

Let's Face It: Adult Librarians Are YA Librarians

by Kathleen S. Wheelless and
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Who serves young adults in North Carolina libraries? If you are a reference librarian, you do. Public libraries give information to YAs on a regular basis. A recent Department of Education survey shows that this small group (ages 12-18) accounts for 25 percent of public library users.¹ Yet there are only three full-time young adult librarians at work in North Carolina public libraries.

Most of us in public libraries perceive ourselves as either children's or adult services librarians. As a result, a unique service group with special informational needs and developmental considerations is underserved and statistically "invisible."² Facing the realities of YA service and finding solutions are important tasks for adult services librarians.

There are both historical³ and current influences which contribute to the invisibility of this client group in public libraries. Current influences which promote unequal access to information for YAs are reported fully in library literature. Hodges discusses a misunderstanding of the developmental needs of YAs and a lack of training for YA librarians in our library schools.⁴ *Output Measures for Public Libraries*⁵ and *Planning Process for Public Libraries*⁶ do not address young adult services, an omission which results in a lack of standards for service. Other negative influences include the lack of administrative support for separate services to young adults,⁷ and the fact that teens use the library differently than any other group.⁸ Varlejs and Lynch both discuss the need for a definition of "young adult." Hodges reported in 1987 that the Young Adult Services Division (YASD) and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) of the American Library Association were in the process of defining early adolescence by age. Professional groups, such as ALA's Young Adult Services Division and NCLA's Young Adult Committee, should lead the way in validating young adult service using statistics. Unfortunately, it seems that national leadership is slow in coming. Until an operative age range is applied to the term YA, it will be impossible to gather statistics nationally.

While the typical adult reference librarian does not have the time to collect and analyze effectively the statistics revealing public library use by young adults,⁹ our goals can certainly be more modest, but equally effective. There are practical actions and activities which the busiest reference librarian can undertake.

Reference librarians will find that thinking about YA service in the library and trying a few of the suggestions below will serve YA patrons in many ways. Staff time will be saved when effective methods of handling YA needs are enacted. When school projects are approached with a service mentality, productive solutions to the high demand for individual topics can be met. With improved service and effective use of staff time, staff morale and attitudes toward teens will improve. As the library begins to

be accountable to one of its major user groups, the group will, as a consequence, become more visible to administrative bodies. This should result in tangible support.

FIVE THINGS YOU CAN DO TODAY TO IMPROVE SERVICE TO YOUNG ADULTS

Because librarians in the public library reference setting are overworked and fragmented, and have little time to crusade for young adult services, the authors believe that the most immediate way to bring about positive change for young adults in the public library is to set forth specific actions that each of us can take, TODAY.

The key word here is ACTION. Read these suggestions; consider their merits; and take action. Take the suggestions one at a time, in any sequence. Adapt them to your specific library environment, and get ready for improved service to one of your most significant client groups, young adults.

1. PAY ATTENTION TO PROFESSIONAL TOOLS CURRENTLY DEVELOPED AND PUBLISHED TO AID IN SELECTING YOUNG ADULT MATERIALS. These include the following:

— *Booklist's* young adult book review section, "Books For Youth," particularly the sections "Adult Books for Young Adults" and "Books for Older Readers."

— *VOYA, Voice of Youth Advocates*, is a professional journal devoted to serving young adults with detailed, insightful book reviews that specify reading grade level and utilize a lively code system which rates quality, popularity, and grade level interest. *VOYA's* definition of popular is "every YA (who reads) was dying to read it yesterday."

— *Grassroots*, a quarterly, North Carolina-based newsletter with book reviews, pathfinders, program ideas, and articles on young adult issues, published by the Young Adult Committee/PLS/NCLA.

— Publisher's and vendor's catalogs that specialize in young adult materials, such as EconoClad, PermaBound, Rosen Publishing, and Carolina Biological Supply (for science project materials).

2. RECEIVE YOUNG ADULT REFERENCE QUESTIONS AS VALID, IMPORTANT REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION. Developmentally, teenagers' needs differ from those of our adult patrons. If librarians recognize these special needs in the reference interview, interactions will be more productive. Rethink the reference interview for young adults.

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To help the reader 'rethink' this action, the authors have modified the "Model Reference Behaviors," outlined by the 1986 revision of a reference study of Maryland public libraries.¹⁰ The five reference behaviors below have been modified for young adults.

- Verify the question.
Repeat the question.
Paraphrase to make sure you are on the same wavelength.
- Clarify the question.
Ask open-ended questions, such as "Can you tell me more about your question?" or "What aspect of _____ are you interested in?"
- Give each individual YA your full attention.
Make eye contact.
Smile.
Do not interrupt.
Comment ("I see" or "Uh Huh.")
- Report the progress of your search.
Cite your sources as you use them.
Go to the source with the YA.
- Always ask, "Does this completely answer your question?"

3. DEVELOP ONE YOUNG ADULT PROGRAM THIS YEAR. Does this idea sound too formidable? Here are a few suggestions for generating ideas. Listen to what teenagers are asking for and use programs to address unmet needs. Fill the gaps where books and printed materials are not sufficient. Find ideas for programs and contact persons available throughout your North Carolina network. Excellent **standards** have been set by the North Carolina Public Library Directors' Association Award for Outstanding Young Adult Program. *Grassroots*¹¹ has featured details about these programs in its issues. Each year look for announcements of winning programs in *Flash*,¹² the public library directors newsletter published through the State Library.

One key aspect of these award-winning programs has been cosponsorship with a sister agency in the community. A cospon-

sor can help with planning, finances, and publicity of the event.

4. WHEN THE DELUGE OF HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS COMES, MAKE LIFE EASIER BY DEVELOPING IN-HOUSE RESOURCES TAILOR-MADE TO FIT EMERGENCIES. Producing pathfinders, vertical files, and

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bibliographies requires an investment of time initially, but these tools will benefit the entire reference staff and improve the department's overall service.

When twenty YAs are determined to do a science project on "the effect of music on plants," and the library has no materials to support this project, try an online search to see what articles are out there. Online searching and other more "sophisticated" tools of reference service should be offered to young adults as readily as they are offered to adult patrons. If this type of information is obtainable, it is the right of young adult patrons to have access to the information. It is also important to follow through with document delivery. Assist YAs in obtaining articles or in a referral to the appropriate library or agency. Go as far with a young adult patron as you would with an adult patron.

5. TAKE A FRESH LOOK AT THE PHYSICAL LAYOUT OF YOUR LIBRARY. One basic dilemma for young adults is getting to know the library beyond the Children's Department. What's out there for young adults? Since most public libraries have no separate young adult department, teenagers are left to fend for themselves in a library organized into adult departments. Does your library offer any direction to young adults in its physical layout and signs?

Take the "It's Not Totally Dreamland" Quiz¹³ (page 66). This

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quiz was developed by Cathy Carey and the Wayne Oakland Library Federation in Michigan with the help of Sylvia Mitchell of the Hawaii State Library. Total the score for your library and implement one physical improvement.

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- ¹³Cathy Carey and Sylvia Mitchell, "The 'It's Not Totally Dreamland' Quiz," *VOYA* 13 (June 1990):95.

The "It's Not Totally Dreamland" Quiz

Public Library Teen Area Self-Evaluation

- | | |
|--|------------------|
| 1. As you enter the library, can the location of the YA area be discerned? | 10 points |
| 2. Which of the following are located in or are adjacent to the YA area? | |
| a. Study Guide | 2 points |
| b. College Catalogs | 2 points |
| c. Career Materials | 2 points |
| d. Sex Education Books | 2 points |
| 3. Is the YA section identifiably separate from other areas? | 5 points |
| 4. Is it closer to the adult collection than to the children's section? | 2 points |
| 5. Is it slightly secluded giving the appearance of privacy while still allowing some supervision? | 2 points |
| 6. Does the teen area include | |
| a. Videos (music, classics, teen hits on the big screen) | 5 points |
| b. Popular recordings | 5 points |
| c. Computers | 5 points |
| 7. Is local pride reflected? Perhaps a bulletin board devoted to current teen accomplishments, along with contests and a calendar of events, perhaps even local sports scores. | 5 points |
| 8. Are there plenty of comfortable places to sit? | 2 points |
| 9. Are the books for teens mostly paperbacks? | 10 points |
| 10. Are there multiple copies? | 2 points |
| 11. Is there a "drawing card"...something of interest for the browser? Example: teen magazines | 5 points |
| 12. Do you use some bookstore (face out) shelving? | 5 points |
| 13. Are your shelves uncrowded? | 2 points |
| 14. Are all books within reach, with most between 36 and 60 inches from the floor? | 2 points |
| 15. Are the books for teens attractive? (Avoid rebound books unless original dust jackets are saved and reattached.) | 8 points |
| 16. Is your YA collection divided by type, i.e., SF&F, Mystery, Horror? | 2 points |
| 17. Do you have a flashy colored notebook, with lists arranged by subject, available in the teen section? | 4 points |
| 18. At the librarian's desk? | 1 point |
| 19. Are materials in displays available for immediate check out? | 2 points |
| 20. Do displays contain realia or 3D materials? | 5 points |
| 21. Is there sufficient supply of attractively displayed free handouts? | 3 points |
| 22. How frequently is the teen collection weeded? | |
| a. Once a month | 10 points |
| b. Twice a year | 5 points |
| c. It's been so long I can't remember | Deduct 25 points |
| 23. Did you survive the quiz? | 1 point |

Scoring: 75-51 Congratulations (Or did you lie?); 50-25 You're on the right track.

Below 25 Please don't feel discouraged if your score is low. NOW GET GOING!

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