

Digital Reading Promotion for Children in U.S. Public Libraries: A Survey of Practices and Implications (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To investigate the current status of children's digital reading promotion in U.S. public libraries and provide references for China's practice in this domain. [Method/Process] Based on service population, nine tiers were established, with five public libraries randomly selected from each tier. Through web-based investigation, the digital reading platform functionalities and children's digital reading promotion activities of 45 U.S. public libraries were examined. [Results/Conclusion] U.S. public libraries provide personalized digital reading zones for children, offer rich multimedia resources, and collaboratively conduct graded digital reading promotion activities for children by uniting various stakeholders. It is recommended that Chinese public libraries: enhance the quality of children's digital resources; attend to age differences among children; strengthen multi-party cooperation and expand channels for children's digital reading activities.

Full Text

A Survey of and Enlightenment from the Practice of Children's Digital Reading Promotion in American Public Libraries

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Abstract:

[Purpose/Significance] This study investigates the current state of children's digital reading promotion in American public libraries to provide reference for

similar practices in China. **[Method/Process]** Based on the 2011 Public Library Data Services Statistical Report, public libraries were divided into nine tiers according to service population. Five libraries were randomly selected from each tier, yielding 45 libraries for investigation of their digital reading platform functions and children's digital reading promotion activities through web-based surveys conducted from October 2016 to March 10, 2017. **[Result/Conclusion]** American public libraries provide personalized digital reading zones for children, rich multimedia resources, and collaboratively conduct graded digital reading promotion activities for children with various stakeholders. Chinese public libraries are recommended to: improve the quality of children's digital resources; emphasize age differences among children; strengthen multi-party cooperation; and broaden channels for children's digital reading activities.

Keywords: digital reading; reading promotion; public libraries; children; America

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Introduction

Under the influence of the digital tide, children's digital reading frequency and digital resource access rates continue to rise. The 2015 *Children's Digital Reading Report* [1] indicates that 71.1% of Chinese children and adolescents spend less than three hours per week on learning-related digital reading. Psychologists [2] and educators [3] define the preschool stage as ages 3-6, early school age/middle childhood as 6-12, and adolescence as 12-18. The American *Standards for Children's Services in Public Libraries* defines children as under age 13 [4]. Therefore, this paper focuses on children aged 6-13 as the key target group for public library children's digital reading promotion services. Children at this stage experience significant development in physical, cognitive, and social skills, and gradually acquire independent reading abilities. However, due to age limitations, they lack clear criteria for evaluating the quality of children's reading materials and are easily influenced by their environment, making this a critical period for cultivating reading habits [5]. Consequently, digital reading promotion targeting this group by public libraries carries profound significance.

American public libraries rank among the world's leaders in service quality, offering many mature practices and valuable experiences in children's digital reading promotion worthy of exploration and reference. However, current research on this topic in American public libraries remains limited. Wu Jiao [6] found through investigation that American public library websites feature children's reading promotion digital resources with broad content scope, diverse formats, bibliographic databases catering to children's interests, and digital resources constructed based on children's needs and resource advantages. Liu Yan and Wang Feng [7] introduced three reading promotion programs by Reading Is Fundamental (RIF), the largest American public welfare cultural organization,

suggesting they help alleviate reading inequality among children caused by socioeconomic disparities. Niu Bo [8] analyzed the transformation of American library “summer reading” programs into “summer learning” initiatives, noting that American public libraries emphasize children’s services and have shifted from single reading promotion to inclusive reading promotion. Huang Yaodong [9] introduced the Born to Read program for infants and toddlers in American public libraries, which focuses on cultivating reading ability and interest, and holds value in guiding parent-child reading, protecting infants’ reading rights, and promoting early reading. This paper aims to summarize the characteristics and experiences of American library children’s digital reading promotion activities to provide reference value for China’s children’s digital reading promotion efforts and enhance their effectiveness. The concept of digital reading in this paper extends beyond reading on digital devices to encompass all reading activities conducted through digital means. Digital reading promotion involves not only recommending digital reading content to readers but also includes libraries utilizing various digital media to promote digital reading activities and innovate channels and methods for digital reading.

1. Children’s Digital Reading Promotion in American Public Libraries

1.1 Research Design and Data Sources This study references the *Public Library Data Services Statistical Report 2011* [10], which classifies libraries into nine levels based on service population. Using Excel’s random number generator, five libraries were randomly selected from each level as survey objects, totaling 45 public libraries (see Table 1). American libraries generally release activity announcements through official websites, and their website construction regarding children’s digital resources reflects the library’s emphasis on children’s reading. Therefore, this study primarily investigated the official websites of each public library to understand children’s digital reading promotion practices, supplemented by information from other channels. Website survey content included: reading zones, multimedia resources, reference consultation services, reading activities, and borrowing policies. The survey period was from October 2016 to March 10, 2017.

1.2 Survey Results and Analysis 1.2.1 Digital Resource Construction Centered on Children’s Needs

Children’s comprehension of books is limited, and conveying information through text alone yields minimal effect. Multimedia resources transform abstract text into audio, video, and games, providing integrated visual, auditory, and verbal experiences that compensate for the flat content experience of traditional paper books and establish more three-dimensional reading sensations for children’s early reading. American public libraries’ multimedia digital resources feature rich content and diverse types, primarily including e-books, movies, music, games, and online courses. As shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper], 48.9% (22 libraries) of public libraries’ digital col-

lections focus on e-books to guide children's digital reading. Beyond pure-text e-books, American public libraries have introduced e-books embedded with various information technologies, such as OverDrive's picture book e-books and enhanced e-books, TumbleBooks' animated books integrating animation and audio, and BookFlix's interactive e-books. Additionally, approximately 24.4% provide movies and music, 11.1% provide interactive games, and 4.4% provide online courses and other multimedia digital resources, continuously enriching children's digital reading content.

In terms of resource discovery, American public libraries scientifically plan the types and proportions of children's digital resources based on their reader demographics and establish specialized reading zones for children's digital resource types on library homepages, providing scientific self-directed reading environments for young users and improving information retrieval efficiency and resource utilization. Among the 45 surveyed American public library official homepages, the proportion with dedicated children's digital reading zones reached 82.2% (37 libraries). Libraries without dedicated children's digital reading zones accounted for 17.8%, primarily those serving smaller populations with lower degrees of website digitalization. Table 2 provides examples illustrating the types and content of children's digital reading. The Boston Public Library website has made the most obvious optimization for children's reading zones, categorizing e-books, videos, and audio, and separately listing summer reading bibliographies for user convenience. Parents can learn about recent parent-child activity information and obtain children's digital resources in the adult section. Librarians emphasize communication with child users in daily services, continuously optimizing digital reading zones based on children's interests and information demands.

1.2.2 Developing Graded Digital Reading Promotion Activities for Children

Children's reading needs and behaviors continuously change with age. Beyond reading length, content scope, and methods progressing from simple to complex, children must also learn to extract their own viewpoints, develop independent thinking, and acquire language retelling and expression abilities through gradual reading processes [12], making graded reading particularly important. Digital technology development provides new opportunities for children's graded reading promotion. American libraries emphasize distinguishing reading needs across different age stages, commonly using the Lexile reading difficulty grading system developed by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Based on test scores in vocabulary, reading comprehension, proficiency, and writing, this system helps understand children's current reading levels, habits, and interests [13], thereby expanding reading promotion activity content and innovating activity methods in a targeted manner using digital resources and information technology to construct comprehensive, diversified digital graded reading environments and systems for children.

As shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper], American public library

children's reading promotion activity types include storytelling (66.7%), themed activities (46.7%), summer reading (28.9%), parent-child reading (20.0%), and games (17.8%), with fewer competitions. For younger children (ages 6-8) newly exposed to digital reading, American libraries first improve children's perception of collections through personalized digital resource recommendations, such as the Houston Public Library's platform providing personalized reading list services. Readers can inform the library of their reading preferences (favorite books, e-books, or audiobooks, etc.) through a dedicated reader preference survey section on the library website, and the library will recommend digital resources matching reader preferences via email. Additionally, American libraries emphasize cultivating initial interest in digital reading among young children, actively integrating digital resources into reading promotion activities. For example, they optimize children's digital reading experiences through online animations or interactive games to guide children to gradually participate in digital reading. The New York Public Library's technology zone holds monthly digital resource experience events, freely providing children with iPads, Surface Pros, and other digital reading devices on activity days, with librarians using devices and game interactions to help children experience the joy of digital reading.

For children (ages 8-10) who have initially developed digital reading needs, American libraries begin developing various digital reading activities centered on cultivating children's digital reading abilities, including training on utilizing digital resources and using digital reading devices. For example, the New York Public Library conducts "e-device help" training series covering how to search, browse, and download e-books, audiobooks, music, images, and other free digital resources provided by the library. The Dallas Public Library conducts "computer mentors" training series on learning how to access library-provided digital resources using mobile phones, tablets, or other digital devices. The Los Angeles Public Library holds weekly e-reader clinics offering one-on-one guidance from librarians to teach readers how to borrow library e-books and e-audiobooks and use e-readers. The Detroit Public Library offers courses for children to learn to use digital resources.

For children (ages 10-13) who have accumulated certain digital reading skills, American libraries' digital reading activities primarily aim to provide platforms for digital reading communication and expression. For example, the Phoenix Public Library organizes children's digital storytelling sessions where parents and children read e-books together and use tablets to interact and follow up on children's digital reading. The Chicago Public Library annually holds Rahm's Readers Summer Learning Challenge, requiring participating children to read any content, including e-books and audiobooks, for 20 minutes daily. The Kewaunee Public Library's "1000 Books Program" records children's e-book reading progress, with children receiving special stickers for every additional 100 books read.

1.2.3 Collaborative Digital Reading Promotion Activities

Library digital reading promotion is a systematic social engineering project.

American public libraries actively collaborate with schools, families, publishing and distribution institutions, other libraries, and relevant social organizations, mobilizing various aspects of children's digital services to expand children's digital reading promotion content from resources themselves to personalized digital services, further improving the feasibility, activity intensity, and influence of public library children's digital reading promotion and expanding social benefits.

Parent-child reading is a cooperative activity between parents and children. Parents play important roles in children's early education. The *Kids and Family Reading Report* (4th edition) [14] shows that 72% of parents are enthusiastic about parent-child reading. American public libraries attach great importance to parents' influence on children's digital reading when planning activities, incorporating interactive parent-child digital reading into activity content and actively using multimedia to conduct reading activities to enhance public library children's digital reading promotion effectiveness. For example, the Chicago Public Library has established a dedicated Parent and Child section providing e-books suitable for parent-child reading, where parents and children communicate through reading to stimulate children's interest in reading.

American public libraries also cooperate with schools to improve children's information literacy and autonomous learning abilities, primarily by integrating resources from both the library and school libraries and establishing guidance teams of professionals including librarians and teachers to provide homework guidance and test tutoring services for children in grades K-12, while cultivating correct digital reading and learning habits. Test tutoring provides relevant review materials for national standardized tests. For example, the Portland Public Library provides students with relevant pre-exam review materials and additional help based on test types. For homework assistance, public libraries provide professional tutoring teachers and librarians who rely on collection digital resources to provide family digital reading guidance and counseling for children in grades K-12, further enhancing their information literacy. Generally, American primary and secondary school homework consists of exploratory topics, and library tutoring teachers mainly provide children with relevant subject knowledge points and related resource links, emphasizing the cultivation of children's autonomous learning abilities. The Jacksonville Public Library offers courses connected with schools, where children use electronic learning tools for online learning, including file sharing, meeting replays, tutor archives, and test archives. They can also submit papers and other written articles in 24-hour writing labs to exercise expression and writing skills.

Furthermore, the digitalization of reference consultation service methods can expand public library service space, improve service quality, and positively promote children's digital reading. Among American public library digital reference consultation service methods, email consultation (51.1%) and telephone consultation (46.7%) have broad coverage, while online consultation (31.1%) is relatively less common, with each library having fixed operating hours. Public

libraries serving populations under 10,000 do not provide online consultation services.

2. Implications for Children's Digital Reading Promotion in China

American public libraries deeply recognize the importance of children's digital reading promotion, constructing personalized digital resources based on children's needs with abundant total resources and diverse types. In practice, they fully consider differences in cognitive levels, reading abilities, and reading interest needs caused by age differences, combining digital resources and technology to conduct diverse digital reading promotion activities, and jointly creating a child-centered digital reading promotion environment with families, schools, publishing institutions, and other libraries to enhance library social benefits. According to domestic scholars' investigations on public library children's digital reading promotion in China, Chinese public libraries have also attached great importance to children's digital reading promotion practice in recent years. Some common characteristics exist between China and foreign countries in children's digital resource promotion. In terms of resource types, both mainly include pictures, videos, audio, e-books, etc., and reading promotion activities also focus on storytelling, parent-child reading, and summer reading. However, compared with foreign countries, China's children's digital reading promotion still has certain defects.

First, digital resource construction suffers from redundant construction and insufficient resource discovery and updating. For example, new book recommendations only provide simple bibliographic information, and most online reading simply pastes articles from the internet without novelty or specificity. Children's digital reading platforms and devices are not sufficiently user-friendly, resulting in poor experiences [17]. Domestic platforms such as Diandian Book Database, Comic Book Database, and Zhongshao Happy Reading mainly provide comics, picture books, and other e-books integrating text and images, with weak interactivity and multimedia features. Most resources can only be read online and cannot be downloaded, failing to maximally satisfy children's digital reading needs. Second, digital reading promotion activities do not consider children's age characteristics and acceptance abilities. Libraries' promotional efforts for digital reading promotion are insufficient, with low activity frequency and poor responsiveness, even neglecting promotion and recommendation altogether. Taking Nanjing Library as an example, in 2014, the children's reading room conducted over a hundred activities, while children's digital reading promotion activities numbered less than ten [18]. Third, child readers themselves exhibit utilitarian and exam-oriented reading patterns, and parents have considerable concerns about children's use of digital resources [19].

Both in children's digital resource construction and children's digital reading promotion activity organization, China lags behind American public libraries. These gaps relate to national support levels, resource provider development standards, public library funding sources, talent team construction, education

systems, and parents' digital reading awareness. Facing these digital reading promotion obstacles, this paper summarizes systematic and comprehensive digital reading promotion practices from American public libraries and, considering the actual situation of Chinese public libraries, proposes four recommendations for children's digital reading promotion.

2.1 Improving the Quality of Children's Digital Resources The IFLA *Guidelines for Children's Library Services* establishes six standards for children's literature selection: (1) high quality; (2) age-appropriateness; (3) timeliness and accuracy; (4) reflection of various values and viewpoints; (5) reflection of local community culture; and (6) introduction to world cultures [20]. Domestic public libraries can refer to these standards to scientifically plan children's digital resource procurement types and proportions. Additionally, public libraries must ensure periodic updating of digital resources, improve the discovery level and platform interactivity of children's digital resources, and guide child users to utilize collection resources through retrieval platforms to fully satisfy children's reading needs. Children's digital reading requires support from rich digital resource content and digital reading devices. Domestic public libraries should incorporate digital reading devices into collection plans, conduct reader lending services, fully utilize their role in children's digital reading promotion, and achieve library modernization and service innovation.

2.2 Emphasizing Age Differences Among Children Domestic reading promotion activities emphasize promoters' subjective initiative, treating e-book reading promotion activities as an educational means to improve children's reading abilities while neglecting children's own preferences, with low activity frequency that fails to establish activity participation awareness among user groups. As knowledge disseminators, public libraries should optimize and reorganize digital resources and reading promotion methods based on children's cognitive development characteristics, fully investigate user needs, conduct graded and personalized children's digital reading promotion services, and increase the frequency and sustainability of each themed activity. While emphasizing activity interest, they should also focus on cultivating children's digital reading skills, such as holding digital resource usage lectures, organizing children's digital resource reading activities, and optimizing digital resource platforms to enhance child users' acceptance of digital resources and information literacy, exercising their ability to skillfully use collection digital resources. Children at different ages have distinct psychological characteristics, reading abilities, and reading needs with obvious differences. For example, children's attention stability and persistence vary by age. Under normal circumstances, children aged 0-4 have weaker attention persistence, while children aged 5-12 can maintain attention for 10-15 minutes. Under game-based activity formats, 2-3-year-old children's attention can reach 20 minutes, while 5-6-year-old children can reach 90 minutes [21]. Therefore, public libraries should identify acceptance ability differences among children during digital reading processes and provide graded

and personalized digital reading promotion services for different age groups.

2.3 Strengthening Multi-Party Cooperation Strengthening multi-party cooperation in library digital reading promotion helps public libraries increase collection digital resources, expand the influence of children's digital reading activities, attract more children to participate in digital reading, generate preferences among social groups, and establish library brand images. The 2016 *13th National National Reading Survey Data* shows that among families with reading behavior by children aged 0-8, 90% have the habit of accompanying children in reading [22], indicating that parents have embraced the concept of parent-child reading. However, the 2016 *Chinese Urban Children's Reading Survey Report* shows that among various reading formats, e-book reading acceptance rate is only 36.9% [23]. Chinese public libraries have relatively little communication and interaction with parents regarding children's digital reading. Against the backdrop of exam-oriented education, parents are more concerned about children's academic performance and worry that digital reading devices may affect children's eyesight. Therefore, Chinese public libraries should actively encourage parents to participate in children's digital reading. First, they should regularly push digital resources related to child development to parents, hold parent-child reading activities with different themes, transform parents' resistant attitudes toward digital reading, and strive to create a healthy digital reading environment for children. Second, schools are libraries' closest partners because both share intersecting services and goals—both 致力于 improving students' reading and knowledge acquisition abilities—and schools have strong guidance and appeal to students, which other partners lack. Therefore, libraries can attempt to establish cooperative intentions with schools to deliver digital resources to students through classrooms, enabling students to understand and skillfully use digital resources. For example, teachers can use public library interactive e-books in classroom teaching, assign summer reading tasks through library e-book platforms, public libraries can offer digital resource usage courses for child users, and utilize collection resources to provide pre-exam tutoring and homework assistance reference consultation services for child users. Finally, to ensure children's digital resource construction, public libraries should strengthen cooperation with digital resource suppliers. On one hand, they can obtain the latest children's digital resource information and procure children's digital resources according to children's interests and library development goals. On the other hand, they can timely feedback children's reading preferences to digital resource suppliers to enhance suppliers' ability to produce quality resources, achieving win-win outcomes for both public libraries and digital resource suppliers.

2.4 Broadening Channels for Children's Digital Reading Activities

The network information era provides diverse channels for public library children's digital reading promotion, helping public libraries expand user scope and activity influence. American public libraries proactively promote children's digital resources and reading promotion activities through official websites, blogs,

Twitter, email, and other social media, and fully utilize network platforms to conduct online reading promotion activities, such as offering online digital resource usage courses and remote storytelling activities. Chinese public libraries should combine library development policies, domestic users' social habits, and reading needs to broaden digital resource marketing channels and conduct children's digital reading promotion activities according to local conditions. In recent years, Chinese public libraries have used WeChat, Weibo, QQ, and other social media to build children's digital reading communication and interaction platforms, pushing dynamic information about collection children's digital resources, children's reading promotion activity announcements, and online reading activities to users. For example, the National Library of China's WeChat public platform has three functional sections: information, resources, and services. The information section includes five subsections: children's world, lecture previews, cultural training, cultural broadcasting, and frequently asked questions. The resources section includes special Spring Festival topics, collection appreciation, national library open courses, Wenjin classic reading, and the National Museum of Classic Books, all available for online reading. The services section includes borrowed books, OPAC retrieval, application collections, and book recommendations, allowing users to use online book borrowing functions. The Dongguan Library's WeChat public platform (WeChat ID: dglig1) offers more detailed services, with its micro-service hall section covering book renewal, library announcements, Dongguan Learning Center, electronic reading rooms, reading report forms, recommended reading, and book transfers.

Digital reading significantly impacts contemporary children's learning methods, and China's children's digital reading development still lags far behind that of the United States. As public welfare service institutions, Chinese public libraries should leverage their unique advantages in children's digital reading promotion, build digital resource collections centered on child user needs, unite social forces to create suitable environments for children's healthy digital reading, actively promote personalized and graded children's digital reading activities, stimulate parents' and children's interest in digital reading, cultivate child users' digital information literacy, and vigorously advance children's digital culture.

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