

# STRIVING TO SERVE Diverse Youth

## MAINSTREAMING TEENS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS THROUGH PUBLIC LIBRARY PROGRAMMING

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**T**o be effective in their field, public librarians in young-adult services must attempt to serve all youth, including those with unique needs due to emotional and behavioral disorders or developmental disabilities. Targeted hospitality and active outreach will help bring this population into the library, and careful and creative planning will ensure all youth involved in programming and library events grow from the experience regardless of the presence or lack of a disabling condition.

Please note: Any names and identifying descriptions of minors throughout this article have been changed to ensure anonymity.

### **Young Adults with Special Needs in the Public Library**

As a young-adult librarian in a midsized public library, I have the privilege of serving a truly diverse group of adolescents. I enjoy planning and facilitating programs that draw a wide variety of teens: *Dance Dance Revolution* tournaments for gamers, trivia contests for quiz enthusiasts, book groups for emerging literary critics, and arts programming for young crafters and artists. Successful programs are always rewarding, but the events with the most gratifying results are those that involve youth representing the full spectrum of library customers. Among the youth who frequently attend the programming I facilitate are several teens that display behaviors commonly associated with emotional, behavioral, and developmental difficulties. While I cannot know the specific diagnosis of each teen with special needs I work with, some adult caregivers give me unsolicited information about the teen (or teens) they care for as an explanation of atypical behaviors or to

offer refocusing techniques that work with the youth in question. Additionally, some adolescents feel compelled to inform me of the reasons they behave the way they do. For example, fifteen-year-old Jake, who told me that he "can't sit still for more than ten seconds because of [his] really really bad ADHD," and fifteen-year-old Juanita, who approached me at her first teen library event and said, "You will have to remind me that it is not okay to hit people, because sometimes I do that without even knowing it." When teens or adults share such information with me, I try to use it to better serve that particular youth while keeping the diagnosis confidential.

Due to my lack of specific training or education in diagnosing or treating emotional and behavioral disorders or developmental disabilities, I will speak in terms of behaviors, not specific disorders, diagnoses, or disabilities. When I refer to emotionally, behaviorally, or developmentally disabled teens in this article, I am using these terms to identify adolescents who consistently display atypical behaviors in the library environment. The majority of the teens discussed do have a medical or psychological diagnosis that I have been made aware of, but, regardless of the presence of a diagnosis or disability, if atypical behaviors are displayed by a teen participating in a library program, program facilitators will be more successful at guaranteeing a safe, enjoyable, and productive environment for all program attendees and library staff if the individual's special needs are taken into account.

## Challenges of Inclusive Programming

It can be challenging to facilitate activities and programs that welcome both adolescents with and without special needs. All teens deserve the utmost respect and compassion from program leaders and should be offered programs and projects that engage and stimulate in a variety of ways. I have found that teens, regardless of abilities, share many interests, and library programs involving popular culture, the arts, video games, and craft activities have drawn strikingly diverse participants.

Among the challenges of actively welcoming youth with disabilities into public library programs are preparing and coaching the library staff to ensure appropriate relations and interactions with patrons, working with participating teens to make library events comfortable for all program attendees regardless of abilities, fielding the questions and concerns from parents and caregivers of teen participants, and facilitating interactions between teens and outside

visitors who might not expect to see youth with special needs at the library (such as media representatives) who come to observe an event or program.

## Targeted Hospitality and Active Outreach

Serving youth with special needs was not addressed in my library school courses or practicum work. I had some experiences with library users with physical disabilities in my library jobs while working toward my MLS, but it wasn't until I began employment with Ocean County Library System last June that I began to evaluate services offered to teens with special needs through the public library. While I saw many adolescents with special needs in the community, in schools, and even in the library building, none of these youths were participating in library programs. I began approaching teens with observable special needs who already visited the library and explaining what teen events were coming up, thus extending a personal invitation for them to participate. This targeted hospitality resulted in a small number of teens with special needs attending library programs. After initial success with this user group's participation in library programs, I began to perform outreach directly to agencies serving youth with disabilities. This included maintaining a working relationship with area group homes, families with teen children with special needs, and special-education teachers at local public schools. This outreach has resulted in a steady increase in the number of teens with disabilities attending library programming. I can now expect at least one or two youths with handicapping conditions at all teen events, with some types of programs consistently drawing a higher percentage.

## The Sushi Slayers Anime Club

One biweekly program I facilitate, an anime group called the Sushi Slayers Anime Club, attracts many teens who have special needs. As the group has developed and grown over the past six months, it has been both a challenge and a joy to ensure all participants have fun and feel comfortable with each other and with the program content. The purpose of the program is to give young anime enthusiasts an opportunity to watch new anime episodes and talk to other teens who share this passion for Japanese animation. The program is structured yet relaxed; some attendees quietly watch the anime, some chat with friends about their favorite books and movies, some hang around the snack table and eat, and some

compare drawings and original manga writings. It is not unusual to have between fifteen and twenty-five teens at anime events, and when sixty or seventy percent of the participants have special needs, creative planning is essential to keep everything going smoothly. The best part of working with the Sushi Slayers Anime Club has been watching how quickly and easily teens accept each other's unique behaviors and form strong friendships. While it is fantastic to see these friendships take root within the boundaries of the anime club, it's even better to see them grow outside the library. For example, when Sasha, a sixteen-year-old who exhibited some severely disruptive behaviors—including excessive shouting, swearing, and growling—started coming to Sushi Slayers, many teens were hesitant to interact with her simply because of the loud volume of her voice and the words she used to express herself. After two meetings, the group became able to see through these behaviors and appreciate all that Sasha had to offer (including an impressive mastery of all things related to *Fullmetal Alchemist* and a stellar Winry Rockwell impression). During a book-talking visit to the local public high school last month, I heard Sasha down the hallway, and when I reached her, I saw she was surrounded by four other teens that come to Sushi Slayers, and they were engaged in a spirited conversation about the previous night's television airing of *InuYasha*. I don't know what Sasha's school social life was like before she became part of the anime club, but it was clear that she was successfully networking with peers through our meetings.

Another Sushi Slayer Club regular, fifteen-year-old Raj, also displayed an increase in social skills through participation in the group. Raj's mother introduced herself and her son at the first club meeting. "Raj has some needs you should be aware of," his mother told me, "He has Asperger's Disorder, and tends to avoid contact with peers." Raj added that he liked older people and younger people more than peers his own age, because peers were "generally much more unkind and much less understanding of my social interaction styles." But Raj's love of anime and manga were enough to keep him coming to meetings, and four or five weeks after his first visit, his mother called to let me know that Raj had asked her permission to invite two teens he had met at anime meetings to spend the night at his house. She was surprised—Raj had never asked to have friends over before. "He told me that the other club members are just as interested in anime as he is," Raj's mother reported, "which I find hard to believe, but we'll give this having friends thing a try."

## The Public Library's Role in Development and Socialization for Young Adults

Though growth and development of social skills are evident in youths like Sasha and Raj, it is unrealistic to claim that public library programming can alleviate emotional disorders, behavioral disorders, or developmental disabilities. But I believe that library programming is, by definition, beneficial to adolescent participants. All teens are faced with constant challenges, including physical changes in the body, variations of hormone levels, new social and behavioral expectations, and important changes in the ability to think in an increasingly abstract way. Well-designed library programming can help teens establish healthy self-esteem, strong information-seeking skills, confidence in their problem-solving abilities, and a better understanding of the importance of a diverse social network.

The library is a natural place for teens to want to be during the period of transition from child to adult. Many teens who exhibit one set of behaviors at school or home act differently at the public library. The library is a place where a teen can essentially "start over" by establishing themselves as the person they want to be, since the library staff does not usually know how the teen interacts with her parents and siblings, how she does in school, or what her police record looks like. Thus the library is a safe place to try out new personas. Since the library offers many recreational options, like video-game events and popular culture-themed programs, it can be seen as a respite from other parts of a teen's life where there are established patterns of negative behavior. For example, I have a very enthusiastic fifteen-year-old teen volunteer who has been working with me at the library for almost five months. He has never let me down in any sense; he's always on time, energetic, and pleasant, as well as talented artistically and attentive to detail. During a recent school visit, I spoke to one of his classes, and he came up to chat with me after my presentation. When the period ended and the students left the room, the classroom teacher expressed shock that I knew Jason, claiming that he was a "thug" who consistently causes trouble and fails classes. I was disappointed that she felt it necessary to label a student that way, and if I had not known Jason previously, her opinion may have had a significant impact on the way I viewed him. Since I had met him outside of his school environment, however, I had the opportunity to interact with him away from his existing reputation. Likewise, teens with special needs have no real responsibility to tell

me what their diagnosis is, so I am able to work with them without knowing about any issues I don't see. By focusing on present behaviors, I can serve that teen in a way that makes sense in a library environment, without focusing on other needs that do not apply to our current project.

## Creative Programming and Event Facilitation

At the beginning of most teen library programs, attendees split themselves into the small groups they feel most at ease with. Assorted clusters of teens take over different corners of the meeting room, and if a participant does not "belong" in one of these established groups, he has no choice but to stand apart from the rest of the young adults in the room. This isolating behavior can be magnified if one or more of the teens display atypical behaviors. It is not unusual for teens without obvious disabilities to be slightly taken aback when first introduced to youth with special needs. It can take some encouragement to get groups of teens to welcome adolescents displaying unusual behaviors into their crowd. At programs, I often ask all teens in attendance to "mix up" so everyone can get to know new people. If that doesn't work, and a participant seems to be left out of the larger group, I will simply walk the teen who seems hesitant to actively engage with others to a table or small group and introduce her while making a space or pulling up a chair for her to occupy. I have yet to have a serious problem with teasing or ostracizing youth because of a difference, but I have had a few teens distressed over symptoms of specific observable differences, like loud voices, differences in personal space needs, and the use of inappropriate language. Ten minutes into an activity, however, everyone gets more comfortable, and differences—while not forgotten—become a nonissue.

## Adult Caregiver, Community, and Library Staff Concerns

While most teens are able to quickly overcome any discomfort from working with peers with special needs, adult caregivers of young adults without a disability often display more hesitance. Adults coming to pick up an adolescent from library events have made some surprising comments when seeing youth with special needs involved in the programs, ranging from statements like, "I didn't know that this was a community service program" to more offensive questions, such as "Is it safe to have kids like that with

regular ones?" I find it most effective to answer queries from adults directly and in a normal tone, without pulling them aside or whispering. I answer all questions honestly, without sharing any unnecessary information about the teens or their unique diagnoses or symptoms. I will say things like "I think we all feel safe with each other, and if things start to get out of hand I just encourage the group to reevaluate their actions," or "Isn't it great to see so much diversity in young library users?" which is usually enough to satisfy concerned adults. I have had phone calls from parents who want more information on my ability to "control" adolescents with special needs while their own children are present at programming. When this occurs, I do my best to offer these parents reassurance that library events are designed with safety in mind for all participants. I frequently invite caregivers—concerned or not—to attend teen programs, but few choose to stay through the events.

Another hurdle to welcoming diverse teens into library activities is ensuring all library staff are knowledgeable of appropriate ways of interacting with youth who act in ways that seem unusual. I am fortunate to work in a library in which essentially all of the staff enjoy teens and will eagerly make accommodations for youth with disabilities. When teens who exhibit eccentric behaviors visit our library, the staff handles atypical actions and seemingly inappropriate behavior graciously. Beyond demonstrating a high level of respect for the customer regardless of their behavior, the staff also impress me with their professionalism while working with other customers' who have comments or questions. I recently observed the circulation staff serving a large group of teens with special needs visiting from a group home. The teens made several inappropriate remarks, including accusing the library staff of withholding certain privileges from the group based on race. Not only did the staff effectively work through the issue, but when a later customer attempted to start a conversation about the needs of these adolescents, the circulation representative looked him straight in the eye and asked "What can I do for you?" without acknowledging his query about the youths. By ignoring the comments about the previous customers, the staff was able to effectively and efficiently continue their work while protecting all customers' right to privacy and integrity.

An occasional issue I have had with teens with special needs arises when media representatives visit the library to cover teen programming. It can be a difficult space to navigate when a reporter wants to interview a teen with special needs. While I am thrilled

to see any teen receive attention from reporters and photographers, unusual interactions can ensue when the youth involved exhibits unusual behaviors. I generally do not step in to assist with communication unless the situation gets obviously uncomfortable for the teen involved. I once witnessed a twenty-five-minute interview, which was supposed to be about an anime event, in which the young adult being questioned enthusiastically explained not why he enjoys coming to the library to watch new Japanese animation with his peers, but instead detailed the complex relationship between his Faye Valentine (a *Cowboy Bebop* character) action figure and his stuffed Kakuna (a Pokémon character) toy. The teen loved having the chance to talk to someone new about his toys, and if the reporter couldn't find a creative way to end the conversation, I wasn't about to bail her out. Joe talked about his interview for several weeks afterward, and now refers to his Faye Valentine and Kakuna as "news-paper stars."

## Safety and Behavioral Issues

While I am in total support of hosting all kinds of teens at public-library events, it should be acknowledged that regardless of diagnosis or known disability, it is absolutely unacceptable to have abusive or physically out-of-control young adults involved in public library programming without proper support. While all teens deserve the opportunity to take part in programs and events at the library, it is not appropriate to allow potentially or previously violent teens to endanger other participants. If a potentially or previously violent teen comes to an event without a support staff—whether a parent, other relative, or professional caregiver—who can assist the teen with maintaining appropriate behavior, that teen may need to be, respectfully and compassionately, asked to leave the event. This is also true for teens that are verbally abusive or socially manipulative. *Safety of the group must come first, and as a public librarian this occasionally means having to exclude a teen from a program until effective support can be established.* At larger public libraries, it may be possible to enlist the help of additional library staff for programs drawing a large percentage of teens with special needs, similar to aids and teaching assistants employed by schools. At many libraries, though, there simply are not enough resources to train and allocate staff for this type of work.

While behavioral issues arise with some frequency when working with any large group of adolescents, groups of youth including individuals with special

needs are especially prone to behavioral difficulties. It is important not to reprimand the whole group when one or two adolescents are acting out. I also refrain from loudly identifying the teens who are having trouble with self-control. The most effective strategy I have found while working with a large group of teens, including some with special needs, is to target specific behaviors in ways that work for that particular youth. If John responds well to a "three strikes and you're out of the program" model of facilitator feedback, I will use that system. If Marta reacts quickly to redirection when she is acting out, I will have some possible tasks in mind that I can offer if her behavior starts to escalate, such as asking her to check on the snack table or help me do a count of the program participants. It can take several interactions with a teen to find the best way of effectively redirecting their energies, and if I have difficulties working with a particular youth, I will often ask the youth or their guardians for suggestions.

## Peer Support

Inclusion in public-library programming has the potential for being a fundamental steppingstone for youth with special needs making the transition from teen to adult. Teens with special needs require effective modeling from others in the community to help them feel confident of their ability to become contributing members of adult society. As proven by the high rate of school failure and dropout, inability to get or hold a job, financial failure or incompetence, and poor connectedness to peers seen in young adults with disabilities, youth with special needs have a difficult time making the transition into adulthood. One way of helping this transition is to offer teens minimally invasive and destigmatizing intervention strategies.<sup>1</sup> One such strategy is peer mentoring. In a recent research paper entitled *Effects of Peer Mentors on Work-Related Performance of Adolescents With Behavioral and/or Learning Disabilities*, authors Debbie Westerlund, Elizabeth Granucci, Peter Gamache, and Hewitt Clark explore the ways peer mentoring can assist with the development of necessary skills in a workplace. According to their findings, "A peer-mentor instructional and coaching role for youth with disabilities in . . . training programs could provide an especially effective means to build on young people's interests and strengths, tailor supports, and improve successful learning of work-related curriculum skills," a statement which can easily be extended to encompass public-library programming. The study observed youth with learning disabilities and emotional distur-

bances, and the "intent was for these young people in transition to gain greater competencies and successes through the use of a nonstigmatizing, natural support in a vocational educational setting."<sup>2</sup> Offering teens with disabilities a place in large- and small-group activities, where participants work together to create a pleasurable environment and complete a task, allows them to watch, understand, and mimic the appropriate behaviors of other young adults. By being a part of the group, each teen is essentially mentoring and mentored. Subtle behavior modification, in the form of natural supports such as targeted demonstrations, descriptive praise, and corrective feedback, are more effective when provided by peers instead of an adult facilitator.<sup>3</sup>

Thus said, it is not only the teens with special needs that benefit from inclusion in library programs. Youth who do not exhibit symptoms of mental, behavioral, or developmental disabilities can also gain significant knowledge and experience by participating in events alongside adolescents with unique needs. Research with teens has shown that individuals with "psychiatric disorders are stigmatized more severely than people with health problems."<sup>4</sup> Teens actively discriminate those who exhibit stigmatizing behaviors caused by mental illness more readily than similar behaviors caused by non-biological origins, to the extent of rating an adolescent with mental illness caused by a brain tumor "less dangerous, less likely to be feared, more worthy of help, and less likely to be avoided than the teen with mental illness without organic cause."<sup>5</sup> This type of finding emphasizes the importance of grouping diverse teens together. Early and frequent exposure to peers with special needs will effectively reduce the negative stigma associated with teens who have disabilities. Facilitating and encouraging group work with adolescents of varying abilities creates an opportunity to allow teens to grow into compassionate adults who do not discriminate against individuals exhibiting atypical behaviors.

## An Optimistic Future

Evidence in recent publications indicates that public libraries are beginning to actively develop their ser-

vices to youth with special needs. Articles like Holly Halvorson's "Asperger's Syndrome: How the Public Library Can Address These Special Needs," published in the winter 2006 issue of *Children and Libraries*, and Emily Dagg's "Middle School Volunteers with Special Needs at the Denver Public Library," from the summer 2006 *Young Adult Library Services*, do a great service to librarians and library-support staff by modeling empathetic and constructive ways of serving youth with special needs. I look forward to seeing this trend of inclusion continue.

Thus far in my tenure with the Ocean County Library System, I have found great fulfillment from welcoming young adults with emotional, behavioral, and developmental disabilities into teen programming and library events. I believe that continuing to do so will increase the awareness of diversity in the youth I serve and help build a strong foundation for a sense of community among teens who may otherwise resist interaction. By sharing diverse skills and gifts, adolescents can begin to see that the best results in life come from collaborating with people who reflect difference. Through group work and interaction with diverse peers, all youth can gain an appreciation of differences and build from this understanding a sense of human unity. ■

## References

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2. *Ibid.*, 245.
3. *Ibid.*, 250.
4. P. W. Corrigan, Lurie B. Demming, and H. H. Goldman, "How Do Teens Regard Peers with Psychiatric Disorders?" *Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter* 21, no. 7 (July 2005): 3.
5. *Ibid.*



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