Designing a Teen Program With Joy

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Defining Joy in Teen Librarianship

Historical Lens: Joy as "Labor of Love"
- Rooted in self-sacrifice and passion (Manley, 2008)
- Romanticized burnout as dedication

Contemporary Lens: Joy as Wellness & Sustainability
- Recognizes emotional labor and burnout
- Joy becomes a shared responsibility between staff and institution (Rodger, 2025)

Public Lens: "Library Joy" as Branding
- Builds positive perception
- Reflects genuine affection for libraries
- Oversimplifies the realities of library work

Bringing It Together
- Teens feel joy when they are seen, safe, and empowered.
- Teen librarians feel joy when supported enough to create those environments (Keach, 2025).
- The field is shifting from romanticizing burnout to prioritizing sustainable wellness

Reflective Questions for Teen Librarians

- Where are you in your program design?
- What does your program look like now vs. before you started?
- What are you and your teens getting out of your programming?

- What do you want from your programming?
- What obstacles stand between you and your ideal program?
- How can you incorporate your own joy into your work?

Signs Your Joy-Centered Approach Is Working

- Programs attract diverse groups of teens.
- Younger kids eagerly anticipate joining teen programs.

- Teens return to share how meaningful the library was to them.
- Former teens use the library as adults.

How Intention & Joy Transform Teen Services

Building Trust & Supporting Healthy Development
- Authentic engagement with teens builds trust (Griffith, 2024)
- Strong connections with mentors and the community reduce ACE impacts (~40% of U.S. students) (Pierce, 2023)
- Library relationships build confidence, social skills, and agency (Teen, 2019)

Fostering Creativity & Curiosity
- Technology access empowers teens as creators (Zlatos, 2012)
- Research-based programming nurtures curiosity (England, 2020)
- Teen-only makerspace time builds leadership (Jacobson, 2018)

Building Community & Safe Spaces
- Librarians help set expectations and mediate behavior (Terrile, 2012)
- Libraries support teens experiencing trauma with safe spaces, book lists, discreet resources, food access, and partnerships (Eades, 2020)

Why Intentional Design Matters

Safety, teen empowerment, and support don't happen by accident they must be designed intentionally.
- Thoughtful programs help teens:
  - Engage confidently with their peers and the world.
  - Build stronger interpersonal relationships and trust.
  - Feel safe when their world may not be safe.
  - Experience joy as a natural outcome, with all the benefits of feeling safe, regulated, and seen/heard. It's not just a "feel-good" add-on.
- Intentional design creates measurable impact with lasting value for your teen program, your teens, and the library's brand.

Intentional Design → Safety, Empowment, Support → Joy & Growth

Evaluating & Planning Your Programming

Start With: Who's Here and Who Isn't

Who attends?	Who is missing?	Can outreach fill gaps?	Short and long term goals

Needs vs. Wants in Teen Services

Needs (Foundational)	Wants (Enhancements)
• Safe, welcoming environment	• High-cost tech (VR, robotics, studios)
• Consistent, relationship-based programming	• Special guest presenters
• Predictable schedules & drop-ins	• Large-scale themed events
• Learning opportunities (tutoring, life skills)	• Premium craft supplies
• Equity & inclusion	• Branded swag or professional marketing
• Teen voice & leadership (TAB, co-design)	
• Basic supplies & infrastructure (Wi-Fi, devices)	

Less can be more: sometimes teens just need space, connection, and a snack

What Evaluation Can Look Like

- Review your calendar. How much are you offering?
- Compare current stats to previous years
- Did programs meet attendance goals
- Did the programs "matter" and how do you define that?

- Patron satisfaction
- Staff experience (all levels)
- What to add, remove, or change
- Patron/admin requests
- Your own capacity (personal and professional)

Getting Teens Into the Library: Outreach Basics

School Outreach

- Send "Welcome Back to School" letters in August. Your local school district may have teachers' email addresses listed in the staff directory.
- Offer class visits, book talks, and event promotion
- Bring calendars, booklists, and small giveaways

Focus on tweens

- Make connections with Sixth Grade teachers, visit their classes and collaborate if you can.
- Partner with teachers for library card sign-up events

Community Presence

- Table at festivals, conferences, art fairs, school events.
- Bring handouts, games, and attention-grabbers. Offering a dog watering station is a great way to have people stop at your table during the summer.
- Build relationships with local businesses. They may be able to donate coupons for SRP prizes, collaborate on programs, offer discounts on food.

Tips for a Successful Teen Advisory Board (TAB)

- Meet regularly and consistently
- Create a welcoming environment
- Snacks, social time, easy service hours and easy sign up.
- Fun icebreakers and activities

- Build group culture and traditions-- give yourself permission to be silly.
- Older teens mentor younger ones
- "Yes" mindset for reasonable requests
- Give teens real influence and respect

The challenge is finding balance to create joy amongst the craziness

- Caring for the Teen Librarian, daily responsibilities, volunteer coordination. TAB requests, administrative expectations, parent/community feedback, everything else that comes with teen services

Conclusion

- Creating joy in your job as a teen librarian is more than a labor of love, it is a challenge to see and hear your teens while honoring personal and professional boundaries for yourself.

- It takes time to build or reshape a teen program into something that reflects and excites your community. Give yourself grace and permission to keep trying or try something new.

- A great first step to building a teen program is having a Teen Advisory Board and letting the teens help brainstorm, plan and lead things. If you offer volunteer hours, volunteers need a work permit. School outreach and a strong tween program can help build your numbers.

- The work we do as Teen Services librarians matters and may look like "playing around" to others, but we're creating safe spaces, building connections and trust with our teens, and getting books into their hands. We're just fortunate to have the chance to have fun on the job.
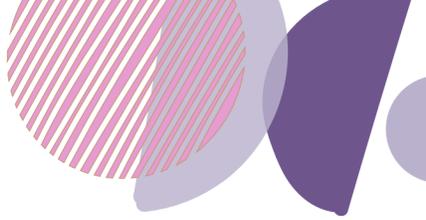
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