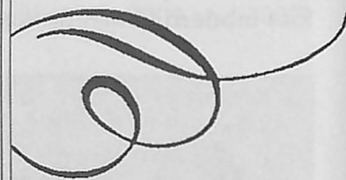


## KEEPING THE PEACE: A PLAYBOOK FOR DEALING WITH TEENAGE PATRONS IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

by Dawn D. Savage



**I** looked up at the clock on the wall and cringed. It was 2:45 p.m. and a large group of unruly teenagers would be pouring into the library at any minute. I heaved a sigh and set aside my present work to revisit later. I just knew that as soon as those teenagers walked in the doors my entire time would be wrapped up in maintaining security and keeping the library branch under control. Later that night, after a fight and a call to 911, I had to wonder how our staff would continue to keep the peace night after night and if we could find a way to engage our teenage patrons in constructive activities.

Does this scenario sound familiar? Public libraries across the nation are more and more frequently challenged to deal with teenage and even adult patrons who demonstrate all kinds of antisocial behavior. At times, this behavior can be rude, hostile, and even violent. Regardless of their sometimes-bad behavior, teenagers are patrons, and reaching out to them is one of the most challenging, but nonetheless rewarding, aspects of working in an inner-city library.

In four years as a juvenile librarian in just such a library, I had to challenge myself to find ways to engage the teenage patrons every day. At first, it seemed like an impossible chore. In the end, however, I found it to be a very rewarding experience and one that I believe had a positive impact on both the library and its patrons. While the practices that I have learned to incorporate into my teen services may not work in every situation, I hope that they will spark some ideas to help you in your quest to provide appropriate services for teens.

In general, the best practices for engaging these important users of library services revolve around the central idea that librarians must first change the typical "adult" ways of thinking about teenagers. It is not uncommon for adults to think of teenagers in a number of negative ways: noisy, unstable, disrespectful – just to list a few. All of these things naturally conflict with our traditional view of the library as a quiet, orderly place. The key to successfully engaging teenage library patrons lies in balancing the librarian's need to be an authority figure with the need to establish

credibility among teenage patrons and to be a part of their social network.

### GET TO KNOW TEENAGE PATRONS AS INDIVIDUALS

Teens are social creatures. They often group together and talk for hours at a time. Their need to socialize stems from their development of self-identity, as well as the pressure that they feel to seek approval for that identity from their peers. In *New Directions for Library Services to Young Adults*, Patrick Jones (2002) states that: "One unique need of young adults, for example, is the need to socialize in groups. This is normal, but often problematic in a library setting. To respect the unique needs of teens is to respect this behavior and, as best as possible, to accommodate it" (p. 17).

Believe it or not, this developmental need is a perfect foundation for crafting library services that engage teenage patrons. Getting to know teen patrons on a personal level will do two things for a librarian. First, it helps the teens to feel more comfortable with the librarian as a source of information. It also helps to establish a foundation of respect among the teenage patrons for the librarian's responsibility to keep the library safe and accessible for all patrons.

"Getting to know" teenagers takes a lot of time and effort, and for this there is no substitute. The librarian needs to learn the patrons' names, what schools they attend, what they like to do for fun, and who their friends are. The librarian has to communicate a sincere interest in the things that are important to the teenage patrons as individuals.

At one of my prior assignments, on any given night there were about thirty teens in the library at once. It was hard to get to know them, especially considering that the majority of the teens went by nicknames rather than by their given names. Every day after school when they came streaming past the reference desk, I asked them how school was and what they learned that was new. I introduced myself and slowly I learned and remembered their names. After a few weeks of doing

this, the teens began to stop at the desk on their own, anticipating my questions and having answers for them.

If you are going to engage your library's teenage population, it is also imperative that you are not the only staff member who makes the effort. The support of fellow staff members is vital to maintaining the teen-friendly culture of the library. Like any other person, teens can sense when people do not care for them. It is important that they perceive the library as a place where they are welcome and where they are appreciated just like any other patron. Otherwise, the result can be a hostile environment in which both the librarians and their teenage patrons are constantly in conflict.

A warm, welcoming, and inherently social atmosphere naturally reduces the frequency and severity of behavioral problems. My experience is that the majority of today's teenage patrons are more responsive to the idea of helping librarians do their jobs if they know them as regular people, rather than nameless authority figures that mill around behind a service desk. It is hard to break the rules if doing so would be disappointing a friend or acquaintance.

### **RESPECT THE TEENAGER'S NEED TO "SAVE FACE"**

We have already learned that teens expend a lot of energy exploring their self-identity and that they continually look to their peers for approval. Once you begin to see the world from this perspective, it makes sense that when you try to reprimand a teen for bad behavior in front their peers, their defense mechanisms are engaged. If you have put in the effort to get to know them, it is possible to engage them on a personal level – often with better results. Teens are much less prone to act out if you do not challenge them in front of their friends. As adults, we have a tendency to go "over the top" to try to assert our authority when we feel it is challenged. Likewise, teenagers also feel the need to stay in control of a situation and "save face" with their friends.

Librarians must put forth the effort to handle confrontation with teenagers discretely and with an understanding of the teenager's unique perspective. Doing so increases the likelihood that teenage patrons will gain positive social and educational benefits from using library facilities and services. It also reduces the amount of tension and energy required from the library staff to get teenage patrons to follow rules and expectations consistently.

### **BE FAIR AND CONSISTENT**

Consistency in rules and expectations is also important. Rules must be clear and consistent. If you set an expectation, follow through with it. Your

teenage patrons need to know that you must carry out your responsibility to make the library inviting for everyone. Be prepared that you may have to ask some patrons to leave the library if they fail to follow the rules. If you have set the expectation that teenage patrons will be asked to leave if they engage in certain behaviors, then you have to follow through. Unless the behavior is a significant challenge to the security of the library or a serious violation of library policy, respect the personal approach first – and ask the teen patron to change his or her behavior.

If one or more such attempts fail, then it is time to ask the patron to leave. If you get to this point, walk with the person to the door and let them know that you like having them in the library, but that it is a place for everyone to enjoy. Let them know that you are expected to keep it that way. Some teenagers may make a scene – as a result of the need to "save face." Continue walking the teen out, showing as little reaction as possible. While it is often difficult not to show your emotion in these situations, just remember that the teen is trying to get a rise out of you. If you respond emotionally, then the conflict will escalate. Staying cool and collected goes a long way to demonstrating that you are fair and that you have no problem enforcing the rules if the situation requires it.

This technique takes a while to perfect, but it is worth it. My experience has been that teens will start monitoring themselves because they do not want their friends to be asked to leave. Also remember that tomorrow is a new day. As hard as it can be to forget bad behavior, it is best not to hold a grudge. I can't tell you how many surprised looks I have had from teens who I had to ask to leave just the night before, when they find me asking them how their day at school was during their next library visit.

Little things like this, if done consistently, help demonstrate that the librarian's enforcement of the rules is not a personal attack – it is just a responsibility that is carried out calmly and consistently every day. After trying these approaches for several weeks, I really got excited one day when one of the teens in our library told another teenager, who was new to the neighborhood, not to "talk back to me" because I was "okay." Teens are usually more perceptive than we give them credit for being, and I felt that this was a sign that the efforts of our staff were starting to have a positive impact.

Consistency in setting and enforcing rules and expectations is one of the biggest challenges for librarians. For some reason, it is always easier to excuse the behavior of younger children and even adults, but teens always seem to stand out. They group together when they socialize, and sometimes appear to be problematic before there is really ever an issue. It

seems to be much easier to disregard elderly patrons who are practically screaming to be heard, and children who are too excited in the library to sit and listen to a story, than it is to disregard a group of teens who are talking at a table or waiting for a computer. It is really a state of mind.

If you ask teen patrons to take a boisterous conversation outside, then the same must be applied to adults. The reverse of this situation should be enforced in the same way. Teenage patrons need to see your consistency at every opportunity. Treat all teens the same, without exception. There will always be the teens that love to read and are "as good as gold," but be sure that all rules and expectations apply to everyone.

Be reasonable. Avoid "pouncing" on teens as soon as they come into the library. Is their behavior worth the confrontation? Is their behavior endangering anyone? Is their behavior bothering other patrons? Keep in mind that teens will seem more intimidating to other patrons, so complaints about their behavior should be analyzed before being acted upon.

### **GET AS MANY TEENS AS POSSIBLE INVOLVED IN PROGRAMMING**

As librarians, we would love to have a group of teens who come in, ask for the latest teen books, and sit down to read in the teen area. As with many aspects of life, the reality of the situation is not that simple. In many cases, our teenage patrons struggle in school and have problems at home of which we are unaware. Nevertheless, these patrons are an important constituency of our communities, and one with which the library can have a positive impact. Engaging them with programming is one of the best ways that the library can serve the community.

One of the toughest aspects of developing effective programming for teens is figuring out how to get started. I recommend doing a survey to find out what your teenage patrons do for fun and what kinds of structured activity they might be willing to do at the library. Program for their interests and do not be afraid to think outrageously! Try some programming that is outside of your comfort zone! Programming for teenage patrons requires creativity and flexibility. Teens are, for the most part, too old for crafts and too young for coffeehouse-style book discussions.

I have had some success with programs that centered around life skills. For example, I had a "fast food" program that was well attended. For the teens, of course, the food was the big draw. During the program we prepared foods that required them to follow directions, use the microwave, and work with units of measure. Although this seems like a very basic program, it allowed the teens to learn, taste the food that they

had prepared, and socialize. The feedback on the program was very positive. While there was educational content and the program provided structured activity, it did not have the feel of a classroom.

As is the case with adult programming, seeking advice and feedback from the patrons themselves is vital. I always make sure to ask what our teenage patrons would like to do in the future and how we can make the programs more enjoyable.

### **KNOW WHEN TO LET GO**

There will always be one or more teens who are just too "cool" to go to library programs or to get to know the librarian. It may not be possible for you to understand why some teens are more unresponsive than others. It is important to treat each teenage patron the same and be able to let some go. You do not have to reach every teen, but it is important to at least make the effort. It is important not to antagonize or browbeat teens who are not enthusiastic about programming or who give you a hard time when enforcing the rules.

One afternoon in our library, three teenage boys were asked to leave because of their behavior. On their way out of the building, one of the boys smashed a donor plaque near the entrance. Unfortunately, the view of the entrance was obstructed, and we were not sure which of the three boys did the damage. Since we were unable to see exactly what happened, we decided to "let it go," and to allow the boys to go ahead and leave. This allowed the situation to cool off so that we could get the outburst under control and clear the undesirable behavior from the library.

The next day, the boy that I thought had smashed the tile came back to the library. As usual, I asked him how he was doing. After a few minutes of small talk I proceeded to ask him about the incident. He admitted that he was the one who broke the donor plaque, and we talked about why. He was angry that he was asked to leave when it was his friends who were causing all the problems. We then talked about appropriate ways to vent anger. He did have to pay for the damage to the donor plaque, but the next time I had to talk to his group, he quickly got them under control. In the end, the outcome was as positive as we could have hoped. The broken plaque was replaced, and the confrontation was deferred to a time when it could be resolved calmly and more rationally.

### **KNOW WHEN TO SEEK HELP**

Definitely seek help when any patron's behavior is dangerous to other patrons in the library. Fights in libraries are always a good reason to seek help, whether that help comes from your security guards or the police. It is not a good idea to try to break up fights. Whether it is an adult or a teen, fighting has no

place in the library and should be acted on immediately.

Policies and procedures for dealing with dangerous situations vary among library systems, but it is important to understand that your library board or administration has most likely enacted these policies based on advice from experts in risk management, security, or law enforcement. Make sure to learn your library system's protocols for dealing with specific types of dangerous situations so that you are prepared to carry them out when these situations occur.

Seek help from peers if you become frustrated. Engaging teen patrons and developing the kind of rapport it takes to keep bad behaviors in check is a challenging balance that requires much energy. Most of all, it requires a team effort from the entire library staff. You should routinely ask your colleagues to discuss problems that you are encountering. In particular, I sought the help of a clerk who lived in the neighborhood where our library was located. Her relationships with the families and friends of the individuals who used our library were a great resource.

## CONCLUSION

The potential positive impact that engaging teenage patrons can have within a community is an aspect of library service that is often overlooked. As librarians, we often have an adult perspective that makes the attitudes of teenagers seem alien at first glance. As a result, we often tend to focus on the "problem" of controlling teenage behavior. Much of the tension that

we instinctively feel when teenagers cross into the traditional peace and quiet order of our libraries can be alleviated by consistently applying just a few simple, commonsense principles. While it is our responsibility to maintain order in libraries, regardless of whether the libraries are located in the inner city or a quiet suburb, we must balance that responsibility with the need to serve our teenage patrons. The potential reward for doing so more than repays the effort required.

## REFERENCES

Jones, P. (2002). *New directions for library services to young adults*. Chicago: American Library Association.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dawn Savage has a Master of Library Science and is currently employed at Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library.

