2

Risk-Worthy Collections

Erin Downey Howerton told the authors about a past incident when her library asked her to select books from the teen collection that might be too mature for younger patrons and move those books to a new "older teen" section. She refused. Her thinking was, "If I agree to this, how long until there are no more books left in the regular teen collection?" Eventually, with the help of ALA's statement on labeling and content, Erin convinced her administration to see her point. A risk? Absolutely. Not only did Erin vocally disagree with her superiors; she took a stand to advocate for teens and their access to materials.

That's what collection development is all about—providing access to things like books, movies, music, video games, and information. A risky business in and of itself, the process becomes even riskier when the collection is for teens. Not surprisingly, it's also an area where librarians find themselves in the position of feeling afraid or defensive. This chapter will help assuage some of that fear and anxiety by breaking down the types of risk involved in collection development and why it's important to consider jumping into risky collection development.

But before discussing risk taking with teen collections, it's necessary to address the most prominent reason why risks aren't taken in the first place: fear.

How will parents, the administration, and the community react to the materials the library makes available?

How it is possible to justify recommending this book to a teen?

Will the librarian get into trouble for aggressively weeding?

Essentially, what will the consequences be?

These are all valid questions and ones that librarians of all experience levels grapple with, despite their willingness to take risks. When selecting or deselecting an item, the librarian's name gets associated with that action, and it's possible it will be necessary to answer to someone because of it. That idea causes anxiety, which can sometimes influence actions. But it doesn't have to. By knowing what the risks are, preparing for any questions, and putting the needs of teens in the community first, the actual risk will seem much less frightening.

WHAT MAKES A TEEN COLLECTION RISKY?

Any time an item is added, displayed, or deleted, the collection's identity changes slightly. Add too much of one format, or delete too many books on one subject, and the identity becomes even more defined. This is a good thing! But it can be scary. Who are we trying to please? Ultimately the collection is for teens, but how often do librarians find themselves thinking about the reactions of fellow staff members, administrators, parents, and community members?

Potential controversy can inhibit decisions—if we let it. When Jamison Hedin started working as a librarian at Ludlow (Massachusetts) High School, she began to update the collection to enhance its appeal to teens. In the process, she drew some resistance from staff, but the feedback she got from students made it worth the risk. She told the authors,

It's my second year in my position. Slowly, with limited budget resources, I'm working to update the print collection with fiction and high interest

nonfiction. The fiction collection I inherited had an average age of close to thirty years and was divided between classics and incredibly dated popular fiction from the 1970s and 1980s. I'm purchasing new YA titles, including works with street lit and GLBTQ themes—a first for this collection. I've also added the first graphic novels to the collection. There has been some resistance from faculty members, but the response from the students has been overwhelmingly positive.

THINKING ABOUT LEVELS OF COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT RISK

Jamison has taken several of the risks that will be addressed in this next section. Below are practices that could be considered risky. Some are high risk and others are minimal. Not every risk is right for every library; these are only examples of what others have done, some with varying degrees of success.

Content Risks

Action: buying materials with explicit sexual content, offensive language, or containing other controversial subjects

The risk: When it comes to the risks associated with collection development, fear of censure due to your decision to include specific materials usually ranks close to the top. These are the materials from which most challenges stem: profanity, depictions of homosexuality, or frank discussions of sex and sexuality. Holliston (Massachusetts) High School librarian mk Eagle told the authors about how she took on the risky challenge of incorporating these kinds of books into the collection during her first few months on the job:

> My predecessor kept a number of books—including many of the LGBTQ-themed books—in a back office where students had to ask to access them. My first book order contained a number of titles with queer themes, and I displayed them all proudly on our new books shelf.

Why it might be worth it: If it's risky for librarians to purchase and display the books, think about how risky it is for teens to check them out!

Librarians must set an example for teens by sending the message that their needs are being met before even having to ask. This is especially true when discussing sex-related topics (more on that and other risky subjects later in this chapter).

A little less risky: If your community or school is ultraconservative, test the waters with materials that are not quite so incendiary. Take a moment to think about why it's important to select certain items and

Profile of a Risk Taker:
Beth Gallaway

I advocated for a YALSA-selected video games list in 1998. I made several inquiries about establishing a task force to investigate the possibility of the list, and as a result I was put on a task force to evaluate all selection lists. Learning about the process involved in change was eye-opening. I know now that talking to the right people and filling out the right paperwork are key!

I had success with YALSA establishing a Teen Gaming Discussion Group in 2007, which morphed into an interest group, and we put on a program and published a list of recommended games on a wiki.

Incidentally, my colleague John Scalzo of the Video Game Librarian fame created an award based on his blog—and the first awards were announced last year. I started my own e-mail discussion (with more than six hundred members) to talk about gaming in libraries, and I've gotten involved with the Office for Literacy and Outreach's efforts to tie *all* types of gaming to literacy for ages zero to eighteen.

Ultimately a selected list of video games for YALSA didn't work out, but the process was a learning experience. At the very least, I've raised the awareness in the profession about games as interactive digital storytelling.

what kind of benefit they can offer for teens. Inform administration about the reasons why these items are important for the collection. Then gradually begin to incorporate more of these books into the collection—and be prepared for challenges. Just remember: for every complaint you get, there are probably dozens of teens silently thanking the library for creating a collection that actually represents them.

Review Source Risks

Action: selecting items without professional reviews or recommended age ratings

The risk: The circumstances are anything but unique, and becoming more commonplace as the concept of a YA collection changes and grows. The teen librarian wants to purchase something for the library but can't find a review for it in any professional journal. It's even impossible to find an age rating from the publisher or vendor. What to do? Nontraditional items may be harder to justify because there is no one to back up the recommendation for purchase. What's worse, if the item were to be challenged, there is no expert besides the librarian selector to deem it acceptable for your collection.

Why it might be worth it: As the definition of a YA collection grows, it becomes more difficult to find reviews for everything. Does that mean the collection shouldn't include materials like manga, anime, and series paperbacks? Not at all. Rather as collection parameters grow, so must ideas of acceptable review sources. Why shouldn't a favorable customer review, a catchy cover the librarian knows will beg to be picked up by teens, or a request from a patron be counted? Popularity and demand are factors in any good selection policy. The sales rank in popular online stores, the number of copies ordered from publishers by vendors, or positive chatter from teens on social networking sites should all be factored into selection.

A little less risky: If a library needs an expert opinion, but can't find reviews to support a potential purchase, look to YALSA's selected lists. The titles on the Best Fiction for Young Adults lists will most likely have reviews, but books like the quirky nonfiction titles that have been nominated for the Quick Picks list might not. However, if a title is nominated for the Quick Picks list, that means it has been endorsed by at

least one member of the committee, and probably field-tested with teens. Look into the policies, procedures, and processes of YALSA lists to justify selections. Aside from fiction and nonfiction, YALSA also has lists for graphic novels, audiobooks, and DVDs. Learn more about YALSA's lists at www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists.

If there are still collection areas that are not commonly covered by journals and award lists, remember that change is always possible. It wasn't long ago that graphic novels and games were rarely recognized; now they are included more often than not. It took graphic novel and gaming advocates to get these resources widely accepted. Be an advocate for change and be open to how a new genre or format might garner support.

Beth Gallaway, a private consultant who focuses on service to teens, has been a long-standing supporter of video games and their link to literacy. Beth took a risk by campaigning to create a YALSA selection list for video games. Her story demonstrates the risk in working for change, and how the results can sometimes be successful in different ways than initially expected. , from an interview with the authors.

The Risk of Adding Adult Materials

Action: placing materials in the teen section that were originally published for adults

The risk: Buying an item for the teen collection that was published with teens in mind is usually a safe bet. But including books that were published for adults next to teen books on the same shelf? Risky. By putting adult books in the teen collection, the library is implicitly recommending them for teens. Some of these titles may have extreme language, violence, and sexuality; placing them next to YA books may invite controversy.

Why it might be worth it: Teens aren't interested in what books they *should* be reading, only what they *want* to read. If librarians are successful in getting teens to read, then why should they be concerned with the collection designation? For example, street lit is immensely popular with teens. Though originally published for adults, many of the books are beloved favorites of urban teens. Megan Honig, young adult materials specialist with the New York Public Library, advocates for the inclusion

of street lit into collections. In the 2008 *VOYA* article "Takin' It to the Street: Teens and Street Lit," she says, "Collecting street lit both supports teen reading and shows street-lit fans that they have a place in the library and in the community."[1] She later asserts that including street lit in the teen section can serve as "a way of inviting street-lit readers into the library's teen section and to facilitate their discovery of other genres that might be of interest." Any time it's possible to find a way to invite teens into their own space in the library and make them feel that they are heard and represented, that's success. Offering adult materials in the teen area is an effective method to achieve this, whether the adult books are controversial or simply marketed to adults, such as Jodi Picoult or Nicholas Sparks novels. In a 2009 *VOYA* article, "Crossing Over: Books from the Other Side," Candace Walton describes the ever-increasing blurred line between YA books and adult books. These crossover books share many of the same themes that appeal to teens, which means success for librarians: "Many young adult librarians embrace the crossover trend, believing chiefly that any book, whether written for adults or young adults, is a good thing if it gets teens reading and into the library."[2]

A little less risky: Maybe the budget simply can't accommodate the addition of adult books in the teen section. Public libraries can still provide access for these books by leaving markers in the teen area for how to find them in the adult section. Achieve this by creating print and online booklists for teens recommending certain adult titles; bringing cohesively themed books from the adult section for a display in the teen area; or posting signage in the teen area describing what else is available in the adult section and how to access it. As for school libraries, there are no adult sections to direct them to, unless you send them to the public library. Think about taking the leap for more mature materials, and let students be the guide as to what they enjoy and what they'd like to see in their school.

Is Leaving Dewey Behind Risky?

Action: eliminating Dewey decimal shelving and creating a bookstore atmosphere

The risk: Libraries and Dewey go hand-in-hand. It's what librarians know! It makes sense! For people familiar with the Dewey Decimal Classification system, finding a specific item is easy. And any time there

is a major change in any organization, there is a prolonged adjustment period. Some might say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Why it might be worth it: Maybe it *is* broken. Librarians have little trouble navigating the shelves, but what about everyone else? Would they say they have an easier time finding books in the bookstore? What do teens—who, aside from required reading in school, probably just want to browse—think of Dewey? The Perry branch of the Maricopa County Library in Arizona opened in 2007, with nonfiction books shelved using the bookstore standard BISAC (Book Industry Standards and Communications) system.[3] Lauded for its simplicity and user-friendly approach, BISAC uses organizational concepts like those found at a bookstore, such as sections on gardening or cooking—a system that can be much less intimidating than numbers that can be eight digits long. The Maricopa Library made the switch after patron surveys showed that a majority of respondents indicated that they prefer to browse. If the BISAC system would help to create a more enjoyable browsing environment, why not do it? Since the Perry branch opened with BISAC shelving, libraries across the country have taken notice. Some have followed suit, while others have adopted a BISAC/Dewey hybrid. The key is to give teens every possible advantage for finding what they want—even what they don't know they want.

A little less risky: Another, less drastic way to achieve the easy accessibility of bookstore shelving, without abandoning Dewey altogether, is by shelving the same title in multiple locations. For example, copies of *A Child Called It* by Dave Pelzer could be shelved in both biographies and child abuse; Shakespeare titles could go in both plays and a required reading/classics section; and graphic novel companions to such fiction series as *Maximum Ride* by James Patterson and *Cirque du Freak* by Darren Shan could be shelved in both the graphic novels area and alongside their counterparts in the fiction section.

Risks in Meeting Individual Community Needs

Action: revamping a traditional library collection to meet the needs of the individual community

The risk: At first blush, revamping a teen collection doesn't seem risky at all. Librarians are reminded constantly about the need to stay relevant in this ever-changing time. But truly meeting the needs of some

communities or school populations will mean different things and have different levels of risk. Maybe curriculum-based nonfiction is never going to circulate in a busy urban branch next to a school. Why keep it when part of the budget could be spent on more popular items like street lit? Perhaps the demand for video games forces cuts in other areas, such as nonfiction DVDs. Maybe books on CD sit dusty on the shelf. Taking the leap toward downloadable audio or Playaways might be the thing to do. Or even riskier—eliminate audiobooks altogether, if they're not circulating. Making major changes to any collection, especially if those changes mean less of what are described as beneficial or educational materials, means upsetting the status quo.

Why it might be worth it: Listening to what teens want and responding to their needs is the ultimate test of faith. Success means providing the best experience for the majority while still upholding the institution's mission. But take caution: while pleasing the target audience (teens), there might be others (parents, staff, and so on) who don't have the insider information available to librarians. Share surveys and statistics—numbers really do tell a story. Be prepared to defend decisions.

A little less risky: It's possible to reenergize the teen collection without venturing too far astray from the traditional collection. Carve out a portion of the budget so that the teen advisory board can purchase the materials of their choice; combine the reference and nonfiction section and begin circulating it all; interfile audiobooks with print fiction, and so on. Sometimes small efforts can result in a larger change in teen attitudes toward the library's offerings.

Risky Outsourcing

Action: outsourcing selection from the library to the vendor

The risk: The idea of putting your collection into the hands of vendors can be downright frightening. Vendors don't have a vested interest in the community, but they might have financial gain from favoring one publisher over another or one format over another. Additionally, outsourcing can lead people to wonder why librarian jobs are so important if someone three states away can do the work for less pay. Finally, to truly refine and perfect the outsourced selection could take years, an amount of time to which most libraries may not be willing to commit.

Why it might be worth it: Putting people—not materials—first is what will continue to make libraries relevant. By outsourcing collection development, librarians have more time for one-on-one interactions, outreach, searching for grant and funding opportunities, and so on. It also gives librarians time to focus on more specialized kinds of collection work, like weeding, updating collections, and analyzing circulation data to identify trends. When Phoenix Public Library began outsourcing their selection and turned a critical eye toward circulation reports, they found some surprising information. The truths they thought they knew weren't always the case, and they began a massive overhaul to beef up areas that were hot and weed those that got little attention.[4] In a time when budgets are shrinking, it's imperative to spend what is available on the most useful materials to teens. Outsourcing selection allows libraries to spend time researching trends and making personal connections to discover what it is teens really want.

A little less risky: Hand over the no-brainer selection, like best sellers, feature films, and top-selling music. Set up standing orders for well-known authors, series, and publishers. Ask the vendor to send lists at regular intervals that contain items reflecting the very detailed profile of your library provided to them. This allows the librarian to use selection time for work that requires more research and knowledge of your community.

The Risk in Personal Recommendations

Action: personally recommending books with risky topics to teens

The risk: Giving the right book to the right teen at the right time is the goal every YA librarian strives for, but sometimes the right book may invoke controversy. Parents may not be as pleased with the street-lit book as the teen who checked it out, and topics like sexuality can be seen as delicate too. "Each book we hand to a teen could result in a challenge," Kate Pickett, young adult librarian with the Johnson County Library in Kansas, revealed to the authors. When given a choice between recommending a book known to be perfect but potentially risky or an adequate book that won't make waves, what is the choice?

Why it might be worth it: They came to the librarian for a reason, right? Whether it's a first-time library user or one of the usual kids, asking an adult for advice is tough. Couple that with a risky topic and the

situation becomes delicate. It's important to prove to the patron that she can trust the librarian's recommendations and that the librarian understands what it is she wants. Furthermore, it's important to recognize that what a teen is asking for may not be what she actually wants. "Books about dating" could mean "I need to know about sex, STDs, and contraception." The key is to listen, pick up on subtle hints, and offer up titles in an open manner. Equally important to earning teens' trust is for teens to earn the librarian's. Librarians must have faith that these are intelligent young adults who will read only what they themselves can handle. In a YALSA Blog post dated May 22, 2009, Teri Lesesne described a couple of challenges surrounding the novel *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson, in which the main character suffers from anorexia.[5] She says, "This attempt to somehow protect teens from reading about any difficult issues and topics seems not always to be a matter of being overly protective. Rather it seems that we, as adults, are not giving teens sufficient credit for being intelligent beings, perfectly capable of reading about anorexia or sexual abuse or vampires or witchcraft without becoming anorexic (or becoming witches for that matter)." Librarians need to trust teens as much as we hope they'll trust us, and one very solid way to achieve this is through personalized book recommendations. Providing this kind of service will result in a loyal following.

A little less risky: Creating a display or booklist for a particular set of materials can highlight items that patrons may not know are available. In this instance, it's possible to light the path toward those risky books but not personally escort them down the path. It's less risky because with a display or booklist, it's the library that is making the recommendation; with a personal recommendation, the teen who receives the book will remember the librarian who gave it to him. But a bigger risk may mean greater returns—the personal recommendation will establish a personal connection where the display or booklist won't. Why not do both?

Weeding Can Be Risky

Action: aggressively weeding the collection

The risk: Weeding the collection can provoke outcries from staff and public alike. Aside from throwing out the obvious—outdated information and low-circulating materials—often weeding becomes a series of

judgment calls. Using personal judgment rather than following a strict set of rules is really the riskiest practice, because decisions may be harder to defend. When it comes to a teen collection, because of the ever-changing nature of the content in which teens are interested, it's important to be even more aggressive than in areas suited toward other age groups.

Why it might be worth it: Judgment is really crucial here, because the librarian knows the collection and the community best. A book may have a spectacular story or contain key information for a student's report. However, no teen will pick those up if the cover features teens from ten years ago sporting fashions no longer remembered. Even fonts and graphics have a way of looking dated and teens will most definitely pick up on this. The reward for doing away with the old? More shelf space to create a browsing collection and higher interest as a whole. It also sends teens an important message: "We recognize you have taste standards and we'll do our best to respect that." When in doubt, throw it out—if something is really good, there'll be an updated cover for it. If the library can't afford the new reprint, create a wish list of items and shop it around to teachers, staff, parents, Friends, and so forth.

A little less risky: Still weed, but take some of the items that seem like judgment calls, ones that cause apprehension, to the next teen advisory board meeting. Explain the weeding policy to them and ask for the teens' opinions. Then use their expert opinions to back you when someone questions the decision.

Going Digital Is Risky Business

Action: eliminating books in favor of an entirely digital collection

The risk: Books = libraries = books. Period. To remove the books would cause an uproar.

Why it might be worth it: Think about what the patrons' needs are. Do they use the facility just for research? How would redirecting the book budget into online resources and technology help research needs? Cushing Academy in Ashburnham, Massachusetts, went all digital for their 2009–2010 school year.[6] In redesigning the library to feature laptop-friendly carrels and huge flat-screen TVs projecting Internet data, they haven't given up entirely on books—just the printed format. They loan Sony Readers that can hold hundreds of books at a time. Yes, many

people (including librarians) think it's crazy. Yet by focusing on the needs of patrons and the organization's mission, it's possible to find that it actually makes sense.

A little less risky: Maybe going completely digital doesn't make sense because it's not what's best for your patrons or budget. But it's still possible to use the principle of this risk—disregarding format in favor of content—and it may be prime for some smaller risks. Maybe it makes sense to eliminate curriculum-related nonfiction in favor of databases, highlighted access to authoritative websites, or real-time online homework help services. Where can the budget be spent most wisely while serving the most teens possible?

POLICIES

While developing a teen collection is always a risky business, not all risks are created equal. Here is where the calculated risk comes in: by creating a solid collection development policy that will cover most, if not all, situations. Whether the details of teen collections are covered in the library's broader policy or if you have a policy specific to teen services, it is imperative that the language be encompassing, flexible, and allow for taking risks.

A good policy should cover the philosophy behind selection and should allow for future technologies to be implemented seamlessly. Consider potential hurdles that may be faced in taking risks with the collection and speak to them in the policy. Make sure to cover the following:

> **Age.** Who is this collection meant for? Who is the primary community? Also address how items that are appropriate for eighteen-year-olds may not be suitable for twelve-year-olds, and so forth.

> **Genres and formats.** What will one find in the teen collection? What won't they find?

> **Selection criteria and resources.** What will be considered when making selections and what types of resources will be consulted in order to determine what materials are added?

Weeding guidelines. This should include the philosophy of weeding along with general information about how often weeding needs to take place.

The procedure to respond to patron challenges or inquiries.

Now that the basics are covered in the policy, go back through it to see how flexible it is in terms of risk taking. If a move is made from DVDs to downloadable video, will it still work? If selections are made using teen reviews on Goodreads or *Teen Vogue*'s book forum, can the purchase still be justified?

The next step is to make the collection development policy available online. Some libraries might see this as a risk but it sends a message that says, "We're not trying to hide anything. If you take the time to read this, we'll take the time to follow it." See p. 29 for examples of teen-specific policies.

Say you've crafted a policy that allows risks. It's published. Does the staff buy into it? While it seems natural that all staff members would support a policy that encourages access and discourages censorship, it's still a good idea to bring any changes to light and get everyone on board. Maybe someone doesn't understand why the library is now buying street lit for the teen section, or why the library stopped buying curriculum-related nonfiction. This is the chance to get practice in defending risky decisions and to garner support for the changes. Chances are these are the folks that will most often communicate directly with patrons, so it's vital that they understand and support the new policy.

Finally, perhaps the biggest risk of all could be not having a collection development policy. Through the policy, it's possible to create a safety net for all the risks taken via collections; the policy is definitely a sound investment. Yet some believe that by not having a policy at all, it can give the library the freedom to select without inhibition. How's that for the ultimate risk?

APPROACHING RISKY TOPICS

With a solid collection development policy and a clear mission, there should be few subjects that are off limits in the teen collection. However,

Teen Collection Development Policies

When looking for examples of collection development policies for teen library collections, try these:

Haverhill Public Library in Haverhill, Massachusetts.
www.haverhillpl.org/About/policies/teenmaterials.html.
Has a separate collection policy for teen materials and is referenced in the general policy

J. W. Mitchell High School in New Port Richey, Florida.
http://mitchellonline.pasco.k12.fl.us/~media/Media/Academic_Media_files/ MHS%20Collection%20Development%20Policy.pdf.
Covers general collection points as well as those specific to the school environment

Monterey Public Library in Monterey, California.
www.monterey.org/library/cdp/cdp13.html.
Offers specific teen information within the context of the whole library's policy

San Francisco Public Library in San Francisco, California.
http://sfpl.org/index.php?pg=2000011101.
The teen section of the overall policy is very specific in terms of what the collection offers for teens.

Whitefish High School Library in Whitefish, Montana.
http://wfps.k12.mt.us/Teachers/KohnstammD/Collection%20Dev%27t%20 Policy%20for%20Web.htm.
Describes their community and user groups both within and beyond the student body

it's always best to anticipate which topics will likely be most controversial, allowing staff to recognize the risks in adding them to the collection. According to ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom, sex, profanity, and racism continue to top the list of reasons why books are challenged.[7] "The big three" should be acknowledged in the selection process, if only to make sure the library can justify the purchase and ensure that its policy defends the selection of materials that discuss those topics. It's also important to recognize what a balanced collection means. For example, if a book includes homosexuality, many believe the appropriate balance to that is offering Christian-themed books. Actually, the balance to homosexual themes is the portrayal of a heterosexual lifestyle. Books featuring Christianity can be balanced with those of other faiths, information about teens engaging in sexual activity can be balanced with information about abstinence, and so forth.

Note how your community may react to a particular subject area. In a 2009 YALSA Blog post, Jen Waters wrote about a delicate situation at her library.[8] She purchased *The Book of Bunny Suicides* for her library, and her coworker—who recently lost her daughter to suicide—objected. Jen didn't pull the book, but was concerned about responding sensitively to her coworker. Kate Pickett recently found herself in a similar situation at a middle school where she planned to booktalk a book about suicide. "I was told that it may not be a good idea to booktalk the book as the school had experienced a suicide only the year before. I talked about the book anyway and several students told me they were interested in reading it. However, now thinking back on it, if there were heat to be caught in this situation, not only would it fall on me but on the teacher that invited me to the school. Sometimes we are taking risks with more than just ourselves." Jen's and Kate's stories illuminate how extenuating circumstances can change the risk factor. Despite the potential pain the inclusion of these books might cause, both librarians chose to take the risk in hopes of providing the best service to teens, which is commendable.

Graphic novels represent another risky area. Patrons may raise little or no objection to a sex scene in a traditional YA novel, while a graphic novel's illustration of the same scene could illicit furious complaints. But just as all descriptions in prose are different, so are all graphic illustrations. Treat each book individually. If you're researching a controversial item to add to your collection and don't have access to the item, then

look for reviews, ratings, or sample pages online to gauge the content for yourself. Look to demand for the item and find the most appropriate collection to place it in.

Finally, the most important aspect to think about in terms of risky topics is one's own perceptions versus reality. Sometimes librarians expect certain materials to cause a fervor when they blow over quite quickly. In 2005, the book *Rainbow Party* by Paul Ruditis drew intense speculation. The story revolves around an upcoming high school party in which all the attendees will engage in oral sex (the "rainbow" comes from each girl wearing a different color lipstick), and the characters who will be attending. Each character has a reason to go to the party, and a reason for being petrified of it. In the end, the party doesn't happen—kind of like the built-up anxiety librarians and booksellers felt about the book. Neither Borders nor Barnes and Noble carried the book in stores (but both made it available online). Many libraries didn't buy it. And despite the media hype around it, the book didn't sell. Many agreed that the topic was interesting but the story itself wasn't well-written.[9] Contrary to predictions, teens didn't clamor for it or pass it on to each other, pages dog-eared. On the other hand, take a book like John Green's *Looking for Alaska*, the 2006 Michael L. Printz winner. No one expected it to show up year after year on ALA's frequently banned books lists. The language can be coarse and there is sexual content, but most important the story is compelling— which makes teens pass it on to each other after reading. The moral of the story? It's good to be aware of the buzz going on with a book, but it's even better to investigate.

In this respect, Jamison Hedin says,

> I'm realizing more and more that what constitutes a risk for one professional in one working environment and community culture may not be a risk at all for someone else, working somewhere else. For me, recommending *Tweak* for the summer reading list was a big risk, and it's been somewhat controversial. I would imagine that elsewhere, it would not be a risk at all. Risk is relative. As professionals, I think it's important to think about risks in context and to celebrate them—whether small or large.

Each librarian is the best judge for community temperament. If patrons or fellow staff members mention that a book will generate controversy, request an advance readers' copy from the publisher and read

it. Know that there is a certain blindness going into selection. No one can predict which books will be classic favorites and which will be tossed aside. But ultimately, it's best to let your teen patrons do the tossing.

HOW RISKY COLLECTIONS SUPPORT TEENS

We've identified the risks in collection development, created a policy and encouraged staff buy-in. Now we come full circle to the reason for creating these collections in the first place: to provide the best experience possible for teens. As noted in chapter 1, the Search Institute's Forty Developmental Assets for Adolescents (ages twelve to eighteen) are "40 common sense, positive experiences and qualities that help influence choices young people make and help them become caring, responsible adults." [10] The list describes experiences teens have and qualities they learn at home, school, and in their community. Not every one includes the work done in libraries but many of them do. For a look at all forty of the developmental assets, see appendix D; below are the five that will thrive with positive-risk collection development.

Caring School Climate. School provides a caring, encouraging environment. School libraries can provide the kinds of materials and formats that encourage students to thrive.

Community Values Youth. A young person perceives that adults in the community value youth. Youth will feel valued if the kinds of materials they like are available for them. This may include some riskier formats, genres, and topics.

Reading for Pleasure. A young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week. When teens are given carte blanche to read whatever they want, including online reading and audiobooks, they are more likely to continue to do so.

Youth as Resources. Young people are given useful roles in the community. Want to offer teens exactly what they want so they'll feel valued? Want to encourage reading for pleasure? Ask them what they like to read, and really listen to the answers.

Personal Power. A young person feels she has control over "things that happen to me." Teens go through many firsts in adolescence. By providing top-notch information about whatever new experiences they're having, librarians send a message that teens can control their lives through knowledge.

GOING OUT INTO THE COMMUNITY

The last step in providing risky collections to support teens is informing the community about the importance of such materials. This doesn't mean holding a town hall meeting, but it does mean being prepared to discuss specific decisions and risk as a whole. Without risk, libraries can fall prey to:

Self-censorship. Has there ever been something you chose not to purchase for a collection? How did it feel after the decision was made? Later, did you wish that it had been purchased? What about something you purchased that caused problems? Did it change selection practices afterwards?

Stagnancy. If you don't push boundaries to bring new items into the collection, kids will get bored. Think of what your library meant twenty years ago and what it is now. Someone had to take a risk to be the first to bring movies, music, graphic novels, and video games into libraries. Where would we be without these pioneers?

Irrelevance. If we don't stay current, then teens won't care.

Erin Downey Howerton says, "If we're not speaking up in order to provide patrons with what they want and need, then we're not doing our jobs right—period. Libraries are combination intellectual factories/warehouses and risk is inherent in our work." The key for risky collections is laying a foundation that allows for risk and building a strong collection development policy as well as a supportive team of library staffers. Combine that with a real working knowledge of what teens in the community want, and the library will be set.

3

Risk-Worthy Collections
What Authors Have to Say

Chapter 2 described the kinds of risky challenges librarians face when creating collections for teens. These collections could contain everything from books published for young adults to graphic novels, feature films, popular music, e-books, street lit, and more. Risks surface around a material's content, format, and availability. But what do authors think about risk when it comes to writing their books, the teens who read them, and the librarians who put them on their shelves (or not, as the case may be)?

In this chapter, four amazing, risk-taking authors speak about the risks they take when writing about touchy topics such as suicide, sex, abuse, and LGBTQ issues. But each one also contemplates the risks librarians take when purchasing their works for library collections. The authors were interviewed in November and December of 2009.

ELLEN HOPKINS

Q. **Which of your books do you think required the biggest risks?**
A. *Identical* and *Tricks*

Q. **Why were those titles so risky?**
A. *Identical* looks at childhood sexual abuse . . . incest. Even the word is hard to say. Actually looking at what that means is not something

people want to do (but it's something we *must* do). *Tricks* is about teen prostitution. There is sex in the book (it's prostitution!!), and it isn't pretty sex. Both books are honest, raw, and necessary.

Q. What did your editor say?

A. My editor, Emma Dryden, supports me totally. In fact, I sort of waited to see if she'd ask me to pull back a little, waiting to defend the more difficult scenes. She never did, and to give Simon and Schuster credit, neither did they.

Q. What did reviews say?

A. *Identical* got two starred reviews. *Tricks*, though termed "graphic," has received excellent reviews. Both books have been called things like "disturbing" or "not for the faint of heart," but reviewers, too, seem to understand that the subject matter is important. Also, because my books are so character-driven, readers become invested in the characters, which propels them through the harder passages.

Q. What did teens say?

A. I've probably heard from three or four who told me they had to put the books down. But I've heard from thousands more who thanked me for them. Victims of incest have thanked me for not closing that bedroom door and letting readers assume what's going on. Because the assumption might be it didn't really happen, or what happened wasn't that bad. And even teens whose lives have never been touched by anything remotely like this appreciate being considered mature and sophisticated enough to handle this subject matter. In high school, I didn't have good YA to read, so I went straight to adult stuff including V. C. Andrews, Jean Auel, Jacqueline Suzanne, and even Erica Jong.

Q. What did librarians say?

A. There are still some librarians who want to be gatekeepers and refuse to understand that today's teens are, indeed, sophisticated enough to handle this kind of material. However, they are a (literally and figuratively) dying breed. Most librarians (and I talk to a lot of them, believe me) understand that kids today are not only reading about addiction, abuse, thoughts of suicide, etc., but living

those things. Librarians, for the most part, respect the kids they see and know which ones need most to read about kids like themselves, so they know they're not alone. When the inevitable challenges come, they face them head on. I love librarians!

Q. **Will you take this type of risk again?**

A. Of course! I don't write to please the gatekeepers. I write important books that speak to today's teens (and older). I don't write for the money, or to be gratuitous. I write to touch lives.

Q. **What would you like to say to librarians who might be afraid to put risky books like yours on their shelves?**

A. It would be nice to give kids nice, scrubbed childhoods. Unfortunately, life rarely offers them that. Better to give them the tools they need to make the right choices. As I wrote in my poem "Manifesto," "Ignorance is no armor." But knowledge is a great weapon. We need to break stereotypes, to change statistics like "one in four young women and one in seven young men will be raped or sexually abused before they turn twenty-one." We do that by dragging these issues out into the light of day. Certainly, they aren't new. But historically, we closed our eyes to them, choosing instead to be victimized by them. Today, with knowledge as our weapon, we have to say, "No more."

BARRY LYGA

Q. **Which of your books do you think required the biggest risks?**

A. I know what you're expecting here, but the honest answer is that each book required big risks. They were just different kinds of risks. That first book was my first foray into YA, which felt very risky at the time. *Hero-Type* was a risk because I knew people would be expecting something more like *Boy Toy*. *Goth Girl Rising* was a *huge* risk because I was writing as a girl, when I had built my reputation as a boy writer. Even *Wolverine* was a risk because I didn't know if people would respond to me writing something sort of fun and goofy.

But, yeah, *Boy Toy* had risks all its own, and that's the book most people automatically think of.

Q. **Why was that title so risky?**

A. For *Boy Toy*, the big thing, of course, was the sex. It wasn't just
the mere fact of the sex—it was that the sex took place between
a twelve-year-old boy and a twenty-four-year-old woman and for
most of the book, the perspective on the sex was that it was good.
Josh enjoyed having sex with Eve. Loved every minute of it. It's not
until the end of the book that he acknowledges that it was wrong,
that he'd been abused, so for most of the book, I'm depicting an
immoral, illegal relationship, but the main character is saying, "And
it's *great!"*

 People are touchy enough about sex in books for teens to begin
with. When you write about child abuse and have a character say
it's all right (even if that character is proven wrong by story's end),
people really get twisted into knots.

 The funny thing about that book, though . . . I challenge people
to re-read it and pay particular attention to the sex scenes. They're
not *nearly* as explicit or graphic as people tend to think they are.
Most of the "action" happens between the lines and in the reader's
imagination.

Q. **What did your editor say?**

A. I blush to say it, but she was extremely complimentary and heaped
all kinds of praise upon it. She also said it was too long and that
I needed to cut two hundred pages. (That first draft was much
longer.) I think I ended up cutting north of a hundred pages, and
we came to a compromise length that made us both happy.

Q. **What did reviews say?**

A. Again, blushing, but the reviews were uniformly, overwhelmingly
positive and effusive. I think there was one that I remember that
seemed to hedge a little bit, but I know that for a while there, it
seemed like every day brought a new, amazing review. It was quite
an experience. *Boy Toy* is, without a doubt, my best-reviewed book.

Q. **What did teens say?**

A. I have yet to hear from a teen who didn't like it. But more important
than that are the teens I've heard from who really got something
out of the book, who came to understand an abused friend or loved

one. I heard from some kids who'd been abused themselves who really appreciated someone writing down what they felt.

Q. What did librarians say?

A. As with reviewers, it was almost uniformly positive and encouraging. The sad part, though, is the librarians who said they loved the book, but they didn't feel they could recommend it to kids.

Q. Will you take this type of risk again?

A. God, yes. I take risks with every book I write. I don't see the point in writing books if you're not going to take risks. The only way to grow and improve as a writer is to challenge yourself, and you can't do that if you're writing the same book over and over again, afraid to branch out, afraid to try new things.

Q. What would you like to say to librarians that might be afraid to put risky books like yours on their shelves?

A. This is difficult to answer because—obviously—there's an element to this that transcends mere freedom-to-read. Which is to say, people's jobs could be at stake. If someone puts a risky book on the shelf and it causes a confrontation, this person could end up fired. Or in a tussle that has long-lasting ramifications personally, professionally, health-wise, etc. So I would never say, "Put my risky books on your shelves or you are a bad person!" That's not my place.

What I would say is this: Information and ideas are important. Your job is to disseminate that information. The forces arrayed against you, the people who *don't* want that information to be disseminated, are working against not just you, not just my book, but against every person who needs information and cannot find it.

The truly disturbing facet of all this is the way that the forces against information hardly have to lift a finger these days. One librarian e-mailed to tell me that she loved *Boy Toy* so much that she read it three times . . . and then said, "But I can't put it on my shelf. I might get in trouble." She "might" get in trouble. Might. Based on nothing more than the perception and the possibility, she did not put the book on the shelf, and the "bad guys" won. They won without firing a shot. They won without a struggle. They won

without even knowing that there was a fight! Because there was no fight. Just a unilateral surrender before the fact.

If you think there "might" be a problem with a book and it's a problem with fallout you personally are not willing to handle, then don't just give up. Ask around. Talk to a supervisor. Make sure there's going to be a problem. Find out if there's a way around the problem. If you're going to surrender, do it because you made a good faith effort. Do it because of an actual problem or issue, not one you think might, maybe, someday exist.

Make no mistake: You are a crucial player in a battle against the reactionary tides of ignorance. Your decision must be whether or not you will participate in the battle. I'm not here to tell you what your decision should be. I just want you to know what the stakes are before you make up your mind.

LAUREN MYRACLE

Q. **Which of your books do you think required the biggest risks?**

A. I didn't think in terms of "risks" when I wrote my first novel, *Kissing Kate*, but it turns out that girls kissing girls is indeed a risky subject. Girls and sexuality, period (and girls' periods!) are also risky, it turns out, and the treatment of those subjects in the Internet Girls series, as well as the Winnie Years series, has drawn lots of less-than-enthusiastic response.

Q. **Why were those titles so risky?**

A. I think some adults are uncomfortable with sexuality, especially when it comes to tweens and teens, and especially when it comes to girls. It's the whole "protect our innocent darlings" mentality, and also, I suspect, a totally understandable desire to keep kids in the safe bubble of childhood until they're forty.

Q. **What did your editor say?**

A. Susan, who worked with me on the Internet Girls series, said, "People think girls don't talk about sex. Guess what? They do. I love how honestly you portray the issues girls struggle with these days. Go for it."

Julie, who worked with me on the Winnie Years series, said, "Love it. Wish I'd had a guide to girlhood like this when I was twelve. People are going to have problems with the tampon scene, but they'll just have to deal with it."

Q. What did reviews say?

A. Oh, a mix. Some commented negatively on what they perceived as unnecessary vulgarity and sexual explicitness; others praised the same qualities, but used adjectives like "brave," "authentic," and "real."

Q. What did teens say?

A. Also a mix! Ha. But with a much different ratio of negative to positive comments. I'd say 90 percent of the e-mails I get about the Internet Girls series are super enthusiastic, with the girls saying things like, "I can't believe you're a grown-up. Seriously. How do you know how we think?" But there are also girls who write and say, "I loved the books, but I don't understand why you used bad language. The books would have been just as good without that."

As for the Winnie Years books, however, adults are the only ones who have a problem with the chapters dealing with bras, menstruation, and the general bizarro land of puberty. The girls who write me? They just say "thanks," and that they wish they had a friend like Winnie in real life.

Q. What did librarians say?

A. A sampling:

"Oh, the girls love your books. We can't keep them on the shelves!"

"I applaud you for what you do, but I have to keep your titles hidden on the counter. I give them only to girls if I know their parents won't cause a fuss."

"Can you come speak to our high school students? Great! But please don't mention *ttyl* or those other instant messaging books."

"The kids loved your visit. They absolutely adore Winnie! But between you and me, I am *so* glad you didn't read the tampon scene. I was so afraid you might!"

Q. **Will you take this type of risk again?**

A. Forever and ever, amen. Why? Because the point of writing, for me, is to try my best to offer a glimpse of the world that's true, so that readers can take those ideas in, process them in a safe and private way, and decide for themselves what they think.

Q. **What would you like to say to librarians that might be afraid to put risky books like yours on their shelves?**

A. I'd paraphrase the brilliant David Levithan, who said something like this in response to a librarian who expressed fear of losing her job if she put books like *ttyl* on her shelves: "What's the point of having your job if you're not doing your job? A librarian's job is to serve *all* students, and a librarian who only puts 'safe' books on the shelves is failing to do that."

I'd also tell them to be brave, take a stand, and make considered decisions about what books they're willing to fight for. And, of course, have your rationales ready. And after they did put risky books on their shelves? I'd high-five them and say, "Thanks, librarian-person! You rock!!!!!!"

ALEX SANCHEZ

Q. **Which of your books do you think required the biggest risks?**

A. Riskiest was my first novel, *Rainbow Boys*. Next riskiest was my most recent novel, *Bait*.

Q. **Why were those titles so risky?**

A. The risk of rejection when starting out as a writer is huge. Since before *Rainbow Boys* I'd never been published, it was a risk to spend hours creating something that no one would want to read. The manuscript was the first time I'd ever been truly honest in my writing. I was only able to take that risk with the encouragement of friends. With *Bait*, the biggest risk was in writing about something as personal and painful as sexual abuse. It's a risk to be vulnerable to others. But there can be no reward without risk. For me, the reward in writing is to hear when readers connect.

Q. **What did your editor say?**

A. For *Rainbow Boys*, he saw the book as groundbreaking. Previously, a handful of other YA novels with teen gay characters portrayed them as isolated and struggling with their sexuality. The risky newness here was portraying gay teens as natural, normal kids for whom the problem wasn't being gay but rather a society that didn't want to accept them. The good news was the love, friendship, and connection they were able to find with each other. For *Bait*, he was excited by the portrayal of a complex character who was neither exclusively victim nor victimizer, challenging the usual either/or views of people.

Q. **What did reviews say?**

A. For *Rainbow Boys*, the most memorable review was from a librarian who said, "have the courage to make it available . . . it can open eyes and change lives." For *Bait*, "Unlike most recent fiction that addresses sexual abuse, this story focuses not on the telling of secrets, but on making sense of the experience and building a healthy foundation for moving forward . . . High interest and accessible, this coming-of-age story belongs in every collection."

Q. **What did teens say?**

A. What's been so amazing with the Rainbow trilogy has been the thousands of e-mails from teens who say how the books inspired them to take new steps in their lives: to accept themselves, to come out, to be more accepting of others, or to start a gay-straight alliance at their school. With *Bait*, it's been tremendously moving to hear from boys and girls who have been abused or know someone who has and how the book helps them to heal.

Q. **What did librarians say?**

A. The consensus from librarians about the Rainbow books seems to be how difficult it is to keep enough copies in circulation. Yay! With *Bait*, many are thrilled to have a book that addresses tough emotional issues among boys. They want more books about boys that focus on issues other than sports and competition.

Q. **Will you take this type of risk again?**

A. I have to. Risk is what keeps me writing. Every manuscript has had its own risks. With *So Hard to Say*, the risk was to write from a female protagonist's point of view. With *Getting It*, the risk was to portray a homophobic straight teenage boy becoming friends with an outspokenly gay boy. With *The God Box*, it was to tackle conflicts of spirituality and sexuality. Risk is what keeps the writing fresh and passionate for me and hopefully for the reader, too.

Q. **What would you like to say to librarians that might be afraid to put risky books like yours on their shelves?**

A. I understand that librarians may find themselves on the frontlines of challenges. And I'm impressed by the willingness of so many who are willing to risk those challenges because of their passion to present a diversity of voices, librarians who went into the field because of their desire to spread knowledge, and who recognize how books can inspire and empower young people. I'd encourage fearful librarians to reach out and seek support from those who have dealt with their fears about risky books and who have reaped the rewards of taking risks. You're my heroes!

Librarians are authors' heroes? Certainly the feeling is mutual! From these interviews, it's easy to see that we're all on the same page, so to speak, when it comes to getting teens the information they need in order to become healthy, happy, self-sufficient, world-wise adults.

4

Risks in Programming
A Necessity

Programming for teens in libraries is a great way to tie all aspects of teen librarianship into one (or two, or three, or more) amazing event. It encompasses nearly all the work teen librarians do: talking with teens, building collections, mobilizing staff expertise, planning, advertising, and more.

But what makes teen programming risky? What does risky teen programming look like in libraries? It depends on how the librarian mixes together different elements of programming. A successful formula for teen programming in any library might look like this:

teens + library resources + you = fabulous library program

Risk can enter the scene at any point in the equation.

**risky teens + risky library resources + (most of all) risky you! =
fabulous risky library program**

RISKY PROGRAMMING IN THE KNOW

Before beginning to think about taking risks in programs, however, keep the following advice in mind:

Know the audience. Talking regularly to the teens in your library, neighborhood schools, and the community makes it possible to correctly gauge just how much risk to take. Talking with teens should provide a hint as to what kind of audience a program will draw. Remember, a risky program with no audience isn't much of a success. Be sure that the risk taken is something teens will appreciate and support by attending. A successful program makes it possible to brag to the director and community members. It will also be possible to highlight that taking a risk was well worth it.

Know the community. Be honest: hosting a graffiti art dance party in a conservative community is not the best first programming risk to take. Rather, take what's known about the community and think deeply and carefully about how to turn teens' amazing, groundbreaking ideas into something that won't send the rest of the community or library staff, into an uproar.

Know the library administration. The administration is the best supporter for teen programming. Be sure to keep them in the loop with any teen programming—risky or not—planned for the library. After the program, let administrators know about the success of the risky program. Highlight why the risk was worth it and how taking it added to the success of the program.

Acknowledge limits. Recognize that everyone has different comfort levels. It's okay to be uncomfortable hosting a street-lit book discussion group with teens. Maybe someone else on staff isn't! Moreover, if a program faces strong opposition from the library director, be honest with the teens at the library about its chances. Or if teens are asking for programming that challenges staff comfort levels, try to figure out how to accommodate teen ideas by reimagining the program into something that integrates a piece of the original idea, but is not quite as risky. Developing something that includes a less-risky aspect of a program can demonstrate to colleagues what's possible, create a positive buzz, and make it possible to take more risks next time around. Never be afraid to take baby steps to build future support for bigger, more important risks.

FAST OR SLOW MOVEMENT IN TAKING PROGRAMMING RISKS

The first step in figuring out what's possible in teen library programming is to use the framework laid out in the previous section. It will be helpful in deciding how risky to actually be. And it's possible to also use the structure that follows to figure out how quickly to move forward with risky teen programming.

Take Baby Steps When:

- The library has never hosted teen programs before. Ever. But the library has given the teen librarian the go-ahead to launch teen programming.
- The library is in a more conservative area; community values might not equate to what teens in the library are requesting.
- The director or administrator is timid when it comes to having teens in the library or hosting events specifically for them. No one in the library has ever heard of a teen advisory board, and they're even afraid to ask what it is and what it can accomplish!

How to be risky: Proceed with caution. In a situation in which teen programming is an entirely new initiative, everything is risky and baby steps are key. The secret to success is knowing what the administrator will support and what will be harder to sell. Remember, the best path may be the careful one that slowly builds into a strong, dynamic teen program that is stable and supports all of the needs of the teens in the community. Be sure to communicate the reasons for baby steps with teens. Once they understand the library process, they'll be better informed on how to advocate for both themselves and the library.

Take Bigger Steps When:

- The community may not be the dictionary definition of progressive, but it's clear that people are open to new ideas—especially those that support teen development. Adults who frequent the library understand that teens need to be teens, so complaints about behavior are few and far between, even during busier hours.

- The library has a history of programs for teens, and might even have a space for teens, and a collection. The director requires reports on all teen activities that the library sponsors. The teen librarian has worked in the library for several months, and has had the opportunity to lead teen programs—maybe even a teen advisory board—from time to time.

How to be risky: Move quickly and be sure to keep library staff and the community in the loop on all teen programming. Be sure to let community members know when a teen program is happening so they can plan their own schedules accordingly (i.e., to be at the library on that day, or not). Audience-building is also key: focus on hosting teen programs once per week on the same day. Creating a regular schedule lets teens and their parents know to come to the library on that specific day of the week for awesome programs. Other patrons will learn not to come on those days of the week to avoid any additional noise, rowdiness, enthusiasm, and so forth on the part of the teens that the program may illicit.

Being in this situation provides leeway for trying new ideas and pushing the boundaries of teens' expectations for programming. Ask teens to come up with some out-of-the-box ideas and talk with administrators and community members about those ideas. Administrators and community members might not be open at first, but the more the topic is discussed, the more they'll listen. Risks in programming when working at this level may be related to program content, such as tackling issues like teen pregnancy or risqué books. Or perhaps this is the perfect time to tackle a new format, such as gaming.

Take a Leap Forward When:

- The library has a teen area, if not a teen center. Programs occur on a daily basis, and there are several staff members dedicated to teens.
- There is a great collection, great administrative and community support, and a history of groundbreaking teen programs.
- The director is excited to hear reports about teen services, and teen services are on equal footing with the adult and children's departments.
- The community is used to big teen programs at the library, and

there is a dedicated teen audience for many, if not most, of the programs, which happen daily.

- There is a dedicated teen advisory board that meets weekly to discuss plans for the library, and the teen librarian knows the right pathways to execute those plans.

How to be risky: Go for it. There is support from both administration and the community. There are funds from grants or the development office, and it's obviously time to roll. The director is open to any idea that gets teens through the doors of the library, or using the library's services virtually, and he is willing to help the teen librarian find the time and the funds to make it happen.

This is perhaps a fairly progressive community, with lots of support from parents, schools, community-based organizations, and the grass-roots relationships built with the teens who frequent the library. The library and librarians likely achieved this strong support with backing from several administrators, so it's important to keep supervisors and the director in the loop on all program planning and accomplishments. That support needs to continue when risks in programming start happening.

Risks in programming may come when tackling controversial issues, new program formats, or inviting new audiences into the library. Remember: be fearless! There's a track record, and administrative support often follows that record.

Once it's determined how fast or slow to go with risk taking in programming, teen librarians will be better qualified to gauge what types of risks to take.

RISKS IN DEVELOPING THE AUDIENCE

Many libraries see a core audience of teen visitors every day. They come to programs, hang out at the desk with the librarian, and ask for reading recommendations.

But what about the teens who don't come into the library yet or the teens who drop in to check out books and make their exit before anyone can pitch a program to them? What are their needs? What about teens in the community who are out of school and need to earn their GED? Is

there a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in the neighborhood high school or middle school? Are there homeless teens who come to the library? Are there teens with special needs in the community? Chances are one of these groups —and likely most—is part of the library's community, and it's up to the teen librarian to figure out where they are and how to get them into the library with fun, effective, and interesting programs.

Start by going where the teens are. If a teen GSA meets at the high school, then the teen librarian could attend one or more meetings to introduce himself, find out what types of programs the teens in the group would like to have at the library, and maybe even plan a library program as a part of the meeting agenda. Visit the local homeless shelter and talk with teens there, or visit the adult basic education program where teens might be taking classes to successfully complete a GED.

Of course, these scenarios require the teen librarian to spend time outside the library building, which some administrators and colleagues might consider inappropriate. So going outside could be risky. But if in the long run, leaving the building brings teens into the building for programs and more, then it will be worth the risk. And it will be possible to show colleagues and administrators the value of that risk with higher programming numbers.

Serving these teens may require riskier programming tactics, but remember that the library should serve everyone in the community, whether it's a public or school library. Never be afraid to remind community members or administration that these new audiences are part of the library's service population.

But there are libraries where teens never set foot into the building. Librarians in these facilities may hear teens shouting out to each other as they walk outside the building, so they must be close by. How do those teens get brought into the library? Moreover, how does the librarian convince the administration to start a teen program in a building that's never had anyone between the ages of thirteen and eighteen walk through its doors?

Ray Lusk, the events coordinator at the Madison Library District (Rexburg, Idaho) was the first librarian to host teen programming in his library. He went all the way from zero programs to teens spending the night. He created a teen summer reading program and eventually convinced administration to allow him to host an overnight teen lock-in. Ray knew to talk to the teens in his library's community. That helped him

prove to his administration that teens needed their own programming at the library. Ray also knew that he had other allies within the community who could help him advocate for teens. By reaching out and collaborating with businesses and other nonprofit organizations in his community, he was able to take risks and strengthen his teen program with support from outside the library.

Ray Lusk Discusses Risk in Teen Programming Start-Up

What began as a question about an underserved population in the Madison Library District has blossomed into a wildly successful teen summer reading program. The Madison Library District in Rexburg, Idaho, serves a population of about thirty-two thousand people, including eleven thousand K–12 students. The children's summer reading programs have been an integral part of library services for decades. However, the library had never had a summer reading program, or any regular programming for that matter, for adolescents before we organized their first summer program five years ago.

The Rexburg area is largely agricultural and nearly 40 percent of the library's service population resides outside the city limits. This led us to question whether teens would come to the library for programming. Another difficult question to answer was whether the teens needed, or even wanted, their own summer reading program. We determined in 2005 that the only way to answer those questions was to take a risk, and organize the first teen summer reading program at our library.

Once we were determined to make the program happen, we had to figure out who would run the program, how it should be structured, and how it should be funded. After much discussion among the youth services staff, it was decided that the program would reward teens ages twelve to eighteen based on the number of pages they read, and whoever read the most would receive a grand prize at the conclusion of the program. The library director

gave us a budget of just three hundred dollars for the program. We also solicited input from the pages at the library, whose insights were invaluable. After all, they were currently or recently teens themselves. With their help, we planned a final after-hours party with free food and games to end the program.

Because the entire program was uncharted territory, we had no idea what to expect. The library had never had any YA programming of any kind prior to this year. It was a major risk. What would happen if it flopped? Would we ever try again? Would it be a waste of our time? We took the risk. We were so excited to have approximately ninety teens at our final party and a total of two hundred teens sign up for the summer reading program. Wow! What a successful first year!

We never would have known how many teens we could reach had we not tried. But now we faced another question. Could we do it again? What had we done to make the program a success? For the past five years we have modeled our program on the same basic structure—the person with the highest page count winning a prize, and a final party for all. However, each year we learn more about what our teens want and each year we make changes to accommodate those needs.

In the years since the program started, the number of teen participants has remained largely static. This last year, the participation more than doubled to 442 teens who signed up for the program. What made the big difference? Last spring, a few of us who work with teens decided to try reaching out to teens at the local public high schools and junior high during their lunch period. At the time, we didn't know whether those visits would have an effect on our summer reading statistics. The impact of those visits was more than we could have imagined.

To accommodate our growing program, we reached out to community organizations that have recognized our success and the importance of our programming. They now contribute many of our prizes at no cost to us. By partnering with other organizations, all parties receive benefits. Sponsors experience an

increase in visibility, while the library can offer greater incentives to participants.

This past summer we decided to have weekly activities. Some weeks we invited guest presenters, others featured a quick craft. The craft-based activities totally flopped, but presenters who were interactive were very successful. Teens in every community are different, so you may find that an activity that was successful in a nearby community just doesn't appeal to your teens. Our teens, we learned, would rather have an improv comedy group perform and teach them about acting and expressing themselves, than make masks and have a masquerade. How did we learn that? By taking a risk and trying.

Did we take a risk? Yes. Did some risks flop? Yes. But the most important thing is that no matter the outcome, we learned what worked and what didn't, and we can apply those lessons in the future to better serve our teen population.

"Only those who risk growing too far can possibly find out how far one can go."—T. S. Eliot

BEST PRACTICES FOR RISKY PROGRAM PLANNING

Ray Lusk offers a good example of how one library staff member can build a strong teen program. But how does a librarian really get things going? How does a librarian encourage feedback and gain support from administration and colleagues? Consider a scenario where a library's teen advisory board (TAB) members have brainstormed creative new programming, but the librarian is not sure how to bring those ideas to fruition. The teen librarian needs to gain support from the administration, make sure the teens are prepared to plan and implement the program, be able to stand up for teens with coworkers and administrators, and get the word out about the success of teens. More specifically the teen librarian should undertake the following initiatives.

1. Invite her supervisor and administrator to talk with teens or the TAB. So much of the work that young adult librarians do can be improved through relationship-building. From a distance, an administrator may think of teens in the library as a rowdy group of unruly kids. But if placed face-to-face with a group of dedicated, open, honest teens who want to make the library a better place, it will be hard to miss understanding how the TAB can fulfill the needs of an important part of the library's community. Set up a meeting with an administrator and the TAB or a group of neighborhood teens. Make sure the teens know to be on their best behavior. Host a practice session with the teens to help them prepare for the meeting. The more focused they are, the better they'll be able to communicate their ideas, and any administrator will be more willing to listen.

2. Be a project manager. Teens have great ideas, but it's crucial that a librarian help them shape those ideas into something feasible that fits into the framework of the library. Help teens understand the steps they need to take to get their ideas heard and executed. Be honest with them; if their ideas won't work, let them know and tell them why. It may seem risky to be honest, but the teens will respect that honesty.

3. Help the group come up with other options if an idea is too risky, and be prepared to stand up for teen ideas when appropriate. Explain to teens how the library operates and how they can fit their ideas into its plans. It's not an easy task, but it's a great opportunity to put the ideas of youth development—giving teens the opportunity to be a part of planning and implementing activities they participate in—into action.

Kate Pickett of the Johnson County Library was once charged with working with her TAB to create a teen space in the library. As the young adult librarian, part of her job was to represent the opinions of teens when speaking with her administrators. "I am not afraid to voice my opinion if I think administration is making a decision that would negatively impact teens," she told this book's authors. The TAB was given complete artistic control of the space by the board of directors. However, after the group

decided on a mural for the wall, the library board came back and vetoed the teens' ideas. Kate stealthily represented the teens at the next board meeting and explained why it was important to empower the TAB and respect their opinions. Eventually, the board, Kate, and the TAB were able to come to a consensus that satisfied all interested parties.

4. Celebrate success. Taking risks practically demands demonstrating to everyone in the library and the community why the risk was worthwhile. Host an event to celebrate the success of the risky program. Invite the TAB, their friends and families, administrators, and the rest of the library staff. Ask one of the teens involved in the project to talk about what led to the successful completion of the program, and be sure that the library administration has an opportunity to thank the teens publicly for their hard work and dedication. Take plenty of pictures to document both the project and the final event or outcome.

OUTSIDE-THE-BOX RISK TAKING

It's risky to try a program that's never been implemented in the library. But taking risks in programming can find the library hosting an event or offering an activity that lines up with the library's mission in an unexpected way and that utilizes a new artistic, educational, or social medium. These kinds of programs can be controversial because they challenge user and staff notions of what is deemed an appropriate library activity. Programs like this come in all shapes and sizes; they might involve new technology that the library has never utilized before. They might celebrate the library as a central social meeting ground for neighborhood teens. And they might be fun, noisy, and not tied to school curricula. Programs like this could include library lock-ins, gaming events, machinima design workshops, break dancing instruction, and more. Planning and executing these programs can be simultaneously exciting, stressful, and exhilarating.

These programs require lots of preplanning and detail work, sometimes utilize a special guest, and should get support from all levels of

library staff before they are executed. It's important to use the risk checklist (see appendixes B and C) before moving forward on these programs in order to anticipate reactions from the public or the library staff.

Stephanie Squicciarini, a young adult librarian at Fairport Public Library (New York), took a big risk by founding the Greater Rochester Teen Book Festival and planning its first year without finalizing a budget. To move forward without certainty of funding, she collaborated with the others in the library and community. They chose a date for the event, selected and booked a location, and began inviting authors. The event did get a budget eventually, and the first Greater Rochester Teen Book Festival went off without a hitch and was a hit with the teens there. The event is now in its fifth year, and teens are still loving it.

RISKY PARTNERSHIPS

Another great way to take risks in programming is to find partners. Collaborations with recognized cultural and social organizations increase programming credibility in the eyes of the audience and library staff. As a result, the work, activities, stress, tangible outcomes, and responsibilities related to the program are shared among the collaborators. Burdens of risk are even more relieved when partnering with a recognized community organization, such as an after-school program, historical society, community theater, and so on. Just be sure the partnership meets the needs of the teens and the library.

Partnerships can take many forms. Experts in local hospitals can be a great resource when it comes to talking to teens about health issues. Local radio stations might have DJs who could lead workshops for teens. Senior centers might provide volunteer opportunities for TAB projects. Local authors might offer free book discussions or talks to teens. Finally, after-school organizations are perfect partners that can help build audiences for new library programs.

Of course partnerships come with their own sets of risks. It can be risky to start a relationship in which the partners aren't all that familiar with each other and need to learn to trust each other's work styles and habits and respect different philosophies related to serving the community as a whole or teens. But although there are risks in these partnerships, they are often worth taking because they expand the possibilities

for getting things done for teens and highlight the importance and value of library teen services.

When starting a new partnership with a community organization, begin with a small project so that the partners can get to know each other. Start by working with just one other organization or community member. That provides an opportunity for getting used to working with another agency and learning about what makes community partnerships work.

Don't forget that many cultural institutions and social organizations in the community may have youth outreach grants that require them to find partners. Many of these grants often include creating programming beyond the walls of the institution or bringing new audiences into their building. Either of these could be great educational and creative opportunities for teens to learn about another organization in the community that supports their needs. Plus these kinds of shared programming ventures stand out on future grant applications.

PAD THE RISKS

With an understanding of the variety of risk-taking opportunities in teen library programming, it's time to look at some ways to build credibility and support for ideas with the administration before taking a risky leap. Remember that meeting any and all of the benchmarks that follow can help build support for a risky program and give the library administration the right level of confidence to know that it's OK to proceed with risks.

Get Support

Get support from everyone in the library, or as much support as possible. This support goes all the way from the staff on the front lines to the director, other administrators, elected officials, and more. The more support garnered, the better equipped a librarian can be to handle any issues that arise before, during, or after a program. Figure out what issues fellow staff members could face ahead of time and discuss them with colleagues. Simply talking about the program and brainstorming these issues with staff members is a great, easy way to win support. Ask

opinions and encourage attendance at the program once it comes to fruition, so that they can experience the success.

Ask to speak to your board of directors or trustees about the program. When the invitation comes, be prepared. Know what needs to be said and how to say it. If asked to give a presentation, be sure to come with the appropriate handouts and technology needed to properly outline the particulars of the program. If possible, include direct quotes from teens in the presentation about why they think implementing the program is important. If there are pictures of past successes, include those as well. Remember, the better the librarian presents herself in front of colleagues, the more trust there will be in the decision making that goes on related to teen services.

Talk to the Teens

When it comes to advocacy, nothing is stronger than words coming straight from the horses' mouths. Get support from teens who come to the library or who are in the community. There may be opportunities for teens to speak to the director or elected officials about teen library programs. If this chance does arise, be sure to take time to prepare the teens. Coach them on what to say and how to say it. Give them insights on how their audience will react. Ask the teens to rehearse their talks during a TAB meeting to get them used to hearing themselves speak publicly. Don't take chances with winging it; this is the teens' opportunity to shine for the library and they should be ready for the spotlight.

Also ask teens to talk to their friends about the program. This can happen both in person and online. No one gives better PR for teen programming than teens themselves. Once a few teens endorse a program, others will follow. The administration will love it when the programming numbers increase due to teen word-of-mouth.

At the end of the program, tell the teens about upcoming programs, so they'll make a return visit. They are the greatest ambassadors to the rest of the teen community.

Promote the Risks

Regardless of whether or not your library has a public relations department, promoting a risky program is key to getting the word out and

getting teens into the library. Be sure that everyone on the staff is aware of the program and can talk about it to teens, parents, and families who frequent the library.

Create fliers, handbills, or other print advertising to distribute to local schools and businesses and to post around the library. Give out the fliers during class visits to neighborhood schools, and be sure to leave copies in school administrative offices.

Be sure to blast the event through the library's social networking pages, such as Facebook or MySpace. If teens who are active at your library are your friends on a personal social networking account, include information on the event in your status update or send them a message. Ask TAB members or teen programming regulars to post the event in their own online communities. Contact local newspapers, TV, and radio about your program. This is an easy way to get the word out to both teens and their parents.

If there is time and money, brand the risk. Come up with a short, memorable umbrella title for the series of risky programs. Provocative headlines such as "Risk!," "Not What You Might Expect," and "Be Here Now" can become effective advertising slogans that grab the attention of teens who might not think of the library as a place where risky programming happens. Use the brand on all advertising. Teens, along with everyone in the community, will eventually come to recognize the brand.

Document Success

It's been a lot of work to create an awesome, risky program. Make sure to capture it to show all aspects of the program development and implementation to skeptical library administration—or to add it to your resume. Blogs, photos, and videos document the hard work that went into the risky program building. And documenting successes is crucial to securing future grant applications and partnerships. If pictures or video are a part of the documentation, get parental permission if you decide to publish any pictures of youth under the age of eighteen.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Defining the parameters of risky programming for libraries requires an understanding of the needs and values of teens, their caregivers, the community, and the library staff. Once teen librarians understand all of those pieces, it's time to take the first steps. Remember that even though administration and fellow staff members might not give the green light to try everything desired by teens at the library, most likely it will be possible to move forward on some aspects. Keep teens in mind at all times when planning any programs for them, as they are the best trump card when it comes to advocacy. Teen voices, combined with a librarian's communication skills, can help the rest of the library staff understand why risk is necessary in serving teens at the library.