

# **Crash Course in Teen Services**

*Donna P. Miller*

**Libraries Unlimited**

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# INTRODUCTION

## FOR WHOM IS THIS BOOK WRITTEN?

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This book is written for those public library staff members who are new to the profession, have had little or no formal training, or both, in addition to those who may be experienced in the public library field but want to learn new techniques and information in order to update their practice. Those librarians who provide training for new staff or volunteers will also benefit from reading this book. The book deals specifically with library services and programs designed to meet the needs of teens, and the information included will be relevant for library staff members who serve that group of customers. Note: the author will use the term “customers” rather than the more formal term “patrons” to describe the people who patronize the library by checking out or using resources or taking advantage of programs delivered or sponsored by the library. For the purposes of this book, the terms “teens” and “teenagers” will be used interchangeably and will refer to youth from 13 through 19 years of age.

## WHY SERVE TEENS?

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Those who work in public libraries, especially small libraries that may have only one staff member, often find themselves performing a myriad of functions and serving a wide variety of customers. One of the most challenging yet important customer groups of public libraries is teens. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in *Census 2000* that 14.48 percent of the population in the United States is in the 10- to 19-year-old age bracket (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). According to Michael Cox, a public library staff member in Pueblo, Colorado, children aged 0 to 18 represent 20 to 32 percent of the population of the United States (Cox 2006). From this data, it appears that this younger segment of the population in our country is growing. Obviously, not all of these youth are teens, but those who are not yet teens will soon become members of this age group. This group could represent a significant percentage of the customer base for the public library. Therefore, it is important to the success of the library that public library staff members learn how to serve this group effectively, efficiently, and in a way that results in our teens developing a positive impression of libraries.

Not only is providing excellent customer service to teens important to the health and well-being of public libraries, but it also has ramifications for our communities and even our entire country. Well-informed and well-educated teens can positively impact the ongoing health and prosperity of our society. These soon-to-be adults will either be the citizens who will recognize that libraries do indeed serve the common good, or they will be among those who neither value nor support public libraries. The experiences that they have as teens when they visit and use the public library may well be the determining factor as to which attitude this group of citizens adopts. Thus, public library librarians and staff have an obligation to provide exemplary service to these customers. Not only is

this the right thing to do, but it is also the prudent thing to do, to help to mold young citizens and preserve our public libraries.

## WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS BOOK

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Readers will find essential information on a variety of topics throughout this book. The topics included are those that have been identified by the author as ones that are foundational to operating a public library serving teens. While the book does not provide exhaustive coverage of every topic, it is intended to include the most critical points of information, to help library staff members who are looking for strategies and techniques that can be immediately implemented as needs occur. Thus, the purpose of this book is to give readers a practical, usable handbook to assist them in serving teens. The book has been written with the practitioner in mind, so the information is intended to be of a practical nature, and the strategies included can be implemented easily without additional information. A brief description of the contents of each chapter follows.

Chapter 1, “The World of Today’s Teens,” provides an overview of teen culture including teens’ peer groups, the issues that they face in contemporary society, some of the popular teen icons, and strategies for relating to teens in a way that brings success. Due to the fact that some factual information and background is necessary for this chapter, the reader will find references to the work of a few social scientists and specialists in the area of teen brain research. The succeeding chapters will not include many references, as this book is primarily based on the experiences and opinions of the author.

In chapter 2, “Reality Reference: Assume Nothing,” the author includes tips for being more approachable to teens, a model for the reference interview to help staff gather information from teen customers, some examples of reference interviews, information about virtual reference services, suggestions for working with teachers and school library staff, guidance on identifying and dealing with plagiarism, an explanation of the Big6 research model, and a list of “tips and tricks” to use when working at the reference desk.

Chapter 3, “The Teen Collection,” is a thorough guide for building and maintaining a collection of materials, in various formats, to serve the needs and reading interests of teens. The chapter covers essential information on each part of the collection development process, from describing what is involved in developing a collection policy to describing an array of electronic resources that are available for either free use or purchase.

Readers’ Advisory can be an important service to encourage teens to use the library, and chapter 4 will introduce this service to readers, along with specific strategies for implementation, interviewing techniques, and bibliotherapy, instructions for conducting book talks with teens, a discussion of genres of fiction and types of nonfiction books, and a listing of several resources to use. In addition to the material included in this book, Libraries Unlimited is developing a comprehensive database on its Web site that will present a wide variety of tools that can be accessed and used by library staff for Readers’ Advisory and other services.

Chapter 5, “Programming for Teens,” describes various types of programs for teens that can be implemented in the library. Included are such programs as book clubs (both traditional and online), summer reading programs, school visits to promote the library, and a variety of other in-house programs for teens. Since evaluation of programs is important to help library staff continue to improve their offerings, tips and tools for evaluating library programs are offered.

Not only must library staff have an understanding of today’s teens and their world, but also they must then follow up by creating a teen space in the library that welcomes teens and helps to make them feel comfortable in the library. Chapter 6, “Creating a Teen-Friendly Library,” addresses this important topic. Although smaller libraries may not have space to set up an actual teen library, it is possible to create a cozy area for teens that is unique to their needs. This chapter will discuss how to provide this type of space.

Library staff will discover that it is not enough to meet the needs of teens in the present, but that instead, for the library to continue to be used by teens, staff must keep up with teen-related interests, services, and topics, as well as continuing to promote the library to these young customers. Chapter 7, “The Three Ps,” addresses the critical topics of professional resources, professional growth, and public relations to help library staff maintain a teen-friendly library that continues to serve the needs and high expectations of the teen customer.

## **HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

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The book is organized so that specific sections can be used at the point of need. Therefore, it need not be read from cover to cover. Instead, readers can review specific chapters or sections of the book to find pertinent information on a specific topic. In addition to the table of contents and the index, “plain English” terms will be used throughout the book, or, in cases where it may be necessary to use library jargon, these terms will be explained to the reader. Also included is a bibliography listing books, articles, and other resources. Lists of pertinent free Web resources are included at the end of each chapter. All of these resources will provide readers with further information on various topics. Finally, lists of book awards, celebrations, projects, and organizations are included to give readers additional resources for implementing programs and projects for teens. As indicated previously, readers can also find more comprehensive information on many of the topics covered in this book at Libraries Unlimited’s Web site, which will be updated regularly.



# CHAPTER 1

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## The World of Today's Teens

### WHO ARE THESE STRANGE CREATURES?

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We've all been teens, yet once we reach a certain stage of adulthood, we seem to be unable to remember what it was like to be younger. Thus, we sometimes struggle to understand or relate to these gangly or graceful, loud or quiet, brash or thoughtful, loving or hating, happy or sad, trendy or traditional, funny or humorless, pack-animal or isolationist (sometimes all within a matter of moments, it seems) people called teens or teenagers. As librarians, we are committed to organizing and providing information and recreational reading resources for all of our customers, but despite our best efforts, it can seem that we are not successfully communicating with this group, nor are we serving their needs. Although there are many complex reasons for this, some facts are easy to understand, and if librarians will take a bit of time to learn these facts, their encounters with teens in the library will be much more pleasant. Further, one would hope that if the teens that frequent the library have positive experiences, they will not only be return customers, but they will also tell their friends that the library is a safe, enjoyable place to visit.

Of course, the first and most difficult challenge is to attract teenagers to the public library in the first place. Chapter 5 will address this challenge by suggesting programs and services appropriate for teens. For now, we will assume that we do have

teens visiting our libraries. So how can we better understand and communicate with them?

The first important point is that we need to understand the physiological changes that impact teens’ behavior. We know that teens’ bodies are growing and changing rapidly, and this can account for their physical discomfort when they try to adjust their bodies to fit into chairs, use computers that may not be at a comfortable height for them, or access materials on shelves either too high or too low for their reach. Chapter 6 will address the physical environment needed for teen areas. But what accounts for the often erratic behavior we see in teens, and how can library staff deal with it in a way that is satisfactory to both the teen customer and the library staff? Knowing a bit about current brain research on teens will certainly help!

Researchers in the past believed that tremendous brain growth occurred from birth to about age three, and from that age on, our brains grew at a much slower rate of speed. Scientists such as Dr. Jay Giedd of the National Institute of Mental Health have recently conducted studies suggesting that another period of rapid brain growth occurs at puberty in an area of the brain called the frontal cortex (Public Broadcasting System 2002). This part of the brain, which controls decision making, planning, and impulses, is not only changing rapidly during adolescence, but it is also the last section of our brains to stabilize. Thus, it is easy to understand why teens are emotionally volatile and impulsive, and make poor decisions at times.

If librarians take into account the physical factors and brain issues impacting teens, it will be much easier to deal with them in a way that shows understanding rather than judgment. Teen librarian Michele Gorman says that we can “Think of teen reference as an opportunity . . . to act as a surrogate frontal lobe—stepping in to help with planning, processing information, and problem solving” (2006, 34). What a healthy and positive approach to a struggling teen this could be! If we as library staff can operate from a more objective, adult perspective when interacting with teens, taking into account what we know about physical challenges and brain development, interchanges with teenagers in our libraries can be much more positive.

## **TEEN CULTURE**

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All we need do to realize that today’s teens live in a very different world from those of us who are over 30 is to watch these folks closely. We can quickly see that today’s teenagers are “wired for sound” as well as for sight and touch. The pervasiveness of such small technological devices as PDAs, cell phones, MP3 players, portable DVD players, notebook computers, and other items is amazing, and today’s teens are not only the primary purchasers and users of such items, but they are also the experts in setting up and troubleshooting almost any technology-based piece of equipment that is available. The long-term cultural impact of our teens being so tech dependent is unknown, but one immediately noticeable effect is that teens are definitely multitaskers.

This means they are not only adept at performing more than one task at a time, but they actually seem to demand that a multitude of devices should be available and that they should have the opportunity to perform two or more tasks simultaneously. The author has personally witnessed students walking down a hallway, visiting with friends while they text message and listen to music on their MP3 players.

In addition to being hardware savvy, today's teens use various software applications and are frequent visitors to a variety of Internet-based resource sites. In fact, computer use, especially the use of Internet resources, is a daily fact of life for many teens. According to a *Newsweek* cover story, written over five years ago, profiling teenagers in the United States, 48 percent of teens who were polled reported that they used computers at home on an almost daily basis (Begley et al. 2000, 55). One would suspect that this percentage has increased over the last five years as computer hardware has continued to decrease in price and increase in availability. Due to the pervasiveness of technology and the commonplace family situation in which, if two parents are still residing in the home, both probably have jobs outside the home, today's teens may actually spend more time alone than previous generations. Although they certainly still "travel in packs" and are very peer oriented, when today's teenagers are away from their friends, they tend to be by themselves, without adult supervision, in their own world of the Web and video games (Begley et al. 2000, 54). Thus some teens prefer to work alone, with very little supervision or support from adults.

## Power of Peers

The term "peer pressure" is almost a cliché when used to describe the super dependent relationships that today's youth have with their friends. At no time is peer pressure more powerful than in adolescence. It seems contradictory that while teens are struggling to become independent, they are at the same time tightly bonded to their friends. Perhaps part of the tight bonding and group orientation we see in today's teens are a direct result of the fact that many are spending so much time alone at home. Thus, they need peer group support now more than ever. In fact, the previous generation of teens has carried this team orientation into the workplace, so that huge corporations such as Microsoft have implemented a flattened organizational model in which work teams are responsible for all decisions about and implementation of the projects they are assigned. The good news here is that today's teens better understand how to be team players, and, in fact, they can often accomplish more within a group than they accomplish alone. So what does this mean in terms of the public library?

Library staff members need to be tolerant of teens working in groups and realize that the quiet library and traditional "shushing" librarians must be things of the past! Productive noise is now the norm, so librarians must not only be accepting of the increased noise level but must learn to work with groups of teens rather than expecting to deal with only one person at a time. This situation can be uncomfortable and feel a bit threatening, but if the librarian can work within this context with teens and even

support and help facilitate the research and information seeking that groups are engaged in, he/she will establish a very positive rapport with the young adult customers. Some tips for interacting with groups of teenagers are provided below:

- Greet groups of teens in a positive, pleasant manner as they enter the library.
- If a group of teens appears to be having success, leave them alone!
- If you see that a group of teens needs help, approach them confidently, but in a friendly, open manner.
- Try to ascertain who the group’s leader is, and direct questions to that person.
- Accept that the library may not be quiet when teens are working in groups.
- Unless a group of teens is obviously disturbing others, allow them to talk and interact as needed to accomplish their task.
- Be open to groups of teens coming into the library just to “hang out.”

## Teen Issues

Today’s teens live in a much more complex world than many of us who grew up in the 1950s or 1960s. They face and deal with issues that we could not have even conceived of in our teen years. Some of the issues with which we may be familiar are much more prevalent in today’s society than they were when we were teens. While we may have known about some of these issues, they may not have personally touched our lives, or, if they did, their severity was perhaps less than is experienced by today’s teens. Some teen issues that librarians need to be aware of, as they may have implications for interactions with teens, as well as providing librarians with a list of topics for collection development, are listed below.

In her book *Helping Teens Cope: Resources for School Library Media Specialists*, Dr. Jami Biles Jones includes the following young adult issues (Jones 2003, iii, iv):

- Maltreatment: neglect and abuse
- Substance abuse
- Depression and suicide
- Eating disorders and problems with body image
- Self-inflicted violence
- Divorce
- Teen pregnancy
- Relationship violence
- Driving
- Bullying and cliques

In addition to the issues previously listed, the author would suggest that the following are also pertinent issues for today’s teens: body piercing and tattoos, social group identification (for example, as Goths, Punks, Techies, Band O’s, Populars, Crunchies, Boarders, Jocks, Ropers, Emos, Preppies, etc.), peer status, racial and ethnic