



Bee-Tweens at the Bee Cave Public Library

Listening to
Tween Voices
Leads to
Opportunities and
Successes



By Terry Lewis and Cate Sweeney

Several years ago, our library underwent an assessment for a comprehensive remodel. Once the bidding process was done and after extensive meetings with an architect and designer who specialized in the unique features and challenges of a library like ours, we brought the estimate and plans before our City Council and Mayor. The Council members combed through our annotated purchase requests, which added up to a considerable sum. Our library director sat before the dais, bracing herself for an onslaught of challenges and questions for her to field. After a long silence, a new council member leaned toward the microphone and rather sheepishly asked, “I have a question. What exactly is a *tween chair*?”

Though it seemed a rather absurd thing to ask at a moment like that, with so many other larger ticket items on our proposal, it was also more than a fair question. Not only because we tend to use terms like “tweens” commonly in our library jargon but also because it hits on one of the defining challenges of this middle-aged group. What is a tween and why do they need something as specific as their own book collections, programming, or furniture?

Even experts who spend time immersed in these topics acknowledge, “The word *tween* holds a rather ambiguous definition. There is no doubt that it defines the period between childhood and the teenage years, yet the question lies in the exact ages” (Wilkins-Bester and Balducci 2014). So when our library became interested in reaching this “ambiguous” age group through some targeted programming about five years ago, we

recognized early on that we needed to begin defining our concept of a tween and how we could meet tweens where they were developmentally. Much of this process began by building on successful programming aimed just a few years beyond these tweens.

Building TAB First

In many ways, the impetus behind our tween programming began with our Teen Advisory Board, or TAB. This volunteer-based monthly program had a modest start with just three or four teen shelvers in search of more volunteer hours through the library. We formalized the program by branding it as a way for teens to “come boss the library around” for an hour each month and opened it up to grades seven through twelve. Though this grade range actually brought in a few twelve-year-olds over the years, we found this worked, with the older teens taking on more leadership roles and eventually becoming “TAB officers.”

Over time, we encountered an unexpected challenge: an increased demand from younger ages to attend TAB events and meetings. Tween patrons and their parents would see a flyer for a program that appealed to them with words like “Chocolate Wars” across the top and immediately wanted to participate. We began having to field pleas along the lines of “But my daughter reads on a teen level” from parents with a child just a year or two below the TAB cutoff. It was difficult to describe to the parents that the age restriction wasn’t about how academically capable a child was. As a response, we became more transparent with our reasoning behind the cutoff, stating

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things along the lines of “This event is focused on creating a social environment specific for the teen age group.” Though most of our patrons came to understand our reasoning, we realized that there was clearly a demand to engage this preteen age group separately and distinctly from teens. And it seemed that our TAB had inadvertently begun to build some momentum for tween programming already.

Evolution of Bee-Tweens

Our discussions on how to structure and build a tween program included everything from a formal book club to something mirroring our TAB program. Early on, we purchased *Voya’s Tween Scene* publication (Wilkins-Bester 2014) that helped us get a better sense of what we could expect from our tweens developmentally and how to distinguish the age range that we would target.

We reflected on our library’s mission to offer a new cross section of our community a safe social environment and promote positive associations with the library as a community center for interest-driven learning, and to do a monthly activity-focused program for fourth through sixth grade students. We found ample anecdotal and academically supported evidence to back our decision to be less like the classroom structure of a book club or a meeting.

We decided on sixth grade as an upper end point because TAB offered the next grades up. We also noticed that the difference between a third grader and a sixth grader developmentally in a group setting was vastly different from that of a fourth grader and a sixth grader. So much happens between third and fourth grade that it seemed as though the best social opportunities would be with a smaller range in age differences. According to Thompson, “social interaction with another child who is similar in age, skills, and

knowledge provokes the development of many social skills that are valuable for the rest of life” (2020). That said, we do invite third graders to our summer tween programs as a way to help provide a sneak peek of what they have to look forward to in a year and to help offer opportunities to build the program as the older tweens age out.

Through it all, we continued to commit to not requiring program registration. Though this led to unpredictable numbers and made planning difficult, ultimately it made our programs more accessible and made it possible for tweens to “bring a friend” at the last minute. Because this furthered our mission of creating a safe and welcoming social environment for this age group, we felt it was a worthwhile exchange.

Even with these careful considerations, the first year of our “Bee-Tweens” program was rough. Despite the feedback from the community indicating interest, we still managed to bring in only one to six tweens to these monthly events. But, once again, our experience building the TAB program taught us that momentum can build, especially when we observed what was and wasn’t working. From there, we could incorporate small tweaks along the way.

One especially useful tool was to create a formal poll. Because our summer reading tween programming had relatively strong turnout, we had the perfect group of parents to solicit for feedback on which days and times worked best to host this program as well as the types of activities that would appeal to their children. We also used that group to begin building an email list for those interested in attending similar events through the school year. Each month, we would send an announcement with more details about the upcoming program, allowing us to maintain interest with those who had the intention to at-

tend but might forget. This gradually brought in an extra tween or two each month, increasing the base of support for the program.

Perhaps the most significant effect on building our turnout, however, came from our branding efforts. Previously, we had created our flyers with the Bee-Tweens logo and a general explanation of the program being activities for fourth to sixth graders. Though this had worked for TAB meetings in the past because the service hours were such a draw for both the parents and teens, we quickly found that tweens needed something more visually engaging and identifiable, like references to pop culture (“Iron Chef Bee Cave”), food (“Chocolate Wars”), or a crowd-pleasing activity (“Lego Challenges”). In addition, we found that parents wanted to feel as though their kids were learning something, so we embedded terms like STEM and STEAM to applicable events such as our forensic programs, “Slime Time,” and “Computer Guts.” Once we started targeting both audiences (tween and parent) with the visuals and terms that spoke to them, we saw our numbers rise significantly over the following year.

Learning Curve

Not everything TAB did could directly translate to Bee-Tweens. Some differences were small. For one, a big appeal of TAB is getting community service hours for attending because our local high school requires volunteer hours for graduating seniors. That incentive, which encourages attendance, was not applicable to the tween program. Another difference is that TAB meetings involve group planning and working toward future activities, whereas Bee-Tweens is solely fun and activity oriented.

The biggest difference we encountered, however, was the developmental variance between teens and



tweens. Some programs translated well between the age groups. Others did not. We witnessed firsthand the truth that, “tweens are not ready for, and have less interest in, more abstract and complex teen programming”

mess of overfrosted cupcakes, broken bits of candy everywhere, and socially perplexed adolescents. Of the many programs we plan to recycle in the future for upcoming tweens, this one will not be revisited.



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(Wilkins-Bester and Balducci 2014). For instance, “Chocolate Wars” began with TAB and, with a few minor adaptations, has been used almost every year with Bee-Tweens. It is incredibly fun and popular! On the other hand, although we have also done escape rooms with both age groups, the teens were much more able to self-direct, whereas the tweens required more guidance and needed more defined tasks.

One program that had an epic developmental “lost in translation” between teen and tween programming was “Cupcake Wars.” In this program, teams of three or four people were given a dozen cupcakes and assorted icings, sprinkles, and other decorations. The teams then had to arrange and decorate the cupcakes to look like something related to books—character, setting, book cover, etc. With our teens we saw wonderful social collaboration that resulted in amazingly creative and humorous handiwork. The tweens, on the other hand, struggled with every aspect of the program. Unable to grasp the concept of the task, they were too socially uncoordinated to work effectively with their peer group. The result was a comical

Tweens tend to be more socially awkward than teens. As witnessed in the “Cupcake Wars” debacle, tweens don’t always work well in groups. Typically, “social comparison with peers is an important means by which children evaluate their skills, knowledge, and personal qualities, but it may cause them to feel that they do not measure up well against others” (Thompson 2020). Recognizing that working with others and by oneself are both important life skills, we tried to incorporate both aspects into our tween programming by varying activities, both within individual programs and in programming overall. We offered team activities such as games and group projects as well as self-guided crafts and activities. For example, in “Chocolate Wars,” tweens paint with chocolate pudding and take the Chocolate Taste Test by themselves but work as a team in the Hershey’s Kisses Relay and the Chocolate Quiz. “Buckle Up for a Wild Ride,” on the other hand, was completely team oriented. Small groups worked together to build a roller coaster out of foam tubular insulation. With some adult guidance in the task to help with group dynamics, they ended up doing a great job and

having a blast. We always let the kids choose their own groups when possible but coming into a room and not knowing anyone in any of the groups can be very disconcerting for tweens. In that case, we’ll put them in a group with someone we know will make them feel comfortable and welcome.

Parental involvement is a considerable difference between our teen and tween programs. Most TAB teens are independent enough to drive themselves or have their parents drop them off. With tweens, however, parents are understandably more present. We welcome that for safety reasons alone, offering parents the option to stay in the room during the program or wait in the library downstairs. Most parents are happy sitting in the chairs provided and reading, working on a computer, or just observing. There are other parents, however, who want to be involved in the program. Though parent participation can sometimes be helpful when we have an activity that needs lots of guidance and are lacking the staff or volunteers to help, it can also quickly diminish our social focus of the program. This situation was the case at one of our escape rooms when a mother became overly invested in the outcome of her child’s group as they worked to solve the various puzzles in the game. After showing no signs of stepping back, we finally had to take the initiative to encourage her to let the group work through the challenges on their own.

Predicting program turnout has been challenging because we have found that tweens are attracted to the event based on the program topics more than anything. We do have some regular Bee-Tweens attendees, but we mostly have programs where people participate, and then we don’t see them soon after. Observing this experience informs us more than discourages us. Tweens are at very different levels of development and

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have different interests. If we can offer a program that interests them and that they're willing to make the effort to come to, that's a win for all of us!

Successes

As with all our library programs, we found it useful to measure this program's success with a range of different criteria. And during the process of considering all of these measures, we discovered both intended and unexpected successes.

Our original goal with the program was to provide a new social environment for tweens to interact and enjoy open-ended learning processes with their peers. After a couple of years building our numbers, we found ourselves hosting events of a dozen or more tweens from private, public, and home schools throughout the area. Some tweens came with friends, but mostly they met new peers as they solved escape room puzzles, unwrapped Hershey's kisses with oven mitts, or made slime out of various household products. Out of context, these activities may seem like modest accomplishments for a learning institution, but we saw these events as huge successes, especially keeping in mind all we had learned about the social needs of this unique age group. Particularly, "the social skills learned through peer...relationships, and children's increasing ability to participate in meaningful interpersonal communication, provide a necessary foundation for the challenges of adolescence" (Child Development, Stages of Growth 2020).

Among the successes we hoped to see was building a safe and engaging social community for this transitioning age group. Knowing "(m)iddle-school-age children have a strong need to feel accepted and worthwhile...(t)hey like to be in an organized group of others similar to themselves," we created events that focused as much on the

process as the outcome (Myers-Walls and Karns n.d.). We want the tweens to feel valued, so we have them wear name tags so that we can call them by name. Depending on the program, we'll sometimes start with the kids introducing themselves to everyone, telling the group their name, grade, and school. Because this age group needs help with group activities as well as some social skills, when they are working in groups, we make sure that they introduce themselves to the others in their group. When we have newcomers, we try to pair them up with someone else from their school, hoping this will give them a connection that makes them feel comfortable. It's such fun to see kids, who didn't

they see her on the library floor and don't hesitate to ask her for help or to share what they're reading. We see it when they proudly show off their crafty creations to other library staff on their way out. We feel it when parents express sincere and heartfelt appreciation at each program, praising individual activities they loved as well as the program as a whole. Perhaps one of the greatest ways we saw this though was when Bee-Tweens Saturday fell on the birthday of one of our regular attendees. She didn't want to miss that day, so she came and brought a friend. That felt like such a huge success—there was truly nowhere she would have rather been on her special day than the library!



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know each other previously, pairing up to go through the various stations or work on a project together. At "CSI: Bee Cave," our forensics program, we had a "laser beam" obstacle course. During the last ten minutes of the program, we had about five kids, most of whom did not know each other until that day, create races and challenges with each other to see who could get through the course the fastest. It was heartening and totally hysterical!

We set out to build positive associations and an expanded view of the library for parents and children with all of our programming efforts. We have seen successes in this area in myriad ways. We see it when tweens eagerly greet the program lead when

One of the most interesting and unexpected successes of the program is how it has interacted and become so symbiotic with the TAB program itself. Because tween events require volunteer support to run certain stations, TAB teens stepped in to get additional service hours. Teens loved this opportunity to get involved in programming with older ages (because generally they are helping really young age groups stay safe with scissors, etc). Kids in the tween age range admire and imitate older boys and girls, providing yet another social development layer for the tweens and a leadership opportunity for the teens (Query and Levings, 2006). Ultimately, what results is an ongoing feeder program for our TAB as tweens begin looking forward



to aging into these volunteer and leadership opportunities as they get older. Both programs thrive through this relationship.

Tween Programing During a Pandemic

Much like the middle schoolers that we serve with Bee-Tweens, our library is going through a transition. After several years of learning and fine-tuning this program, we are now reckoning with the COVID-19 crisis, which is challenging our fundamental practices for providing programs and services. In a time when gathering our community members for hands-on activities and learning has become a health hazard, it is easy to start wondering if everything we have previously built and learned in serving and connecting our community members is somehow irrelevant.

How can we safely help our young patrons socially connect, have new learning experiences, and build positive associations with their local library when we currently aren't even able to open our doors? As daunting as it is to search for answers to these questions, it may be helpful to remind ourselves that this is the kind of existential crisis that precedes any kind of developmental growth. And if there was ever an age group that would mirror these kinds of challenges, and perhaps be forgiving as we feel out-of-sorts trying out new practices, it would be our tweens.

Consequently, we have found it useful to beta-test overall programming through our tween programming. They are, in many ways, the most forgiving group to work with for something like this because we have built key infrastructure pieces with an email list for feedback and polling, a number of programs to draw inspiration

from as we look for adaptations, and a knowledge base of what to expect from this unique age group.

Of course, like many libraries we are learning new ways to engage various ages with online streaming platforms and are beginning to discuss the possibility of a tween Zoom book club. We have also hosted an online Literary Escape Room where participants were mailed medals for competing. However, we also recognize that virtual platforms aren't the only, or even primary, answer to serve this group. As a result, we are looking into partnering with our Parks and Recreation Department as well as our neighbors in the shopping area where we are located to potentially use outdoor spaces with the hope of adapting a "Ninja Warrior" program we had slated for the fall. We plan to incorporate our TAB teens to help set up the course in stages, painting the sidewalk with prompts for areas where tweens could jump, dodge, limbo, and more while maintaining social distance. The course would be offered for an extended period of time for tweens to run through as many times as they like, encouraging them to send pictures and videos that we can post on social media. As we become part of the collaborative and creative conversation about safely adapting library services, we are finding few limits on our ability to still accomplish our goals.

Conclusion

Part of our core mission with programming for everyone from our youngest to oldest patrons is to create opportunities for our community to both connect and engage in lifelong learning. In the case of tweens, we can help meet that developmental need to interact in a structured social environment while also providing an engaging

and memorable event, regardless of circumstance. And when we accomplish that, we know that once we get past the challenges of this moment, we will see them again coming through our doors. ■

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