

The Library Squad:

Tweens in the Public Library

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ALEC CHUNN is a Youth Services Librarian at the downtown Eugene Public Library, where he coordinates school-age programming. His favorite part about librarianship was doing storytime—until he started working with tweens. Storytime still goes on at home, where Alec reads aloud to his partner or his cats (they’re pretty good listeners). When he’s not reading at all, Alec likes to try new hobbies and quickly abandon them.

Introduction

Though tween services in libraries are far from new, there is surprisingly very little written about them. Unlike early literacy, which is undoubtedly the most common priority amongst librarians serving youth, tween services might seem like the newest passing trend. Some libraries have dedicated tween librarians who not only offer tween-specific programs but curate tween collections. Other libraries offer combination tween and teen programs. At the downtown Eugene Public Library, tween programs fall under the umbrella of school-age programming for youth ages six to twelve. Trend or not, youth services staff have excitedly begun to delve more deeply into this often forgotten stage.

What is a Tween?

The definition of tween varies from organization to organization, ranging from as young as six to as old as fourteen (Faris, 2009, p. 43). The common thread: tweens are not quite children and not quite adolescents. They change from childlike to adultlike from moment to moment (Lyttle & Walsh, 2017, p. 7).

Developmentally, tweens fall into the period of middle childhood (ages 6–12). This age range encompasses a wide range of needs and differences. Per Banks & Thomas (2019, p.182), middle childhood has historically been seen “as a time of plateau, where children capitalized on the gains they had made in early childhood and before the teen years.” During middle childhood, youth are typically entering into formal education, participating in social and recreational activities, and enjoying more independence (Banks & Thomas, p. 182).

At the downtown Eugene Public Library, we define tweens as ages 9 to 12. Our tweens, especially those over 10, begin to develop a different sort of relationship with the library: the library is one of the first safe places they can go without an adult. Our tweens primarily use our children’s section and materials, though some dare to venture across the rotunda to the teen section. Most staff who deliver tween programming work in both sections, giving tweens a familiar face wherever they hang out or browse the collection.



Planning Tween Programs

Since there is no space specifically for tweens in our building, some tweens don't feel they belong in either the children's section or the teen section. Programming is our bridge, creating a temporary space that's just for them. Programming also helps foster a "continuum of services" (Lyttle & Walsh, 2017, p. 147), retaining tweens who've aged out of programs for the early elementary crowd.

Borrowing from the "pillars" of Toronto Public Library's Middle Childhood Framework (2014), our approach to school-age programming encompasses three priorities: (1) the joy of reading, (2) literacies and learning, and (3) play. While arguably the best library programs touch on all three, it's helpful in terms of holistic programming to target each priority individually. Our programs are intended to be patron-focused, interest-driven, and participatory. Beyond experiences being fun for our patrons, our second most important outcome is relationship-building—be it with people, with ideas, or with our collections. The following sections will highlight these priorities as well as specific programs that have been successful in accomplishing Eugene Public Library's goals.

The Joy of Reading

BOOK CLUBS

Scholastic's Kids and Family Reading Report (2019, p. 11) finds that third grade is a turning point for reading enjoyment (the "decline by nine"): only 35 percent of nine-year-olds report reading five to seven days a week compared to 57 percent of eight-year-olds. A tween book club, then, is a natural support for a library to help bridge these gaps. Eugene Public Library has hosted its Tween Scene book group downtown for over a decade. During the hour-long program, participants spend about half of the time with discussion and snacks and half doing an extension activity. Extension activities have ranged from virtual reality to playing \$10,000 Pyramid to zine-making and are typically the strongest motivator for participants to return each month. Attendance ebbs and flows but, generally, selecting a really popular title (such as *Wings of Fire: The Dragonet Prophecy* by Tui Sutherland or *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling) has boosted the program when we've needed to attract new participants.

POP CULTURE PROGRAMMING

Tweens are not only aware of pop-culture but strongly influenced by it. It might seem unconventional to view pop culture programming as something that promotes the joy of reading, but the shoe fits when "reading" is expanded to include any engagement with library collections. Moreover, media tie-ins offer an appeal that potentially bridges into reading broadly. Pop culture programming can be that similar tie-in to the rest of the tween programming menu.

Our pop culture programs—loosely termed "tween fandom" programs—grew out of a failed experiment with a series of comics programs. The most successful comics programs focused on a single series—for example, Steven Universe or Cucumber Quest—and were less about making comics and more about comics appreciation. We decided to rename the comics programs and open them up to other popular series and formats. Typical fandom programs involve trivia, crafts, snacks, or games. In addition to Steven Universe and Cucumber Quest, we've highlighted the *Wings of Fire* series and *The Tea Dragon Society* books. Our next program will celebrate the Legend of Zelda video game series.



Literacies and Learning

SEWING CLASSES

Our Downtown Library has a Maker Hub that is only open during select hours (and only to those with library cards), so we like to take as many opportunities as we can to bring equipment out of the Hub and into public spaces. One of the in-house favorites is our tween sewing series. A staff member leads participants through a project—for example, making a cape or a lunch bag. Since we only have ten machines, space is always limited and registration fills up quickly. Tweens are always proud to show off what they created and many return each month for the next project.

MINECRAFT

Per McGrath (2018), “At libraries, tweens can experiment with tech without the pressure of grades and still develop important habits of collaboration and discovery—all while having fun.” No program for school-aged kids draws as much enthusiasm, collaboration, and fun as our Minecraft meetups. These weekly hour-long programs (which are open to ages 6-12, rather than just tweens) involve a group build challenge and, at the end, a brief show-and-tell. We have ten computers available for the program so participants must pre-register. The spaces almost always fill up so, as an alternative, Minecraft is also available in our computer lab outside the program during all open hours.

Play

UNLOCK THE BOX

As my colleague Puetz (2018, p. 8) puts it, Unlock the Box programs cultivate critical thinking skills, build teamwork, encourage creativity, and exercise good communication. In these programs, a team works together to solve a series of puzzles in a given time frame. Most programs utilize the same locks so, after the initial startup costs, they’re a fun, low-impact way to add gamification into library programming. We’ve written our own—such as Escape the Space Station—or used the pre-created ones from Breakout EDU—such as Trapped in the Upside Down. Since the programs generally work best in smaller groups of four to six, we run the puzzles two to four times in a single day to accommodate as many participants as we can.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Because of the new line of middle-grade Young Adventurer’s Guides and an overwhelming number of tweens trying to sign up for our teen-only Dungeons and Dragons program, we tried hosting a group for the younger audience. Eight tweens met for four weeks on Wednesday afternoons in September. Since there aren’t currently official campaigns for this age group, a teen volunteered to be the dungeon master and wrote the campaign. The teen used simplified character sheets so participants of all levels would feel comfortable playing. A small subgroup of those tweens that met in our program now meet regularly in the library to continue playing together on their own—that’s a win!





Tweens practice their Dewey knowledge in a library-themed Unlock the Box challenge.

Conclusion

As youth services librarians, we are in service to youth—all youth. Scheduling, funding, and staffing may pose barriers, but tweens deserve dedicated programming as much as any age group. The best way to create successful tween programming is to get to know tween interests, to get their input on ideas, and to tell them to bring their friends. Tween programs might look a little different than crowded storytime rooms or big summer reading assemblies, but it can't just be about the numbers. With tweens, as with teens, it's about the relationships. Not every tween program will be successful, but every relationship built—such as two Wings of Fire fans connecting and exchanging emails to share fanfiction—makes it all worth it. 🐉

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