

Teen Volunteers

The Good, the Bad, the Ugly (and the Necessary)

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If you've ever worked with teen volunteers at your library, you know it can be an incredibly rewarding experience. That said, it has its share of stresses as well. But overall, it's an experience we likely couldn't survive the summer without at Brown County Central Library in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

For our summer reading program (SRP) especially, teens/tweens are essential to having things run smoothly. Our library branch registers about 2,500 kids for the SRP each summer, so keeping sign-ups and programs running smoothly is largely in the hands of capable volunteers. This past summer, I supervised about sixty volunteers—those going into sixth grade and older are eligible.

To recruit volunteers, I begin sending volunteer applications in May to all school library media specialists in our area, and I send applications to teens who previously volunteered. Applications are also available in the library.

Here's a brief rundown of how our teen volunteers are used for our SRP. Children sign up for the program at a table where they later come to report their hours. Teens fill out the forms and give the registrants an SRP game board, a bookmark, and a library events calendar.

When the child reaches at least one of the prize levels, he or she can come back to the library and report to the table, where the volunteer will stamp the game board to signify that the prize was given. The volunteer will also stamp the registration cards kept at the library for statistics purposes at the end of summer. Teens volunteer for two- to three-hour shifts on the table.



Photos by Mary Gracyalny-Krauss

In addition to SRP registration, teen volunteers are also used to help set up and assist with summer programming. The most volunteers we have used for a program is fifteen; those were for our most well-attended programs—this year, it was for our Frozen Fest (featuring costumed Elsa and Anna princesses, which drew about seven hundred fifty attendees) and our Percy Jackson Heroes and Monsters event, which drew about fifty attendees.

Time commitment for the programs can be a bit longer; most may last from two to four hours (including set-up and take-down time).

Training Volunteers

An important part of my job is training the volunteers; ideally, they should be able to assist patrons at the SRP table without staff help. We offer several trainings before SRP starts and a few just before the second half of the summer session, staggering the days and times to try to accommodate everyone's schedule.



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Volunteers Ashley and Diamond share duties at the SRP sign-up table.

The trainings run between half an hour and an hour long depending on how many teens show up (and if they have been trained before; we do have a fair amount of repeat volunteers).

In addition to instructing them on how the SRP works (both children's and teen sign-ups), I go over general rules. It's important to lay out the rules early so the teens are aware of the expectations. Those cover everything from library behavior (no swearing, and so on), dress code (wear what you would wear to school not what you would wear to the beach), and common courtesy, especially regarding use of cell phones and tablets (which we allow volunteers to have on their shifts). We do have a guide I give the volunteers during the training for each of the SRP programs. I keep this at the desk in case they have any questions and they are, of course, encouraged to ask us if any issues arise. I give them a volunteer guide also that lays out the general rules, hours, and the phone number to reach us if they can't come in to work, as well as general information about the end of the year party.

Training also includes a reminder to call in if they aren't going to make it for a scheduled shift. We try to emphasize that although they are volunteers, they should treat their commitment as they would a job—be polite and approachable, don't be late, and call if you will be late/absent.

As volunteer coordinator, I do my best to learn all the volunteers' names immediately and greet them with their name whenever I see them. I want them to feel important, welcomed, and most of all, appreciated. And I try to check in with each of them at every shift, to make sure the SRP table has sufficient supplies, see if they have any questions, and make sure they aren't looking for something to do.

Occasionally, the table is slow, and a volunteer may get a bit bored, even if they do have something to read or work on. If this is the case, I try to have something on hand for this situation. For example, all our prizes (like restaurant coupons) are numbered, so I have the volunteers number these since it saves me time at the end of the summer for statistics.



Volunteer Tyler takes his role as "chef" very seriously at a Dino Dining play day/food literacy event.

Other projects our volunteers help with are cleaning preschool toys, alphabetizing registration cards, working on craft projects (such as making die-cuts), or preparing items for upcoming programs. Some volunteers have been eager to help in any way; others (who may have been urged to volunteer by their parents) are simply passing time to get volunteer hours (which may be required by their school).

Thanking Volunteers

At the end of summer, we hold a party to thank the volunteers. We often host a pizza party since it is fairly easy to accommodate for allergies. We provide pizza and soda as well as leftover prizes from the teen program, particularly restaurant coupons. Each table setting receives at least one coupon.

Volunteers can enter their names for several door prizes, such as messenger bags, books, T-shirts, movie coupons, and gift cards. In addition to the drawings, each volunteer who attends gets to choose a prize off a table as a thank-you gift.

The party also includes a performance by a selected performer; we also arrange to have the performer present a workshop for the volunteers after lunch. Last year, we featured a comedy improv group; this year, two former professional clowns presented Science of the Circus, along the lines of the Fizz, Boom, Read SRP theme. Both programs were hits with the teens who stayed around for the workshop. It's important to us that the teens feel appreciated and rewarded for their hard work, and this is a small way to show our gratitude.

Getting a solid base of teen volunteers each summer can be challenging, but reach out to the local schools and the teens you see regularly. Once you get a solid rotation of teens, having them assist you with regular library tasks or the summer reading program can relieve stress and work for you.

Most of them want to help and given the chance, many will go the extra mile. Encourage them, make them feel appreciated, and you will find they return again and again. ☺