

**YALSA Board of Directors Meeting
ALA Midwinter Meeting, Seattle
January 19-24, 2007**

Topic: Request for Board Action: Adopt Reference Guidelines

Background: At the 2005 Annual meeting YALSA's Board voted to establish an interdivisional taskforce with RUSA to create reference guidelines for teens. The taskforce has completed its work and is submitting the Guidelines for Board approval.

Action Required: Action

NAME = Sarah Flowers, RUSA/YALSA Joint Reference Taskforce Co-Chair

REQUEST = Approve the RUSA/YALSA Guidelines for Reference Service to Teens.

RATIONALE = This is the result of the Joint Task Force activity.

**Guidelines for Library Services to Teens
Board Review Draft, Midwinter '07**

Forward

These guidelines were created in 2006 by a joint task force of members of both RUSA and YALSA. Members of the task force were Sarah Flowers, Helen Hejny, Rosemary Chance, Mary K. Chelton, David Fuller, and Stephen Matthews.

Introduction

Teens are substantial users of public libraries (NCES, 1995) and the primary users of secondary school libraries. Their presence and numbers, as well as their developmental characteristics and life circumstances present a unique challenge for reference service providers.

While adolescents have many personal information interests, mandatory schooling requires them to use libraries for what Melissa Gross (1995) has termed, "imposed queries" that is, questions imposed on them by teachers for assignments. These "imposed" queries increase the challenge of the reference interview because teenagers do not know or are often not interested in the content of what they're asking, only that they have to have it, preferably yesterday. Sometimes their parents come as surrogates to help them, and they know even less about what is needed. Public librarians sometimes mistakenly assume that teens have been taught how to do research by someone else. School librarians often address these imposed queries by providing instruction that promotes inquiry-based learning but this is far from

universal. In addition, classroom teachers usually “impose” assignments on many students at once, thus creating a problem with “mass assignments” in libraries where many teenagers want the same information at the same time, regardless of what is available.

Even the personal reference questions of teenagers can be challenging because of the popular and transient nature of young adult interests in topics like the occult, popular music and graphic novels. This is further complicated by the fact that many adults are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with many of these interests. Topics that might be considered routine for an adult are often viewed by librarians as problematic when a teenager wants the same information. It also goes without saying that many parents resist the maturation of their adolescents by setting boundaries on what information or formats may be accessed. This can create problems for librarians who find that service to teenagers requires a clear understanding of, and adherence to, ALA’s stated intellectual freedom policies, often beyond personal comfort levels.

All of these contextual issues are compounded by adolescent development. One of the most amazing things that happens during adolescence is the development of formal operational thinking which is the ability to hypothesize and think about the future and foresee consequences for different actions. From this ability comes the development of personal ethics and critical thinking abilities. Thus teenagers wait until the last minute to do homework assignments that need library resources, and despite being perceived as computer-savvy by adults, they do not know, nor allow themselves time to learn, how to search intelligently and systematically for information. In addition, they often resent having to ask for help, or expect the work to be done for them, since they’re not interested in it anyway.

Another developmental aspect of early adolescence is extreme self-consciousness. With gradually developing abstract thinking skills and limited experience, teenagers feel that they are the center of the universe. This is normal, not selfish or deliberate. This ego-centrism makes them easily embarrassed because if they “mess up,” they think that the whole world is watching. Thus, reference librarians need to assure courteous service and confidentiality. Teenagers will not ask certain questions if they fear that other adults or kids can find out what they’re asking. Service must also be non-judgmental because perceived slights like not making eye contact or acting as if a question is trivial will be greatly magnified by the teen. (Chelton, 1997). All of these factors combine to make reference service to teenagers unique as well as uniquely challenging. It is our hope that these guidelines will help reference librarians in all kinds of libraries provide excellent service to teenagers.

References

Chelton, Mary K., *Adult-Adolescent Service Encounters: The Library Context*. Rutgers University, 1997. Doctoral dissertation.

Gross, Melissa. “Imposed Query,” *RQ* Vol. 35, No. 1 (1995): 236-243.

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Guidelines

1.0 Integrate library service to teens into the overall library plan, budget and service program.

It is essential for the leaders and policy makers of the library to understand that service for teens is not a fad; that the need and demand for library services will only increase; that teens have unique library service needs that are different from those of children or adults; and that nothing short of a total moral and financial commitment to library services for teens will meet the needs and demands of the present and future teen library user.

- 1.1 Acknowledge the educational and developmental needs of teens in the library's strategic planning and evaluation process.
- 1.2 Incorporate funding for materials and services for teens in the library's operating budget.
- 1.3 Actively seek supplemental funding for programs and services to teens.
- 1.4 Provide spaces and collections for teens that are separate from children's spaces and collections.

2.0 Provide teens with courteous and professional customer service at every service point.

Friendly, positive, and unbiased customer interactions are the goal of every public service provider. This is especially true in the world of libraries, as we strive to offer courteous professional services to all library users. All library customers, regardless of age, benefit when library staff foster a knowledgeable, friendly, and inviting atmosphere.

- 2.1 Promote a more beneficial working relationship with teens through continuous staff development and education.
- 2.2 Integrate library services to teens with those offered to other user populations.
- 2.3 Assure that services for teens embrace cultural diversity and economic differences.
- 2.4 Train all staff members to respect the teen's need for privacy.
- 2.5 Provide services by teen specialists or certified school library media specialists as well as by others who are trained to serve teens.

3.0 Use the most current information and communication technologies, the connections that they use on a daily basis, to provide information to teens.

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Online information and electronic communication is a way of life for most teens. They have come of age with the web, the iPod, cable and satellite television, the cell phone, etc., and these tools form a seamless part of their everyday lives. Change and innovation are and will be the defining forces in personal technology, so this list of gadgets and interfaces will expand and change as the “ways to be wired” morph and grow. Librarians need to understand how these “digital natives” perceive the world. We need to provide direction, structure, and effective assistance, both when we are asked directly to help as well as when we are not. Sound and savvy instruction in information literacy and thoughtful design of intuitive and welcoming portals to our virtual libraries are essential allies in serving the needs of teens.

- 3.1 Provide unfettered and convenient access to licensed databases and other online library resources for teenagers.
- 3.2 Incorporate the use of instant messaging, blogs, and social networking sites into service plans that are designed to provide reference services to teens.
- 3.3 Employ in-person as well as digital (on-line tutorials, help screens, search process prompts) methods of information literacy instruction at the point of service.
- 3.4 Develop and promote homework assistance websites/portals as key elements in meeting the information needs of teenagers.
- 3.5 Ensure that teens receive the same high quality of online reference service as all other users.
- 3.6 Endeavor to make online reference services available 24/7 to accommodate teenagers' busy lifestyles and often unpredictable study and research habits.

4.0 Provide and promote information and resources appropriate to both curriculum and leisure needs of teens.

Teens approach the reference desk with two main types of questions: the “imposed” query (usually a school assignment) and the personal query (often a popular culture interest). Maintaining a collection that is relevant to the interests and needs of teens will help to maintain the relevance of the library in their lives. The library’s role extends beyond gathering resources to keeping them current and actively seeking means to publicize and promote them. The library should be positioned as a primary access point to information on everything from school curriculum topics to college planning, health issues, career opportunities, and popular culture.

- 4.1 Develop collections to reflect the information needs and interests of teens.

- 4.2 Take the requests of teens seriously, and ask for their input in developing collections for them.
- 4.3 Recognize that homework is a major part of teen information seeking and that homework assistance is a necessary service for this age group.
- 4.4. Provide a variety of formats for information and resources, such as audio books, databases, internet access, and listening equipment, as well as computer programs such as word processing, spreadsheet, database, and web publishing software for homework assignments, class projects, and recreational use.

5.0 Provide library services and programs appropriate for teens.

Libraries should provide a community setting for teen programming that will ultimately enable teens to develop new library skills, to become independent and skillful library users and to enjoy traditional informational or recreational programs.

- 5.1 Provide positive programming to meet the needs and interests of teens and their family members as well as opportunities for teens to experience ownership of the library by contributing collection suggestions and situations in which they can share their expertise (with reading, technology, hobbies etc.)
- 5.2 Create activities that promote growth and development such as community service hours, volunteer opportunities and projects that help develop a sense of responsibility.
- 5.3 Guide teens to become self-sufficient library users through example and pertinent activities and positive programs specifically designed to meet their interests.
- 5.4 Develop programming and services to meet the needs of teens unable to visit the library through technology and outreach.
- 5.5 Publicize services and programs for teens in popular local establishments and using current technology trends.
- 5.6 Actively involve teens in planning and implementing services and programs for their age group through advisory boards, task forces, and by less formal means (i.e., surveys, one-on-one discussion, focus groups, etc.)

6.0 Cultivate partnerships with community agencies and groups serving teens.

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Library programs and services for teens should not replicate those of other agencies, but can complement and support them. Investigate possible joint programs for teens. Identify resources the library can provide to assist professionals who work with teens.

6.1 Identify community organizations and groups of and for teens.

6.2 Collaborate with schools in areas such as class assignments, reading lists, and bibliographic instruction to more effectively serve teens with their academic needs.

6.3 Collaborate with other organizations serving teens such as youth groups and afterschool programs.

6.4 Partner with schools and local organizations for library programs and delivery of services.

Resources

Alexander, Jonathan. *Digital Youth: Emerging Literacies on the World Wide Web*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006.

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Youth Information-Seeking Behavior: Theories, Models, and Issues. Mary K. Chelton and Colleen Cool, eds. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004.

Youth Information-Seeking BehaviorII: Context, Theories, Models, & Issues. Mary K. Chelton and Colleen Cool, eds., Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007.