



## AT THE LIBRARY

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***“The ages defining ‘children’ and ‘young adults’ are not consistent across libraries... Surveys show that the low and high ages libraries use to define children and young adults vary widely. For example, some libraries consider 15 years of age to be the lower limit for young adults, whereas other libraries consider 15 as the upper limit.”***

-National Center for Education Statistics website (nces.edu.gov)

Have you ever wondered about the difference between the children’s area and the teen one? Well, you aren’t the only one – this is an ongoing discussion in public libraries, as we try to meet the needs of all our young library patrons. Sixth, seventh and eighth graders in particular are difficult to plan for: Some want books or music that may be more sophisticated, while others are still reading books in the children’s section.

One aspect to this question is simply the location of materials. As kids get older, they are ready to find their books and CDs anywhere but the children’s area. I see this with school reports: We have excellent country, state and biography books in the children’s area – but a thirteen-year-old may prefer books from the adult section – or at least, from the teen section. And I can understand not wanting to go into an area that has shelves and shelves of brightly colored picture books and is frequently

populated by toddlers and their parents.

The next question is: If specific ages are targeted for each of these areas, what should they be? As my beginning quote shows, ages for this vary widely. The library system I work for considers high school the beginning of young adulthood. This puts kindergarteners through eighth graders in the same area, being served by the same budget and the same staff. In a small library, this probably doesn’t really matter – there may not even be a young adult librarian and the children’s staff serves newborns through high school seniors. I know of many libraries where this is true and there are programs and materials for all these ages.

But in a library system where a line is drawn between these populations, it has become more difficult to know just what to do. As someone mentioned at a meeting I attended recently, kids are

growing up faster than ever.

Part of the dilemma is the difference between a public library system and the commercial world. Many of the products and services targeted for children as young as nine – such as diet books, makeup, and popular music – may not be appropriate for these ages. But, with advertising and movies, computer games, and television programs making them visible and attractive, children want them. So, if there is the demand, does that mean the children’s section public library should provide this kind of information for these library users? What exactly is our goal – to provide a thoughtful but possibly old-fashioned standard or to follow popular trends?

This is a touchy issue for many of us, as we shy away from anything that could look like censorship, yet strive at the same time to provide age-appropriate materials. But one

point made to me recently by a fifth grade teacher really made sense. She pointed out that when parents see a “J” (for juvenile) label on something, they assume it is appropriate for their child – while a young adult or teen label implies it may be more controversial. And even though librarians everywhere emphasize it is up to a parent to monitor what their child brings home from the library – no matter which section it comes from – there is still that secure feeling that comes from knowing your child is bringing home something that came from the same section as *Runaway Bunny*.