

adults

**just wanna
have**

fun

AUDREY BARBAKOFF

programs for emerging adults



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PREFACE

LOOK AROUND THE public library. Who do you see?

Perhaps a few senior citizens read books and newspapers in one corner, while others check their e-mail at the public computers. Young children and their parents head toward the storytime room. A group of teenagers, which seems to be larger every year, studies and relaxes in the teen space.

One age demographic is notably missing: adults in their twenties and thirties. The millennial generation is the largest in history, outnumbering even its baby boomer parents. So why are there so few in the library?

Simply, librarians are failing to serve this group. Emerging adults have unique needs, different from both teens and older adults, and different from the needs of adults of the same age in earlier generations.

This book contains practical, actionable instructions for creating programs that will attract and retain emerging adult library patrons. By recognizing the importance of play and fun for adults, these programs can help public librarians build adult audiences that are as engaged and inspired as our youth.

Because libraries have only begun to recognize the need to serve emerging adults as a distinct group, a programming librarian may face extra obstacles in reaching them. How will she get funding and support for her events? How will he design and promote an effective program for a new audience? This chapter will serve to address the most pressing aspects of those questions.

Who Are Emerging Adults?

In order to program successfully for emerging adults, we must understand who they are and what they need. As expenses rise, wages stagnate, and the importance and length of higher education increases, modern adulthood is changing.

Due to a combination of financial and social factors, Americans now hit the classic milestones of adulthood (marriage, homeownership, parenthood) later, if at all. The days of turning eighteen, settling down with a good steady job, and starting a family are long over. Instead, a uniquely lengthy period of transition from adolescence to traditional adulthood has emerged.

Researchers believe this extended phase has given rise to an entirely new developmental period, which they call emerging adulthood.¹ Though the concept is relatively new, its exact meaning is already expanding. When psychology professor Jeffrey Arnett coined the term in 2000, it referred to adults ages eighteen to twenty-five.² His 2013 book on the subject included adults up to age twenty-nine.³ As Gallup and Pew each separately studied the percentage of younger adults still living with their parents, often considered a hallmark for the expanded transitional period of emerging adulthood, both included adults through age thirty-four.⁴

Ultimately, though, these age brackets are in flux because they are merely general estimates of when a person is likely to go through certain experiences. Research suggests that five main characteristics define emerging adulthood: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and a sense of possibility and optimism.⁵ Exploring these features is a very individual process that can take place at many points along the age spectrum of younger adults. Perhaps because of this, researchers of emerging adults choose different age ranges for their data, making it impossible to consistently compare a narrow range of ages. Therefore, for the purposes of this book emerging adulthood will be defined broadly as people in their twenties and early thirties, usually without children.

The reading and library use habits of emerging adults indicate that they have the potential to become a core part of our user base. According to a Pew Internet study, *Younger Americans and Public Libraries*, emerging adults are avid readers.⁶ Eighty-eight percent of Americans under thirty report reading a book in the last year, compared to 79 percent of those older than thirty. This age group loves to read and learn, making them a perfect match for library services.

However, this is also a population we risk losing as library users for life. Emerging adults consistently rank libraries as less important than older groups do. Only 19 percent of people under thirty say that the library closing would have a major impact on them, compared to 32 percent of those over thirty. Fifty-one percent think it would have a major impact on their community, as opposed to 67 percent of older people. With this loss of value, the erosion of library usage among younger adults can happen swiftly. In November 2012, 56 percent of adults eighteen to twenty-four had visited a library that year; just one year later, that figure had dropped to 46 percent.⁷

Despite some worrisome trends, many emerging adults currently use and feel positively about the library. If we apply our resources to reaching emerging adults, we can engage these readers and learners at an often-overlooked moment in their lives.

Why Make the Effort?

Serving emerging adults is an incredible opportunity to create lifelong library lovers. People attach special emphasis to things that happen to them at this point in their lives. The “events of emerging adulthood are most often recalled as the most important” life moments, writes Jennifer Lynn Tanner.⁸ During these years people are consolidating their sense of self, forming a stable adult personality based on the choices they make. As such, “the choices and decisions made during this era . . . define personal biographies across the life span.”⁹ If librarians can instill a passion for the library during those years, perhaps we could create truly lifelong users.

While emerging adulthood is creating new opportunities for public libraries, it also highlights our failure to recognize some existing ones. Historically, libraries have attracted users at key turning points in their lives. For adults, this has often meant parenthood and retirement. Librarians have long counted on affordable access to children’s books, enriching entertainment for families, and relationships with other parents to bring disconnected younger adults back to the library when they become parents. However, as emerging adulthood is characterized by the delay of milestones like having children, serving young children is no longer a reliable way to attract adults in their twenties and thirties to the library.

When we try to consider the needs of adults in this age group, we reveal a stark absence in public library programs. We have never consistently offered programs to appeal to these adults themselves. Even when people in their twenties and thirties come to the library as parents, we provide little or nothing to appeal to their own personal interests beyond their children. Even if everyone had large families and flocked to the library for youth programs, even if currently childless emerging adults start families later in life and become avid users for their children, we would still be failing to serve them adequately as individuals. Why not create programs for these adults so that they continue to love libraries for themselves, independent of their family choices?

By reaching emerging adults, librarians can instill a passion for libraries that does not depend solely on milestones. Currently, the design of library programs may encourage intermittent use throughout life—during childhood, as a parent, as a retiree. If libraries can prove relevant, meaningful, and joyful for emerging adults, we may be able to create true lifelong engagement without gaps.

How Do I Program for Emerging Adults?

Emerging adults, by and large, do not think to look to the library for programs. More than a third of adults under thirty say they know little or nothing about what their local library has to offer them—no surprise, since the answer has historically been “not much.”¹⁰ To attract this new audience, fun and play are indispensable. A splashy, unique, high-interest program at a convenient time and place, advertised well to a specific target audience, has the power to change minds. Yet it is not necessary, or even desirable, to completely abandon the library’s educational mission to do this. The most successful adult programs will combine learning and play for a powerful, engaging experience that is unique in your community.

When you read the last paragraph, was your knee-jerk reaction that “learning” or “education” would never attract young adults looking for fun experiences? Did these words conjure up devastatingly boring images of lectures and PowerPoint slides? Librarians, administrators, and patrons alike absorb this perception from pop culture depictions all around us. We have internalized the idea that adult learning looks silent, serious, passive, and difficult.

In the immortal words of the Jedi master, it is time to unlearn what we have learned . . . about learning.

The very best learning happens through fun. It happens through play. Active participation, excitement, and joy are not fluff. They are not frivolous. They are not extras to be valued and funded only after the “real” or “serious” educational programs have been accomplished. “Play is a catalyst for learning,” writes Scott Nicholson, professor of Game Design and Development and director of the Brantford Game Network and the BGNLAB at Wilfrid Laurier University in Brantford, Ontario, “as learning happens best when players are encouraged to explore and choose a path that is meaningful to their backgrounds and interests.”¹¹

Numerous studies bear out the critical importance of adult play. Undergraduates in science, technology, engineering, and math courses are 55 percent more likely to fail a lecture-based class than one with even a little active learning. Active learning also increases average test scores by more than half a letter grade. “We’ve got to stop killing student performance and interest . . . by lecturing,” that study’s lead author, Scott Freeman, concluded.¹² The majority of these undergraduates are likely between eighteen and thirty, the very target population for the programs in this book. If lectures and passive learning don’t engage them in the classroom, they certainly will not seek out similar experiences in the library. Active and participatory learning is essential, fundamental, and indispensable to engaging and educating emerging adults.

Further studies reveal that play is as important in real-world settings as it is inside the classroom. It builds the skills that are most crucial to today’s flexible, fast-paced, global workplaces. “Play promotes problem solving and creativity,”

write the authors of *Einstein Never Used Flashcards: How Our Children REALLY Learn—and Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less*.¹³ They cite an experiment in which children were allowed to play with a coveted toy, but only if they were able to retrieve it from a far-away box without standing up. As tools, the children had several toy sticks that could be put together. Some children had unstructured play with the sticks beforehand, others were simply shown the answer by the researcher, and a third group received no guidance at all.

The average adult learner (or librarian, or administrator!) might guess that the children who were shown the solution had the best results, but this was not the case. Although some of these children imitated the correct procedure immediately, many were unable to do so on the first try. These children simply gave up. They may have felt that they were incapable, that they had failed to learn from the researcher and therefore could not learn how to do it.

The children who played, however, worked out their solutions through trial and error. When one tactic failed, they tried something else. They persevered until they achieved their goal. This group of learners developed creativity and resilience.

Though this study was with children, we can extrapolate its themes to adulthood; playful learning is not only more enjoyable, it is more effective. It all boils down to one simple equation, conclude the authors: “PLAY = LEARNING.”¹⁴ Through play, the library can encourage the flexible education that adults need in the modern workforce, developing skills like creativity, critical thinking, and resilience.

Emerging adults crave this kind of fulfilling, fun educational opportunity. Demand for adult summer camps, preschools, and coloring books has exploded.¹⁵ A 2013 Pew study found that 53 percent of people ages sixteen to twenty-nine said the library “definitely should” offer more interactive learning experiences, with an additional 37 percent saying they “maybe should.”¹⁶ With more than 90 percent of emerging adults expressing some interest in hands-on interactive learning at the library, playful programs have the potential to be as popular as they are meaningful.

The programs in this book create a space for younger adults to be playful, exploratory, hands-on, messy, and loud. They are fun—and that is exactly what makes them so valuable.

How Do Adults Play?

In our culture, play and childhood have become nearly synonymous. “Most of us consider play to be left over from recess,” says play expert Fred Donaldson. “We put away play when we put away childish things.”¹⁷ Studies support the conclusion that as we age, we learn to consider ourselves less creative, less

imaginative, less playful. In 1968, researchers administered a creativity test to 1,600 five-year-olds. Nearly all—98 percent—scored “highly creative.” Five years later, only 30 percent of the same children ranked “highly creative,” and by age fifteen, only 12 percent did. The same test, administered to more than a quarter million adults in subsequent years, showed only 2 percent as highly creative.¹⁸

Think about that: 98 percent of children, but only 2 percent of adults, are highly creative. When do we lose our ability to imagine, to explore? Is this an inevitable result of growing up? Not at all, the researchers determined. “What we have concluded,” wrote project lead George Land, “is that noncreative behavior is learned.”¹⁹

Noncreative behavior is learned. If adults learned to stop playing somewhere along the line, then we can learn to play again. “Adults actually have a lot of potential,” says Alan Gregerman, author of *Lessons from the Sandbox* and proponent of a “Take your Adult to the Playground” Day.²⁰ But what educational institution can help adults relearn exploration, enthusiasm, and creative failure? Who can give adults a safe place to be silly and vulnerable, without worrying about maintaining a perfect image or attaining a degree-worthy skill set? Of course, this is the perfect job for the public library.

So what programs can librarians provide to rekindle the spark? How do adults relearn how to play?

Since creating playful programs for adults is new to many libraries, we need to examine what play really is and how it works. Fortunately, librarians do not need to just hold our collective breath and hope our programs will somehow be fun. In light of the convincing evidence that adult play is a powerful force for learning, it has become a serious focus for research and scholarship.

One of the most prominent scholars on play and games in libraries is Scott Nicholson, professor of Game Design and Development at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario. Nicholson identifies six key components of meaningful play, which he has dubbed its RECIPE:²¹

- **Reflection**—assisting participants in finding other interests and past experiences that can deepen engagement and learning
- **Engagement**—encouraging participants to discover and learn from others interested in the real-world setting
- **Choice**—developing systems that put the power in the hands of the participants
- **Information**—using game design and gameplay concepts to allow participants to learn more about the real-world context
- **Play**—facilitating the freedom to explore and fail within boundaries
- **Exposition**—creating stories for participants that are integrated with the real-world setting and allowing them to create their own.

Not all of these elements will apply to any given program, but considering which ones are at work, and how, can help librarians encourage playfulness. For example, a program on making homemade spa products gives people information about how to reduce chemical exposure and save money, creates engagement as they share ideas and opinions with other participants, provides choice about what colors and scents to use, and lets them play as they invent and experiment with various combinations.

Thinking about these elements can also help us target areas for improvement in our existing programs. For example, we could increase choice in the spa products program by offering a wider variety of scents and colors. We could introduce an element of reflection by asking people to discuss their motivations for participating or to share their results.

Most play and gaming research is not directly focused on libraries, but it can still impact how we consider play in our programs. These studies often examine how elements of games and gaming affect our brains to create a sense of fun and play. They may explore applications of those features to encourage greater engagement with real-world issues.

Much of this recent research on adult play has focused on games and gamification, a subsection of the broader subject of play. Gamification means applying a gameful layer to a non-game, real-life activity.²² The most familiar library example would be summer reading programs. This research focus on games and gaming is understandable. Because games have end points and goals that can result in quantifiable real-world impacts, they lend themselves neatly to study and have direct, profitable applications in business and marketing. Prominent games and gaming researchers include Jane McGonigal, Ian Bogost, and Adam L. Penenberg.

However, other types of research are also needed for designing playful emerging adult programs. Despite significant overlap, play is not exactly the same as a game. Games are a type of play, but not all play is gaming. “A game is, at its root, a structured experience with clear goals, rules that force a player to overcome challenges, and instant feedback.”²³ Free, imaginative play can lack some or all of these structural elements.

Play activities are defined as being done by choice rather than obligation, for fun, in a spirit of creativity and exploration. The mechanics of a game may be applied, or not. Though this book will include games and gameful programs, many high-engagement, low-cost library events engage adults through exploratory or imaginative play alone.

Recent non-gameplay research on adults is limited. The bulk of general play studies are still conducted with children; even those concerned with adult creativity and success often focus on the role of childhood.²⁴ Researchers who do examine playfulness in adults often eschew that word in favor of language with direct appeal to the financial interests of businesses—think innovation, disruption, creativity, and problem solving. While all this research is highly

valuable and can inform librarians' program choices, it does not illuminate the full spectrum of play in adult life. For a fuller picture, it is hoped the focus of this field of research will expand to include adult play of all kinds. For now, the result is a still-evolving picture of what adult play can be in libraries.

So what is a programming librarian to do, if the answers we want are not forthcoming? Of course, we will find them by playing! Programming librarians can experiment—can play—in order to discover what delights adults in our communities. Try programs that sound exciting and engaging. Fail. Tinker. Try again. And all throughout, make it fun, make it messy, make it joyful.

Look to Youth Services

Luckily, the adult services librarian trying to design programs for playful learning is not alone. You might just have an expert in this subject sitting next to you. Children's librarians have made the intersection of play and education a standard pillar of youth library service for years. The federal Institute of Museum and Library Services states matter-of-factly that young people “learn best . . . [through] content-rich, play-based experiences.”²⁵ Research abounds on the importance of play in children's learning. The National Association for the Education of Young Children devotes an entire section of its website (www.naeyc.org/play) to research and information on this topic.

Children's programs at libraries reflect this understanding. Consulting a storytime handbook, such as *I'm a Little Teapot!: Presenting Preschool Storytime* by Jane Cobb, reveals dozens of pages of programs which include not only read-aloud books but fingerplays, songs, movement, and crafts. The first public library summer reading games appeared in 1890, and 95 percent of public libraries now provide them.²⁶ The New York Public Library youth calendar for summer 2014 includes fun, experiential programs like building robots, meeting live animals, making squirt gun volcanoes, attending parties, playing video games and chess, and learning Chinese Ribbon Dancing, just to name a few.²⁷

With this variety of playful youth events, and this solid understanding and wide acceptance of their importance, it is hardly surprising that 70 percent of people attending library programs are there for children's activities. However, adults are hungry for library programs that will offer the same benefits to them. Overall library program attendance for all ages increased almost 25 percent between 2004 and 2011, according to the most recent data currently available.²⁸ Play is a powerful force for education at all ages. After all, to misquote Dr. Seuss, a person's a person, no matter how large.

Build on the success of children's librarians and enlist them as partners and guides. Many reference librarians can tell stories about adults coming to the

desk, asking half-jokingly if they can attend a children's or teen program. That is a perfect moment to try aging up that program for adults! Youth librarians can share the research that guides them, the words of persuasion that won the library board's support for an innovative program, and the programming ideas that keep their events fun and engaging.

Youth librarians are also experts in advocating for the importance of play. They arrange fun, playful programming on a regular basis, and usually receive funding and broad support for it. Even as adult services librarians struggle to articulate the value of gaming events, sci-fi parties, and maker programs to our Friends, foundation, and boards, youth librarians are lauded for understanding and maximizing the role of play in learning. In addition to borrowing ideas for programs and events from our youth-focused counterparts, adult services librarians can learn to use their successful language and framing.

By working in partnership with children's and teen librarians, adult services librarians can make a clear case for programming that supports a pattern of playful exploration that begins in infancy and lasts a lifetime.

How Do I Convince My Funders?

The language librarians use to talk about fun emerging adult programming is as essential as the programs themselves. As long as these classes and events are seen as extraneous fluff, they will struggle for funding and support. The adult services librarian may know all about the importance and power of play in education, especially when reaching out to this chronically underserved age group, but her projects will never get off the ground without the backing of the library director, the branch manager, colleagues, Friends and Foundation groups, and the community at large.

Winning this support is easier than you may think. We can often revolutionize people's perspective on these programs simply by changing a few words. This is the key: use language that draws a clear connection to the library's fundamental values.

"What is valued gets funded," states Valerie Gross, CEO of the Howard County (Md.) Library.²⁹ Gross is an astonishing success story about the power of words. By changing *only* the language her library system used to describe itself, she was able to significantly increase the library's perceived value in the community. She realized that her community and local government valued education highly, and so she aligned the library's language with an explicit educational mission. Without making a single change to the events themselves, storytime became children's classes. Outreach became community education. Programs became classes, seminars, workshops, and events.³⁰ "[P]ut yourself in the shoes of your county executive (or mayor, governor, or a taxpayer voting on a tax increase),"

she proposes, “then ask yourself which you would fund more generously—or cut less—*storytime* or *children’s classes that teach the foundations of reading*?”

Consider the values of the library where you will propose an emerging adults program. Across systems, research has identified “literacy and learning” as a cornerstone of the library’s value. “What is the value of libraries? Through lifelong learning, libraries can and do change lives, a point that cannot be overstated.”³¹ Adult services librarians need to take a look at their library’s mission, vision, and values statements. Chances are good that concepts like “lifelong learning” and “education” will feature prominently. Therefore, it is crucial to frame proposals for emerging adult programs in the context of education.

This language makes it clear that your events are an essential piece of the library’s mission and a key component of its value. When seen in that light, funding, supporting, and caring about emerging adult programs becomes common sense.

Using This Book

As I have played with programs for emerging adults, I have found three overarching categories that consistently engage twentysomethings and thirtysomethings with fun and play. This book is designed around those themes. They are: Get Dirty, Get Out, and Get Together. Each type of activity is a shortcut through the research and practice described here and throughout the book. They are practical suggestions you can immediately apply to create playful environments for your patrons.

These categories, and the programs in them, are a jumping-off point for you to play. The events have been tested in the real world and were considered successful by the librarians who designed them. We experimented, tried, failed, and tried again until we landed on the programs that worked for us. Now you can do the same. Let’s go play!

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GET DIRTY

“BUT I’M NOT really crafty.”

A lot of adult services librarians use this excuse to shy away from hands-on programs. You’re not Martha Stewart, you say. You have vivid memories of gluing your fingers together during a macaroni project in first grade. There’s a reason you didn’t become a children’s librarian.

“But I don’t know anything about technology!”

Or perhaps you’re a craft maven, but you find yourself making the same excuse for tech-based maker programs. You’re not a coder. You were an English major. You’ve never touched an Arduino in your life, and you’re pretty sure you’d electrocute yourself.

You are not off the hook for hands-on programs, crafty, technological, or otherwise. In fact, the worse your personal skills are, the better you may be at leading Get Dirty programs. You do not need to be an expert in order to run a playful hands-on program; even if you are, resist the urge to instruct and let your patrons take the lead.

The purpose of these programs is not to learn a specific skill or craft from an expert. They are not about memorizing by rote the most efficient way to produce a product. Your participants could do that just as easily by watching an online video from home. So why do they come to your events? Why are these programs likely to consistently be among your most popular? What are people learning, and why do they care?

These programs are, fundamentally, about learning to play. They are about diving in, getting messy, making mistakes, failing and starting over, laughing, and getting inspired all over again. This play space is where real, impactful learning happens. That kind of learning goes beyond how to make one single product, and instead teaches people to tap into their creativity. It builds their confidence in their own abilities, and inspires them to keep expanding their knowledge and playing with new ideas long after the class ends.

Styling yourself, or a presenter, as an “expert” who is teaching the “right” way to make something would actually stifle this creative play. Instead, make it clear from the beginning that you are learning right alongside your participants. Sure, you read some books and some instructions, and you’ve tested the project out once or twice. But that just makes you a guide, there for a little support. Your participants are becoming their own experts.

Begin each program by asking participants to share their own background or interest in the class. It is amazing how much diverse expertise you will find in the room! Create a space where each person can discover the incredible wealth of knowledge right there in their peers—and, just as important, recognize it in themselves.

The room setup for this type of program can significantly impact its success. It may be tempting to set up long tables facing forward, lecture-style, so participants can easily see any demonstration and have plenty of space to work. However, this classroom environment encourages solitary work and a focus on results that is antithetical to the real purpose and draw of Get Dirty programs. Instead, set up your tables in circles or squares, with a shared pool of materials in the middle. This arrangement emphasizes that the person demonstrating the project is not the “teacher,” but is instead a coparticipant. It also encourages sharing, interaction, and conversation—maximum learning through maximum play.

Hands-on events are among the more expensive playful programs you may put on for adults. This makes it even more critical to be able to articulate their importance. Your funders need to understand that this type of programming is essential to meaningful adult education and the library’s mission. Happily, this is not hard to do. Maker programs share the same fundamental values as public libraries.

When you help people learn to program a Raspberry Pi or sew on a button, you are empowering them to make choices that align their lives with their personal values. That is precisely the same reason we lend books. Our collections and services allow people to become their own experts. Our users can think, do, and create anything they can imagine, regardless of what is popular or pre-packaged. “Libraries are innately subversive institutions, born of the radical notion that every single member of society deserves free, high quality access to

knowledge and culture,” writes Dr. Matt Finch.¹ We put people in charge of their own learning by giving them the tools and access they need. Hands-on maker programs just update this enduring educational mission for today’s world. And because they are both radically empowering and fun at same time, your patrons will adore them.

NOTE

1. Matt Finch, “Dirty Library Trilogy, Part 1: Drink Your Way to Better Librarianship,” *The Signal in Transition* (December 30, 2012), <http://matthewfinch.me/2012/12/30/dirty-library-trilogy-part-1-drink-your-way-to-better-librarianship>.

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