



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models which focus solely on youth problems.”

-Erica Monasterio, MS,
FNP UCSF Division of
Adolescent Medicine

At a recent children’s services meeting, we had presentations by three women who work with adolescents. The topic of the meeting was the group of young people sometimes called “tweens” – although any term generalizing the characteristics of people is difficult for me. The idea, however, is that this group is somewhere in between teenagers and children, and the more we know about them, the more easily we can figure out their library needs.

One of the presenters was Mary Milton, a district librarian from San Lorenzo (CA) Unified School District. Her observations and comments were based on her experiences with middle school students, as well as on consultations with experts. The strength of her talk was in her obvious fondness for this age and her humorous and warm approach to the issues. She addressed the questions given to her by Alameda County Library children’s coordinator, Bonnie Janssen. The questions included: What are middle school students like; are they maturing more quickly; what factors impact their reading; and

what are the challenges of providing library service to them. Milton’s conclusions showed that this group, like any group, is difficult to pigeonhole. Perhaps the information most germane to librarians is that many in this group don’t consider books “cool,” which can mean that they may be reluctant to be seen reading. This problem goes back a long way - I remember it from my high school days. Why is this, I wonder? And at what point does it change? College? Graduate school? Never?

Another point Ms. Milton made was that many students are interested in topics that are above their reading or comprehension level. For librarians, this means finding books that are easy to read yet sophisticated enough to appeal to a teenager.

Erica Monasterio was the next speaker and she gave an engrossing PowerPoint presentation on the research and science behind these developmental issues. She talked about brain anatomy – with wonderful colorful photographs of the brain – and the brain development of early adolescence. She described the prefrontal lobe,

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which controls reasoning ability, as well as goal and priority setting. As she said: “The part of the prefrontal lobe [which is] linked to the ability to inhibit impulses, weigh consequences, prioritize and strategize does not reach full development until the 20’s.” In other words, adolescents and teenagers are more likely to be impulsive than adults, although there are, of course, individual differences among both teens and adults.

Monasterio made another fascinating point about the frontal lobe, which is the last part of the brain to develop a myelin sheath. During early adolescence, pruning (a decrease in the number of synapses or connections) takes place and so it is thought that a variety of activities is important, rather than staying with one or two primary ones, whether they are video games or violin playing.

She also discussed moral development, distinguishing between conventional morality – pleasing, respecting authority, being punished for breaking the rules

– and principled morality, which is more like an inner morality.

Rena Dein, the Recreation Supervisor from the city of Fremont, was the third speaker. Her entertaining talk was particularly focused on her city’s impressive offerings of programs for this age group. One noteworthy point was her emphasis on the need for different kinds of publicity for younger or older teens – what attracts one group will not attract another.

I am grateful to my library system for providing this kind of opportunity. It is programs like this that make us better at what we do – providing relevant library service.