

The background of the cover features a light yellow-to-white gradient with several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across it. These motifs are simple, elongated shapes with a small stem and two leaves, appearing to float or drift across the page.

READERS' ADVISORY FOR CHILDREN AND 'TWEENS

Penny Peck

 **Greenwood**
PUBLISHING GROUP

Readers' Advisory for Children and 'Tweens

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Penny Peck



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Introduction

When I went to graduate school for my master's in library science degree, readers' advisory was considered an essential skill for children's librarians. Of course, that was before the advent of personal computers! Now library employees have many other responsibilities, from running computer labs, to maintaining homework centers, to managing branch libraries with just one or two employees. So readers' advisory for children and 'tweens sometimes gets lost in the shuffle, and it can be unfamiliar to many library staff members. Many of us still think of it as a key skill of youth services library staff, but in many cases it is learned on the job. This book aims to help in that goal, to assist you with youth readers' advisory skills so that readers' advisory can become one of the main talents you bring to the job.

Maybe you are a longtime adult reference librarian, who now has to work at the children's desk as a result of cutbacks. Or you are a new staff member at an elementary school library that can no longer afford a credentialed librarian. Or you are the young adult librarian who was recently promoted to head of youth services and are quickly learning how to assist younger children. Or you are a new librarian, interested in youth services and children's books, but haven't had much experience yet. All of these scenarios are examples of situations in which you can benefit from this book.

When I started as a children's librarian twenty-five years ago, we still worked with the card catalog. And I was expected to read a good portion of the collection so I could recommend books to children. Now many children's librarians have to manage several employees, write grants, and perform other duties that minimize the amount of time they have to read. Luckily there are Web sites and books that can help with readers' advisory; many are recommended in the following chapters. Even if you haven't read a particular book, you can still recommend it to a young person—you just need to know something about that book. Of course reading as many of the books in your collection as possible is still important and will help you better serve young readers, but sometimes reading every title is impossible. That's where other skills and tools come in.

Some of you may wonder about the use of the word *'tween* in the title of this book. As of this writing, *'tween* is starting to become the accepted term when referring to young people between the ages of nine and twelve—they are truly preteen, but not a small child who needs

babysitting. 'Twins are upper elementary and middle school students who have some independence; they often visit the library on the way home from school, without a parent or caregiver. They are a huge market, spending considerable amounts of money on popular culture items, from "Spongebob" backpacks to Jonas Brothers music CDs. This book provides details on assisting them in finding recreational reading, so they will continue to enjoy reading and not just read for homework.

Serving younger children is also addressed in this book, from assisting parents and preschoolers who want to find picture books, to helping kindergarteners and first graders find easy readers they can tackle on their own, to encouraging second and third graders to move up from easy readers to transitional fiction, which are shorter chapter books, to the full-fledged novels they will read as 'twins. There are chapters focusing on each of these types of books, going into more detail on how to help children find books that are a good "fit" for them and packed with lists of additional books.

Your library may not own every book mentioned in this guide. But it is likely to carry some of these books, which are often very popular and may have been requested anyway. If your library needs to add books to meet readers' advisory demands, consider purchasing paperback copies of some of the more popular books mentioned here so you have something on hand when it is time to do readers' advisory. This book also lists helpful Web sites that offer even more titles you can recommend, especially for the "fussy" reader who doesn't seem tempted by any of your recommendations.

Readers' advisory can and should include nonfiction, folklore, poetry, and graphic novels as well fiction. Many young people enjoy these types of books for recreational reading. You'll also find some tips on promoting books, from booktalking, to booklists, to displays, to programming ideas. There should be something here even for longtime children's librarians looking to freshen up their readers' advisory repertoire. You may even find books here that you want to read yourself!

As you begin to explore this book, you may want to start a file or database of these titles, so you have them at your fingertips when it is time to do some readers' advisory. How you use the book is up to you; it was written to assist the many people dedicated to helping children in the library and to make that job easier. With so many libraries facing cutbacks, many of us need to learn new skills and serve a wider variety of patrons, including young people, and this book is intended to help face that challenge.

Chapter 1

Readers' Advisory

If you work at a library, you may have been the type of child who read after bedtime, with a flashlight under the covers. Reading and talking about books is one reason many of us joined the library profession, whether as a librarian or one of the vital support staff who works at the children's desk. Helping a person find the answer to a homework question is often straightforward, but finding books a child or 'tween might like is a more nuanced and subjective skill.

This first chapter covers some basic skills needed to diagnose what a young reader might like. If you were a waiter, you wouldn't automatically order a dish for a customer without first asking about that person's likes and dislikes, allergies, or other needs. It's the same with readers' advisory: you want to find out a little about the person before offering recreational reading suggestions.

Connecting children with books that will soon become their favorites can be very rewarding. Library staff and volunteers at all levels, from the library aides who shelve books to the library director, probably came to work in a library because they loved reading. So doing readers' advisory may tap into your passion for books. You don't have to have read every book in the children's room to do readers' advisory, but it does require some knowledge of books and children, as well as interpersonal communication skills, like being a good listener and being patient.

Definition of Readers' Advisory

Readers' advisory is usually thought of as finding recreational reading, as opposed to finding books for homework assignments or books on how to draw or play a sport, for example. So readers' advisory often means finding fiction books for the customer, similar to hand-selling in an independent bookstore. It can be very challenging, like picking out clothes for someone you don't know. This can be made even more difficult if the child the books are for is not there. Sometimes parents are at the library to pick up books for their children, but the children aren't there to add their input. This makes readers' advisory more difficult, but not impossible.

Children are often more flexible in their recreational reading than adults. We all have an aunt or grandmother who only reads mysteries, but a child who is a huge fantasy or Harry Potter fan may be willing to try historical novels such as Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series or an animal story such as Wilson Rawls's *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Because children are curious, they often take chances with their reading choices.

Understanding Readers

When children are your customers, it can be helpful to understand some basics of child development to serve them better. There can be some developmental reasons for children's inability to express their needs or to work efficiently in the library. Knowing a few facts about child development can help us be better listeners and more patient with younger customers. It can also remove the filter between you and the child and make your interactions more effective.

It is often determined by child development specialists that children under the age of eight cannot always tell right from wrong or tell reality from imagination. That is why age eight is referred to as "the age of reason" for children to be able to be on their own. Many libraries will have a policy that children must be at least eight to be in the library without adult supervision. These rules are based on child development principles. Those who work with children will notice that they may have to tell a five-year-old the same rules over and over, but a nine-year-old may remember from one minute to the next that there is a rule against running in the library. If the five-year-olds forget, you have to remind them every time they come to the library. Therefore, when the child is younger than eight, the readers' advisor often talks to both the parent and child.

Early childhood is ages three to eight, an age group that is usually in the library with a parent or caregiver. This age group takes great pride in accomplishments, so let them help in finding books they request; even if they cannot type, let them watch you use the online catalog. Partner with them to help them find what they are requesting instead of just handing it to them.

Later childhood is ages nine to twelve. Children in this category will often go to the library without an adult; this is the group referred to as 'tweens. If an adult does come to the library with a 'tween, often the child will separate from the adult when it comes time to ask for materials. Children in this age group are very good at concrete problem solving, are industrious, and take initiative. These children like to use online computers to find their own materials or may want you to just assist while they take the lead. Partner with 'tweens when doing readers' advisory, and they are more likely to accept your suggestions.

Adolescents, or teens, enjoy making their own decisions. Parents and other adults, including librarians and teachers, can show them the results of their search and help them choose again for different results if that is what is needed, but teens are trying to separate from childhood and show their independence. They often need time to daydream, and may be forgetful, but they will appreciate any adult help that comes across as nonjudgmental. 'Tweens often have many of these characteristics, too.

Brain Development

Recent studies on brain development in babies and very young children have been featured prominently in news magazines and on television. A great deal of pressure is placed on parents to, from day one, read to babies and help them develop language skills, use their imaginations, be stimulated visually and with music, and challenge themselves. Parents may ask for books on physics for a three-year-old. The library can help by offering great picture books, music CDs for children, and CD-ROM learning games that are age appropriate, as well as parenting books. But preschoolers still do not have the fine motor skills needed to keyboard, and parents may need to be helped to learn what their children, even the most advanced, can and cannot be expected to do. Then these parents should be prepared to help their children with tasks they are capable of doing rather than frustrating them with tasks they cannot do. Also, every child in a particular age group is not at the same developmental level, so a great rule of thumb is to be flexible and let parents determine what books would be the best "fit" for their children.

Children and Their Needs

Studies by Abraham Maslow, Erik Erikson, or Jean Piaget provide more information about child development in general. Basically, each of these authors outlined a hierarchy of needs in childhood. A summary of what may fit a child, depending on his or her age, is that children under age six are trying to achieve autonomy, children ages six to nine are developing initiative, those ages nine to twelve are becoming industrious, and teens are establishing their identity. That is one reason preschoolers frequently say “No!”; they are establishing autonomy. Teens may seem rude, but don’t take it personally; they are defining who they are.

Children and Choices

Just like adults, children should be offered choices while in the library. Let them look at books both above and below their grade level and see what they choose. Children will often choose nonfiction books that may be too difficult to read from cover to cover, but will serve a need because the photographs are well done. If you provide choices, children are more likely to leave with something; if you only offer one book, there is a greater chance that it won’t be what they want, and they will leave empty handed.

Reader Response Theory

There is a new push by teachers to allow children to choose what they want to read, rather than assigning everyone the same book to read. Librarians have done this for a long time, but educators have done research to show that this allows for more growth by the reader. Nancie Atwell’s *The Reading Zone* outlines this theory, which is often referred to as “reader response theory.” According to this theory, readers respond better to books when they are allowed to choose what to read; reading ability also increases. Readers bring meaning to the texts; a reader’s background influences what the text means to that person. So allowing the reader to choose what to read is essential. That is one reason the readers’ advisory experience is a partnership between you and the reader; you work together to find books that person may enjoy. Asking children and ‘tweens to name books they have already read and enjoyed is one way to use reader response theory to ascertain what books they might enjoy in the future. By celebrating their enthusiasm for books they mention, you can make young readers feel validated. They will listen to your suggestions if you respond positively to the books they say they like.

Preparing to Do Readers' Advisory

If you are expected to do readers' advisory with youth, there are many things you can do to keep up on new titles, familiarize yourself with popular materials, and discover what offerings will be successful. You have already started by reading this manual. Many library staff also regularly read professional journals such as *Horn Book*, *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus*, *Booklist*, and *Publishers Weekly* to follow the trends in books for youth.

Looking over the new books for children and 'tweens before they are put out on the shelves is a great shortcut to keeping up with what your library has. Look at the new children's books regularly and make a note of authors you see often or types of novels you see in abundance, such as fantasy or popular nonfiction topics. You may not have time to read all the new books, but you can look at the book jackets and read the inside flaps to find out what they are about so you can offer them when doing readers' advisory.

Another way to discover what is popular and in demand is to observe what books for children and 'tweens are regularly being reserved and what appears regularly on the return shelves. This can be a quick and easy way to see what is popular in your community.

Familiarize yourself with the children's paperback books; 'tweens often prefer them for recreational reading. See which series you own and which paperbacks look worn; these are often the most popular.

Finally, shelf-read areas in the children's section to see which books are popular. If a shelf looks in pristine condition, it may not contain books in demand (unless a page just did shelf-reading in that section). Notice shelves in disarray; these often contain books in demand. Shelves that are messy is one indicator that the library is being used, and that the particular area contains popular materials. Straighten and shelf-read that area so it is presentable for the next customer, but keep it in mind the next time you do readers' advisory.

Readers' Advisory Interview

When being asked for reading recommendations, first find out if the book will be read for fun or used for homework. If it is for homework, the teacher may have said the book had to be at least a certain length, perhaps 100 pages, or about a certain topic. The teacher also may have specified it be from a list, or that it be a Newbery-winning novel. A teacher may also specify that it be a mystery, or historical fiction, or a "classic";

determining if the request is for a book report for school leads you to regular reference interview questions, such as "Do you have the handout from your teacher describing the assignment?" Sometimes, even when reading for "fun," children need a book from a reading incentive program like Accelerated Reader or Scholastic Reading Counts! (SRC), and not all books are on these lists.

If you determine that the request is for a book for fun and not specifically related to homework, there are several questions you can ask to help discover the child's reading interests.

Begin by asking if the child can recall a recent book he or she read for fun. If, for example, the answer is *Ramona* by Beverly Cleary, you can offer other books by that author. Or you can offer other humorous contemporary novels with a quirky girl main character, such as Barbara Park's *Junie B. Jones*, Megan McDonald's *Judy Moody*, or Paula Danziger's *Amber Brown*. The book the child mentions will also help you determine the child's reading level.

Next, ask what grade the child is in. This can help determine what the child can handle in the way of social issues and give an indication of reading level, but not always, because some children in the same grade read way below or way above that grade level. Also ask if the book is for that person, because some children visit the library to obtain books for a sibling. If you are dealing with the parent, you may want to ask if it is for a boy or girl, because sometimes gender plays a part in what type of books are requested, especially for children ages eight and above.

Readers' Advisory Questions

Following are some common questions you can use when doing the readers' advisory interview. Remember, you are not prying, or invading someone's privacy; you are just trying to determine what that person would enjoy in the way of recreational reading.

- ◆ What grade are you in?
- ◆ Is this for homework or to read for fun?
- ◆ Can you think of a book you read before? (for younger children)
- ◆ Can you think of a book you read and liked? (for 'tweens)
- ◆ Is this for you or for a brother or sister? (or for a child, if an adult is asking)
- ◆ Would you like something true (nonfiction) or a made-up story?

- ◆ Do you have a favorite book series?
- ◆ Do you have a favorite author?
- ◆ Do you like books that are scary or funny?
- ◆ Is there a hobby or sport you like?
- ◆ What movies and TV shows do you like?

Once you get some answers, you can start narrowing down the type of book that the young person might like. More detail about how to do that is provided below.

Body Language and Helpful Nonverbal Cues

The way you present yourself to the child or 'tween can make a big difference in how he or she responds to your questions. Many children are shy, or they have been taught not to bother an adult who looks busy. We have all had the unhappy experience of being waited on by a sales clerk who clearly seems too busy to want to help us; you do not want to convey that attitude when doing readers' advisory. Here are some non-verbal clues that can positively influence the exchange between you and a young person when doing the readers' advisory interview:

- ◆ Make eye contact.
- ◆ Smile.
- ◆ Listen with your full attention. Put away other work.
- ◆ Hold your arms and hands in a relaxed position (not crossed, no hands on hips).
- ◆ Be patient and unhurried.
- ◆ Provide several books to choose from.
- ◆ Walk away and let the person choose without pressure.
- ◆ Check back to see if additional suggestions are needed.
- ◆ When the person checks out, ask whether he or she enjoyed the books selected.

Finding Books for Children and 'Tweens

Once you have conducted the readers' advisory interview, there are several ways to find books for children and 'tweens. Often you can start by using the online catalog; if a 'tween asked for a novel and likes basketball, you can start by searching "basketball—fiction" or "basketball—juvenile fiction." The catalog can be a helpful tool in finding what the child is asking for, from picture books about trains for a preschooler, to vampire novels for the middle schooler who loved Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* and would like something similar.

Another handy way to find books to recommend is to use handouts, such as "Great Books for Boys" and "Great Books for Girls." Paper handouts are an easy and useful way to help people find books; these handouts can be especially helpful to parents picking out books for their children who are not at the library with them. This book also explores other professional books, Web sites, and ways to find books for young readers.

Read-Alikes

If the 'tween is able to name a book he or she read in the past and enjoyed, try to find similar books. These are known as "read-alikes." If there is a regular request for certain titles or types of books, you may want to create handouts; for example, so many 'tweens finished the Harry Potter series and requested other books that were similar, that many libraries wrote up lists of other fantasy novels about kids with magical powers.

Finding Read-Alikes

If you discover the name of a book that the 'tween enjoyed, there are a few steps you can take to find something similar. One is to look at the genre: Was the book a mystery, adventure story, or humorous novel? Then you can find other books in that genre (there is more discussion of genre fiction in chapter 6).

Of course you may also offer other books by that same author. If a 'tween liked one Roald Dahl novel, it is likely he or she will enjoy his other books. Although some authors like Dahl don't write books in a series, many of their books have a similar style and elements that appeal to a reader.