Young Adult Services: You Can Do It

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In discussing young adult services, we usually attempt first to define just what is a "young adult," and we soon learn that it is a very artificial term. It is less offensive perhaps than "young people," which is too broad and vaguely patronizing besides; less psychological than "adolescent" which is probably the most accurate term; it offers more respect than the usual "teenager," but it remains indefinite, even among librarians committed to serving those whom they call "young adults." This confusion is compounded by the press and other mass communications media which use "young adult" to mean persons age 21 to 35.

Margaret Edwards, in *The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts*, says that young adults are people for whom there is no adequate nomenclature. The 1973 Task Force on Young Adult Services Working Paper goes a little further and states that adolescence can be defined as that period in a person's development when he (or she) no longer sees him (or herself) as a child but other people do not see him (or her) as an adult. It is a period of intense intellectual, emotional and social development. To pin a specific age or grade on this individual is unnecessary and impossible.

While there may be good philosophical reasons for this lack of definition, which implies a service attitude of taking people where the YA Librarian finds them rather than imposing an institutional definition of their needs, in my experience "young adult" has meant persons of junior and senior high school age.

This view, while it is widely held by librarians serving adolescents, is at variance with the official service definitions used by the Association of Librarians Serving Children (through age 13) and the Young Adult Services Division (14-18) of ALA. The emergence of the middle school concept in education may help change these antiquated views, however, and Rosemary Young, YA Coordinator of the Denver, Colorado Public Library and YASD President, has already indicated this possibility in *SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL.* Because none of us, including ALA's divisions, is free of institutional restrictions and territorial imperatives, the term "young adult" will ultimately be defined administratively by our local situations. If you are a school librarian in a school serving ninth to twelfth grades, your definition will be different from that of a middle or private school or public library YA librarian, although all of you will be providing young adult services.

I have deliberately used the definitions offered by school, institutional, and public librarians interchangeably in describing "young adult services" although the term itself, unfortunately, has come to be associated primarily with public library services. I see anyone engaged in library services to adolescents as a young adult librarian although goals of service may be very different because of the ultimate differences between a compulsory and a voluntary teenage audience. Since my experience has been in the public library young adult services, my bias in that direction will be evident in this paper.
Ultimately, it is the "adult" in "young adult" which we should remember, for historically young adult services has concentrated most on the younger adolescent, the person emerging from childhood, and has attempted to introduce that person to a sampling of the wide range of options among which he or she will have to choose as an adult and to become an adult. Young adult services promotes the library as an empathetic, helping place in this becoming and decision-making process. Through personal contact, materials, programs, furnishings, the media, and in any other meaningful way, the library strives not to lose this age group at a crucial time in their development.

Assuming that the young adults we serve are to some degree in the state of adolescence, regardless of the grade or age definition we must use administratively, let us examine briefly some of the significant components of adolescence, so that we might better understand our actual and/or prospective clientele. Remember, however, that while we focus on the adolescent in young adult services, it is important to recognize that adolescence is not a period separate from other periods of life but a state in the continuous growth process, and that no single description characterizes all adolescents, even within a common culture.

The most obvious component of adolescence is the biological growth acceleration which occurs. There are pronounced height and weight changes including an increased stomach size and a greater need for food. In girls, breasts develop and menstruation begins; in boys, voices change, ejaculation starts, and in both sexes there are changes in hair distribution, skin structure, and motor development. These physical changes have wide repercussions in adolescents' personal and social behavior and in their attitudes toward themselves and others. Often, just the differences in the rates of development among adolescents will cause severe anxiety for them. A sympathetic fictional portrayal of this is seen in Judy Blume's Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret in which one girl is so anxious because her period has not started that she lies to her friends and tells them it has. It should also be noted that puberty is beginning at a much younger age than it did for those of us thirty-five and older.

Besides a biological and physiological maturation process, adolescence includes personal and social developmental changes. The synthesis of an independent adult identity takes place, and with it comes an emphasis on gaining self-esteem, identifying with others, and learning emotional behavior. Peer group interaction and identification become important as useful social anchors during this transition from de-
pendence to increased independence, and from family control to increased self-control. Peers become the reference points for the adolescent’s definition of social norms, especially those norms of conformity and deviation.

The personality and character development begun during infancy continue during adolescence as a personal set of values is sought through the adolescent’s interaction with all the varied forces and conditions of his or her environment. This value-seeking is especially intense in the development of a sexual identity and socially appropriate sexual behavior.

Establishing independence from adults becomes an important developmental task during adolescence both emotionally and financially, although the latter is often frustrated by our society’s prolonged educational demands and a recession job market. Deciding what job or career to seek is just one part of the establishment of independence during adolescence, however, and it must be accompanied by the development of the ability to make independent decisions on matters concerning him or herself, together with the answer to the adolescent’s question, “With whom shall I identify?”

All the developmental tasks and changes briefly touched on here have been universal in adolescence in many cultures, but we must also be aware of some new factors in modern Western society which affect both adolescents and our library service response to them. Besides the prolonged dependence fostered upon this age group by society’s educational and vocational needs, there is a terrible segregation of adolescents and children from the rest of society—in schools, through child labor laws, in the separation of residential and business areas, in separate patterns of social life for different age groups, in the abolition of the apprentice system, and in the delegation of child care to specialists, among others. All of these forces operate to decrease opportunities and incentives for contact between adolescents and people older or younger than themselves. Racial segregation in housing further decreases meaningful intercultural contacts among adolescents themselves.

Because of this economic and educational segregation by adults, adolescents and youth slightly older have formed a special kind of “youth culture.” They are deprived of psychic support from persons of other ages, a psychic support which once came from today’s transient nuclear family, and this lack makes them subordinate and powerless in relation to adults. They are outsiders to the dominant social institutions. Yet many have money, access to a wide range of communications media and are still relatively large in number. Forced to create and live within this alternative youth subculture, many older adolescents are reluctant to leave it and to become assimilated into the adult culture from which they have been segregated.

Adolescents, then, with their normal developmental tasks and trials, and with the social dislocation and segregations of modern life, might well be seen as a clientele in a state of crisis. Add to this the disturbing question of exactly what is the adulthood we and they wish for them to achieve? Consideration of that question, coupled with an understanding of adolescence is absolutely basic to providing good young adult library services.

The success of YA services depends primarily on the librarian responsible for it. If there is no person responsible for it, or if the person in the position is not well suited temperamentally or otherwise to working with adolescents, or if that person is required administratively to wear too many “hats” with YA services given the lowest priority, or if that person receives no administrative support, the best selected collection of materials will make little
difference to the usual adolescent library community. Moreover, there can probably be no "best selected collection of materials" without a young adult librarian. The librarian is absolutely necessary and pivotal to good young adult services.

Consider for a minute both the personal qualities and the professional qualifications of the ideal young adult librarian. First of all, the person should be a "people person," that is, someone with an approachable personality who enjoys interaction with people of all types, and someone who truly enjoys public service in all its respects. Secondly, the YA librarian should have a sense of humor and tolerance. Young adults in particular can be very trying and very funny as they act out their growing pains, and without those qualities, you will have great difficulty working with them, because you automatically represent an adult limit of some sort against whom they will test themselves.

Thirdly, the YA librarian must have a real respect for young adults and what they perceive as their needs and must recognize that these are not necessarily your own needs or the needs of the library as an institution. This can be a difficult tightrope to walk emotionally since you are 1) part of the library as an institution and 2) you do have your own needs and values. One of the pitfalls of not having respect for young adults is what John Holt in Escape from Childhood describes as a failing of all the helping professions, namely, that those set up to help others often begin to feel that the "others" (in this case, young adults) are incapable of helping themselves.

One of the primary qualities a YA librarian must have is the desire to be a YA librarian. Too often people are "assigned" this job when they really would rather be doing something else or are more interested in another age group. This is a particularly acute problem in large public library systems where personnel departments make arbitrary assignments without consulting, or by deliberately by-passing the YA services coordinator, and in schools where the librarian is there only because he or she is sick of teaching or feels that being the librarian is an easier job. If the school librarian is providing good young adult services, I guarantee that it is not an easier job, and any kind of young adult librarian must be prepared for a lot of good hard work.

It is often said that a YA librarian must be a young person rather than someone middle-aged, and I find this a terrible fallacy. While mature, well-integrated personalities occur in the under-thirty as well as in the over-thirty age groups, younger librarians can often have more trouble serving young adults because they are more self-conscious about authority roles and status, and about admitting their own lack of personal and professional experience. They also may still identify with the youth culture to such an extent that they have no perspective on what they are doing. I am sure I could also list as many problems in older librarians, but I want to kill the false assumption that the YA librarian must automatically be a young person. Therefore, the middle-aged should not consider themselves off the hook yet.

The YA librarian must like to read widely and must not be scornful of popular culture and mass communications such as paperbacks, rock music, commercial films, and television because knowledge of the interest in these is absolutely essential in working with young adults. I was once described by a colleague in Westchester as the only librarian she had ever met who had admitted enjoying anything on television outside of the educational stations, and I found that significant. An example of this is the Star Trek phenomenon in the United States. More YA energy has been expended in Star Trek fan clubs,
conventions, and memorabilia than in most of the libraries in the country, and I still meet librarians who know nothing about it. To know about it, you must know two popular culture media: television and science fiction.

I am often criticized for not putting liking to read at the top of the list for qualifications for a good YA librarian, but I have seen so many “readers” who were dismal failures with people in librarianship in general that I honestly feel the other personal qualities should come first and be well integrated with the reading and reader’s advisory functions of young adult services. I think a librarian who is not a reader would be not only an inadequate young adult librarian but also a monumental hypocrite. Readers advisory and information services are what ultimately differentiate us from recreation specialists.

Since so much of good solid traditional YA services involves working with individual young adults, the YA librarian must learn some basic communications skills, such as how to respond empathetically to questions and to the people asking them. An example of this is the perennial young adult who charges in at the last minute for a skinny book for a book report. Instead of laying a heavy judgment based on your own values on the person by saying, “Why didn’t you start this assignment earlier?” or “Most books are not under 250 pages, you know,” respond to the fact that the person is frustrated and maybe frantic, by saying something like, “You must be feeling really pushed this semester.” Immediately the tension dissolves and a climate is created for a good human library interaction. Along with this, please be well aware of every skinny book you have.

Besides good verbal communications skills, the YA librarian must be willing to walk around the library to help young adults. Margaret Edwards calls this the shift “from seat to feet.” You can’t help anyone well hiding behind a desk, and I feel that the entire library profession has adopted three assumptions designed to drive young adults out of libraries forever. The first is the assumption that the public can find things in libraries on their own and that our main job is to get all the stuff there so we can point to it. Combined with the second assumption, which is that a librarian may not leave a service desk for one minute during the time he or she is assigned to it, this leads to a new art form I have come to call “the librarian’s ballet” in which the librarian is so busy pointing in all directions that he or she never really helps anyone, or worse, never even ascertains whether they have helped themselves. When such a librarian deals with an insecure adolescent who is looking for self-esteem and is unwilling to admit a continued dependence on adults, the effect is disastrous.

It is even more so when it is combined with the third assumption which is that everyone loves the card (or book) catalog as much as we do and should know how to use it. I have to tell you a well-kept professional secret—they are never going to love it. The catalog was never meant to be a public tool and it is more important that the young adult find the materials and the human reinforcement which he or she needs than that he learn to use the catalog. Asking a young adult, “Have you looked in the catalog?” is the biggest possible turn-off we can offer, and I challenge you to find alternative questions which will allow for a more human interaction, because, I repeat: They are never going to love it.

Public speaking skills are almost essential since young adult librarians must be prepared to give booktalks, visit classes and faculty meetings, speak in in-service training sessions, and speak to community or PTA groups. These can be learned on
the job but anyone terrified of public speaking will have problems.

Some political knowledge is essential for the young adult librarian. Young adults are a volatile group, usually not well liked and often feared by the community and your adult colleagues, and your advocacy role with young adults will bring you up against these forces. You must have a sense of when to confront and how to circumvent them to serve your patrons well. Also, young adults often will tell you about rather serious personal or social matters and you will have to decide what to do with that knowledge. I do not have all the answers, but I have to say that there is no place in YA librarianship for an Alice-in-Wonderland, surrogate teenager mentality. Being a young adult librarian is a political act because you are, by your existence, advocating service to a politically oppressed group of people.

In case that remark seems outlandish, please realize that there are no "shield laws" for librarians forced into the miserable arbiters role between parent and child. The conflict of rights and services confronting any librarian trying to serve parents and their adolescent children equally is overwhelming. At the same time the adolescents are reaching for information and experiences, their parents are often trying to inhibit their access to both, and the young adult librarian is caught right in the middle. Our current adolescent pregnancy statistics are testimony to the failure of parental control of one type of information.

Finally, the young adult librarian must accept being a role model for the young adults he or she serves, not only for the profession but for all of adulthood, which is pretty scary. Many times, if you are good, you will be the only adult a young adult can talk to at that particular time in his or her life, and you must accept that responsibility. Be well aware of what attitudes toward people, reading, loving, and living you are projecting because they will always be watching you and thinking, "Do I want to be like him?" or "Do I want to be like her?"

Young adults do not expect you to be perfect, and I am not suggesting YA librarians as surrogate parents, but in Young Girls: A Portrait of Adolescence by Gisela Konopka, a fifteen-year-old describes an ideal parent, and by association, I feel she is describing an ideal young adult librarian. Notice the switch from "parent" in the first sentence to "person" in the second.

I suppose that an ideal parent is not of such a different species. I'd consider an ideal person someone who could accept other people without first taking on things like, "Oh, that person's younger than I am," or, "that person's older than I am," or, "they grow up in a different part of town," and would start by looking at people as potential friends and seeing them in that way, more optimistically, perhaps, than thinking, "I won't get along with them."

And I suppose, try to understand — that your children aren't just old individuals for you to mold, to turn out exactly like you, that they are people, and they want to do things to see what life is like, and that they have the right to explore as much as you do, within certain confines — you don't want to let them kill themselves just to see what it is like.

But I think that acceptance of other people, and other ideas, and an openness to them — although that doesn't necessarily mean compromising your own ideals — are really important things for a person to have. And I suppose not being hung up about different roles or games that people have to play — not just masculine/feminine sorts of roles, but roles about parents and children, and people having to have power over each other. You know, it doesn't have to be that way, and I think it is really important for it not to be and for people to understand that.

Now that I have described the ideal young adult librarian and you have decided that I am having fantasies about Wonder Woman and Superman, let us look at what this paragon of service actually does. YA librarianship is a specialty which crosses all specialties and because the interests of adolescents are so eclectic,
we might more accurately be called two-way library interpreters, rather than specialists. With all the resources of the library and the community as our province, YA librarians interpret the library to young adults and young adults to the library.

Whether you are in a school or public or special library, given your YA community's needs and your institutional and personal goals and objectives, your YA materials collection should include some of the following:

Books: Have as many in mass market paperback format as possible and display them on racks so the covers are visible. Young adults adore paperbacks. You should also watch for good titles which have never been reprinted in paperback and call these to publishers' attention.

The ratio of adult to juvenile titles will vary according to the reading levels and interests of your clientele, and also according to the age limits you place on your local definition of "young adult." Remember, however, that transition to adulthood is not enhanced by a collection of safe and sanitized juvenile titles, nor by the total absence of any mind-stretching titles of superior literary quality.

Do not be a snob about the junior novel. A lot of young adults, like adults, read solely for emotional reasons and find junior novels immensely satisfying. Since most junior novels are formula-written sermons, however, be aware of what is being preached in them and whether it fits into your view of the purposes of young adult services.

Include such browsing items as cartoon collections, books of photographs, trivia quizzes, and the Guinness Book of World Records.

Weed vigorously to keep the collection alive and current, whether it is kept separate or interfiled.

Recordings: You should have a wide sampling of current popular music which is very trendy and difficult to keep on top of. Most YA librarians involve young adults heavily in the selection of recordings. Be careful to identify peripheral musical interests among your young adult community so that your collection for them is not lopsided. There are many good spoken word recordings which are often unexplored resources for expanding horizons. Alternate World Recordings, for example, specializes in science fiction.

You will inevitably have a security problem with popular YA recordings which is disillusioning but true, so expect that some will be stolen and figure possible security solutions into your planning.

Pamphlets: The best and cheapest sex information and the most current career information is in pamphlet form. Do not bury these things in the vertical file. Leave them on top of tables and bookcases, or put them in brightly decorated boxes on shelves next to the books and loops on the same subject. Start a "new pamphlet" display somewhere, or better still, put up a piece of clothesline and clip the new pamphlets to it so they are visible and accessible. Be as critical of pamphlets as of any other media. Their size and format often make them more enticing and they should not be considered ephemeral even if you can afford to give them away.

Newspapers: You should include subscriptions to local papers from which you can clip articles of special interest for the bulletin board if no one picks them up. Usually, though, I find a fair number of newspaper readers among young adults. Subscribe to all the local school papers and any alternative papers in the area. These can also be displayed on the clothesline, in boxes, or spray paint a wine rack and roll each paper into each separate slot. Subscribe to any youth-produced papers in your community of interest to
your young adult patrons. Read all these items yourself for community background.

**Referral Files:** You should maintain an up-to-date file of every helping agency for adolescents in your community which includes not only hours, services and fees, but also directions, a contact person, and any comments on the quality of service given there. If you are not committed to keeping your files absolutely up-to-date and are not willing to take some personal responsibility for what happens at the end of your referral, you should not have these files, I do feel, though, that not having them shows a major gap in your service attitudes toward young adults and toward the library's information role in general.

**Reference Works:** These will vary according to your institution and your community needs. Public YA librarians usually depend on an adult or reference department to buy these and will buy only a few bibliographic ready-reference items for the YA librarian's shelf or desk. Try to have material in a variety of formats which circulates since many YAs come unprepared to work in the library.

If you are in a departmentalized public library be sure you are involved in the selection of reference materials and in the formulation of service policies. One of the biggest fallacies in these day of term papers and reports is that school-related reference work is unimportant and should be part of "adult reference" thus freeing the YA librarians for readers' advisory work. Most teenagers do not come to the library primarily to find a good book to read, but rather to do homework. The way they are treated in this reference need may determine whether they ever return.

To relegate homework needs to adult-oriented reference librarians ill-equipped to deal with adolescents in the face of compulsory education laws to me is idiocy. School may be oppressive, but it is also important to teenagers as runaway statistics at report card time inevitably show. Besides this fallacy, it interests me that many school-related reference needs are really reader's advisory in nature for which adult reference librarians are inadequate because they are usually poorly read in YA materials.

The politics of a YA librarian being absorbed by a higher-status, lower-service reference department interested in strictly factual, supermarket, countable interactions are very real, and should be guarded against. Reference librarians often do not wish to validate the reader's advisory function inherent in YA services. Both functions should also be present in school library YA services.

**Films:** 16 millimeter films are of great entertainment interest to young adults and they are great discussion promoters. Usually individual libraries must borrow these from some central source in a school district or a library system. Be sure that you are familiar with what is available, what might be purchased, and that YA interests are represented in any centralized film collection. If you lack facilities to show them yourself, at least call them to the attention of other youth professionals in the community who can show them to young adults.

Do not neglect to acquire 8 mm. films for YAs, if possible, because many offerings in this area are of interest to them and they can be circulated more easily than 16 mm.

**Games and Puzzles:** Some incredible educational games exist which may be circulated or reserved for in-house use, and the proverbial chess set is a great attraction for some young adults.

**Yearbooks:** School yearbooks are great fun for young adults to identify friends, and sometimes lovers, in local schools; to see
what a new friend looked like three years ago, etc. They are a very good way for you to get to know young adults' names. Yearbooks, in fact, are so popular that you may face a security problem.

Posters: These are often best used to brighten up the library for young adults but can be circulated successfully in tubes, or laminated and rolled to be checked out. They are especially popular with young teenagers.

Magazines: Besides the titles aimed specifically at the young adult readers (unfortunately, most of those are aimed at girls with a heavy sexist bias), there are titles on popular music and on just about any recreational interest you can find among young adults: motorcycles, playing the guitar, bicycles, monsters, science fiction, karate, hot rods, surfing, skiing, etc. You are limited only by their interests and your budget.

High-Interest, Low-Reading Level Materials: Format is extremely important in those materials and you will soon find that most of them are produced by educational publishers for classroom use. A few good ones do exist and I think this picture will be changing. Again, do not be a snob. If you are a slave to literary merit as a primary criterion for evaluating print materials, you will go crazy with high-interest, low reading level materials, all of which tend to be formula written and very superficial.

We desperately need to formulate and to figure out how to juxtapose standards for materials for people who can read and standards for materials for those who cannot.

Despite the fact that you will hear endless discussions over the merits of separate versus interfiled public library young adult collections, do not be confused. Neither is an absolute. As long as there is a good YA librarian who has the materials some-where and knows how to get them into the hands of young adults, you have young adult services.

The actual services are implied in the list of materials: reader's advisory floor work, designing and compiling booklists, answering reference questions, making referrals, giving booktalks to classes, guiding tours in the library, advising youth professionals and teachers in the community; speaking to adult and young adult groups about adolescents and library services to them; planning programs yourself or in co-sponsorship with another agency or department or library; writing reviews, newspaper releases and radio spots; attending staff in-service, and professional association meetings; running interference for young adults with the rest of the library staff; trying to get advance notice of mass assignments; visiting youth institutions and providing service directly or cooperatively there; calling the community's attention to gaps in its overall youth services through program forums, private conferences, and if necessary, testimony at public hearings. The list of services is endless and a good YA librarian is limited only by lack of imagination, time, training, initiative, politics or administrative support.

I am sure it is becoming obvious that I could talk for days on this topic, so I would like to conclude with a few comments on continuing education beyond the expected reading of professional literature, inadequate as it is in young adult services. Your professional associations are your vehicle not only out of the isolation of your local situation but they are also a way for you to grow and to make a professional contribution to young adult services. Even if you cannot attend conferences, your dues help pay the salaries of people working in your interest on publications, on legislation and with other segments of the profession.

Unfortunately, many librarians feel that
their professional education ends, rather than begins, with the M.L.S., and they do not realize the continuing education opportunities inherent in strong professional associations at every level. You do have to give for what you get, too, if only in money.

Another problem is that few people in YA services take the time to write about what they are doing so we all run in place reinventing the wheel all the time. I encourage you to write constantly about your successes and your failures so that YA services is recorded and visible in professional literature.

Besides writing and participating in our professional association, it is wise to read in allied fields which also serve adolescents, especially the health and legal professions, and occasionally to attend non-library conferences such as the National Youth Workers conference held in Indiana in June, 1977. Librarians talking to librarians can often be like the blind leading the blind.

Young Adult Services is often criticized as lacking a firm philosophical base, and you will often find that flexibility and expediency become confused in actual practice. Besides being advocates for youth’s right to know, I feel the ultimate goal of YA services could well be summed up in a poem called “Lies” by Yevtushenko with which I would like to end . . . as you begin:

TELLING lies to the young is wrong
Proving to them that lies are true is wrong.
Telling them that God’s in his heaven
and all’s well with the world is wrong.
The young know what you mean.
The young are people.
Tell them the difficulties can’t be counted,
and let them see not only what will be
but see with clarity these present times.
Say obstacles exist they must encounter.
Sorrow happens, hardship happens.
The hell with it.
Who never knew
The price of happiness will not be happy.
Forgive no error you recognize,
it will repeat itself, increase
and afterwards our pupils will
not forgive in us what we forgave.