
Young Adolescents and Libraries

Sue Rosenzweig, Director of Information Services at the Center for Early Adolescence, Carr Mill Mall, Carrboro, N.C., presented a program on "Young Adolescents and Libraries" at the 1985 Biennial Conference in Raleigh. Approximately 200 school and public librarians who work with 10- to 15-year-olds, and library administrators attended.

The following questions were addressed:

1. Who are young adolescents?
2. Why provide special services and programs for them?
3. How can librarians program successfully for the age group?
4. What programming problems are unique to libraries and how can we solve them?

Rosenzweig described normal early adolescence as a time of rapid physical changes including the growth spurt, primary sex changes (menstruation and ejaculation), and secondary sex changes (growth of body hair, voice changes, changes in body shape, etc.). The young adolescent experiences socioemotional changes as well: mood swings, emerging importance of the peer group, problems of self-esteem, and feelings of awkwardness. They wonder if they are "normal."

Early adolescence is a time of great egocentrism. One of the signs of egocentrism is David Elkind's "imaginary audience," where young people believe they are always the center of attention, "on stage," everyone is looking at them, noting details of appearance and performance.

New thinking skills begin to emerge during this period. Young adolescents start to think abstractly and begin to think of the future, but they do not have the life experience to help them make wise decisions. Elkind's "personal fable," another aspect of egocentrism, is also linked to cognitive development. "I am unique. I am the only one that ever felt like this. I won't get pregnant. It won't happen to me," are examples of the personal fable. Recent trends in pregnancy prevention and drug abuse prevention programs

reflect this aspect of development. Brooke Shields's anti-smoking campaign is an example—she exhorts teens not to smoke because "it looks bad," not because smoking causes cancer.

Because of the great changes they are experiencing, physically, cognitively, and emotionally, young adolescents need to have a feeling of competence and achievement. They often volunteer for community work to satisfy these needs. They volunteer in libraries and as candy-stripers, for example.

Our culture is in the midst of a social revolution which makes our work with adolescents extremely important. Young teens do not come home from school to find adults at home. In 1946 only 18% of mothers in dual parent households were employed outside the home. In 1980, however, 66% of mothers in dual parent households held down jobs outside the home. There are more single parents, and in 1984, 78% of all single parents were employed. North Carolina has the highest percentage of working mothers in the United States today.

At the same time that parents are now working outside the home, we see cutbacks in social services: parks and recreation, libraries, and so forth. Young adolescents come home to nearly empty neighborhoods. There are no women at home, no extended families, no supervised playgrounds.

Parents want their teens to frequent the library and to read. The library is free, safe and supervised.

The "latchkey" phenomenon really is not the issue for this age group. There is consensus that younger children need supervision, and those over 15 do not, but even parents cannot agree on the right age at which those in between can be left unsupervised. The lack of consensus reflects the variability and diversity of the age group.

Patrice Ebert, Sharon Branch Librarian with the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, summarized Ms. Rosenzweig's remarks for NCL.

Young adolescents need to interact with adults other than their parents. They need opportunities more than supervision. The Center for Early Adolescence has been studying the "3:00 to 6:00 issue" and identifying successful community programs for five years. (Unfortunately one criterion for success eliminated many library programs: the program must meet regularly over a period of time. Most libraries present programs on an irregular basis.)

In any event, a successful program must address the following needs: physical activity (young teens have boundless energy to expend), positive social interaction with peers and adults, and structure with clear limits (clear expectations are crucial to unsure, self-critical young people). These successful programs will also be responsive to the need for competence and achievement, self-definition (the growing teen is learning about the new adult person he or she will become), and creative expression. Good programs offer meaningful participation. These events are planned with, not for, young adolescents.

After an excellent slide tape presentation, Rosenzweig turned her attention to young adolescents and libraries. Parents want their teens to frequent the library and to read. The library is free, safe, and supervised. The kids need information, and they need the library for homework research.

How do librarians solve the problems they have in dealing with young teens? Early in the program, the participants turned in cards describing their problems. Noting that these same problems inevitably turn up in her presentations all over the country, Rosenzweig invited the audience to offer their solutions. A common problem was discipline. Suggested solutions included having a staffer near the area where the teens congregate—sitting at the table, if necessary. If they hang out and create disturbances, be consistent and firm about evicting offenders. Have few rules, but enforce them. Invite youth participation and let them help you write the rules. Give the kids some useful activities: have them volunteer, make a bulletin board, or even teach younger children how to use the microcomputer if you have one. Visit the schools and be visible. Establish a personal relationship with the kids. If they know you, they will be less likely to misbehave.

Another big problem concerned lack of administrative support. Solutions included documenting the need for YA programs with statistics which show how many teens your library is serving. Point out that these kids will grow up to be

adult library patrons and voters for library bonds in the future. Invite the director and administrative officials to your activities. One library director urged librarians to organize a program proposal and pursue it. It never hurts to ask!

"How do we get kids interested?," librarians asked. Ask the young people—start youth participation and advisory councils. Get their ideas about what they'd like. Write for the low-cost publication "Youth Participation in School and Public Libraries," available from the American Library Association.

If your library is too busy with too many patrons to serve, contact community groups and have them hold their programs in the library, especially if you have a meeting room. This solution works, too, if teens are too busy with other activities to attend library programs. Meet with other professionals who work with youth services and establish networks. Have the kids publish a booklet or newsletter on activities available in the community. Concentrate library programs on teacher work days when there will be no school activities.

Another problem focused on how to get young teens to volunteer. Use buttons or T-shirts, have a party. Ask for a clear-cut, short-term commitment, not a nebulous, long range project without specific goals. Ask your volunteers (and your teen employees) what kind of program they would attend, then let them help organize and run the program.

Book discussion groups, such as "Junior Critics," have great success. Have the kids read, evaluate, and vote for Best Books each year. They can then compare their choices with the ALA YASD Best Books selections. The journal VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates) likes to publish reviews by young adults. Encourage the group to submit their reviews for publication.

In conclusion, Rosenzweig advised to expect some failures. Let the kids experience program failure, too. After all, that's life.

Ms. Rosenzweig welcomes requests for additional information. She would also be interested in hearing what others are doing in their work with this age group.

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