

# ALIA RESEARCH GRANT TO STUDY ACCESSIBILITY FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN



ALIA Research Grant  
winner Jo Kaeding.

The State Library of Victoria states on page one of their Disability Action Plan 2009–10 that 'one of the key principles of a library is that access is provided equally to all citizens of the community it serves.' But the reality is that public libraries can be intimidating or uncomfortable for children with special needs. Children's Librarian Jo Kaeding is the 2014 recipient of the Twila Ann Janssen Herr Research Award for Disability Services, and will use her \$5,000 grant to investigate ways to improve access to public libraries for these children and their families.

As Lisa Jo Rudy wrote on about.com in 2011, 'People with autism are often loud. They may feel the need to touch, pull out or even mouth books. They may have a hard time if a book or video they want to borrow is out on loan ... librarians in general have no training in helping patrons with developmental challenges. As a result, they often respond negatively to disruptive behaviour...'

Within the library profession, there is widespread support for increased access to libraries for people with disabilities. However, literature on the topic of access to public libraries for people with disabilities is dominated by the study of adults with a disability, and in particular adults with sensory disabilities. Without an understanding of the issues related to access to public libraries for children with special needs and their families, it is very difficult for public libraries to provide access equally to all.

This research project will investigate how Australian public libraries can improve access for children with special needs and their families.

The focus of the research will be on the barriers that children with special needs and their families face when accessing public libraries, library programs for children with special needs, resources provided for use within the library by this group, strategies and approaches used by public libraries to improve access, and training for library staff on this topic.

Research for this project will involve a study tour in the greater New York area. Leading libraries and researchers in the area of access to public libraries for children with special needs and their families to be visited include the Brooklyn Public Library (The Child's Place for Children with Special Needs), Middle County Public Library (A Family Place Library), and Fanwood and Scotch Plains Libraries in New Jersey, who are partners in the project Libraries and Autism: We're Connected.

This research will contribute to the understanding of the issue of access to public libraries for children with special needs and their families within Australia.

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