

TEEN

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY



CALGARY
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

FOUNDATIONS **Background and History**

In 1938, librarian Louise Riley opened the John Buchan Room at Memorial Park Library — the first dedicated library room for young teens in North America — to "cater exclusively to students from Grade 7 to Grade 9"¹. Since that early beginning, the Library's teen services have grown and evolved, grounded in research which shows that the teen years are a crucial period of growth and development². The Library's teen spaces, collections, and programs are intentionally designed to support this development as teens make the transition from the dependency of childhood to becoming healthy, independent adults.

Libraries are vital community hubs, where people of all ages and backgrounds come together and access needed resources. Walk through a Calgary Public Library location today and you will see teens studying, strengthening their social skills through engaging programs, or learning something new by tinkering with an interesting piece of technology. There are over 150,000 teens and tweens³ in Calgary, and in-house statistics show that they are using the Library at disproportionately high rates. They use all Library services, including checking out physical and digital material, booking meeting rooms, attending programs, and connecting to Wi-Fi, and they are very heavy users of the Library's desktop PCs and Chromebooks. They are avid readers, enthusiastic volunteers, and lively inhabitants of Library spaces.

Learning, engagement, flexibility, and adaptability are key when working with teens. The Library continually innovates to incorporate new research to meet changing teen needs and aims to make teen services user-centred and teen-led.

¹ Brennan, B. 2012.

² McNeely, Clea and Jayne Blanchard. 2009.

³ Statistics Canada. 2022.

PHILOSOPHY Teens have complex needs and Calgary Public Library provides strong, evidence-based teen services to support this core audience in many ways.

We support teen development

Adolescence is an enormously important period of physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. The teenage brain changes dramatically during puberty and into the early 20s⁴, and the experiences teens have during that time shape their adult brains. The Library has an essential role to play in supporting a healthy transition from childhood to adulthood. We see teens through the lens of Positive Youth Development⁵ and use Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework⁶ as a foundation to understand how we can best aid teens in this transformation.

We support teens as students

School is a full-time job for most adolescents. Teens have specific needs as middle school, junior high, and high school students, and as they move into post-secondary education. The Library provides resources, programs, and services that are aligned with the Alberta curriculum, including study guides, tutoring, research materials, and classroom visits. We also work to support educators so they can better support their students.

We support teens as informal learners

Learning does not end when the school bell rings. In fact, teens have an extraordinary capacity to learn and improve skills that support their own individual interests. One study showed that teen boys were capable of reading at a much higher level than normal — up to six grade levels higher — when they were reading about an online game they cared about instead of a school text⁷. Our teen spaces and programs are designed to support this powerful, interest-based learning.

⁴ Murdock, Andy. 2002. And Giedd, Jay N. 2008.

⁵ Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. V. 2005.

⁶ Search Institute. 2006.

⁷ Steinkuhler, C. 2012.

We support teens as readers

Improved reading skills lead to greater success in school and life, as students are better able to understand written instructions, texts, and forms. The best way to improve reading skill is through practice, and the best way to encourage practice is through engaged reading. Engaged reading happens when teens can choose reading material they are interested in without judgement or censorship. The Library works to foster a love of reading in all ages and provides collections that are diverse in both content and format to encourage a wide range of readers.

We support teens as individuals

Teens are not a homogenous group; each adolescent has their own unique needs and experiences. The Library recognizes that many teens face complex intersectional challenges. We seek to build relationships with our teen patrons, make our teen programming flexible and teen-led wherever possible, and provide teens with a sense of ownership over teen spaces. As part of the Library's commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, we strive to provide resources that meet the needs of all teen audiences, particularly vulnerable groups including Newcomer youth, Indigenous youth, neurodiverse youth, youth who are street-adjacent, and LGBTQ2S+ youth.



We support teens as emerging adults

Older teens are future-focused, and the Library helps them prepare for adulthood by providing volunteer opportunities, career resources, and opportunities to develop leadership skills. Welcoming teens into the Library helps them develop a sense of connection to their communities, and wherever possible our programs include elements of civic engagement. Program topics like financial literacy, public speaking, and hands-on technology provide essential life skills they will need as independent adults.

We support teen wellness

The adolescent years are when many serious mental health issues emerge, including schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety disorders such as OCD⁸. Teens also experience high levels of stress as they face pressure to do well at school, apply to post-secondary institutions, begin work, and make decisions that will shape their entire adult lives. Library programs incorporate Social Emotional Learning to help teens learn to manage their emotions, and we offer resources such as the Wellness Desk to increase teen access to qualified mental health professionals.



⁸ Boxe, Agata. 2020.

AREAS OF FOCUS Teen services at Calgary Public Library cover five areas of focus: spaces, collections, programs, people, and research.

Spaces

Public libraries are an important “third space” for teens: a public space that is not home or school, where they are allowed to just be. Providing a neutral indoor space where teens can study or socialize without having to buy anything is an essential service that libraries provide for this age group. We want every teen to feel welcome in our teen spaces, which are free, open to all, and intentionally designed to meet the needs of teens. These designs are informed by the Young Adult Library Services Association’s National Teen Space Guidelines⁹ and by research into teen library spaces¹⁰.

Teens are encouraged to use every part of the Library; like adult patrons, they may need to access computers, connect to Wi-Fi, use free printing, reserve meeting rooms, make use of quiet study spaces, and browse the collections. However, it is important to recognize that they also need a retreat or refuge designed specifically for them, as free as possible from adult interference, in order to feel safe and welcomed. This is particularly important for teens who may not have the privilege of a safe or private space at home.

The Teen Centre at Central Library is the epitome of this design, with approximately 4,000 sq. ft of dedicated teens-only space that is active, social, and full of opportunities for teen ownership. It contains distinct areas for quiet study and group work, comfortable furniture for lounging and reading individually or in groups, and video game stations, which encourage socialization as teens develop cognitive skills and hand-eye coordination. The space is flexible, and teens are welcome to reconfigure the furniture to suit their needs. Adults are invited to access the prominently displayed Young Adult (YA) collections but are asked not to linger. Tabletop games and self-directed activities are freely available.

¹⁰ Kuhlmann, L. Meghann et al. 2014; Velasquez, J. 2016.

The Teen Centre is also home to the Library's first Teen Tech Lab (TTL), a creative technology space designed to support Positive Youth Development and help teens build their skills through inquiry-based exploration. The TTL is based on the YouMedia model first developed in Chicago and is grounded in research on connected learning, which shows that teens learn most effectively when they can follow their interests in a social environment and connect what they learn to real life or academic success. Teens can access a wide range of supplies and technology, from analog sewing machines to robots and 3D printers, and are supported in their informal learning by Library staff and volunteers with talents that range from knitting to coding and everything in between. This space is guided by the HOMAGO model (Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out) developed by Dr. Mizuko Ito¹¹. An evidence-based approach incorporates research on teen development and learning, and best practices developed by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and its partners.

Most Library locations have designated teen spaces and our goal is to enhance and expand these into more purposeful and dedicated spaces using the Teen Centre model. Teen Centres have now been built at Seton, Shawnessy, and Saddletowne libraries, with more to come. The Teen Tech Lab will also expand to many of these locations. Smaller libraries may implement alternate strategies to create dedicated teen spaces such as reserving program rooms during after-school hours or establishing pop-up infrastructure.



¹¹ Ito, Mizuko et al. 2009.

Collections

Key developmental tasks for teens include developing empathy for others, solidifying their own sexual and gender identity, and building their own moral codes. The Library supports this growth by providing balanced, diverse collections that show the whole range of human experiences. Giving teens a wide variety of material to choose from also promotes engaged reading, as they are much more likely to read for pleasure when they can select their own books. Teen collections at Calgary Public Library are appealing and engaging; the goal is for every teen to easily find something they want to read or the information they require.

Calgary Public Library Young Adult (YA) collections include fiction and non-fiction in a variety of formats. Teens read widely, and often access materials from the children's and adult collections in addition to the materials selected specifically for them. In recent years, there has been a strong movement in YA publishing to promote diverse narratives, particularly those written by people with lived experiences (#ownvoices), helping us build collections in which all teens can see themselves and their communities reflected. The Library intends to extend this work by bringing teen voices into the collections with reading recommendations by youth, for youth.

While many teens are voracious readers, some are reluctant or struggle to read; non-fiction, graphic novels, and "HiLo" books (high interest, low reading level) are key resources for this group. The Library does not teach literacy skills to teens directly, but provides these collections to help teens with lower reading ability, as well as their teachers and caregivers, build confidence in these skills.

Digital resources are a crucial component of our teen collections. This goes beyond eBooks to include online study guides for provincial achievement exams, online tutoring and homework help, online learning, and even self-publishing tools. Digital collections are accessible at all times from anywhere in Calgary. We strive to connect physical and digital collections wherever possible to increase awareness of the resources available and make the transition between them as seamless as possible.

Programs

The Library designs and schedules programs with an understanding of teen development. The brain's executive functions, which include organization and time management, are the last to fully develop¹², so we keep program schedules consistent to make them easier to remember and allow last-minute drop-ins whenever possible. Studies have shown that teens' circadian rhythms are different than those of children or adults¹³, so we avoid scheduling programs on weekend mornings when they are likely to be sleeping in. We recognize that teens are transitioning between childhood and adulthood, but do not truly belong to either group, so programs have a responsible adult facilitator present and always include flexibility and opportunities for choice and independence.

Youth are naturally passionate and engaged in activities they care about, and the more we can involve them in program design, the more successful our programs will be in giving teens what they need. Existing Library programs build in choice around activities and participation levels, and our vision is to work towards more teen-led programs, where youth are full collaborators in the design and delivery.



¹² Murdock, Andy. 2020.

¹³ Hagenauer MH et al. 2009.

Calgary Public Library has a foundation of teen programs designed to be hands-on, experiential, and social, and to provide opportunities for teen choice. From this foundation, the Library continuously seeks to iterate and offer transformative opportunities for teen learning and engagement that will address evolving needs. While the specifics change over time, there are four core categories:

- **Gaming programs** let teens relax and socialize with video games and a wide selection of tabletop games, including competitive and co-operative choices. There is a wealth of research showing that gaming has clear benefits for all ages¹⁴. Games of all kinds support healthy social development, a crucial developmental task for teenagers. They promote critical and strategic thinking skills and logic, and have clear ties to textual, visual, and digital literacy — all essential parts of lifelong learning. They are also fun and encourage teens to build relationships with Library staff and each other.
- **Creative programs** use arts and crafts along with technology to support teen skill building and social development. Teens are highly creative and tactile, and crafts are an engaging and low-stakes way to help them learn new techniques, build confidence, and work on essential social skills. These programs may include volunteers with specialized skills like sewing, art, photography, or advanced coding, who work with teens to support deeper interest-based learning. All creative programs are based on HOMAGO principles and supported by Teen Tech Labs wherever available.
- **Interest-based programs** provide a deeper dive into specific topics teens care about, such as creative writing, coding, bicycle mechanics, or music. The Library works with a wide variety of external presenters and partners to leverage their expertise and is always looking for opportunities to provide these rich experiences to our teen patrons.

¹⁴ Granic, Isabela et al. 2014; Gray, Peter. 2018; Brilliant, Dennilson et al. 2019.

- **Out-of-school programs** focus on the critical hours after school and integrate elements of all other teen programs. This category also includes the Ultimate Summer Challenge, a massive online, asynchronous program that runs throughout the summer and encourages teens to track their reading and complete creative challenges as a way to combat the “summer slide,” or the learning loss that youth experience when they are out of school for those months.

For teens who are unable or unwilling to attend scheduled programs, the Library provides a range of self-directed activities in our teen spaces, including freely available games and self-guided creative activities. These self-directed programs activate our spaces and give teens a sense of ownership and agency. This also gives smaller Library locations a way to provide teen programming, regardless of space or staff capacity.

Finally, youth volunteering is our largest and most impactful teen program, with over 1,100 teen volunteers supporting Library programs and special events. In the process, they develop positive relationships with adult staff, make constructive use of their time, learn valuable leadership skills, and build confidence. Youth volunteers are also automatically members of the Teen Think Tank where they are regularly surveyed for their help and feedback in all areas of teen services at the Library, including the writing of this strategy.



People

Staff are the heart of teen services at the Library. Teens can be a challenging group to reach and work with; knowledgeable, enthusiastic people are key. Robust professional learning gives staff a firm grounding in the research underpinning the Library's teen services and hands-on practice with day-to-day interactions.

Research shows that having positive relationships with adults outside of their immediate family is an important developmental asset for teens¹⁵. They need these connections but are also highly independent and often distrustful of authority figures. It takes time and consistency to build trust, and the rewards are huge: building these relationships makes it easier for teens to approach staff when they need help and makes them much more likely to engage in programs. We consider this an essential ingredient in the Library's teen services.

Library staff act as informal mentors to the teen patrons they work with through programming and customer service interactions. Caring volunteers enhance teen programs, bringing their own expertise and experience to support offerings like Open Lab in the Teen Tech Lab. As Calgary Public Library moves into the future, more intentional mentorship opportunities using evidence-based models for teens and staff will help further the impact the Library has on teen lives.

In order to best leverage Library resources and create a greater collective impact, we work with youth-serving agencies throughout the city, such as the Calgary Board of Education, the Calgary Catholic School District, The City of Calgary, and the many partners in the Calgary Afterschool framework.

¹⁵ Search Institute. 2006.

Research

Teen Services at Calgary Public Library are built upon a foundation of evidence-based best practices. These include a solid understanding of:

- Adolescent development, including brain development
- Positive Youth Development
- The Developmental Assets model created by Search Institute
- Social Emotional Learning
- Twenty-first Century Skills and Connected Learning, including the HOMAGO model.

The Library draws on research from respected institutions such as Search Institute, CASEL, the Connected Learning Alliance, and UCLA's Developmental Neuroscience Lab, among others. We also work to achieve best practices established by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA).

The Library additionally contributes to original research; we have partnered with researchers from Bow Valley College on a multi-year project examining how public spaces contribute to informal settlement support for Newcomer youth and how they foster a sense of belonging for all adolescents. We continually seek out new research and learning, particularly in a local context, and actively seek opportunities to work with respected local organizations who are conducting research about youth and youth services.



OUR FUTURE Calgary Public Library wants every teen in our communities to feel safe and welcome in our spaces as they learn, socialize, and make a healthy transition to adulthood.

Teens are passionate and engaged changemakers, entrepreneurs, and community members. The Library will endeavour to involve teens as co-creators; including teen voices in the design of Library spaces, programs, and services shows them the direct impact they can have on their community. When youth can see real outcomes from their work, they feel valued and inspired to continue giving back and see meaningful ways to lead change in their communities.

Through building dedicated Teen Centres and Teen Tech Labs, the Library will provide an environment intentionally designed to support teen development and foster excitement as teens follow their passions, driving them to learn and empowering them to create their own best futures. Support and mentorship from caring adults will provide the scaffolding they need to build their skills and feel like valued members of the community.

Those teen Library spaces will offer fresh, exciting, and accessible collections that speak to teens' interests, reflect their experiences, and introduce them to the experiences of others. The Digital Library makes these collections available from anywhere at any time, and a wide range of resources support studying, independent learning, and reading for pleasure. Finding ways to bring teen voices into the collections will help ensure that they are always relevant and relatable.

Teen voices are also an essential ingredient in teen programs. The Library will work to develop strong after-school programs at all Library locations near schools, and will offer self-directed programs at every location. We will work to include teens earlier in the process, asking them to act not just as collaborators but as co-designers. This is the best way to guarantee that Library programs meet the rapidly changing needs of teens and stay interesting and appealing.

Engaged Library staff are key to successful teen services. We will work continually to offer excellent professional learning for staff and to provide mentoring and modeling to showcase best practices. Partnerships with other youth-serving agencies expand the range of training available and the Library will take advantage of these opportunities. Ideally, every Library location will have at least one teen services champion.

Finally, we will continue to learn and seek out emerging research to ensure our teen services are always following best practices and meeting the changing needs of teens.



APPENDIX A: Teen spaces at Calgary Public Library are welcoming, safe, flexible, and promote teen ownership (choice and voice). They are designed to accommodate social behaviour and higher noise levels, and to support healthy teen development.

DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR TEEN SPACES AND TEEN TECH LABS

Design Principles

Teen Library spaces are:

- **Social.** Social development is an essential task of adolescence. Library teen spaces are intentionally designed to support groups of teens, including accounting for expected higher noise levels.
 - **Differentiated.** Library teen spaces are clearly delineated from other areas using colour, flooring and upholstery materials, furniture, collections, signage, and / or spatial cues. Wherever possible, teen spaces are not adjacent to children's areas in the Library location.
 - **Flexible.** Wherever possible, furniture is easily movable and teens are encouraged to reconfigure the layout to suit their changing needs.
 - **Tech Ready.** Teens use phones, tablets, and laptops constantly. Power outlets are abundant and easily accessible, and adequate Wi-Fi is readily available. Library computers are easily accessible to teens who do not have their own technology.
 - **Teen-owned.** Opportunities for self-expression, choice, and voice exist throughout the space. This may include display space for teen art, self-directed activities, whiteboards, collaborative exhibits, or teen-created book displays — the possibilities are endless.
 - **Teens-only.** Teens need a comfortable space free of adult interference. Larger spaces like Central Library's Teen Centre are always teens-only; smaller locations may designate teens-only hours after school and on weekends or set up a program room as a temporary teen retreat.
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SPACE COMPONENTS **Collections**

Teen spaces house teen fiction and non-fiction collections in all physical formats. Shelving may be fixed or mobile and is often used to outline the teen area as a type of permeable wall that clearly marks the space without hampering sightlines. Integrated display shelving and standalone display units help to show off appealing material and encourage browsing. Patrons of all ages are welcome to access these collections.

Study Space

Teens need to study individually as well as work in groups on schoolwork and other projects. A mix of study chairs with tabletops attached and tables of varying sizes support both uses. Square tables can be easily combined to create space for larger groups as needed. Group work cannot happen without conversation so we expect that noise levels will be higher than in other parts of the Library.

Social Space

Comfortable, movable lounge furniture creates welcoming spaces for teens to gather and socialize, or to curl up and read a good book. Board games, gaming consoles, and art supplies are available, but activities are never forced: “just hanging out” is an important way for teens to build social skills.

Teen Tech Lab

A Teen Tech Lab is designed to support creative learning through technology, based on the principles of Connected Learning and the HOMAGO model. It can be a permanent space such as at Central Library or a movable cart that transforms any existing space. Technology ranges from simple sewing machines to complex robotics. The focus is on introducing teens to new things, encouraging interest-based learning, building skills, and sparking creative collisions. For example, what happens if you combine robotics with knitting or wire electronics into your sewing project? Curiosity is key.

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