

The Importance of a Whole Library Approach to Public Library Young Adult Services: A YALSA Issue Paper

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Introduction

It is crucial that the all library staff have the skills and knowledge necessary to serve the young adult population with respect and first-rate services. When all public libraries are fully staffed only with those that value young adults, not only does the library thrive, but the community, of which adolescents are a part, thrives as well.

When an adolescent walks into a library he or she may use any number of the services available. A 17-year-old customer may visit the library's technology center in order to locate information about jobs that are available after graduation from high school. A 15-year-old student might seek help from reference staff to complete a research paper on the causes of the French revolution. It is essential that these young adults receive the information-seeking assistance required from well-trained and respectful staff. When they do, the library provides the value that the community deserves.

Abstract

Any community member that walks into a public library or visits a library website should expect the highest quality of service available. This is no truer for children than it is for adults, and no truer for adults than it is for young adults. In some communities, teens are relegated to a specific area of the library with the hope that they will stay there, and that the one staff member assigned to work with teens will keep anyone in that age group out of the way of everyone else. Appropriate and attractive space for teens to read, do homework, and socialize is important but teens also need to feel welcome in all areas of the library.

It is important when promoting positive adolescent development for teens that the age-group be treated equitably — and teens know when there is a service double standard in place. As a result, teens sometimes choose to exhibit undesirable behaviors or choose to no longer use the institution that they perceive as treating them inappropriately. The ramifications on the library can be long term as support from future taxpayers is potentially lost. Teens may also fight back with displays of inappropriate behavior while in the library and these can extend into the local community.

Adolescence is a confusing time for many teens and as a result it is also turbulent for those around them. Young adults are grown but not fully grown. Teenagers can act like adults one minute and like children the next. It's sometimes hard to know what to expect, which is one of the reasons why many adults are wary around the age group.

This dynamic does not have to exist and it can be changed by providing young adults in the library with a full-complement of services and staff who have the skills and knowledge necessary to serve the age group. This can be accomplished through staff professional development, collaboration, and administrative support.

Problem Statement

Young adult service staffing models in public libraries across the United States vary widely. Examples include libraries with:

- no staff members assigned responsibilities that focus on services to adolescents
- staff with primary responsibilities in children's or adult areas that are also asked to provide services to teens on an ad hoc basis
- a staff member that is designated as a part-time teen services librarian while also responsible for at least one other area of library services to a different population group.
- a staff member that is a designated full-time teen services librarian
- staff that make up a full teen department with full-time and part-time members directly (and only) assigned to serving teens.

The ideal in any library is to have at least one full-time young adult librarian and to have all staff throughout the library fully understand the developmental needs of young adults and possess the skills necessary to serve teens successfully. This ideal has proved hard to achieve. In their 2007 study, the Public Library Association found that only 51 percent of public libraries have a full-time young adults services librarian. Sixty-two percent of these libraries have at least one staff person whose job it is specifically to serve teens. This is an improvement over figures from 1994, which indicated that only 11 percent of public libraries had a staff person whose job it was to serve teens. Still, there is plenty of room for improvement.

Many libraries have staff in non-teen departments that are wary of adolescents and/or choose to have nothing to do with the age group. In many of these libraries administration, for whatever reason, does not stand up for teenagers as a unique age group and require that all staff provide the age group with high-quality service.

Recognizing that not all teen services specialists (along with library staff members who are not teen services specialists but yet interact with teens on a regular basis) are able to keep up with teen-related research and skills, in 1996 YALSA launched the Serving the Underserved program. This initiative provided train-the-trainer professional development to librarians across the United States. This training enabled trainees to take their learning back into their own communities and assist colleagues and peers in providing better service to adolescents. Overall, the program laid the groundwork for supporting staff not specifically trained to work with young adults so that all library staff members could serve the age group successfully.

At the time that YALSA initiated the Serving the Underserved program, libraries around the country started to recognize the importance of teen services. This acknowledgment is seen in the growth of YALSA, which in the mid-to-late 2000s saw strong increases in membership and this growth led to the Association's becoming the fastest growing division of the American Library Association (ALA).

A factor leading to the increased recognition of young adults in libraries was the sheer number of teenagers in the United States. Census figures released in 2008 show that there were close to 42 million young adults in the U.S. This large number of adolescents, along with the burgeoning of social media use by teens, the surge in the quantity of information available to young adults in print and on the web, and the significant growth of publishing in young adult literature, led to acknowledgment by some librarians that young adults require a full complement of high-quality library services in order to support their use of and access to a variety of technologies and print resources.

Research on teens and their developmental needs and behaviors is a growing field as researchers seek data on the impact on new technologies on the teenage brain. In November 2010, Harvard researcher, Dr. Frances Jensen, spoke to neuroscientists about scientific findings that demonstrate the brain is only 80 percent developed when a child reaches adolescence (Juskalian, 2010). These findings are an important part of this discussion because they point to the need for librarians to not make assumptions about young

adult abilities and knowledge. While teens have brains that are more developed than those of children, young adults don't have the brain of a fully developed adult. As a result, sometimes teens require support from children's services staff and sometimes they require support from those primarily tasked with serving adults. And, there are times when a young adult services librarian is exactly what an adolescent needs. Adolescents are grown but not fully grown and as such need to have library services that support their needs as developing adults who must make use of children's, young adult, and adult library programs and services.

Proposed Solution

In 2010 YALSA updated its Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth: Young Adults Deserve the Best ([/yalsa/competencies](http://yalsa.competencies)) and added a companion book and evaluation tool to the suite of competency materials available. This update and expansion increased the number of resources available that aid state level library agency staff, administrators, and front-line librarians in development of high-quality teen library services and the evaluation and measurement of these services. The Communication, Marketing, and Outreach section of the competencies states, "The librarian will be able to establish an environment in the library wherein all staff serve young adults with courtesy and respect, and all staff are encouraged to promote programs and services for young adults." This statement highlights the value of providing young adult services outside of the isolated framework of a sole teen librarian being the only staff member that is knowledgeable about, and providing services to, the age group.

Anyone spending time in a public library will quickly see how frequently young adults use all aspects of library services. For example, teens:

- Repeatedly require assistance and support from reference staff to locate homework materials and materials that support personal information needs.
- Need to discuss borrowing records with circulation staff.
- Use computers and other technologies for reading, writing, communicating, collaborating, and creating and often need the support of information technology staff as they work on projects in these areas.
- Take part in events and programs sponsored by agencies with which library outreach staff collaborates.
- Spend time in the children's, teen, and adult departments in order to locate materials or to help out with programs.

How can all library staff support young adults that use a wide variety of library spaces and resources?

Staff Training and Professional Development

A library with a strong commitment to young adults guarantees that the age group is treated with respect by the entire library staff. This is possible only when all staff take part in training related to the developmental assets of teens. Knowledge of these assets, and of why they are important to the successful growth of adolescents, provides library staff with a foundation from which to work when developing policies, collections and programs. This knowledge also provides an understanding of why teens behave as they do when inside a library as well as a comprehension of how to react to sometimes challenging young adult behaviors.

Collaboration in Collection Development

Young adult services staff, reference staff and children's services staff must work together to plan for collections that not only support the homework help needs of young adults, but also meet the personal information needs of the age group. Both male and female adolescents require opportunities to access materials such as those that support their personal interests from learning about relationships, to discovering options for life after high school, to finding out about current trends in entertainment or fashion. A full complement of materials such as magazines and books in the adult, teen, and children's areas of the library are required in order to support the educational, recreational and personal growth needs of teens at all levels of development.

Information Literacy Support Across Library Departments

Data released by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in February 2010 found that "Teens continue to be avid users of social networking websites — as of September 2009, 73% of online American teens ages 12 to 17 used an online social network website, a statistic that has continued to climb upwards from 55% in November 2006 and 65% in February 2008." (Pew, 2010) This high rate of young adult use of virtual social networking points to the need for technology, reference, and teen services staff to work together to develop face-to-face and virtual programs that support teens' information literacy needs and their need to learn to be safe and smart when communicating and collaborating in virtual environments.

Programming for Parents Regarding Adolescence and Adolescent Trends

Technology, adult services, children's services, and teen services staff also play a part in educating parents, teachers, and others about the role technology plays in the lives of teens. Many adults that live and work with teens do not have a firm understanding of the why and how of teen technology use, particularly use related to social media and interactive technologies (often referred to as Web 2.0). Education by librarians on this topic helps adults better understand young adult interests and behaviors within the social media arena.

Similarly, parents are not always secure in their understanding of the changes that take place as their children move from childhood to adulthood. Parents may feel comfortable with children's staff after years of bringing their children to programs at the library and these staff can help a parent with learning how to live with a teen. Adult staff may have a rapport with parents with whom they discuss fiction and nonfiction materials checked out of the library. Due to this rapport, these staff members may prove to be the best qualified to help parents find resources that help them to understand the changes a teenage son or daughter is experiencing.

Cross-Generational Mentoring Opportunities

Children's services, adult services, and young adult services staff that work together to plan initiatives that provide teens with opportunities to mentor children and tutor seniors play a significant role in helping young adults gain important developmental assets. The Search Institute's list of assets that teens need in order to grow-up successfully includes assets of empowerment, support, and social competencies. Programs in which teens share skills and knowledge with those younger and older are essential in helping teens to gain these assets and therefore play a role in an adolescent's long-term growth and development.

Future Directions

Success in the whole library approach to young adult services will occur with complete support from library administration. Administrators that move forward in this framework will:

- Model for all staff members high-quality librarian and young adult customer service interactions. Not only will these interactions serve as models for staff, they will also demonstrate the administrator's own understanding of teen developmental assets and needs.
- Regularly provide opportunities for all library staff to take part in professional development focusing on techniques for working with adolescents. Continuing education will also be made available on topics related teen trends in areas including technology, popular culture, information, and social experiences and behaviors.
- Regularly evaluate library services looking specifically at the quality of teen services across all library departments and communicate with staff to inform them when instances of inadequate service to young adults occur. The administrator will also inform staff that such service is not acceptable in the library.
- Hire only staff that is able to demonstrate the ability to work with young adults no matter what library department is designated as his or her main service area.
- Speak out to community and government agencies, parents, and staff on the value of young adults in the library and in the community as a whole.

Recommendations

The Young Adult Library Services Association asserts that young adult services must be integrated into public libraries as a part of a full continuum of library service. Because adolescents require library services that support unique developmental needs both at the upper and lower ends of the age spectrum, it is crucial that libraries and library staff embrace a whole library approach and integrate teen services into the entire library program including children's, young adult, adult, reference, circulation, technology, and technical services.

Resources

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