



Practical Tips

Vandalism: How to Prevent It and What to Do if It Happens

“Won’t someone vandalize our Little Library?” you ask. The answer is...maybe, but probably not. But our first full year of experience has taught us some lessons. With hundreds of Libraries in places where they were exposed to millions of passers-by and tens of thousands of users, only a half dozen or so were vandalized. Someone broke the plexiglass or ripped the door off.

We suspected that could happen. In fact, we were testing the limits. Three of damaged Libraries were within several blocks of sports arenas which attracted more than a million fans. Many of those fans were drunk, and we’re betting that they were showing off to a couple friends when good people could not see them...at night, in the dark. Several other incidents clearly involved teenage boys.

Look at the odds. Millions of people were exposed to Little Libraries. The total number of incidents? Lower than .0000001%. But you can lower the odds even more.

How to Prevent It

Who would want to damage such a fine (if small) institution as a Little Library? Well, the same kind that might set off firecrackers in mail boxes, turn over gravestones or show off to his

friends. Thrill seekers. Boys in groups, for example. Drunk people in small groups.

What might keep them from doing that?

Location, Location, Location

Will someone see me? The more public the location—the more people who see the Library—the less likely someone is to be seen doing damage. The more likely he is to be caught, or believes that he might be caught, the less likely he is to do the damage. Crime prevention specialists have been right for years. Good lighting helps. So if the Library is in your front yard, keep the light on or have it near a street light.

Does anybody really care? If the Library is surrounded by weeds or trash, or is not well maintained, it is more likely to be damaged. If it is in the front yard of a beloved, friendly neighbor, it is more likely to be safe. Let anyone near the Library know that it has a steward with a name who cares about it. It’s even better if that steward has a picture on the Library and seems like a nice person. Children and smiling faces of all kinds work well. If everyone thinks nobody cares, nobody is watching and nobody can do anything, someone will be more tempted to do damage.

Make it Personal

Get as many people as possible to know they are a part of the success of the Little Free Library. It is a gift to all; not a private possession

Friends, family and neighbors who know each other (“us”) will probably cherish and protect the Library than people who see no consequences to their actions. That’s why tagging and other forms of vandalism show up

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on “other people’s” property. So anything that communicates that this Library belongs to all of us, especially people whose names or faces are associated with the Library, can reinforce the idea that damaging the Library hurts someone.

Worried about renegades and galoots? Kids on a tear? Gangs, real or imagined? Why not invite them in the circle of Little Library stakeholders and protectors? Tell them about it. Give them books. Ask them to be part of the GIFT—the Give It Forward Team.

Leave a handwritten note or a sign that says something like “Thank you for protecting and loving our Library!” A little proactive appreciation rarely hurts.

Temptation

Putting anything in harm’s way, of course, can invite the very harm it hopes to avoid. Is it easy to just grab a piece of the Library and bust it off? Anything that sticks out can be awfully tempting to someone under the influence of, well, evil thoughts and substances. Or rushes of youthful energy.

What Should You Do if Your Library is Vandalized?

Repair it as soon as possible. Remind yourself to believe in the goodness of the vast majority of people. *But don’t challenge those who did the damage to do it again by threatening or confronting them.* If you do, everybody loses. The best solution is probably not a surveillance camera, warning signs or promoting a fear of punishment. Any or all of the ideas above are probably more effective than yelling at or fighting with roaming bands of “you knows.” (Fill in the blank).

Let it be known in a positive way that a precious neighborhood resource has been damaged and comfort is needed. If you think it would help, move the Library to a less risky location.

What Else Can You do?

Ask people in the Little Free Library Facebook group for advice.

Use aikido or judo. Use the other person’s strengths to disarm or overcome him. Try the warm embrace of love and friendship. Forgiveness. Equanimity. And if all else fails, the serenity prayer. Don’t be defeated by meanness or others’ needs to be noticed.

Just in case, though, keep in mind that we try to build Libraries where breaking the door does not require breaking the entire structure. The Plexiglas is designed to break in a safer way than regular glass. Signs and Plexiglas can be replaced. Your faith in humanity can be restored, too, and replenished with goodwill.