

# IN THE YA CORNER

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## Bashing the Kids—Library Style

*"The message this document gives to our younger patrons is that the library expects the very worst of them..."*

Writing not long ago in *The Alan Review*, Editor Charlie Reed, noted: "Today, when I visit our local public library I see many children and parents in the children's room, but I rarely see young adults." She posits several reasons for the absence of young adults in the library:

- School libraries "are so good that they [YAs] do not need to go to the public library;" going to the library is not part of teens' life experience and they can't function there very well.
- Students are not required to do the research they once were, and public libraries do not encourage young adult visitors.

I might have disagreed completely with Reed's last reason had it not been for an experience I had this summer when I participated in a workshop on YA books and services for a group of Ohio librarians. In a panel discussion, called "Battle Tactics: How to Handle Young Adult Problems," participants were a local police lieutenant, a librarian from a nearby public library, and myself.

The officer opened by explaining the legal definitions of loitering, malicious mischief, vandalism, etc., including what librarians' legal rights are when confronted with such problems. The librarian panelist then described problems that her library has faced: ripping and breaking of furniture; boisterous, loud behavior; vandalism; stealing; "and even worse. . . ." (She never told us what "even worse" was.) Most of these problems occur when young adults come into the building after school, she said. The problem had become so serious that a committee was formed to devise a "code of conduct," copies of which were distributed to all YA patrons.

### Code of Conduct

The library seeks to serve the needs of *all citizens* of Sandusky County. The following rules have been adopted for the comfort and protection of everyone using the library. The library staff will enforce these rules in a courteous yet firm manner. We ask your cooperation in maintaining a pleasant atmosphere so that everyone will be able to make good use of our services. If you are confronted with violations of any of these rules, please alert a staff member immediately.

1. We will not allow disruptive behavior. You may not disturb others. Examples of disruptive behavior include the following:
  - a. Loud or boisterous behavior, running, "fooling around," and other disorderly conduct.
  - b. Excessive noise whether done purposely or by accident. (No radios or "boxes" will be permitted).
  - c. Fighting, shoving and other physical abuse.
  - d. Foul, abusive or threatening language.
  - e. Misuse of library furnishings and/or equipment.
2. The following actions are not permitted in the library.
  - a. Solicitation.
  - b. Smoking (Ohio Revised Code 3791.031).
  - c. Eating or drinking.
  - d. Loitering or "hanging out."
3. Shirts and shoes must be worn in the library.
4. Acts of vandalism, theft, drug dealing, or other illegal activities committed on library property will be reported to the police.

If you violate the above rules, you will be asked to leave the library. Failure to leave will result in our calling school officials and/or the police. Repeated offenses will result in your being barred from the library.

Several things bothered me. First, there is the code of conduct itself, a document which is not only distasteful, but discriminatory. What this library is saying to its young adult patrons is that they either shape up or ship out—period! One thing that makes the public library special for a lot of kids is that it's a place where they can gather to study, to

listen to music, or just to see their friends in an atmosphere that is non-threatening and non-judgmental. If I was a YA and handed this code of conduct, I'd feel that I'd ended up back in the repressive school environment I'd just left and hesitate to use the library again. The message this document also gives to younger patrons is that the library expects the very worst of them; the natural response to this kind of expectation is to give you exactly what you thought you'd get.

The code is a discriminatory document because it is aimed specifically at young adults. Anyone who has seen hordes of preschoolers arrive for a library story hour knows that boisterous behavior isn't the sole province of YAs. Adults are frequently obnoxious in libraries; we're learning how to deal with the problem patron. Adult obnoxiousness frequently takes much nastier forms than teenage boisterousness. Yet no library that I know of hands preschoolers a code of conduct or gives adults written warnings. YAs are not only fair game, they are virtually powerless—too many library staff feel free to practice this kind of discrimination.

What disturbed me most that day, however, was the fact that everyone appeared to accept this whole thing as a very fine idea; several said they were going back to their libraries to work on their own conduct codes. If that's the case, then Charlie Reed was absolutely right. Young adult library patrons have lost one of the few non-repressive havens available to them. Sure they may be boisterous. Sure they may test the staff. And sure, they may even have to be thrown out of the library on occasion. But there has to be a better way to handle problems than by handing them a "code of conduct," backed up with threats of police retribution, that says in effect, either be perfect or get lost. We should remember that if they do "get lost" enough times we may never see them in public libraries again. The real tragedy is that a generation of library users may be lost forever, all because they act like kids once in a while. And that would be a shame.