Tweens in the Library: How Public Libraries Can Serve Those in

Between Childhood and Teenage Years

Michael Lillie Moore

INFO 200

Information Communities

Spring 2020

Abstract.

Public libraries with close community ties often prioritize children and teenagers in their programming and physical spaces, neglecting the fascinating age group that exists in between: the tween. While early adolescence (also known as "tweenhood") only lasts a relatively short period of time, it encompasses years that are highly developmental for a person. Tweens exist in a transitional space. Tweens are often misunderstood or overlooked when it comes to public libraries. In this paper, I will provide information on how tweens seek out information, through both physical means and via the internet. I will also discuss common misconceptions on tweens and their needs and behaviors. Finally, I will address how they are currently being served in public libraries, as well as offer some insight on successful methods for attracting and maintaining a tween population.

Introduction.

The "tween", a name referring to their status as being "in between" child and teenager, represents a significant portion of a person's life. While the actual range of years is brief, the impact they have on the human growth and development is strong. Tween age ranges are often up for debate, however for the purposes of this paper I will be referring mostly to people between the ages of eight and twelve, with a few older outliers. Much of what they do or see at this time will have a lasting impact on the rest of their lives. One common issue that arises with libraries and tweens is the drop in attendance. As aptly put by D'orio in his 2013 article: "if kids stop using the library between story hour and teen programming, it can be hard to get them back," (p. 34).

Tweens exist in a transitional stage of life. They are too old to be considered "children", but they have not yet reached the mental or physical maturity of teenagers. That said, tweens seek out information much the way teenagers and adults do. They often use the internet on a daily basis to search for things they need to learn more about, whether for school, their personal health, or to stay up-to-date with modern events. Much of a tween's research relies on the concept of serious leisure, as described by Hartel, Cox, and Griffin's 2016 article. Their hobbies and interests may be seen as leisure, but they are of great importance to the early adolescent. As they work on creating and maintaining an identity for themselves, their interests feed heavily into that.

In this paper I want to address some of the ways that tweens seek information and what they tend to do with it. There are also common issues among the tween community that can affect their interest and attendance at public libraries. I would also like to present the ways that

tweens are currently served in public libraries and offer some suggestions on how librarians can better curate a creative space for this age group.

Literature Review

Researchers of this Topic

The topic of tweens in relation to the library or how they study has been conducted by many. I found that some researcher names came up frequently, such as Andrew K. Shenton. Many of the researchers specifically study information-seeking behavior, with several of them overlapping into studying child development. There seemed to be quite a bit of grounded research regarding the development and information-seeking habits of teenagers or children, but tween-specific research was tougher to locate. There was no shortage of informational articles about adding more tween spaces to libraries, such as Cherrington's 2014 article detailing how she made her library more tween friendly after being hired as the teen librarian.

Subtopics and Themes Covered

While the articles varied in information, many of them covered tween attendance in libraries, as well as tween interests. One of the biggest questions from researchers is what libraries can do to attract more tweens to the library and retain that attendance. The ideal situation is to have kids naturally progress from the children programs to tween programs to teen programs and finally to adult programming. While many libraries still struggle with catering to this age range, the few that are doing it are still working on ideas to help raise attendance.

Additionally, several of the articles I read were about how tweens think and how they find and use information. This was my starting place in research, as it was important to me to try to get in the headspace of the information-seekers I was studying. Within these studies on information-seeking behaviors in tweens, some researchers went a step further and defined how

tweens seek out specific types of information, such Marshall describing how tweens and teens

research sexual health questions in "Sex in the Stacks" (2016) or Lu's 2010 article about how

fifth and sixth graders use the internet to find answers for their personal life problems.

Controversies in the Research

The most prevalent issue that seems to pop up is the definition of what age range

constitutes a "tween". For the purposes of my paper, I am primarily focusing on those

individuals between the ages of eight and twelve, but Faris (2009) came across a variety of age

ranges in her research. She describes the range as "varied from 10 to 14, 8 to 12, 8 to 14, 6 to 10,

9 to 13, 10 to 13, to grades 4 to 8." (p. 43). My own research mirrors hers, in that I have come

across similar age ranges and have had to readjust my research accordingly. In some ways, the

wide range of ages was beneficial to my research, as it allowed me to use some research that was

focused on "teenagers" as a model for my "late" tweens. Even the name (tween) that I am using

for my information-seekers can be difficult to research. Some researchers may use a more

academic term like "pre-adolescents", although there are plenty of researchers who use "tween"

and "pre-teen" interchangeably.

Methodologies Used

Many of the studies conducted used survey results, often from librarians or teachers, such

as in Shenton (2003) and Lo (2019). Very few surveys reached out to the tweens themselves,

with an excellent example being Justice's 2013 article about public library book clubs. In it, she

surveyed over 400 youth at the Metropolitan Library in Columbus, Ohio. This is also an instance

where parents of children (not only tweens) were reached out to for additional information. Of all

the methodologies, my personal favorite was the interviews conducted by Kyle Marshall for his

article "Sex in the Stacks" (2016). He interviewed five teenage individuals about their research

habits regarding sexual education. While the scope of the interview was extremely small, it

yielded some nuggets of wisdom.

Not every article included a survey or study, as demonstrated by Waxman's 2016 article,

which details her library's creation of a project that combined reading and technology for

tweens. Some articles offered practical advice or examples on how to create tween programming

in libraries, such as McGrath's 2018 article "Digitweens" and Grey's 2017 article "Pokemon and

Libraries". Many of the activities described by the authors were tested at their own libraries

before being recommended to the reader. While these articles were enjoyable to read because of

their practicality, I recognize that not every library will be able to do the same activities or access

the same materials.

Weaknesses, biases, and gaps

Some of the greatest weaknesses of these surveys and interviews is a shortage of

interviewees. Due to the age of the studied group, it can be a challenge to get a large amount of

information without prior consent from parents, which can slow research down. Another

common issue is the lack of research done specifically about tweens. Much of the research I

could find was related more to children or teenagers, with little about tweens specifically. This

aligns with the similar lack of tween-centered programs in libraries, as discussed later. The lack

of information strictly about tweens could also be related to the difficulty in tracking down a

solid starting point and ending point for tween years, as previously mentioned.

Methodology

Much of this data was sourced from peer-reviewed academic journals via the San Jose

State University Library and Information Science Source (LISS) database, as well as accessing

Google Scholar. When I came across a resource that was particularly helpful, such as Large,

Nesset, and Beheshti's article, "Children as Information Seekers", I would spend a large amount

of time skimming through their references and following up on those when appropriate. I found

that several of my articles would end up referencing each other or referencing earlier work by the

author. While this was initially helpful in assuring myself that I was on the right track, it did

occasionally lead me in circles.

I also found the book *Born Digital* by John Palfrey and Urs Gasser to be tremendously

helpful when assessing how tweens use digital technology for their research needs and some of

the pitfalls that come with frequent internet usage among young people. When researching

tweens in general, and not specifically related to their library needs, I found the book *Seven

Going on Seventeen* by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh to be beneficial. While it

primarily addressed the struggles of tween girls, it was a good starting point for basic research.

Finally, I also sought out a variety of public library websites and analyzed their

helpfulness and services for tweens. There was a range of accessibility, with some websites

featuring activities and programs specifically designated for tweens, such as the Huntley Area

Public Library (https://www.huntleylibrary.org/category/project-tween/) located in Illinois and

the Hazel Mackin Community Library (https://robertspubliclibrary.org/teen-tween-programs/) in

Wisconsin. Some websites claim to make a space for tweens, but seemed to lack tween specific

programming or resources, such as the Houston Library (https://houstonlibrary.org/learn-

explore/tweens) in Texas. I chose to focus primarily on these three library websites as so many

libraries do not have a section of their website dedicated to tweens at all. My own local library,

the Santa Clara County Library District (https://sccld.org/) has a robust section for children and

one for teens, but there is nothing to serve those in between. This seemed to be the norm in my

research.

Discussion

Information Seeking Behaviors Offline

While many children learn basic web searching early in life, tweendom is when they start

to come into their web searching abilities. Tweens seek information offline as well, whether it is

attending classes or talking to friends. The article I primarily used to determine the offline

information seeking behaviors of tweens was Large, Nesset, and Beheshti's 2008 article,

"Children as Information Seekers". The scope of the study was children aged approximately age

five to twelve, and while the authors do spend some time on five-year-olds, much of the

behaviors translated to tween behaviors as well. When referencing how children find information

in books, the authors posit that children do not always understand how to search for information

in a physical book. On page 126, the authors describe a child researching tarantulas and ignoring

a book titled "Spiders" because the title was not specific enough to suit her needs, even though it

contained information on the tarantula. Another issue described by Large, Nesset, and Beheshti

that plagues the under-twelve crowd is confusion regarding library search resources (p. 125).

Many children are unable to parse the Dewey Decimal System or know how to effectively search

for their topic using an online catalogue. Even further, several children still rely on flipping

through a text to do research. While this can be enjoyable for the reader and often leads to new

discoveries, it is not an effective form of research.

Dresang's article on radical change takes an interesting look at the information seeking

behaviors of tweens (2009). Dresang poses that youth today are thinking in a more "nonlinear"

structure, choosing to problem solve "non-sequentially", while pulling in different sources and

"weaving" the information into a solution (p. 34). The author's theory that children are "interacting" with the learned materials can be seen in the earlier example of a child flipping through a book to find the information they need. When we search for something via the internet versus through an encyclopedia, we are accessing the knowledge differently. The former implies a conversation; the researcher asks the Internet a question, and the Internet responds with everything it could possibly pass along, leading the researcher down a further rabbit hole. Seeking out the information in a book is a more hands-off approach. The encyclopedia may contain the information the researcher seeks, but it will not grow or change over time.

How Tweens Use Technology to Learn and Share

When it comes to information seeking, there is no better place to look than the internet. Tweens use the internet effectively, often utilizing search engines to find answers to their questions. As digital literacy skills rise, they gain access to greater research skills. They often seek information to help them with solving their own problems, as demonstrated by Lu's 2010 article. Research found that approximately 60% of the fifth and sixth graders studied would use print or online information seeking to help solve their everyday problems. Further, sixth graders were far more likely to seek information than fifth graders, with percentages comparing at 67% and 50% respectively. This demonstrates that as they get older, tweens get savvier with their internet searching.

With social media more prevalent than ever, it is easy for tweens to communicate with like-minded folk around the world. Of course, they can see each other in school or clubs or church, but they can also connect virtually. This virtual connection could be with real life friends or social media followers. Fisher and Durrance's 2003 article addresses online communities and how a "disjointed" physical community can thrive virtually. While tweens are not necessarily

disjointed as a physical community, the micro-communities that form within tweens can be disjointed. For example, if you are a tween who loves an obscure anime from fifteen years ago, you might only have one or two friends at school who are familiar with your chosen media. On the internet, however, odds are you can easily find groups of people who love that obscure anime just as much as you do. Some websites do feature age restrictions, but those will not necessarily stop a child or tween from lying about their age. Mary Aiken wrote on the issue of children and cybersecurity in her 2016 book *The Cyber Effect*. In chapter four, she refers to an American study about children accessing Facebook that found that of their participants, about forty percent of them gave a false age on Facebook (p. 124). The issue of creating social media for children is its own source of study, but if the tween is determined to get on social media, they will find a way.

Issues in the Community

The most prevalent issue for tweens in the library is a lack of dedicated space, both physical and metaphorical. This concern is directly referenced in Goforth Gregory's 2015 article "Stuck in the Middle", where she writes that "While many libraries may have a teen advisory board, most libraries do not have an advisory board for kids in upper elementary and lower middle school grades," (p. 43). In an interview with Jodi Krahnke, head of youth services at Ypsilanti District Library, Krahnke and her library decided to "look at tweens as their own population" (p. 43) and help address their unique needs. Tween advisory boards may require additional scaffolding, but it is an excellent place for pre-adolescents to share their ideas with staff. Creating these boards is a way to create mutual respect for librarians and tweens in the library.

Related to the confusion on where exactly tweens fall in an age range, there is often

confusion on what level of complexity they can handle in their programming. This flexibility in

age range can actually serve as a benefit in some instances, as described by Struckmeyer in her

2012 article where she posits that "Patrons who are eight years old, for example, are welcome to

participate in children's programming as well as tween programming, while a twelve-year-old is

eligible to attend tween and teen programs," (p. 36). Since libraries want to keep tweens in the

library, it behooves them to have robust and flexible programming for tween age groups, as it

allows patrons to transition more smoothly from the programming for children to the teen

programming.

Finally, there can be an unfamiliarity among librarians with some texts or media that is

popular with tweens. Librarians need to know the interests of their tween patrons. Some

librarians do this by forming a tween advisory board to help them make informed decisions when

it comes to buying materials for the library. Osborne's 2008 article describes the process of a

Melbourne library that compromised with a group of teenage boys who were mostly interested in

using the library's computers to play games. They formed a club that discussed and created

resources for the game that was so popular. Making sure that tween librarians are adequately

prepared with recommendations for their patrons goes a long way in retaining interest. The

ability to accept new forms of media is also valuable to a librarian. Lo's 2018 research article

looks at the resurgence of comic books and how librarians generally perceive their value. With

683 librarians interviewed, he found that most of them agreed that comic books would attract

students to the library, and many of them also agreed that comic books could become a strong

motivator for reluctant readers. With a rise in popularity for graphic novels, comic books, and

manga, it is valuable for a tween librarian to familiarize themselves with these popular forms of reading.

Analysis of Library Websites

Another issue for tweens in the library is one that takes place online. Library websites need to be inviting and interesting to pull people in. As already discussed, the tween community is an important transitory one in the community, which is why it is important for libraries to have a dedicated tween space both physically and online. During my research, I noticed that some websites are more in tune to attracting tween visitors. Two examples of this are Huntley Area Public Library and the Hazel Mackin Community Library. The following figures are the most current screenshots as of the day of writing (May 7th, 2020).
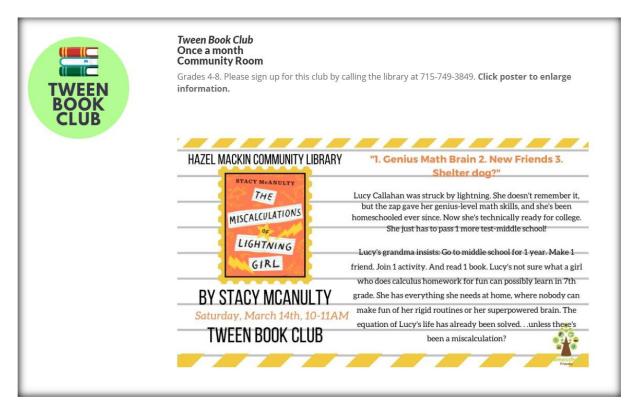

Figure 1. *Prominently advertised tween book club.* Reprinted *from Teen/Tween Programs*, 2020.
https://robertspubliclibrary.org/teen-tween-programs/

Figure 2. *Another tween-centric event at the Hazel Mackin Community Library.* Reprinted from *Teen/Tween Programs,* 2020. https://robertspubliclibrary.org/teen-tween-programs/

Figure 3. *Huntley Library's Project Tween webpage*. Reprinted from *Project Tween,* 2020. https://www.huntleylibrary.org/category/project-tween/
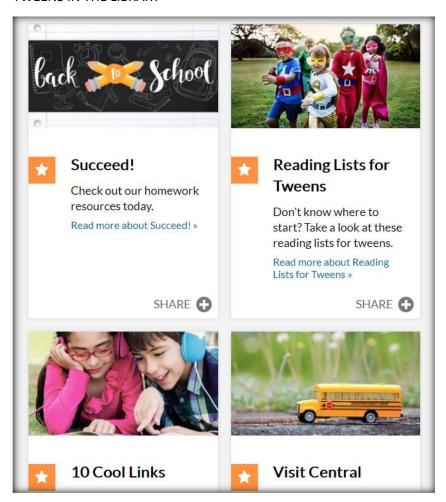
Figure 4. *Houston Public Library's Tween page*. Reprinted from *Tweens,* 2020. https://houstonlibrary.org/learn-explore/tweens

As seen in figures 1 and 2, the Hazel Mackin library organizes strong events for its tween community. Figure 3 features the Huntley Area Public Library and a small snippet of their tween section. Each month they have projects for tweens that are related to high interest topics, current events, and popular books. Finally, figure 4 features the tween section of the Houston Public Library website. Something of note is that none of the links cater specifically to tweens, except for "Reading Lists for Tweens", which shows a picture of children who are obviously too young to be tweens. While this section of their website is dedicated to tweens, it does not feel tween focused.

Present and Future Offerings for Tweens in the Library

Much of current tween programming is similar to current teen programming: book clubs, social hours, movie nights, etc. The Huntley Area Public Library has monthly tween programs, with recent highlights including a skeleton fashion show, a live turtle sketching, and button making. Creative events like these stand out as strong programming. While classic standbys like book clubs and movie nights are still popular, there is also a rise in STEAM centered events and makerspaces. Regarding the future of tween programming, I can only speculate. Foremost, there needs to be an increase in dedicated tween spaces in libraries. Something as simple as a shelf or group or tables advertised for tweens would make a difference. Future programming may want to support popular curriculums in middle schools, such as engineering and social-emotional learning. Bringing in experts to learn from is popular and can potentially spark an interest in a lifelong hobby or career. Whatever the programming, the main priority is creating the space and attracting tween patrons.

Conclusion.

Tweens have it rough in a lot of ways. They are too old to be given the freedom to act like a child, yet they are too young to receive their desired level of respect. They are maturing emotionally, mentally, and physically at different paces than their peers. This can lead them to becoming a type of "lost boy", where they are stuck in between two more prominent age groups. Yet libraries should not abandon the tween, and instead of focusing on trying to bump them up to the next age level, we might want to focus more on their current needs. The pre-adolescent years can shape a person's interests and passions, so as librarians we should try to instill that love of learning in ways that best connect with the person in the moment.

References

Aiken, M. (2016). *The cyber effect: An expert in cyberpsychology explains how technology is shaping our children, our behavior, and our values – and what we can do about it*. New York: Randomhouse.

Cherrington, B. (2014). Tweens. *Voice of Youth Advocates, 37*(4), 26–27.

D'orio, O. W. (2018). Preteen Zeitgeist. *School Library Journal*, *64*(11), 34–36.

Dresang, E. T. & Koh, K. (2009). Radical Change Theory, Youth Information Behavior, and School Libraries. *Library Trends 58*(1), 26-50. Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved from https://muse-jhu-edu.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/article/361471

Faris, C. (2009). Betwixt and between: Tweens in the library. *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children, 7*(1), 43–45. Retrieved from http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lls&AN=502976833&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Farmer, L. S. J. (2007). What is the question? *IFLA Journal*, *33*(1), 41–49. doi: 10.1177/0340035207076408

Goforth Gregory, J. (2015). Stuck in the Middle. *American Libraries*, *46*(5), 42–45.

Grey, E. (2017). Pokémon and Libraries. *Voice of Youth Advocates*, *40*(1), 38–39.

Hartel, J., Cox, A. M., & Griffin, B. L. (2016). Information activity in serious leisure. *Information Research, 21*(4). Retrieved from https://infocom.hyperlib.sjsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/EJ1123254.pdf

Justice, L. M., Piasta, S. B., Capps, J. L., & Levitt, S. R.. (2013). Library-based summer reading clubs: Who participates and why? *Library Quarterly, 83*(4), 321–340. doi: 10.1086/671911

Large, A., Nesset, V. & Beheshti, J. (2008). Children as information seekers: what researchers tell us. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship, 14*(2), 121-140. DOI: 10.1080/13614540902812631

Lo, P., Allard, B., Ho, K. K., Chen, J. C.-C., Okada, D., Stark, A., Henry, J., & Lai, C. (2018). Librarians' perceptions of educational values of comic books: A comparative study between Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 51*(4), 1103–1119. doi: 10.1177/0961000618763979

Lu, Y. (2010). Children's information seeking in coping with daily-life problems: An investigation of fifth- and sixth-grade students. *Library & Information Science Research, 32*(1), 77–88. Oxford, Great Britain: Elsevier B.V. https://doi-org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2009.09.004

Marshall, K. (2016). Sex in the stacks: Teenager sex education information seeking behavior and barriers to the use of library resources. *Journal of Research on Libraries & Young Adults*, *7*(3), 1–13. Retrieved from http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lls&AN=120658525&site=ehost-live&scope=site

McGrath, B. S. (2018). Digitweens. *School Library Journal*, *64*(11), 38–40.

Mitchell, C., & Reid-Walsh, J. (2009). *Seven going on seventeen: tween studies in the culture of girlhood*. New York: Peter Lang.

Palfrey, J. G., & Gasser, U. (2016). *Born digital: how children grow up in a digital age*. New York: Basic Books.

Osborne, V. (2008). Engaging kids where kids are at: The Eltham Library project. *APLIS, 21*(4), 178–181. Retrieved from http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lls&AN=502961439&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Shenton, A. K. (2007). The paradoxical world of young people's information behavior. *School Libraries Worldwide, 13*(2), 1-17. Retrieved from http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lls&AN=502919415&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Shenton, A. K., & Dixon, P. (2003). Sequential or selective access? Young people's strategies for finding information in non-fiction books. *New Review of Children's Literature & Librarianship, 9*, 57–69. doi: 10.1080/1361454032000232103

Struckmeyer, A. M. (2012). Reaching Tweens. *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*, *10*(2), 36–38.

Waxman, C. (2016). Be Creative! *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*, *14*(4), 23–24. https://doi-org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/10.5860/cal.14n4.23