help signal. If you do not know the signal, ask your Supervisor or the Director.