

**EVERY FAMILY HAS A STORY:
A HUMAN LIBRARY FOR PARENTS, CAREGIVERS AND PARENTS-TO-BE**

INSPIRATION REPORT



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OBJECTIVE



This report proposes Every Family Has a Story: A Human Library for Parents, Caregivers, and Parents-to-Be, a storytelling program at Toronto Public Library's S. Walter Stewart Branch. Through structured conversations, participants will serve as "living books," sharing their lived experiences related to parenting, caregiving, and preparing for parenthood. The initiative aims to position the library as a trusted space for narrative exchange, peer learning, and family support.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Public libraries are uniquely positioned to support families, yet many parents do not view libraries as primary sources of parenting information and support. This report recommends implementing Every Family Has a Story: A Human Library for Parents, Caregivers, and Parents-to-Be at TPL's S. Walter Stewart Branch to strengthen connections among parents and caregivers. By centering storytelling and lived experience, the program invites community members to serve as "living books," offering authentic insights into the challenges and joys of parenting. This initiative provides a low-cost, high-impact approach to reducing isolation, strengthening social support networks, and deepening family engagement with library services. The report examines the Human Library model, its relevance to modern participatory library practice, and strategies for implementation within a public library setting.

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that libraries and information centers remain underutilized within parenting communities. Walker (2009) found that many parents did not consider libraries to be important sources of parenting information, despite the library's potential to support families in meaningful ways. This raises an important question for public libraries: How can libraries position themselves as trusted, community-centered spaces that support parents beyond traditional collections and programs?

Throughout the course, I have been particularly drawn to concepts centered on participatory service, storytelling, and community knowledge. These themes inspired me to explore the Human Library model to strengthen connections between parents, caregivers, and public libraries. The idea of using lived experience as a form of shared learning aligns closely with the Hyperlinked Library philosophy and reflects the evolving role of libraries as facilitators of community engagement.

My interest in this topic is also personal. As a new parent during the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced firsthand how isolating and overwhelming parenting can feel when support networks are limited. During that time, a program that connected me with other parents who had navigated similar challenges would have been both reassuring and informative. Access to lived experiences and genuine conversations can offer a level of emotional connection that books and online resources alone cannot always offer.

As a future children's librarian, I am interested in how libraries can support not only children, but also the adults who care for them. Family literacy, child development, and community well-being are strengthened when parents feel supported, informed, and connected. A Human Library focused on parenting and caregiving offers an opportunity to transform the library into a space where families can access both information and human connection through storytelling and dialogue.

I specifically selected TPL's S. Walter Stewart Branch as the proposed location for this program because of its existing commitment to serving children and families. The branch's Sensory Room demonstrates an investment in inclusive, family-centered services that support a wide range of community needs (Toronto Public Library, n.d.). A Human Library for parents and caregivers would build upon this foundation by offering an additional opportunity for connection, learning, and support, while encouraging more families to engage with the library as a trusted community resource.



**HUMAN LIBRARY EVENT SETTING:
S. WALTER STEWART BRANCH
SENSORY ROOM**



Source: <https://tpl.ca/using-the-library/services/sensory-room/>

ORIGINS OF THE HUMAN LIBRARY MOVEMENT

The Human Library began in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2000 (Human Library Organization, n.d.). Early U.S. programs appeared at Bainbridge Public Library and Santa Monica Public Library in 2008, and the American Library Association hosted a Human Library event at its 2011 annual conference (Wentz, 2013). In this program, people volunteer as “living books,” offering one-on-one conversations where readers borrow a person instead of a physical book. The goal is to learn from someone’s lived experience, ask questions, and challenge assumptions in a safe and respectful environment (Human Library Organization, n.d.). The founders wanted to reduce prejudice and encourage dialogue by giving people a chance to talk openly with someone they might not normally meet. The overall global growth shows that the Human Library movement is an innovative approach to community learning and dialogue.



KEY COMPONENTS OF A HUMAN LIBRARY



TERM	DEFINITION
Human Library	A program where people, rather than books, are available to be “checked out” for a conversation
Human Book	A volunteer who shares a personal story, experience or perspective on various subjects.
Reader	Anyone who participates in the program by “borrowing” a human book for a one-on-one conversation.
Catalog	A list of available human books, each with a title and short description that helps readers choose who they want to borrow
Borrowing Session	A short meeting where the reader and the human book talk together
Conversation	An open, informal dialogue where readers can ask questions, learn from the book’s experiences, and explore different perspectives.

WHY A HUMAN LIBRARY FOR FAMILIES MAKES SENSE TODAY



The Human Library model is increasingly relevant today as communities navigate isolation, misunderstanding, and the need for meaningful connection. Many people seek opportunities to talk openly about their experiences in ways traditional information sources cannot always provide.

One core problem the Human Library addresses is stereotyping. By allowing readers to speak directly with someone who has lived a particular experience, the model helps break down assumptions and encourages empathy. It also addresses social isolation, which has become more visible in recent years, especially among parents and caregivers (Loudon et al., 2016).

Libraries today are dynamic spaces where people come together to exchange ideas and experiences. The Human Library enhances this by turning community members into contributors who share their stories directly with others. This participatory model helps libraries stay connected to the real experiences of the people they serve.





USERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

In a parenting focused Human Library, readers may include new parents, parents-to-be, caregivers, grandparents, or anyone seeking guidance or perspective. Living books are volunteers who share lived experiences such as navigating postpartum challenges, raising neurodiverse children, balancing work and family life, or adapting to parenting in a new country. Library staff coordinate recruitment, cataloging, orientation, and event facilitation.

BENEFITS

The program creates a safe space for honest, supportive conversations. Readers can ask questions and learn from someone who has lived through similar experiences, reducing feelings of isolation. The initiative also helps challenge stereotypes by encouraging engagement with perspectives readers may not encounter in everyday life.

CHALLENGES

Recruiting volunteers willing to discuss sensitive topics can be difficult. Living books may share vulnerable experiences, so libraries must ensure they feel supported and able to set boundaries. Readers also need guidance to ask respectful questions. Careful planning is required to ensure conversations remain safe, balanced, and non-judgmental.

CASE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The Hamilton Public Library's Hamilton Stories project is one example of how libraries preserve community voices. Their immigration stories collection highlights newcomer experiences, cultural identity, and the emotional realities of adapting to life in Canada (Hamilton Public Library, 2024). These narratives illustrate how storytelling fosters empathy and belonging.

The Human Library Organization provides many examples of lived experience challenging assumptions. One "human book," titled Facial Disfigurement, shares her experiences navigating public reactions, identity, and self acceptance through Human Library conversations (Human Library Organization, n.d.). Her purpose is to help readers confront biases about appearance and understand the emotional and social dimensions of living with a visible difference.

Peer reviewed research further supports the effectiveness of Human Library programs. Lam et al. (2026) evaluated a Human Library event in Hong Kong featuring autistic young adults as human books. Readers engaged directly with autistic individuals, asked questions, and reflected on assumptions. Post-surveys showed decreased stigma and increased neurodiversity affirming attitudes. As the authors note, through personal interaction with autistic human books, readers developed renewed understanding of autism and insights into autistic strengths (Lam et al., 2026). The study provides evidence that Human Library programs can meaningfully shift attitudes and improve public understanding through lived experience storytelling.

Research on parenting information communities consistently shows that caregivers rely heavily on lived experience as a meaningful source of knowledge. Parents often seek guidance from peers whose stories feel relatable and emotionally supportive, especially when navigating challenges such as child development and emotional regulation. Studies demonstrate that experiential knowledge reduces isolation, validates caregivers' feelings, and offers practical strategies that come from everyday parenting experiences (Walker, 2009).

Stephens (2019) emphasizes that stories help people understand one another and strengthen communities, showing that storytelling is central to how libraries build connection and insight. In his writing on Narrative Inquiry (NI), Stephens (2020) describes NI as an approach that uses open ended questions to invite people to share meaningful experiences. Together, these ideas reinforce the Human Library model's emphasis on empathy and lived experience.



HUMAN LIBRARY ORGANIZATION EVENTS



A book with his reader



Listening in on the book



Librarian guiding a reader

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Implementing the program, Every Family Has a Story: A Human Library for Parents, Caregivers, and Parents-to-Be, would begin by contacting the Human Library Organization to obtain permission to host an official Human Library event and to access implementation guidance, training, and any licensing requirements (Human Library Organization, n.d.).

Following approval, library staff would recruit a diverse group of volunteer “living books” through existing library networks and partnerships with local parenting organizations, childcare centres, newcomer agencies, health care providers, and community agencies. Volunteers would participate in an orientation session covering program expectations, confidentiality, respectful dialogue, and strategies for setting personal boundaries while sharing lived experiences (Human Library Organization, n.d.).

Library staff would then develop a catalog of living books featuring a title and brief description for each volunteer. To improve accessibility, the catalog would be available in both print and digital formats. The digital catalog will be available through the main Toronto Public Library website via BiblioEvents, allowing participants to browse living books, reserve conversation time slots in advance, and receive event reminders via e-mail.

The Human Library event could be offered monthly or every other month, with readers booking 30-minute one-on-one conversations with their selected living books. Library staff would facilitate the event, welcome participants, monitor conversations, and provide support when needed to ensure a positive experience for everyone involved.

Promotion would take place through Toronto Public Library’s website on BiblioEvents, TPL’s main social media pages, in-library displays, children’s programming, and partnerships with local family service organizations. After each event, surveys and feedback would be collected to evaluate impact and guide future programming.



SAMPLE CATALOG



Title of Living Book	Brief Description
The NICU Journey	A parent shares the experience of having a premature baby and navigating life in the neonatal intensive care unit.
Raising a Neurodiverse Child	A caregiver discusses raising a child with autism, ADHD, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, or other developmental challenges.
Gentle Parenting	A parent shares the successes and challenges of using empathy-based parenting approaches.
Parenting After Immigration	A newcomer parent reflects on raising children while adapting to a new country, culture, and support system.
Finding My Village	A single parent shares strategies for building community support and overcoming isolation.
Our Adoption Story	A family discusses their adoption journey and answers questions about the process.
Pregnancy After Loss	A parent shares the emotional journey of pregnancy following miscarriage or infant loss.

CONCLUSION

The human library program, Every Family Has a Story, demonstrates how storytelling can transform public libraries into spaces where information, empathy, and human connection intersect. By adapting the Human Library model for parents, caregivers, and parents-to-be, this proposal positions Toronto Public Library as more than a place to borrow books. It becomes a place where families can share experiences, build community, and feel supported. This initiative reflects the Hyperlinked Library philosophy by recognizing that knowledge exists not only within library collections but also within the experiences of the community itself. Developing this proposal has reinforced my vision of becoming a children's librarian who supports not only children's literacy but also the well being of the families who care for them. I hope to create library programs that foster belonging, encourage the sharing of lived experiences, and remind families that they are not alone.



KEEP SMILING,
LEARNING, AND
DREAMING BIG!



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