

# “Understanding Teens and Their Space”

A chapter from

## **Teen Spaces, Second Edition**

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# Understanding Teens and Their Space

**T**he first rule in design—before any plans are drawn up or any furniture is purchased—is to make sure you understand the customer. In the world of professional design (and in the world of twenty-first-century libraries), successful projects and service are inherently the result of having a firm grasp on customer needs and wants. Responsive and successful design of space for teenagers comes from understanding the group you are serving. Learning to recognize teen behavior and needs, likes and dislikes, is essential in understanding what is necessary and appropriate for the ideal young adult area.

## WHO ARE TEENS?

Based on 2006 data, there are approximately 25,616,753 people ages thirteen to eighteen in the United States, which is 8.5 percent of its overall population. Trends indicate there will be an estimated 26 million teens in 2010, 28 million in 2020, and over 30 million by 2030.<sup>1</sup> That's a considerable group and a clear indication that there is a population out there in need of attention, the services libraries offer, and a space designated just for them. So who are these teens and how can you, as the librarian and teen space facilitator, determine their needs and wants?

In simplest terms, teens are defined by their age. Social age is the level of social and mental development as compared to chronological age, which is the number of years a person has lived. It is possible that a teenager could have a social age that does not correspond to his or her chronological age. For example, a thirteen-year-old might be in sixth grade, or a sixth-grader could have the social age of a fourteen-year-old.

Peter Zollo, author of *Getting Wiser to Teens: More Insights into Marketing and Advertising to Teenagers*, defines teenagers as those twelve- to nineteen-years-old. Zollo also addresses the fact that the teen population is rising faster than that of adults.<sup>2</sup> The uniqueness of this group's size, as well as its diversity by gender, ethnicity, household income, geography, attitudes, and lifestyles, most definitely make it a challenging group to target. Ann Curry and Ursula Schwaiger summed it up best in their article on planning library spaces for teenagers:

Teenagers have never been easy to understand. They straddle both childhood and adulthood, their minds and bodies filled with a restless energy as they hurtle through developmental milestones at an amazing rate, yet each speed is uniquely personal. They are filled with an amazing power, yet are often crippled by anxiety and self-doubt.<sup>3</sup>

Present-day teens fall into a broader group that is variously labeled Millennials, Generation Y, the Net Generation (or Net Gen), Internet Generation (or iGen), echo-boomers, the Gaming Generation, or the Digital Generation. They are defined as being

techno-savvy, multitasking, self-confident, realistic, optimistic, connected, goal-oriented, service-oriented, and collaborative. They will not conform and often ask “why?” Although we have yet to know and define the next generation of teens, they too will have their own values, personalities, and ideas.

Most adults, including the World War II generation, Baby Boomers, and Generation Xers, would agree that being a teenager was one of the most difficult times of their lives, filled with a whirlwind of vastly differing experiences and emotions. A large part of providing quality service to teens and effectively working with them means understanding youth development. Youth development is multidimensional and includes meeting youth needs and building youth competencies to help them become successful adults. Instead of viewing teenagers as problems, it means viewing them as resources, building on their strengths and capabilities to develop within their own community. Youth development programs seek to build competencies, skills, and healthy attitudes and behaviors, with a focus on seven developmental needs of adolescents:

- physical activity
- competence and achievement
- self-definition
- creative expression
- positive social interactions with peers and adults
- structure and clear limits
- meaningful participation<sup>4</sup>

These needs can be fully met in a well-planned, full-service teen library. For instance, to achieve self-definition, teens need and want a space of their own; one that is away from adults and young children. *Libraries can do this.* In conjunction with physical activity, teens need spaces and furniture that help them relax and move and stretch their growing bodies. *Libraries can do this.* Teens need the opportunity to participate in projects that allow them to be imaginative and creatively express their feelings and interests. *Libraries can do this.* Teenagers want and need a place where they can hang out with their friends and also experience positive interactions with adults. *Libraries can do this.* Teens want their contributions recognized and want to receive praise for their ideas and hard work. *Libraries can do this.* Finally, they need structure and clear limits. *Libraries can do this, too.* By building the ideal teen space and actively involving teens in the entire process, you are acting as their advocate, working to create a place with the potential for fulfilling all of their needs.

The Search Institute has spent years researching teenagers and their developmental needs. One of its key findings is that the more assets adolescents have, the less likely they are to participate in dangerous behaviors and the *more* likely they are to engage in positive activities. The Search Institute has identified forty building blocks of healthy development for young people, called developmental assets, that will help youth to succeed in school and to grow up physically healthy, caring, and responsible. (See figure 1.1.)<sup>5</sup> The forty assets are divided into external assets and internal assets and then separated into eight categories. Look at the list of assets carefully, and determine which ones can be applied to your design project. Pay close attention to assets such as community values youth, youth as resources, planning and decision making, and interpersonal competence.

**Figure 1.1** Forty Developmental Assets

Category	Asset Name and Definition
Support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Family support—Family life provides high levels of love and support.</li> <li>2. Positive family communication—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parent(s).</li> <li>3. Other adult relationships—Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.</li> <li>4. Caring neighborhood—Young person experiences caring neighbors.</li> <li>5. Caring school climate—School provides a caring, encouraging environment.</li> <li>6. Parent involvement in schooling—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.</li> </ol>
Empowerment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Community values youth—Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.</li> <li>8. Youth as resources—Young people are given useful roles in the community.</li> <li>9. Service to others—Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.</li> <li>10. Safety—Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.</li> </ol>
Boundaries and Expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Family boundaries—Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person’s whereabouts.</li> <li>12. School boundaries—School provides clear rules and consequences.</li> <li>13. Neighborhood boundaries—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people’s behavior.</li> <li>14. Adult role models—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.</li> <li>15. Positive peer influence—Young person’s best friends model responsible behavior.</li> <li>16. High expectations—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.</li> </ol>
Constructive Use of Time	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17. Creative activities—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.</li> <li>18. Youth programs—Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.</li> <li>19. Religious community—Young person spends one hour or more per week in activities in a religious institution.</li> <li>20. Time at home—Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or more nights per week.</li> </ol>

(cont.)

**Figure 1.1** Forty Development Assets (cont.)

Category	Asset Name and Definition
Commitment of Learning	21. Achievement motivation—Young person is motivated to do well in school.
	22. School engagement—Young person is actively engaged in learning.
	23. Homework—Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
	24. Bonding to school—Young person cares about her or his school.
	25. Reading for pleasure—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
Positive Values	26. Caring—Young person places high value on helping other people.
	27. Equality and social justice—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
	28. Integrity—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
	29. Honesty—Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”
	30. Responsibility—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
	31. Restraint—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
Social Competencies	32. Planning and decision making—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
	33. Interpersonal competence—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
	34. Cultural competence—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
	35. Resistance skills—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
	36. Peaceful conflict resolution—Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.
Positive Identity	37. Personal power—Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”
	38. Self-esteem—Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
	39. Sense of purpose—Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”
	40. Positive view of personal future—Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

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How could these be incorporated into your overall plan? For example, look at the internal asset, social competencies and ask, “What are the implications related to this, the project, and teens?”

Most teen space projects should strive to encourage teens to work with others and to listen to other teen and adult opinions. Such projects should also strive to teach teens how to plan and make choices. All of these are reflected in assets 32 (Planning and Decision Making), 33 (Interpersonal Competence), and 36 (Peaceful Conflict Resolution). Taking this approach will shine a new light on your plans. What may have started as a project with the potential to increase library business could also quickly develop into something even more worthwhile for adolescents and their development.

At first glance, it might appear that creating a successful space for such a diverse group with so many needs is easier said than done. However, it’s not as difficult as it seems. The key is gaining an understanding of them. The rewards for doing so successfully are well worth the effort.

Keep in mind that none of this has to be accomplished overnight or single-handedly. In fact, the libraries that have the most success are the ones that take their time, plan carefully, and work with their teen customers from start to finish.

## UNDERSTANDING TEEN WANTS AND NEEDS

The first step in developing a successful teen space is marketing to and understanding your teen customers. Begin figuring out what teens are all about by considering their pastimes, friends, and personal preferences. Ask yourself a few fundamental questions:

Who are the teens you’re serving—both library users and nonusers?

What activities (both educational and recreational) do teens primarily do?

Where do they prefer to hang out and why?

What is genuinely important to them?

Envision what it was like for you as a teen. Then think about what it’s like being a teen today. What are your perceptions and assumptions? Validate your thoughts, and find out how things realistically compare by browsing through some of the resources found in appendix C.

After reflecting on these questions, begin considering how to apply the answers to the design plan. For example, if hanging out with friends is what is important to teens, how could this information be incorporated into the design of your library’s teen area? If it’s conclusive that the mall and sporting events are high on their list of where they prefer to hang out, how could you best apply that information? Keep in mind that the thought process behind the answers is equally as important as the answers themselves, because making the effort to try to think like a teenager gives an adult important insight into a teen’s world and allows for a better end result.

## MARKETING 101

Marketing is more than promoting and merchandising your library and its collection and services; it is a process. Marketing is about *understanding* your market (i.e., your

teen customers, both users and nonusers) and bringing your products (i.e., your library, teen space, collection, and services) to your customers. In simplest terms it is a three-step process:

1. Identify your teen customers and target groups.
2. Identify your products.
3. Connect your teen customers to the products.

Often libraries and schools make the mistake of designing facilities without a complete or accurate understanding of their market. Knowing your customer is the foundation of good marketing and today's library *must* be customer-focused, which means first identifying all needs of your customers and potential customers. Marketing makes it all work. Just take a look at successful companies that cater to teens such as Apple, Gap, and Pepsi. Businesses such as these are marketing experts, and libraries can learn a lot from them when it comes to marketing, advertising, and retailing. Businesses with successful marketing targeted to teens know exactly how to tie in a teenager's wants with their companies' products. Therefore, don't waste time reinventing the wheel. Make some observations, do a little research, and borrow some ideas or practices. For example, Apple realizes that adults and teens want to apply personality to their technology, so the company developed products that express their customers' personalities (e.g., multicolored computer and iPod options).

Begin the first stage of marketing by conducting market research, making general observations, and informally talking to teens. Chapter 2 discusses how to get additional direct teen feedback and input through focus groups, committee work, brainstorming sessions, and surveys. All of the data and information you obtain from knowing your customers, combined with the information you get from studying your competition (i.e., bookstores), will help you gain a full understanding of the big picture and move forward more effectively with your space plan.

As you proceed, develop a marketing plan by using the marketing mix, or the four Ps of marketing:

Product—what you are selling

Price—cost in time and money to the library as well as the price to the customer (see chapter 3)

Place—location (physical and virtual) of where you provide and promote your product (see chapter 2)

Promotion—the P that everyone knows; this includes advertising, sponsorships, public relations, viral marketing, and more (see chapter 5)

By looking at your product (in this case, your teen space and related products and services) with the right combination of the four Ps, you can improve your results and marketing effectiveness. A marketing plan can also be a well-received addition to your final space plan as outlined in chapter 3.

See figure 1.2 for a marketing strategy grid. You will need to use details in the other chapters to help you fill in your grid.

**Figure 1.2 Marketing Strategy**

<p><b>Product</b></p> <p>What do you have that teens need?</p> <p>What could you offer to attract teens to the library?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teen space</li> <li>Related services and products</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pricing</b></p> <p>What is the cost in time and money?</p> <p>What is the “price” to customer?</p> <p>How can you get the most bang for your buck?</p> <p>How should you evaluate (e.g., ROI—Return on Investment)?</p>
<p><b>Placement</b></p> <p>Where is the most effective location to <i>provide</i> and <i>promote</i> your product?</p> <p>Key: Think in terms of physical space (within the library and outside the library) as well as virtual space.</p>	<p><b>Promotion</b></p> <p>How can you attract teens to your space and services?</p> <p>How do you inform them about the space and products and services you have?</p> <p>Find your “power” networkers and stakeholders—then outreach, outreach, outreach!</p>

## Market Research

To really *know* teenagers you need to find out what they’re saying about their likes, dislikes, wants, and needs. You can find this information through market research, which commonly involves gathering primary and secondary data. The majority of the information will be of the secondary variety, already compiled and organized for you. Primary data involves carrying out your own research through written, online, telephone, and in-person surveys or conducting focus groups, observing teens, and having one-on-one conversations. Throughout the market research process, keep in mind that when it comes to talking to teens, the key lies in direct, open communication—really hearing what they have to say and sincerely making an effort to relate to them. More information on marketing-related concepts can be found in chapters 2 and 6.

## Observation

Another excellent way to gather information is to observe teens. Familiarize yourself with their environments. For example, where do they like to hang out? Possible answers include their bedroom, friends’ houses, the mall, bookstores, and coffee shops. Spend a Saturday afternoon or evening after school at the local mall or coffee shop. How do they use these spaces? What seems to be appealing to them? In addition to observing teens in other environments, closely examine how they use your library. Where are the most popular gathering places and why? Do they struggle using the library? If so, what are the issues? Which services are they using? Which don’t they use? Are there any environmental factors that seem to influence their behavior and use of the library?

Careful observation of the things, places, and people that teens surround themselves with reveals a great deal about their personality, likes, and dislikes. For instance, if you notice that the majority of teens carry around snacks, cell phones, and MP3 players in



their backpacks, this tells you that food, communication, and music are important to this age group. How can you use this information to develop an effective space for young adults? Knowing this, it would be wise for your library to

- provide provisions in library policy for snacking and drinking in the library
- create spaces that allow both quiet and conversational areas
- consider cell phone use policies, potentially integrating cell phone etiquette into the mix
- focus on music collections (CD and downloadable) as well as music-related books and magazines
- feature listening stations and/or a stereo into the teen area
- consider circulating MP3 players (in-house or externally)

The main point is to make a few observations and to see the correlation between teen surroundings and how they can influence the design of an area designated for teens.

### Direct Feedback

If you *really* want to find out more about teens and their preferences, talk to them. If you ask, teens will be more than willing to answer your questions. Talk to them one on one, conduct surveys, form teen committees and advisory councils, and hold focus groups. (For more details on these practices, refer to chapter 2.) Getting teen input is critical to the entire design process. Teenagers are the ones who can honestly (and be prepared for complete truthfulness) tell you the impression your library is making—or not making—on them.

In fact, much of the information presented in this book was gathered directly from teens. During a series of focus groups held in communities across the United States between October 2006 and January 2008, teens were asked what they would like to see in libraries. The top fifteen common responses were

1. More space for teens
2. A separate, distinct teen area
3. Comfortable furniture
4. Warm, welcoming environment
5. More technology such as computers, TVs, listening stations, sound domes, gaming equipment
6. Teen-only computers
7. Areas for talking and socializing as well as quiet study
8. More natural light and better, “cooler” artificial light
9. More up-to-date materials such as graphic novels, music, DVDs, popular books, magazines, and video games
10. Good signs that look nice and make it easy to find things
11. Color (no white walls)
12. Food and drink options such as vending machines or a library café

13. Better advertising of services and programs
14. Cleaner, better organized library
15. Helpful staff and good customer service<sup>6</sup>

Over 75 percent of online survey respondents said having a space just for teens that is comfortable and welcoming, where they could hang out, would make them want to use the library more. Other top responses to increase teen library use included having a café (68 percent), bringing in more technologies such as listening stations, TVs, etc. (58 percent), adding music and DVDs (56 percent), adding more books (55 percent), and adding more computers (51 percent).

Once you have gathered the feedback, begin asking yourself

How can these insights help develop your library's teen space plan? Service plan?

How does their input and ideas influence your ideas and goals?

Being able to compile all your research, observations, and feedback and objectively look at it and incorporate it is the most important (and often overlooked) step in facilities and space planning projects.

## WHY TEEN SPACE?

As the number of teenagers increases and as more school and public libraries look to understand their teenage customers and reevaluate their priorities and services, an unprecedented number will move away from traditional approaches of library service to a new approach of creating more efficient, innovative, appealing, and teen-inspired libraries. Such a reevaluation of priorities is supported by the fact that kids are not only using the library, they are visiting frequently; 78 percent of children ages eight to eighteen have library cards.<sup>7</sup>

The Council for Educational Facilities Planners and supporting research have proven that there is an integral relationship between the quality of educational facilities and the level of student achievement. Facilities impact the learning, development, and behavior of the user.<sup>8</sup> Three-quarters of Americans believe it is a high priority for local public libraries to offer a safe place where teenagers can study and congregate.<sup>9</sup> Equally relevant is the Harris Poll response to the question, "I would use my local public library more often if . . ." Twenty-six percent of the respondents replied, "If there was a space just for teens."

One example of why teen space works is verbYL, a stand-alone storefront youth space for young people ages thirteen to twenty-five, located in the main street of Yeppoon in Central Queensland, Australia. The space, developed with input from local young people, opened in 2005. It was developed in part because it is the only youth center in the area. Debra Burn, library manager at Rockhampton (Australia) Regional Council, developed the concept and continues to oversee the library operations. She says, "Critical success factors for verbYL include the equal partnership between the library council's youth services and library services; the development of a distinctive brand for the service; and the engagement of young people in the design and ongoing operation of the service." VerbYL was recognized in the national awards for local government 2006 as the winner, youth engagement category; and by the Queensland Public Librarians Association for innovative service provision to the community in 2006.<sup>10</sup>

At the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls (South Africa), teams of educators, architects, interior designers, artists, and others created what Oprah Winfrey calls “an atmosphere of possibility.” “If you are surrounded by beauty, it inspires beauty in you,” she says, adding, “Quality is a magnet for quality . . . It’s been said that quality is never an accident—rather, it’s the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction, and skillful execution.” The school’s library has a relaxed feel, with comfortable seating near the windows and around the fireplace; some pillows are covered with mud cloth from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. “Educational places don’t have to be serious; they need to be inspiring,” says Michelle Sakayan of Chicago-based Nagle Hartray Architects, who was one of many responsible for the campus’s architectural work.<sup>11</sup>

When the school board at the Academy of Irving ISD Library (Texas) asked why a physical library was even necessary at their high tech specialty school, since students get all their information from the Internet, library director Caroline Kienzle gave a com-

PELLING presentation about the importance of the library for instruction as well as a place for community. “Our goal from the beginning was to develop a warm, inviting place that students felt comfortable visiting, whether to work on a project, browse for books, do homework, or just hang out during lunch,” said Kienzle’s colleague, librarian Gloria Willingham.<sup>12</sup> Creating appealing teen environments is a way to meet the needs of an important (and traditionally forgotten) group of library customers. It is a way to expand a library’s customer base now and in the future, by appealing to both users and nonusers, creating a wider variety of customers from diverse social groups, backgrounds, and interests.



### WHY TEEN SPACE?

- Build positive, safe environments for studying, socializing, and leisure activities
- Support teenagers and encourage teen belonging, community involvement, and library appreciation
- Expand your customer base by appealing to users and nonusers; traditional and nontraditional customers
- Effectively market your library, and draw teens into your library space, leading them to other services
- Increase current and future library supporters

### WHAT IS TEEN SPACE?

After you have a general understanding of your teen customers and why teen space is important, it is essential that you understand what teen space is. Library teen space refers to both public library space as well as school libraries, and it can also refer to academic facilities. Teenagers say that a good teen area, no matter where it is located, must be welcoming, fun, exciting, clearly defined, attractive, and informal. Its contents must be up to date, functional, easy to find, durable, and eye-catching. At its best, a teen area in a public library should be its own separate space and the heart of teen activity. Similarly, a school library should be dynamic, inviting, and the hub of its school.

Public libraries constantly struggle with how to define teen space and its users. In school environments, it’s generally more cut-and-dried—a middle school library serves middle school students, whether that is sixth through eighth grade or seventh through eighth, and so on. In public library environments, making this distinction becomes a bit more complicated. Does a teen area serve preteens or is it solely intended for those who

are true teenagers? In an ideal world, based on developmental and chronological age, public libraries would have separate, designated, youth space for preschoolers, school-age children, middle school students, and high school students. In larger facilities, there may be an opportunity for this; in small and medium-sized facilities, this is not always the case. Teen space and the topics addressed in this book are geared toward the thirteen-through eighteen-year-old customer.

The definition of teen space must also take into account “library as place” and the library as “third place,” a term coined by Ray Oldenburg in his 1990 book *The Great Good Place*. The *third place* term used in the concept of community building refers to social surroundings separate from the two usual social environments of home (the first place) and the workplace (the second place), where we spend most of our time. (For teenagers, the equivalent would most likely be school.) Third places are defined as locations that have a role between the home and the workplace (or school) that allow people to be around other people without being in a structured setting. More and more libraries are being identified by their customers as their third place. Libraries are incorporating features such as cafés, comfortable seating in living room–like areas, group and quiet study rooms, spaces for community meetings, and public performance venues. Look at the Bookworm branches in China. The Bookworm Chengdu is a library with 5,000 (and growing) books in English, European languages and Chinese, a European restaurant, a full program of poetry and book readings, Scrabble competitions, free wireless Internet access, and more. With increased attention to and accommodation of these characteristics, libraries can become the third place for teenagers. See appendix E for more information.

Just as there is no mistake that children’s libraries are intended for young children, there should be no mistake that a teen area or facility is intended especially for teenagers. A first-rate teen space should have the ability to fit into a teen’s life, meeting the variety of needs and uses essential for this age group. Just as teens long for separate identities, it is equally important for them to establish a distinct area that allows them to express their individuality, including but not limited to how the space is designed and decorated.

If done correctly, teen space is a useful marketing tool, enabling libraries to draw teenagers into the library and leading them to other library services such as materials, programming, etc. All of these efforts provide a path to increasing current and future library supporters. The future of libraries is tomorrow’s adults and, believe it or not, these are today’s teenagers.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

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