

Information Seeking Behaviours of First Time Mothers Implications for Public Libraries

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Abstract

This study aims to look at information practices of first time mothers. The research method employed 4 Information Horizon Interviews (IHI) of first time mothers in Canada. Findings used an induction thematic analysis to conclude 3 major themes with each theme discussed a sensitizing concept which are information grounds, principle of least effort and Hektor's life activities of human information behaviour that illustrates the nature of the information seeking of mothers. The implications for future research is identifying "the red thread of information" as mothers enter information grounds so that they can participate in the social discourses shaping public libraries. The practical implications are to truly accommodate children, so they can express themselves and feel like they belong in public libraries.

INTRODUCTION

"Information behaviour is how people seek, use, and understand information in various contexts" (Case & Given, 2016 p. 3). Information seeking is often employed in response to a gap in knowledge to achieve a goal. Mother's information seeking behaviours differ from other populations which can be explained with contemporary theories such as information grounds. This research identified that mothers have unique needs related to child-rearing.

The original research question was how do mothers prepare for parenting? My research intended to look at how do first time mothers go about seeking information and what do they do with that information? Whether or not the information that they sought was useful and if so how much of that information informed their parenting choices?

The exclusion criteria to this research is that I chose to interview mothers instead of fathers, specifically mothers who have preschool children ages 2 to 5. Many cultures insist that mothers are often the first educators of their children. This research interviewed mothers who are married, and all informants interviewed had a spiritual outlook on life from the Baha'i community.

My work with families of young children informed my topic and population from observing their information needs not adequately being met in libraries. A major theme was informants found that support networks made them feel more competent in their new role. Sensitizing concepts in this research are information grounds, principle of least effort and Hektor's model of human information behaviour which will be discussed later in the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The information behaviours of mothers are aligning with their aspirations to parent their child well. Elliot (2007) suggests that first time mother's information gaps are primarily child developmental theories.

Whereas, librarians and academic institutions are currently expecting generations new and old to become increasingly informationally literate. Hubbard (2005) defines an information literate person as "identifying and retrieving information in print form, analyzing information for its relevance, timeliness, accuracy and suitability, synthesizing the information and presenting it."

Loudon, Buchanan, & Ruthven (2016) mention that "informational support" for new mothers is often neglected by helping professionals claiming that there is an issue with being underfunded, under-resourced and not truly understanding the information needs of mothers (p.25). Loudon, Buchanan, & Ruthven (2016) conducted research indicating that public libraries are used very little among first time mothers and affirms my original research "recognizing information seeking as a process of social construction" (p.25).

Therefore, original research is needed to give a voice to mothers in shaping library services to families so that librarians can gain insight into the 'red thread of information' as mentioned by Marcia Bates that surrounds families in their everyday life. This insight can assist librarians in how they present information to parents – to be informative rather than information dense and to offer services interwoven in their lives instead of a window block of time. Many libraries are embedded in communities which

indicates that librarians need to know and understand the demographic population of such communities. There are some libraries in Toronto that have received funding to redesign their libraries to be more reflective of their community and information needs.

Some public libraries however have strayed away from a specialization in children's services to a more generalist approach (Walter, 2009 p.967) in the belief that any librarian can cater to children's or adult referencing.

"The overarching goals of contemporary library services to children are to promote reading and literacy and to ensure that children have access to information in all formats" (Walter, 2009 p. 968). But there does not seem to be a special place in libraries that cater to the information needs of mothers. Well documented research would indicate that a mother's knowledge of child rearing and support directly affects their child's development and access to library resources.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research conducted recruited 4 female informants who were first time mothers to participate in an Information Horizon Interview a semi-structured interview invented by Diane Sonnewald, to study information behaviour which was recorded and transcribed. The interview guide categorized the type of questions asked in sequence for example, the red thread questions (see Appendix 1) to contextualize their information resources or lack thereof. Informants were asked to draw information resources and supports before or after the interview questions that assist them in their role as a new mother. I gave informants a variety of markers and crayons to choose from for the drawing activity. I asked each informant to discuss their map as they were drawing it.

Ethical considerations for this type of research is not to judge their personal circumstances, and to ensure the interviewer does not have a hidden agenda which would conclude something about a population. I minimized a hidden agenda by asking open ended questions allowing informants to discuss their maps rather than drawing conclusions from it. Consent was given prior to conducting the interview. Any personal identifiers during transcription and for the horizon maps were removed from the data. Audio recording was destroyed after transcribing.

The profile of each informant is as follows:

Informant 1. A young stay at home mother in her late 20's married has 2 children one 4-year-old and one 20-month-old.

Informant 2. A mother in her mid 30's married has 2 children one 3-year-old and a new born.

Informant 3. A young mother in her late 20's married has one child turning 3 and indicated she co-parents. Works part time and attends school fulltime doing her PhD at University of Toronto.

Informant 4. A mother in her early 40's married has 2 children ages 3 and 5. Teacher at a highschool part time.

FINDINGS

Families operate in the socio-cognitive domain. The analytical strategy chosen is the induction thematic analysis because each informant emphasized support networks as essential to meeting their information needs and addressed barriers to accessing information. This type of analysis is useful for providing feedback coupled with the literature to apply this knowledge to practical implications in children services at public libraries. Each theme will discuss a sensitizing concept relevant to the original research analyzed.

Theme 1 Information Grounds

This key informant drew a journey representing any given day of information resources she encounters with her kids starting with her phone to access the internet for information and for her 4-year-old a book. This journey also represents the importance of routine and structure as the informant discussed this assists her with parenting responsibilities primarily the education of children which she looks to the Baha'i Writings for guidance. Her journey ends with her kids playing in the park or having a play date while she immerses herself with other mothers in what is evidently called an information ground.

An information ground is "an environment temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behavior emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information" (Fisher, 2005 p. 185).

All informants interviewed mentioned this serendipitous sharing of information among parents anywhere from breastfeeding to healthy eating habits, potty training and disciplinary strategies if the child needs to be corrected. It is not to say that parents only retrieve information from this social atmosphere but that most of the informants were not really into reading books to find parenting strategies due to lack of consensus in the available literature according to informant 1.



Figure 1. Informant 1 Following the Red Thread of Information

Theme 2 Principle of Least Effort

This key informant discussed in her drawing, resources that made her feel competent in her new role as a mother with a special emphasis on family and community as a support network. This informant also discussed spiritual resources such as religious text and discussing the Ruhi Institute as a means for building capacity within her and her previous experiences with babysitting that prepared her for motherhood.

The principle of least effort, can be applied here however as an implication for librarians in that the informant mentioned when it came to search for information elsewhere that it can be overwhelming stating:

“My daughter is really into reading, but I find it difficult to find good books at the library only because there is either too big of a selection and it takes too much time to go through each book or the moral of the story is non-existent. Every time I go to the library I really have not found books I have been impressed with or enjoy reading to my daughter” (Informant 2).

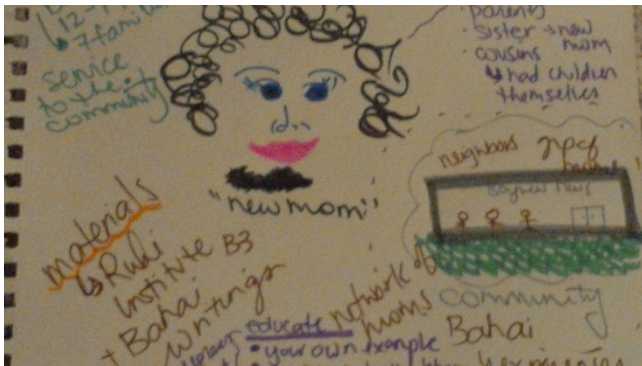


Figure 2. Informant 2 Experience and spiritual resources informing and confirming parenting choices

Theme 3 Hektor’s model

This key informant mentions she co-parents their 3-year-old, she highlighted in the interview her life activities in which she seeks information also known as information activities according to Hektor’s model (see Figure 5.). As a PhD student she is consistently seeking information but as a mother her main concern was the creation of family friendly spaces at academic libraries such as OISE.

In her horizon map she illustrates that family is at the center of her life activity and the wider community. The less vivid triangle that intercepts them represents the information resources at their disposal but use less frequently such as libraries and community centers. The star to the left side represents their child’s preschool where relationships have been formed.

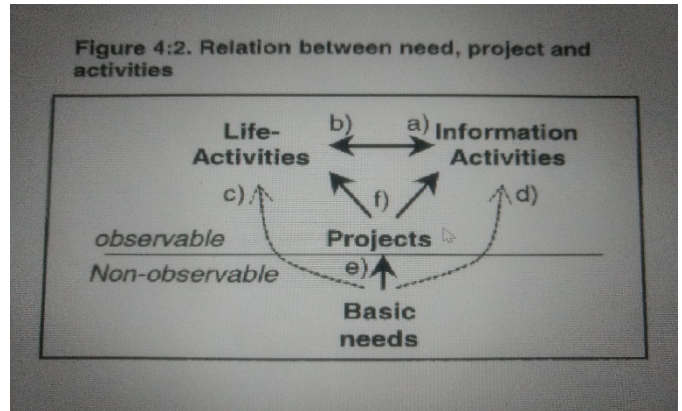


Figure 5. Hektor’s model

Her life activities are demonstrated in Hektor’s model of human behavior. Our basic needs being non-observable but are portrayed in the form of small projects which involve information activities in the context of life activities. This informant said she is always deliberate when it comes to selecting who would be involved in providing child care. This informant said that a caregiver or teacher needs to share the same parenting philosophy.



Figure 3. Informant 3 Spiritual Resources and Life Activities

DISCUSSION

The research conducted was not clear on the information practices of first time mothers which are socially and culturally constructed on how information is collected and used. However, information seeking behaviours of first time mothers are initiated by a gap in knowledge and a desire to fill that gap. Further research is required to understand the information practices of this population. Here we will discuss the practical implications and implications for future research.

Practical implications

The issue with children services in libraries is that librarians try to be accommodating when children are disruptive. This accommodation does not actually meet children’s needs which encompasses 4 foundations for learning: belonging,

well-being, engagement and expression (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2014 p. 23) rather it accommodates adult patrons. It is well documented that children learn through play and is considered their main responsibility according to early childhood education research.

Although library staff are not responsible for supervising children they do have a responsibility indirectly to assist families to educate their children. Children's services should devise age appropriate games that target language and literacy skills which would also continue to foster the love for reading.

Libraries need to partner with early year centers and arrange workshops that involve parents particularly mothers where librarians would present information applying Hektor's model in the areas of giving and instructing using simple language.

Implications for Future Research

This research will impact future studies on parenting and family literacy education and may consider father's information seeking behaviours, or mother's in a different context such as single mothers or immigrant mothers because many people migrate to Canada for various reasons.

Out of the 4 informants interviewed only one of the informants mentioned explicitly how she is co-parenting with her husband even though all informants are married. Studying the information seeking behaviours of fathers could give a different perspective on the topic of parenting and education.

This research indicates, a primary information behaviour of mothers are discovered on information grounds. It is my hope that with future research mother's won't only be concerned with understanding child developmental milestones when they occur but rather be a participant in generating knowledge. Informant 3 discussed how she felt like "the way higher education operates it does not accommodate mothers needs to be with their child. Being a mother does not mean that one cannot pursue higher education but the way education is designed is not accommodating for mothers."

Research needs to be recorded so that future research does not repeat what has already been learned. Child developmental theories for example have been learned; our problem seems to be with disseminating that knowledge. As part of an academic institution and as librarians we need to ensure that this knowledge is accessible to a wider population.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The Information Horizon Interview was an insightful tool all of the informants interviewed said that this drawing exercise was very helpful to see the big picture of identifying and reflecting on their information resources and supports. Their

ability to reflect was indicative of their self-esteem. A drawback to the interview was resisting the urge to lead them on, asking too vague questions that might be interpreted differently for example tell me about your parenting experience may leave informants stuck and need redirection. My first informant drew their map towards the end which interrupted the interview flow. My second informant drew their map closer to the beginning and added in other resources that came to mind throughout the rest of the interview. The drawing exercise created ambiguity overall, as participants were not sure what to draw exactly. When asked to participate there was no hesitation because they were eager to please.

CONCLUSION

Informants from this study expressed a level of unpreparedness when they had their first child. Informants sought information mostly from their support networks composed of family and friends. They used this information in practice with their children after evaluating whether this information is useful or not and how well it is in sync with their parenting style or philosophy.

The 3 key findings are 1.) a primary information practice is the spontaneous and serendipitous information sharing among mothers, 2.) mothers apply the principle of least effort unconsciously to get the information that they need for example using a cellphone to research activities or events to do with their child rather than planning out daily lessons from a textbook, 3.) information activities are situated in life activities which result in projects such as selecting a school for ones child which requires research.

Most of the literature found in library and information science pertaining to information seeking of new mothers were based in the United States and with due regard to health. There are very few studies that have used the Information Horizon Interview (IHI) in generating data about the family unit. If more studies are conducted on this topic it would definitely give a voice to mothers to participate in the social discourse shaping public libraries.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

Brittany Sabharwal (brittany.sabharwal@mail.utoronto.ca) is a graduate student at the iSchool at University of Toronto. She works at the Toronto Public Library and is passionate about children's services specific to family literacy and education. Her educational background is in Child and Youth Care. She runs her own child care business called Radiant Hearts (<https://radiantheartscare.org/>) where she teaches literacy to preschool children among other aspects of early childhood education.

APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

Opening Greeting:

Hello, thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.

[Read consent statement and explain technicalities]

1. Grand tour question: The experienced parent

Please tell me your experience with parenting, what resources and support helped you feel competent in your role? Looking back, were there any unexpected encounters that you have experienced?

Was it what you thought parenting was going to be?

Could you draw what I am referring to as an information horizon map. Put yourself on this piece of paper, and then

draw in all the information resources and activities associated with being a new mother. Please talk about it while you are drawing it.

2. *Mini tour question: An episode of information behaviour*
What information did you or do you seek out after you had your first child?

3. *Information thread question: Information practices*

Take me through a bird's-eye view of an afternoon with your child(ren)

Please tell me about:

How do you go about finding activities or programs to do with your child?

How do you go about educating your children on healthy habits?

Follow-up to Drawing Exercise (Optional)

Do you use any other resources?

Do any of these resources proactively provide you with information? Or suggest other information resources to you?

Previously, you mentioned xyz resource. Would you include them on your information horizon? Where? Why or why not?

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX 2

Quotes from interview

"What resources and support helped you feel competent in your role as a mother?"

"I would say that my biggest sense of support and information was my mother and mother in law.... I used to receive weekly emails now monthly from an organization called babycentre.com and you put in your baby's birth date and it will email you age appropriate appropriate activities. I also read one book that was a week to week format on what to expect every week developmentally, physically, emotionally with my first child." (Informant 1)

"Drawing on friendships and other support networks make me feel competent in my role as a parent" (Informant 4)

What information do you or did you seek after you had your first child?

"The information we have looked for has been very specific we realized we needed to learn more about the sleep patterns of children, so we would talk to other parents or to our doctor and then get some literature on sleep patterns that could suggest to us what time is an appropriate bed time or how long should they be napping? When it was time to potty train we spoke to friends who have had positive experiences with it and we sought out methods that have been used or suggested to us. If there were any behavioural issues we would actively seek information starting online and then

conversations with parents and from there depending on how satisfactory the answer was we might go buy a book or go to a library.” (Informant 1)

What are some of the barriers if any to accessing information?

“It is difficult to select books that have a good storyline often there is such a large selection of children’s picture books to choose from it can be quite overwhelming.” (Informant 2)

“Toronto is so big that it is difficult to access information and have that community feel... Toronto is under-resourced when it comes to programs for children. In London, Ontario where I am from there are 10 early childhood educators at any given time at the Early Years Center who will play with your child especially if they notice the parent needs a little break and we can ask questions. In Toronto if you are not up with your child and have given them breakfast before coming to the Early Years Center for 9am and you come for 10am you only have an hour before they are closed. Where in London, you can drop in anytime between 8am and 6pm.” (Informant 4)

What do you mean about drawing on spiritual resources as a parent?

“When I think of resources for parenting it’s not just about information, it is the tiniest part, one needs emotional and spiritual resources in that as a parent one can have a lot of self-doubt and general doubt about bringing a child into the world that we live in...One must draw on spiritual resources when to be patient with their child, to show a deep love for their child and for others, or other qualities that can’t call material like money and time.” (Informant 3)

“Family and community is more than just being about you. When we go to the park the support that I am providing to him is a lot more about how you engage lovingly and joyfully with other children in the park. Rather than just making sure that he does not fall off the swings. Instilling in my son this idea that this park does not belong to just me or you, but it is a space where our neighbourhood comes together. How do we make friends with our neighbours? How do we share? (Informant 3).

APPENDIX 3

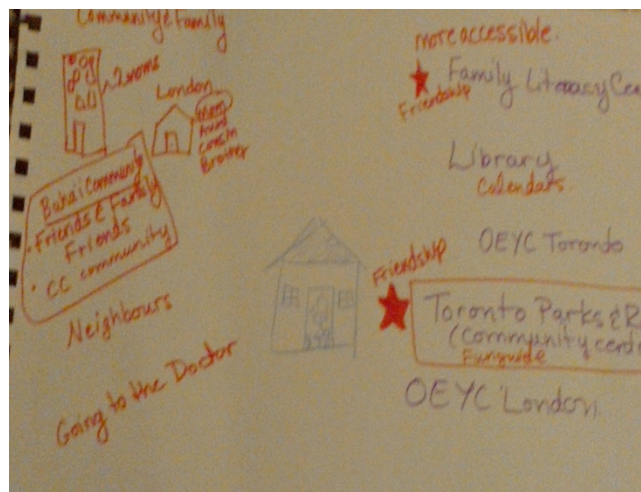


Figure 4. Informant 4
Accessibility Issues and support networks