

Libraries are obviously treasure troves of books, but their resources for children and families go far beyond the printed page. Here are some tips to help you maximize the incredible—and free—public resource in your community.

### Start on their Website

Most public library systems have information available online about their resources, often available in alternative languages. If you don't already have a library card, start by visiting your library's website to apply online or review the form in advance so you know what to bring with you to apply in person. Typically libraries will ask for a proof of a current address and a picture ID.

If you happen to live near more than one library system, expand your search to the other(s) nearby to take advantage of all the resources you can. Residents of nine neighboring counties can get a library card from the DC Public Library, for example, as can anyone who attends school there. Ask your local librarian how you can get a library card, and consider helping your child apply, too. Having their own card and actively engaging in their book selection process can create a true sense of responsibility and ownership for young readers.

- While on your library's website, look for **services** they provide to patrons. Your library might offer help with a job search, access to computers or printers, meeting rooms for reservation, adult learning support or even passport processing.
- Next, explore the digital databases that your library system offers. Many libraries subscribe to research, educational, and recreational databases and library card holders can access those resources for free. A few practical and exciting databases you might look for include Ancestry.com, Mango (for languages), Novelist (for book recommendations) and Lynda (for video classes on business, software, technology and creative skills). We'll explore digital materials, like audiobooks and e-books, more below.
- Finally, while online, check to see if your library system offers **an app**. Digital resources may be highlighted there, along with the ability to search your library's catalog. You might also find an "Ask the Librarian" option on the app or website if you have research questions and need to speak with someone in real time.

### Plan a Visit

Once you have had a chance to get a sense of their virtual offerings, plan a trip to your local library to take advantage of their **classes and events**. Information on programming may be broken into the target audience, so scan for options for kids, teens, or adults, depending on your interest. For the youngest readers, check the calendar for a **Storytime**; these events typically suit infants and lap toddlers and, depending on their popularity, may be ticketed.

Storytimes differ widely, but expect a librarian to lead the group in a song, read a story, and perhaps introduce finger-play (like “Itsy Bitsy Spider” or “Wheels on the Bus”) to incorporate some movement into the session. Older readers might look for book-themed gatherings or **TAB** (Teen Advisory Board) options. Some library systems offer tweens and teens access to a **Maker Space** in which patrons can build STEM-based skills or learn new creative skills such as sewing or printmaking. Adults might enjoy language discussion groups or book clubs. Some libraries will even check out sets of popular books for patrons to organize book club sessions of their own.

And, speaking of checking out unexpected items, ask your library about what materials other than books that it might share and look for a **Library of Things**. The Arlington Public Library (Va.) offers its patrons gardening tools, wireless hotspots, and American Girl dolls to borrow. Berkeley Public Library (Calif.) offers fancy kitchen gadgets, and the Musical Instrument Collection at the Free Library of Philadelphia (Pa.) will have you strumming away in no time with fretted instruments that even come with picks and a tuner. Now you can check out that Instant Pot right alongside the cookbook to test it!

### **Beyond Books**

Your public library offers limitless possibilities to read, learn, connect, and play. A community hub, these are welcoming spaces just waiting to be explored online and in person. Be a card-carrying member of your local library and take advantage of all they have to offer your family.

### **While You’re There**

Keep an eye on the calendar for special events that extend your library use beyond basic book check-outs. For younger patrons this may be a movie night, poetry slam, or **Paws to Read** program where your child can read aloud to a trained therapy dog. For adults, it could include author virtual or in-person visits; seasonal gatherings, like Valentine’s Day mixers or pumpkin-painting contests; and even bookish cocktail hours to fundraise for the library or a local nonprofit. Keep an eye out for a **summer reading program** as these often partner with interesting activities such as Berks County Public Library (Pa.) Rockin’ Reptile musical petting zoo or Kent District Library’s (Mich.) Touch-a-Truck.

### **Plug In**

Catering to fans of e-readers and those who prefer their phone to a tome, libraries offer **digital downloads** of popular books through programs like Overdrive, Libby, and Hoopla. Look, too, for audiobooks. A fantastic option for all ages, these recordings sometimes come with signals for page turns and may be paired with a print copy of their picture book so early readers can listen and follow along. Best of all, digital loans vanish from your device when the borrowing period ends, so you’ll never have to worry about late fees!