

Meeting Information Needs of Adolescents

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The peace and quiet welcome all who enter. Books fill the shelves, perfectly aligned. Patrons browse the stacks, whispering their questions to solemn-faced librarians. Librarians are stereotyped as “shush-ers” in both books and movies, enforcing the quiet code of a library. Often elderly and gray-haired, these characters sit at the reference desk and assist patrons or catalog books, stopping only to quiet unruly children and teenagers. Though these pictures of libraries as silent places and librarians as stern enforcers of order are not accurate today, they are rooted in a modicum of past truth. Walking into almost any library today will confirm the stereotype of these places as quiet, orderly institutions. Public libraries are wonderful places that provide a number of services to patrons of all ages. Unfortunately, while services to adolescents have improved across the board in recent years, public libraries are not doing enough to meet the information needs of teenagers.

The purpose of a public library is to meet the information needs of all patrons, regardless of age, socioeconomic status, career path, or any other demographic factors. Unfortunately, these agencies do not provide *enough* services to meet the information needs of one of their most important demographic groups, adolescents, though mostly unintentionally or unknowingly. Meeting information needs goes deeper than simply having the ability to find a book. It includes, but is not limited to, finding and evaluating sources and their reliability, a skill that many teens and adults alike need to develop. The typical public library does have many responsibilities to their patrons and must attend to each in turn. That said, these teenagers will become the future adult patrons of the library whose desire, or lack thereof, to use the services provided to them and their children will make or break the agency. Without making a special effort to welcome and encourage

adolescent patrons, public libraries are setting themselves up to become obsolete when the same individuals shy away from libraries as adults, feeling they do not belong and are not wanted.

In sharp contrast to the quiet of a building filled with books and resources, adolescents are a group who relate best to the world by talking about it. They are eager to share their thoughts and feelings, which can often become unruly or loud. According to psychologist Lev Vygostky, child and adolescent development is largely dependent upon “social and cultural influences on the child’s developing mind” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2007, p. 45). Teenagers are not as set in their ways as most adults. This demographic group can be influenced in positive ways by both peers and adults. They need to socialize in order to process new information. Their behavior can be perceived as uncontrolled and disruptive.

In the same book, Eggen and Kauchak point to Swiss biologist and psychologist Jean Piaget for an additional explanation of the words and actions of teenagers. This group of individuals has a tendency to think egocentrically; with them, egocentrism is displayed in a “sense of personal uniqueness and a desire to be noticed, a belief that others are as interested in them as they themselves are, and for some, a sense of invulnerability” (2007, p. 40). This desire to be noticed can make fitting into the typical, quiet library setting difficult for adolescents. Instead of blending in, they want to stand out, to demonstrate to the world that they are unique and important. This often takes the form of trying to impress peers with boisterous behavior, which is frowned upon in many public places, including libraries.

Unfortunately, the tendency of libraries to treat adolescents as either children or outcasts who do not belong in civilized company is reflective of the culture in which public libraries exist. Teenagers may not be demonized, but they certainly are not well understood or welcomed. In the United States today, one reads an abundance of headlines about teenage bullying, adolescent pregnancies, and high school dropouts up to no good. Keyword searches for articles about “teenager” or “adolescent” on the *New York Times* website reveal primary headlines such as “Teenagers and Attention Deficit Disorders,” “Marijuana Use in High School Students,” and “Web of Popularity, Achieved by Bullying.” The fact that these are the first results to appear sends the message that teenagers are bad news. Related searches appear at the bottom of the page, including “teenage drinking,” “teenage depression,” and “teenage sex.” *Time* magazine prints cover stories with titles such as “Dropout Nation” and “Are Kids too Wired for their Own Good?” These headlines shape the perceptions that society has of adolescents: uncontrollable, rebellious, or, at the least, disruptive.

Many adults are uncomfortable around middle and high school students. The Maplewood Public Library in New Jersey thought they had found the solution to dealing with unruly adolescents. According to Brian Kenney in *School Library Journal*, the library closed their doors from 2:45 to 5:00 p.m. each weekday, when middle and high school students are most likely to gravitate to the building (2007, p. 11). This is an enormous disservice to the teenage population and must be addressed. Closing the library is simply not an option. Instead of seizing the opportunity to provide services for teenagers that would help them become model library patrons, the Maplewood Public Library turned their backs on this group (Kenney, 2007, p. 11). Though not everyone has

such negative perceptions of teens, at the very least this group is seen as difficult to deal with and is treated as a segment of society meant to be kept separate.

Teens, preteens, and even young adults often find the silence of a library stifling. They receive the message, intentional or not, that they are not welcome, they are unruly, and they do not belong. As a social and cultural institution, the public library has the potential to greatly impact a teenager's life, yet many libraries today do not embrace their personalities. Libraries have much more than simple movie nights or lending services to offer and must take advantage of the opportunity they have to impact adolescents. When adolescents interact with adults, those who are more knowledgeable than teens, they can develop "an understanding that they wouldn't have been able to acquire on their own" (Eggen & Kauchak, 2007, p. 46). Adolescents are influenced easily by those they respect, and it is clear in today's society that teenagers need positive influences in their lives. Librarians must embrace this opportunity. Among other guidance, "adults explain, give directions, provide feedback, and guide communication (Eggen & Kauchak, 2007, p. 46). If the library provides only a place to check out books, teens receive a message that there is no point in spending time there unless they are looking for a book. This means that the library has the potential to greatly impact the lives of teenagers. Libraries can influence teens by becoming places where adolescents are taught how to seek out reliable information and are empowered to make decisions about their information needs.

Despite the discomfort the larger culture may feel around teenagers, libraries can do much more to include and engage teenagers. According to Julie Spielberger, Carol Horton, and Lisa Michels in their 2004 discussion paper of the Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development Initiative (PLPYD), "Although nearly a fourth of library

patrons are teenagers, public libraries traditionally have devoted less of their space, personnel, and financial resources to services for teens than to any other age group” (p. 1). Teens are only one segment of library users, but as young patrons, they are an essential part of the library’s clientele. The potential that they have to participate in library activities and utilize library services for many years to come cannot be overlooked. This study gave teens opportunities to become more engaged in their local public libraries through volunteer and advisory opportunities.

A search of several Kansas public library websites reveals that, though it depends on the size of the library, teen programs are not living up to their potential. Though all of these libraries have teen collections and offer a number of programs for teenagers like movie nights, they simply are not going far enough in their provision of information resources to adolescents. The Great Bend Public Library website has only a brief mention of a Young Adult Summer Reading Program, but no explanation, no links, no extra information. Teen pages for several libraries, including the Andover Public Library and the Augusta Public Library, are only lists of links to other websites that may fit the interests of teenagers. Both of these libraries have limited young adult collections, even in comparison to the limited size of their overall collection. The Wichita Public Library site includes information on their Teen Read summer program and ways for teens to volunteer, in addition to their own link list. The Emporia Public Library has a monthly teen newsletter, a facebook page, and an e-mail address to contact librarians. Topeka’s public library site has a good teen page, with a regularly updated blog that addresses myriad teen issues. The problem with all of this is that the lists of links are connecting adolescents to other information resources instead of finding ways to provide similar

services within the library. While connecting students with valuable online resources is certainly an important function of the library, it is not enough. For starters, it does not encourage teens to come to the physical space of the library, where they can find many different resources that may be better suited to their needs than the available websites. Library patrons, including adolescents, must be taught about different types of sources, print in addition to online. Also, teenagers are at a stage where they need to begin to fulfill their own information needs; librarians can teach teens how to find reliable sources of information rather than simply providing a list of possible sources.

One of the most important functions of a library is to provide information for patrons. This could be something as simple as finding the right book or as complex as a researching for a paper. Adolescents find the task of searching for information a difficult one, yet it is one that will be instrumental to future academic or career success. Julie McKenna reviewed a study that looked at barriers that students encounter when asked to seek information in school libraries. The study found that “the teacher-librarians demonstrated a high need for control and power over the students’ activities and behavior, and the students themselves had almost no power” (2009, p. 169). This controlling behavior could be one reason that teens become frustrated with information-seeking. While the teacher or librarian is obviously an expert in his or her field, their control does nothing to help the student or acknowledge his or her independence.

The same could be applied to a public library. Librarians must work to empower students, so that their patrons are eventually able to seek information on their own. Teenagers need to stretch themselves and find independence. If librarians cater to the egocentrism of adolescents by teaching them how to search for information on their own,

this group will become more and more likely to utilize library resources for their information needs, rather than turning to online search engines or struggling to find materials independently. McKenna (2009) concludes that “students have information habits that must be validated in order to assist them in changing or establishing new information seeking behaviors” (p. 170). These habits must be recognized by librarians, who can use them as a starting point for instruction and assistance.

Libraries have great potential to improve their relationships with the teenage population. In addition to providing books for them to read or video game nights, libraries should also embrace the opportunities they have to provide a positive place for teens to learn and spend time outside of school. The PLYPD programs found that most of the youth participants who were able to become involved in the library “said they learned more about the library and viewed it differently than they did before the PLPYD Initiative” (Spielberger, Horton, & Michels, 2004, p. 6). They also had a better knowledge and understanding of resources available and “viewed librarians as more friendly and saw the library as a place they can be social and have fun – instead of ‘quiet and boring’” (Spielberger, Horton, & Michels, 2004, p. 6). This is a huge compliment coming from adolescents.

While many libraries are developing programs for youth, these events are often separate from and outside of the normal business of a library. Video game and movie nights are just that – nights. As a starting place, this entertainment will begin to draw teens into the library and create relationships with library staff. But it is not enough. Teen rooms, if there is a separate place for the young adult collection, are small, housing a tiny percentage of the entire collection. This segment of the collection needs to include

nontraditional books, such as audio books and graphic novels, to appeal to teens. The services of a library need to merge with the needs of the adolescent population.

In addition to the fun nights that invite teenagers into the library, librarians must provide reasons to use the library for information seeking. Librarians need to create an environment where adolescents are welcome and want to use the library for more than a free movie. What librarians need to ask is how these activities tie into traditional library services, which mainly involves providing information through books, databases, and other resources. “Public libraries have the potential to design youth programs that provide developmentally enriching experiences to teens and have a positive effect both on youth services and on the library more broadly” (Spielberger, Horton, & Michels, 2004, p. 3). In PLPYD, the programs included library positions for adolescents, training for students, and work with other community associations in order to meet the needs to teens. Libraries that provide any services for teens become safe havens where they can create positive relationships with adults and build strong ties to the institution. The hours after school would be the perfect time to seek advice from teens for how to improve library services. Librarians could lead classes on information seeking. They could give book talks to encourage reading.

Adolescent patrons are a vital segment of library users. Librarians need to move past a cultural perception of teens as inappropriate, disruptive, and uncontrollable, to find a way to include them in library services. Services to teens such as movie nights, video game tournaments, and growing young adult collections are a great start in addressing the needs to this population. In addition, libraries must seek to go deeper with teens in order to meet their information needs. This will create a good working relationship that can

last for decades and enable adolescents to become responsible and knowledgeable information seekers.

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