Firm, Fair, and Human-Centered:

Managing Unreasonable Teen Behaviours in Council Library Spaces

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THE PLACE TO BE

Public Libraries remain one of the few safe, free, and welcoming indoor spaces available to young people outside of school and home.

A “third place” where teens can socialise, study, and access technology, without the pressure to buy anything.

That’s what makes libraries vibrant - but also places where boundaries are frequently tested.

Libraries sit at the intersection of learning, belonging, boredom, and social space.

That means that implementing behaviour management is not indicative of a failure of service *… it is simply part of the service.*

01 PERSPECTIVE

Reframing the problem.

Caring for the people doing the work.

Supporting people on both sides of the Welcome desk.

Effective behaviour management is not about being punitive or permissive; it is about being clear, consistent, confident and compassionate, while protecting staff, other customers, and the integrity of the service

Now, for the most important part

Managing teen behaviour is emotionally expensive

- It asks staff to regulate their own emotions while confronting disrespect, aggression, or repeated testing - sometimes multiple times a day.

Without psychosocial support, that emotional load turns into:

- Burnout
- Hypervigilance
- Or staff disengaging because it feels safer to stop intervening

Key Takeaways:

- Being firm and fair doesn't mean being unkind. It means separating **the behaviour** from **the person**.
- We can hold boundaries and maintain dignity. - *But only if staff feel psychologically safe to act.
- **Debriefs matter. Clear process matters. Visible leadership alignment matters.**
- Because confidence doesn't come from personality - **it comes from support.**

02 PARTNERSHIPS

Behaviour Management Is Not a Solo Act.

Effective behaviour management relies on partnerships.

Partnerships give teams consistency, authority, and reassurance that they are not acting in isolation. When teams know that if they act appropriately, they'll be supported - not second-guessed - everything changes. Partnerships don't replace frontline skill. They strengthen it.

Key partnerships can include:

Local Schools- *so expectations don't stop at the school gate*

- Aligning behavioural expectations, reinforcing Conditions of Entry, and addressing repeat or escalated behaviour collaboratively rather than reactively.

Local Police /Council Safety Department- *for lawful support and escalation when needed*

- Support during escalations, enforcement of lawful directions, and guidance around bans, restrictions and safety thresholds.

Local security providers- *whose presence alone can prevent escalation*

- Visible support, early intervention, and frontline presence that allows staff to focus on library service rather than constant behaviour management.

CEO, GM, Library Leadership, + Complaints Management Team- *visibly advocating for strategic change*

- Ensuring staff actions are backed, documented, and defensible, particularly when restrictions are applied.

03 PERSISTENCE

Doing the work repeatedly - and well.

Unreasonable behaviour is rarely resolved through a single response.

Strong resistance is likely prior to compliance, when defining boundaries

Persistence builds credibility: with staff, with young people, and with partner agencies. The teens we struggle with most often - already know our policies. What they're watching is whether we apply them every time, or only when someone feels confident enough. Consistency isn't about control. It's about predictability - and predictability creates safety.

Persistence shows up as:

Ongoing training and refreshers - not once but repeatedly

- (e.g. teenage behaviour modules and situational training) Beth Wahler/Ryan Dowd.

Shared language and consistency across shifts, roles, and branches

- Through our dialogue and discourse, teens receive the same messaging and responses regardless of who's on shift.

Clear and consistent follow-through when boundaries are crossed

- Provide predictable outcomes and consequences.

Consistent reporting and strong documentation

- *Even when it feels repetitive. Ensures repeat patterns are identified and risks escalated appropriately.

Continuous improvement and reliable support

- Using incidents and missteps as learning opportunities

04 PLACES

CPTED - Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

Lighting, layout, sightlines, furniture placement, and congregation points all influence behaviour.

If the same behaviours happen in the same places every day, it's not coincidence. Good design reduces the need for constant intervention. And that protects staff energy.

05 PROCESSES

What works on the floor is simple - but not always easy

Some tried and tested approaches - *results may vary*

This approach reframes behaviour management as risk reduction, not confrontation.

Across Ipswich Libraries, effective approaches included:

- **CLEAR, PLAIN LANGUAGE, EXPECTATIONS -** delivered calmly and consistently
- **EARLY INTERVENTION -** before behaviour escalates, and vary the staff who intervene, so that any escalation is not targeted at an individual staff member
- **FOLLOWING THROUGH -** when limits are reached (asking patrons to leave, involving security or police if required)
- **ZONING AREAS OF THE LIBRARY SPACE -** for teen use during peak visitation times. Allows for easy monitoring of behaviours and creates alternate spaces for customers to position themselves
- **CPTED ASSESSMENT -** and activation of recommendations
- **DOCUMENTING INCIDENTS -** ensures responses are cumulative rather than starting from zero each time
- **SUPPORTING AND ADVOCATING FOR OUR TEAMS -** Collaborating, debriefing, training, team building and ensuring the psychosocial impacts for our teams are acknowledged, documented, and shared, at our highest management levels for priority attention.
- **RESTRICTION REQUESTS -** in more extreme and escalated situations collated incident documentation to support restriction requests

06 PROGRESS

Moving from Reactive to Sustainable

Shift Perspectives
Build Partnerships
Be Persistent
Assess Places
Proactive Processes
and…

Advocate for your Teams

THE BOTTOM LINE

Managing unreasonable teen behaviours in libraries behaviour isn't about choosing between safety and welcome. Nor is it about being stricter or softer; it is about being firm, fair, and human-centered.

It's about understanding that clear boundaries are part of welcome.

When we are firm, we're protecting access, safety, dignity and wellbeing for everyone.
When we are fair, we build trust.
When we are human-centered, we protect staff as well as customers.

If teams are supported, consistent, and backed - young people learn quickly where the line is. And most will meet us there.

Thank you

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