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Unattended children are, sadly, a familiar risk management issue in many public libraries in Australia and overseas. Recently, Maplewood Memorial Library in the USA received a lot of negative press for their decision to close the library early due to the unmanageably large number of unattended children in the building each day after school and the behaviour problems that resulted.

In NSW, the Commission for Children and Young People defines *child-safe* as taking steps to keep children safe from physical, sexual or emotional abuse and *child-friendly* as taking steps to ensure kids are valued, respected and included, so they feel confident they will be listened to.

One of the challenges any public library faces in providing services to children is striking a balance between providing a child-safe and a child-friendly environment. Many of us have childhood memories of spending hours in local public libraries. But it's important to understand that unattended children are not supervised by library staff and when these situations occur, the staff need policies and procedures to guide them. Unattended children may leave the library at any time, be approached by strangers, become sick, injured or hungry, become frightened, endanger themselves or another person, behave inappropriately (and so be asked to leave the library), and may be left at closing time without a parent or guardian to collect them.


We all have a much greater awareness of the vulnerability of children left unsupervised in any public place, including public libraries. Child protection legislation varies across the states and territories of Australia. There is no standard age at which children can be left alone and in each case individual circumstances are taken into consideration. Consequently, library policies vary from council to council with each library developing policies, procedures and staff training to ensure the safety of young people.

Teenagers present different challenges for public library staff; they are important clients, heavy library users, but they often congregate in noisy groups and staff may feel intimidated by them. The Search Institute identifies *The 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents* required in order to achieve

their potential as adults. Some of the external assets include: experiencing organisations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments; being valued by their community and having opportunities to contribute; knowing what is expected of them and whether activities and behaviours are 'in bounds' or 'out of bounds', and they need constructive, enriching opportunities for growth through creative activities and youth programs.

Public libraries in NSW are tackling these issues collectively through two current projects; the 'Child-Safe and Child-Friendly Public Libraries' working group is developing a set of resources in co-operation with the NSW Commission for Children and Young People to help libraries assess their risks, develop staff and volunteer training programs, write policies and develop procedures for their staff and volunteers.

The second project, 'Youth in Public Libraries' has two goals: communicating library 'house rules' effectively to youth, both their rights and their responsibilities in the library space, and developing skills and attitudes in library staff to enable them to deal effectively with youth. This project draws inspiration from the shopping centre and public space youth protocols that have been developed in NSW.

For more information about these projects please contact Mylee Joseph at the State Library of NSW ([mjoseph@sl.nsw.gov.au](mailto:mjoseph@sl.nsw.gov.au)). 

## Finding policy information

Policy information mentioned in this article is available at the URLs given below: Creating the Space for Dialogue: A guide to developing a local youth shopping centre protocol <http://www.propertyoz.com.au/scca/2005PDFLinks/YouthProtocolSeptember2003.pdf>

Maplewood Memorial Library [David Rothman.net blog] <http://davidrothman.net/2007/01/04/maplewood-memorial-library/>

NSW Commission for Children and Young People, <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/>

Search Institute 'The 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents' <http://www.search-institute.org/assets/>