From Hanging Out to Homework: Teens in the Library

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I
ts just past three o’clock and here they
come clomping into the library, calling
loudly to one another over the bass-
thumping of their headphones, tossing
backpacks across tables, and colonizing
computers in clusters. The teens have ar-
ried and whether they settle down to ad-
dress the day’s homework or simply hang
out waiting for a ride home, the library
is suddenly host to the energy unique to
adolescence.

How librarians acknowledge, under-
stand, and accommodate that energy can
help shape the quality of the library experi-
ence for teens, other patrons, and staff.

But is it really possible to understand this
species that emerges like mutants from the
sweetness of late childhood? Or is it simply
easier to wait out the turbulence caused
by hormonal floods and watch the clock,
trusting in two certainties: that the teens
will eventually go home, and that someday
they will mature into adults? Fortunately,
recent research has opened new avenues
of understanding about adolescent brain
development that provide those who live
or work with teens an opportunity to re-
consider our perception of teen behaviors.

Brain Development
An assumption of brain development
theory has been that human brain growth
is more or less completed by the onset of
puberty. Recent research (Geidd 1999) how-
ever suggests that not only is such develop-
ment not finished, but that adolescence is
a time of growth as explosive for the brain
as during the first few years of life when
neuron connections increase tremendously.
Using functional magnetic resonance imag-
ing (fMRI), researchers have been able
to observe brain activity and determine
which parts of the brain use energy when
performing certain tasks. Comparing brain
activity of adults and adolescents suggests
that the behavior of teens has as much to
do with brain development as it does with
hormones.

In one study researchers scanned the
brain activity of teens and adults who were
asked to identify the emotion displayed in
photographs of facial expressions. All of the
adults were able to correctly identify the
emotion of a fearful woman. But less than
half the teens, and none under fourteen,
were able to correctly identify fear as the
emotion they perceived. Instead, teens saw
confusion, anger, and sadness. Research-
ers conclude that teens process information
differently than adults and can easily arrive
at different perceptions. What adults think is
obvious teens may not recognize at all. Con-
sequently, a librarian’s frown in the direction
of a table of rowdy teens may be a mean-
ingless gesture for its intended audience.

When adults were naming the emo-
tion in the photographs, two regions of
the brain were involved: the limbic system
and the frontal cortex. The limbic system
is the brain’s more primitive component and
is associated with gut reactions like anger,
fear and aggression. The frontal cortex is as-
associated with more complex functions such
as judgement, insight, self-awareness and
goal-oriented behavior and organizing skills.
When teens studied the photographs, only
the amygdala, the core of the limbic system,
was active among the younger teens. Activ-
ity began to gradually increase in the frontal
cortex among older teens, suggesting that
development was ongoing there through
the teenage years.
Since libraries are often rule-driven environments, librarians can put teens at ease by developing spaces, attitudes, and policies that are more flexible and supportive of this phase of adolescent growth.

The lack of a fully developed frontal cortex in teens has many implications. Consider the list of chores a parent gives a thirteen-year old: clean your room, empty the dishwasher, fold the wash and sweep the porch. Ten minutes after grudgingly agreeing to do the work, the same thirteen-year-old is sprawled on her bed lost in music and a magazine. This behavior is neither churlish nor rude if viewed from the perspective of brain development because the same lack of frontal cortex development that prevents her from identifying facial expressions also precludes her from organizing information, especially if that information is multi-layered. In the library, these same teens may have difficulty when given multiple resources for their homework projects. They may simply not be able to process the information we provide them about these resources and how each one may help them complete the assignment. Perhaps it would be better to give them a single source to get them started and then provide them with another some time later.

Cognitive Development
One of the more interesting aspects of cognitive development is the concept of adolescent egocentrism whose two types of thought are apparent to observers of teens in the library on any given day. One type is the imaginary audience which describes the teenager’s belief that everyone is as interested in them as they are in themselves. That is one reason why teens are so loud—they simply want to be sure that no one needs to strain to hear what their life is like today. Another type is personal fable which refers to the teen’s belief that they are unique and no one else can understand them. Because of personal fable, a teenager will believe himself to be the exception to any rule. Since libraries are often rule-driven environments, librarians can put teens at ease by developing spaces, attitudes, and policies that are more flexible and supportive of this phase of adolescent growth.

During adolescence a transition occurs from concrete to abstract thought. Until about age fourteen, teens deal with what “is” rather than grasping the concept of what “could be.” This developmental stage underlies the all-knowing attitudes of many younger teens who insist they know everything about searching the Web because they can get to “Ask Jeeves.” These teens need concrete examples and visual demonstration in order to solve problems, which is why teaching information literacy skills during middle school years is so challenging: the
Perhaps a reason librarians experience frustration with the lack of information literacy among students is that, like algebra and logic, it requires a mature brain to process the complexities of an information search strategy. This growth seems fundamental in order to develop essential internet research skills such as evaluating search tools and hit lists, author credentials and content. Because younger teen brains are not yet wired for such tasks, it may be futile to try to teach more than the most simple search strategies and evaluation skills until they are ready. Perhaps a reason librarians experience frustration with the lack of information literacy among students is that, like algebra and logic, it requires a mature brain to process the complexities of an information search strategy. And, not surprisingly, teens don’t get that they don’t get it. Just because they may look mature does not mean that their brains have matured.

The Physical Space
Perhaps nothing is as obvious about teenagers as their physical growth. Teenagers take up a lot of space. They often come into libraries in groups, but frequently they come in alone. It is important for libraries to provide teens with space that can accommodate their need to be in a group and socialize (usually loudly) as well as a place where an individual teen can curl up in a small secluded area to read or study.

Providing them with supportive environments and attitudes becomes critical when considered in terms of brain development. Dr. Richard Geidd of the National Mental Health Institute believes that during adolescence the brain “hardwires” the activities learned and repeated during the teen years into lifelong skills (Geidd 1999). In other words, sports, music, and academics engaged in repeatedly during these years become part of the brain’s repertoire, whereas parts of the brain not engaged by frequent activity are pruned away. Geidd refers to this as the “use it or lose it” hypothesis (Geidd 1999).

If libraries are to play a role in “hardwiring” reading, information literacy and even library use in the teen brain, then librarians will want to do all they can to understand what’s going on inside the growing adolescent brain. 

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References

from the additional effort to incorporate early literacy information into age-specific storytimes, but the changes will not be “directive” or “instructional”—just more fun!

How Storytimes
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Libraries and parents are working together to give children a love of libraries and reading.