

## A Room (or Shelf) of Their Own: Teen Spaces in Public Libraries

### Why

On average, 25% of a community's population is teenagers. Yes, you read that correctly, **25%**. According to the most recent census, we have roughly 600,000 teenagers in Colorado. Now look at the public space in your library. Is 25% of the space devoted to teens and their needs?

What collections do you have that appeal to teens? What about fiction, non-fiction for fun reading, magazines, and media? Do you shelve the teen materials in a teen section, or are they interfiled with the children's or adult materials? Do you have teens digging through your large adult fiction collection, desperately seeking a teen paperback mystery, fantasy, or romance novel? Pull your teen collection into a teen space, even if it is just a row or two of shelves. Separate out the teen collection and make it easy for these reluctant readers to find something they actually want to read.

### Decor

The children's area of your library probably has large colorful posters and toys. You have matched the décor to the clientele, and you should do so with teens as well. Use different colors, teen-friendly posters, and teen-choice furniture to define the area. Put colorful wrapping paper on the ends of the shelving units that contain teen materials. Consider spray-painting the shelves, to give a simple visual clue that this space is different from the rest. Use different colors or styles of promotional materials in the teen space as well. If you purchase furniture, make it teen-friendly, teen-sized, and low to the ground. Patrons will be given an instant, simple visual clue that this area is built for the 12-18 year old crowd.

Be sure to ask the teens what they think. Show them the READ posters from ALA and ask them to pick the posters to hang in the teen area. One of the most important places in a teen's life is their bedroom, the place they get to decorate and claim as their own. Your teen space becomes their Third Space, their room out in the community, where they get to define who and what they are. They'll want it to reflect who they are, what they think, and what they like.

### Where

Teens, like toddlers, are in a loud developmental stage. They need to be able to socialize in order to push the boundaries, discover their senses of humor, and develop into the adult they want to be. That means the teen space, *just like the children's space* and *just like the large print section* may be louder than the adult part of the library. Place the teen shelf or area carefully. Teens will congregate in the teen space, and the gentle rumble of a couple of teens, while no louder than a group of adults, may cause consternation. Think twice about locating the teen books directly next to the quiet adult reading area.

Think thrice before locating the teen space somewhere that will endanger the teens. Remember, there is no such thing as free and there is no such thing as safe. Public means public. Your library probably does not allow unattended adults to hang out in the children's section for extended periods of time, particularly in afterschool hours. If an adult were to approach a 6-year-old, you would intercede to protect the child from a stranger. Why then would you allow those same adult strangers to hang out near vulnerable 14-year-old girls in the teen space?

### **Rules for the teen area**

Rules have a way of coming back to haunt you, so be careful which rules you choose. There are two crucial rules for any teen area, be it a range of shelves or a whole room of their own:

#### **1) The teen space is for teens**

You need to establish this basic rule early on, and have support at all levels. No policy exists in a vacuum, and your administration must back you up. No teen will feel welcome in the space if the area is filled with adults, nor will a shy 13-year-old ask an adult to please leave the teen area. While teens seem invincible in groups, they are in fact quite vulnerable. Just like a patron of any other age, library policy must reflect a teen's right to use the library free of impediments, including aggressive adults.

The adults have plenty of room in the adult parts of the library, they do not need to horn in on the tiny corner you set aside for teens. Odds are, you have more staff overseeing the adult parts of the library than you do overseeing the teen space. It is all too easy, therefore, for the teen space to become the nexus for negative adult patron behavior, behaviors adults cannot get away with in higher-staffed areas of the library. Avoid conflicts from the beginning with this simple rule: The teen space is for teens.

#### **2) Respect**

Respect for themselves, for each other, for the other patrons, for the building, for the staff, respect for the collection – this one-word rule can be applied in a myriad of situations. This rule does not talk down to teens, it does not employ the word “No,” and it requires the same thing from all patrons and all staff.

If you have any questions about teen services, there are people available to help you. Contact Colorado Young Adult Advocates in Libraries, <http://www.aclin.org/~cyaal>, for more ideas, suggestions, and advice.

Mary McCarthy  
City of Boulder Public Library

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