Finding a Place for the Tween

Makerspaces and Libraries

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The emergence of tweens as a specific demographic of library users has created an opportunity to develop new services in public and school libraries. Tweens were first identified by the marketing and advertising industry in or around 2001 with a steady rise in marketing and publishing for this audience since.[1] It is important that libraries too, start making a place for tweens.

Despite the growing awareness of the population, many librarians struggle to engage tweens, who fall between the cracks of the children's room and the young adult area. Additionally, tweens are often too old for children's programs such as storytimes, but may be too young for young adult events.[2]

Finding the space and place for tweens is a challenge. Tweens begin to form their social consciousness and become more aware of how they are being perceived by their peers.[3] They are painfully aware of their personal "cool" factor and how the things they do impact it. How can we preserve a tween's "cool" reputation while helping them have fun in the library? By finding them a physical and creative space in the library.

Makerspaces Just for Tweens

One way is through makerspaces specifically designed for tween patrons, which have grown in popularity as a new collaborative library service involving librarians, library space, and patrons.[4]

Makerspaces consist of a community of makers that come together to create by sharing tools, skills, and knowledge—creating a place to learn a new skill, to become a creator, to connect with a community and build friendships, or to gain access to specialized equipment.

Makerspaces have all the right ingredients to engage tween audiences while allowing libraries to work within the limitations of a shrinking budget, small staff, and limited physical space. They can also provide tweens with a space all their own physically and/or creatively in the library.

Depending on a library's budget, public libraries can incorporate permanent or temporary makerspaces into the design of their children's room or as a weekly program. Blogger Buffy Hamilton explains that makerspaces can be created by devel-

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Low cost supplies made available for students to complete a game design challenge at Michigan Makers' Makerspace.

oping a permanent space with specific tools or simply reliant on the creative and collaborative mind-set of participants.[5]

The space that the program occupies or the specific activities offered will be as various as your patrons' interests. Stephen Abram emphasizes that "makerspaces provide creative time and, well, *space* for people of all ages to build prototypes, explore questions, fail and retry, bounce ideas off one another and build something together."[6]

Every library's makerspace will likely look different, but they have the potential to represent something very powerful and meaningful.

Makerspaces can focus on a variety of projects and topics, but it's essential that tweens are engaged and able to make connections to their own lives. Tweens have busy lives, balancing school, extracurricular activities, and budding social lives. For many, the library and its services are low on their interest list.[7]

To compete with other activities and priorities, librarians must provide activities that apply directly to tweens' lives and capture their imagination. Organize focus groups to activities. Don't limit the projects to what *you* expect their interests to be. Your patrons may willingly defy gender norms and the status quo when they are engaged creatively.

When creating a makerspace, the logistical questions of "what"

Middle school students collaborating to put the finishing touches on their Snap Circuits Board.

or "where" are not as crucial to the program's success as the "how." At the heart of makerspaces and maker culture is inquiry and participatory-based learning.

Susan Ballard, Kristin Fontichiaro, and Peg Sullivan presented on makerspaces in school library media centers at 2012 ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, California. They mentioned using the maker model in school libraries to help students think critically, create, share knowledge, and demonstrate personal growth. The emphasis on education and learning makes for an obvious translation of the maker model into public library programming for tweens.

The "think, create, share, grow" model is still applicable, but public librarians have the flexibility to allow more deviation from K–12 curriculum and educational standards.

Engaging Tweens

Developing tween-specific programs and physical spaces in the library would not only meet the needs of this growing patron base, but also help the library. From a strategic viewpoint, developing tween programs that emphasize education and curriculum goals of K–12 educators could garner a lot of support by public officials, school administrators, and parents of tweens.

Additionally, a strong tween patron base may help a public library generate lifelong library users. A YALSA study found that teens who feel engaged in the library and its decision making are more likely to become lifelong library users.[8]

Some Tips for Developing a Makerspace

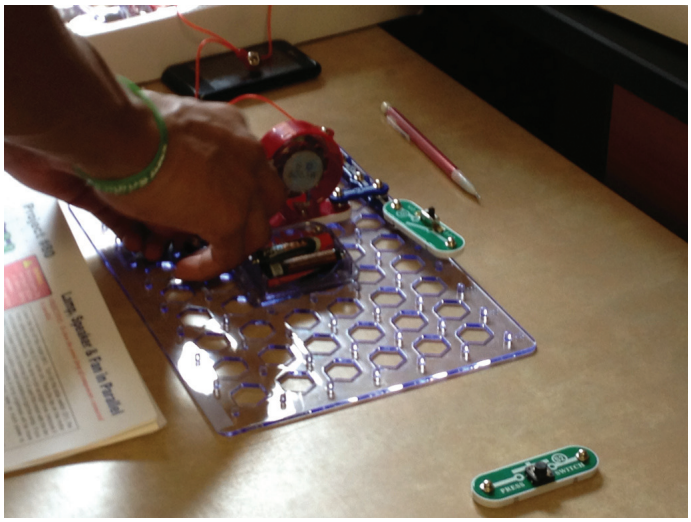
- **Plan sustainable and long lasting activities**. Don't invest in expensive materials that patrons take home with them. Instead, invest in products and kits that can be reused in many ways.
- **Scaffold your activities**. This will allow for participants to feel challenged and engaged, as well as limit the amount of direct instruction required during each session and provide more time for making.
- **Bigger isn't always better**. Simple and inexpensive activities can encourage creativity and be just as fun as products that require expensive equipment, such as 3-D printers. Game creation can be done with a box filled with scrap materials like paper, cardboard, markers, buttons, fabrics, and plastics. Low-cost materials can be obtained through donation, dollar stores, thrift stores, or clearance merchandise.
- **Consider online resources such as LittleBits**, Snap Circuits, Cameo, and Maker Shed, which will provide relatively low-cost, technology-based products. Topics range from electronic music, the science of circuitry, graphic design, and computer programming.

That's likely true for tweens as well. It is important that the library remain relevant and connected to patrons continuously throughout childhood and adolescence to reinforce the significance of library services and encourage lifelong library users. If tweens stop using the library because they feel out of place, it's likely they will not return for programs or as regular users later in life.

To capture the interest and attention of tweens, the services and spaces provided by the library for that age group need to be engaging. In addition to makerspaces, this can be achieved through the physical space of the children's room. The physical space of the children's room can potentially be a barrier for tweens. To encourage tweens to visit and use the children's room in the library, a library must balance its use of childish themes aimed at toddlers and preschoolers with imagery that appeals to older patrons. How can librarians make the physical space more engaging for tweens?

Program and service ideas specifically for tweens have been presented in previous issues of *Children and Libraries* and include the creation of a cooking show,[9] a focus on fantasy fiction,[10] and technology-based programs that involve gaming and encourage socialization.[11] These programs, which were considered successful, were promoted specifically to tweens.

Makerspaces can be permanent or temporary spaces for tweens to claim as their own. The YOUmedia center in Chicago is a good example of how makerspaces can be a permanent physical space. The center is a learning space where teens and tweens can access resources and tools to create digital projects,



Middle school student exploring the science of circuitry through a Snap Circuits puzzle.

available at five Chicago Public Library locations.[12]

Makerspaces can also be established as transient spaces, such as the University of Michigan School of Information's (UMSI) maker project, Michigan Makers. Led by faculty member Kristin Fontichiaro, the group consists of UMSI graduate students. Once a week, mentors visit an elementary and middle school and set up a portable makerspace as an after-school program. Programs are planned by mentors, the materials both donated as well as purchased with grant funds, and, ultimately, inspired by the participants. The projects engage students in a variety of activities from sewing scarves, creating computer programs using Scratch software, and making comic strips at pixton.com.[13]

Makerspaces naturally promote the exploration of technology and science through hands-on activities that tie them closely with STEM education.[14] The emphasis on STEM education and inquiry-based learning evident in maker culture makes tweens and makerspaces a perfect pair.

References

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