



You are Welcome Here:

Helping Conservative Children, Tweens, and

Teens Navigate Your Library!

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# This presentation...

This presentation is designed to help a librarian in a public library learn about why conservative families may struggle with the community library and selecting materials.

You will learn strategies for how to slow teens and tweens down so that they can feel that that YA sections belong to them, too.

You will also learn about conducting book clubs and discussions that are sensitive to the needs of conservative kids and teens.

Finally, you will have the opportunity to ask questions and hear suggestions for working with families in this sometimes multiply-diverse demographic.

# Big Disclaimers

I am a teacher/librarian, but not a theologian, so there are some questions I may have to defer on, but I'll do my best to help you find the answers you may need to serve your community.

I'll be using observations from my friend Beth, who lives in Milwaukee, and is an Orthodox Jew and a librarian in a "more liberal" Jewish school as well as observations from my Muslim friends who teach in Charlotte, North Carolina.

They are members of diverse communities. What they told me doesn't go for all who practice their religion, but can give you an idea for what kinds of questions to ask.

# Who is a “conservative”?

A “conservative” is anyone who prefers not to read about certain topics that are often considered “controversial” for any reason.

--This can be from a religious perspective, but it does not have to be.

--This person’s family might vote “conservatively” or not.

Being “conservative” about book selections isn’t about politics; rather, it’s about being selective about how one reads by choice as informed by one’s own ethics, one’s faith, and/or one’s family values.

# Presentation Contents

- Spotting the Barriers
- Easy Tips to Help You Get Started
- Working through a Scenario
- Leading Book Discussions
- Questions and Answers
- Resources

They didn't cover this in library school...

Where are the  
barriers?



# Pitfalls

- Boy/Girl Relationships
- Bad Influences (Bad kid who doesn't get reformed)
- Language (can be broader)
- Violence
- The YA section

# Big Picture

No book comes into the house that we can't all read. Some of us might not CARE about Medieval tapestries, but we all could read it.



Just What Do I DO?

Some Easy Tips to Get  
Your Brains Started!



# Helping Youth Navigate

**Know your collection.**

If you don't know what you've got, it's harder to recommend titles!

Quick tip: use the "Kosher Book List" found at <http://www.chinuch.org/> (Register and search for "Secular Book List").

# Helping Youth Navigate

**Think right age, not “stretch age.”**

Typically, children and teens like to read about main characters a few years older than themselves, right? This may not be the case for the conservative kids and teens. Consider offering titles whose main characters are at, or slightly younger than, the age of the child or teen asking for a recommendation. Often “problem areas” will take care of themselves since they are being filtered through the appropriate developmental age. Once you get to know them better, you can more easily branch out.

# Helping Youth Navigate

## **Create inclusive displays that don't become barriers**

We love creating displays around themes which sounds great, but this can function as an unintended barrier. As an example, creating a "Muslim Reads" display suggests that these are all your books on the topic, and they require a separate section. Instead, consider inclusive displays such as a Valentine's display that includes books that has chaste dating, arranged marriage and so on. Then you can include without excluding!

# Helping Youth Navigate

**Consider an “in-between” area to help invite young teens into the YA section.**

We often have “in-between” sections to bridge the gap between picture books and chapter books. How about including some “in-between” titles for the older child/teen reader. Once teens feel comfortable in the YA section and know they can find titles that suit them, they won't be as likely to avoid the section completely.

# Helping Youth Navigate

**When in doubt, avoid any “school stories” or dating stories unless you are familiar with the work.**

The biggest area of “dangerous waters” across the board can be “school stories.” Instead, find books that focus on adventure, fantasy, mystery, etc. For most of those books, romance is tangential and, if it’s historical, often of the “kiss is everything” variety and if there IS a kiss, a marriage may be soon to follow.

# Helping Youth Navigate

**“Oldies” can be goodies.**

Seriously. Middle schoolers often LOVE Lloyd Alexander’s *Vesper Holly*, *Prydain*, etc. and generally there’s no romance (a slight hint in some places, and in *The High King*, it’s all in contemplation of marriage, which is a different standard). Highlight some oldies in a display, and they can’t help but look at some of their old favorites!

# Helping Youth Navigate

## Be Careful What You Weed

We have some great rules of thumb for when to de-select books, but sometimes we lose some more “conservative” titles in the process. Many YA hits from the 80’s actually still resonate with a teen audience today since what was “edgy” then is pretty tame for today’s standards. Similarly, Eth Clifford’s Mary Rose and JoBeth books can work well for families whose kids aren’t heavily influenced by modern culture. If you worry older titles won’t circulate, try “selling” them in a display first or recommending them to your conservative patrons. The same goes for older children’s titles: the older the title, the more likely it’s not really ALL that controversial!



How do I know?

# The Hidden Nature of Conservatism



# Be a good detective

Do you see a teen who seems to avoid the YA area? See if you can find out why.

Do you see families come in together, but each book is run past mom or dad, first?

Do you know of conservative, religious families in your town that you never seem to see in the library?

(Marketplace Theory in Disability applies here.)

# Let youth be your guide

Consider an advisory board (or just casual chatter) with your more conservative patrons. What are they reading? What are they NOT reading? What do they want more of that they can't seem to find?

Parents, religious officials, and teachers at religious schools can help, too. If you enlist their help, they might have suggestions of good titles.

Let's Try One Together:

# Unpacking a Scenario



# Scenario

Let's assume a 14 or 15 year old girl has been coming into your library after school. She's been in the children's room, sometimes moves into the YA area, then the adult area, and seems to have trouble finding a place to just BE until she leaves around 6:00 each day. You've smiled at each other a few times...today's the day you find out what's wrong!

Book Clubs and Classroom Dialogue

# Leading Book Discussions



# Helping Youth Navigate (in Book Groups)

## **Be sensitive about troublesome areas**

Make sure to pre-read before “assigning.” In libraries, everything is voluntary, but people like to be warned. Often parents can be thrilled that an adult is going through a controversial book with a child or teen because the objection is that a person shouldn’t have to go through a rough book alone; if you’re known as being aware of controversial issues, you may be seen as someone who can be trusted!

# Helping Youth Navigate (in Book Groups)

## **Look at the whole picture, not part of the picture**

You have a fabulous title. You're paging through it, preparing for book club and...darn it all, here's a kissing scene, smack in the middle of a fantasy story that's otherwise fabulous. This doesn't mean you have to pitch the book entirely or fail to recommend it. Just be honest about the problem passage and where it's located. It's up to the reader to decide what to do with that information. Maybe he or she will skip that part or leave the room if you talk about that part, but that's up to him or her and that doesn't mean the whole book is useless.



# Helping Youth Navigate (in Book Groups)

## Teach about Diversity

Discuss how writers have an audience in mind when writing their novels. It is important for children and teens to understand that perhaps the majority of the audience is secular and it is culturally acceptable in the culture of the story to do certain things. Such conversations will help to sharpen critical thinking skills and allow readers to make choices they are comfortable with while learning about others as well. Simply ask the readers to decide what the intended audience is, and whether the “problem” area or areas work for that audience.

# Helping Youth Navigate (in Book Groups)

## **Avoid “Tossing the Baby with the Bathwater”**

As facilitators that love the written word, we want to make sure we do not make young adults avoid reading. Mentor by reminding all readers that if they are reading a novel and come to a passage that offends them to simply advance ahead in the text a couple of pages until that scene is over. Most novels can still be enjoyed and understood even if a few passages or pages have been skipped. After all...that's how some of us read, too, right?

# Helping Youth Navigate (in Book Groups)

## Be Creative in Test Prep

If part of your goal is to help students familiarize themselves with works found on standardized test, you can choose to use excerpts from some of the standard novels that appear. We want the teens in our community to have a basic awareness of the texts that they will be expected to know by the time they graduate from high school. This method can also help students to get familiarity with *more* texts in a shorter timeframe, which can be critical in test preparation. Tell teachers who come to you for advice that passages from controversial literature are often enough, so they don't have to worry SO much about opt-outs and can work with children, teens, and their parents.

# Helping Youth Navigate (in Book Groups)

## Take Advantage of the Classics

The classics are always an option for students to read in schools because it is simply harder for the students to make out all the innuendo and there's often more *talk* of violence than actual violence enacted on the stage. This makes such works easier to teach because the implications and themes in many of the classics are still just as strong as ones found in today's literature but some of the problematic passages such as those found in Shakespeare, *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Arabian Nights* may be missed by the modern reader. Don't feel like you have to explain the old "sex jokes."

# Helping Youth Navigate (in Book Groups)

## Look in unusual places.

Make sure not to dismiss some titles because you may not agree with one aspect of it. For example, the *Twilight* series, if you can get past the whole concept of vampires, is surprisingly tame (well...at least initially). It does not have explicit sexual scenes because if Edward were to get too close to Bella, then he might accidentally get too carried away and kill her because he finds her blood too irresistible. Early volumes of Rick Riordan are also loved by conservative families, but as the series progresses, some stop reading. Reading the “safer” books means those who want to delve further can, and those who don’t can stop with passing familiarity with a “hot” title.

What else?

# Answers to Questions



Let's Share!

What are some questions you have for me?

What have you always wanted to know, but had no one to ask?

Now What?:

# Bringing the Message Back to the Library





# The Big Picture

- Every Book Its Reader
- Let the child (or teen or tween) lead you; it's between the reader and his or her parents, not you, if there are problems
- Don't take books out of the collection to please anyone; you're a librarian, so you put books INTO the library; If there is a problem with the collection, ADD books, don't remove
- Read about other faiths and secular ethical perspectives as well, as you would about people from other cultures. The more you understand the *why* (and there's always a why), the more likely you can be sensitive and anticipate problematic areas. The more welcoming you are, the more "conservatives" will use your library.
- Get the word out about book clubs to conservative families as a way to try some books with an adult's guidance (maybe have family book clubs to encourage adults coming to help you navigate the trouble spots!); book clubs can be a safe place to ask questions and try some things out
- Do not believe you need to "enlighten" anyone and, when the reader is ready, you will be the first person they'll come to with questions to which you can provide frank, honest answers

# For Further Reading

Want a fast way to get acquainted with a lot of titles fast? Head to

<http://www.chinuch.org/> and search for “secular book list.” My Jewish friend passed this on and my Muslim friends LOVED it because lists the issues that some families might have, so you can adapt it to meet your needs. It’s a fast way to look to see what might be a problem, as in, there’s mischief (okay for some kids), but no nudity, for example. It’s also called the “Kosher book list.”

For movies, try Movie Mom or the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ movie reviews rather than rely on MPAA ratings which seem rather random. These alternative review sources break down WHAT, specifically, might be a problem and then you can use that information to guide what you tell patrons. The idea is to learn what MIGHT be a problem and to present that information honestly so the patron (of any age) decides what to do with that.