



TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY

# YOUTH

SERVICES STRATEGY

TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY

“

**You have almost everything  
you can think of doing.  
It's not just one thing.**

Youth Hub participant

”



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# I. INTRODUCTION



## Showing the Way Forward

Toronto Public Library's (TPL) Youth Services Strategy reaffirms the Library's commitment to contribute to positive outcomes for youth ages 13 to 24. It provides a framework for enhanced and purposeful service that supports personal development, equitable access and learning in youth. It positions the Library both as a space where youth are welcome and supported, and as a partner helping youth build positive futures for themselves and their communities.



**“The strategy builds on many years of working with youth and on research of this critical life stage.”**

The strategy builds on many years of working with youth and on research of this critical life stage. It advances a vision for effective and responsive service, fitting into a larger customer service framework and following the service pillars described in TPL’s Service Delivery Model.

The strategy is informed by formal consultations and ongoing dialogue with staff and youth. During consultations, staff shared their observations about support youth need, as well as priorities for future service, and youth shared their perceptions of library service, as well as their personal interests and needs.

The strategy aligns with the youth services priorities of municipal and provincial governments and with principles from the positive youth development field of practice. It responds to the American Library Association’s Young Adult Library Services Association call to action for libraries to address social inequality and ensure that youth can meet the challenges and leverage the opportunities presented by digital media and technology.

The strategy shows the way forward by examining the diverse experiences and needs of Toronto youth, reviewing current service, identifying key service principles and priorities and providing a starting point for strategic service planning.

Actions and outcomes outlined in the strategy’s service pillars and areas of focus will form the basis of supporting processes and documents, including:

- Action and Implementation Plan and evidence-based evaluation process
- Programming Vision Statement and Guidelines
- Teen Spaces Guidelines
- Youth Services Staff Manual.

The strategy sets the stage to provide a more comprehensive, progressive and responsive service that will meet the evolving needs of youth. Building on our customer service orientation and innovation practices, we will focus on youth engagement, service coordination, capacity building and partnerships.



## II. BACKGROUND



### Understanding Youth Experience

Youth services at TPL have traditionally focused on serving teens ages 13 to 19. This strategy redefines youth services to encompass youth ages 13 to 24, removing false divisions and addressing a gap in service. In order to improve service to youth, TPL needs a better understanding of who they are – their experiences, needs and values.



## Youth Development

Youth generally experience three stages of development during which they mature dramatically but are also more vulnerable to stress. Many face pressures related to school, friendships, career path and independent living.<sup>1</sup>

**During early adolescence**, youth are rapidly developing cognitive functions while experiencing emotions more intensely and developing more empathy. At the same time, youth begin exploring their identities and often experience lowered self-esteem.<sup>2</sup> This is a key transitional time when youth are undergoing puberty and beginning high school.

**During mid-to-late adolescence**, youth further develop their capacity for planning, self-regulation and assessing risks and rewards. They also begin navigating the larger world, including social roles and differing perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Youth are finishing and leaving high school at this time.

**As youth transition through early adulthood**, their self-sufficiency strengthens, and they are increasingly motivated by internal values. In this period, youth look for greater independence and influence and move into the world of work.<sup>4</sup>

## Challenges Faced by Youth

Although youth have much to contribute to society and are resilient, they are not always treated with respect. Youth can be stereotyped, dismissed and rejected. Some of them in particular face multiple barriers and challenges that arise from systemic inequities, including marginalization, discrimination, racism, educational setbacks, social and cultural isolation, unemployment, poverty, mental health issues, addiction and homelessness.<sup>5</sup>

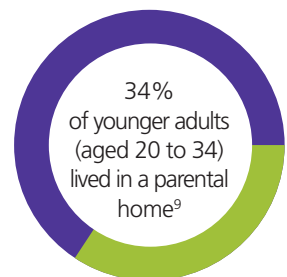
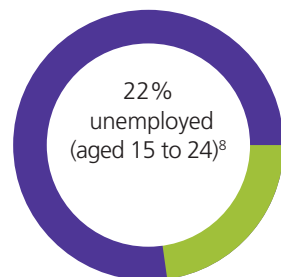
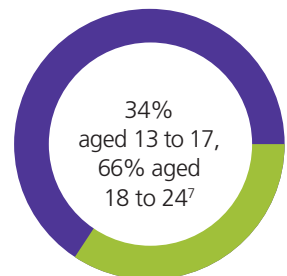
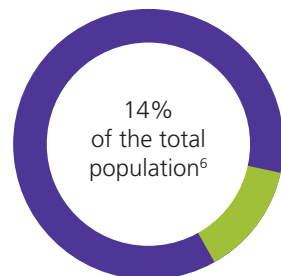
## Helping Youth Achieve Their Personal Goals

Youth told us that they value and use library services that benefit them in different areas of their lives. As the Library continues to offer innovative new services, it is prepared to play a larger role in contributing to positive outcomes for youth in varying circumstances across the city. To ensure that more youth benefit from our services, we will raise awareness and prioritize accessibility as well as youth-friendly and supportive spaces. We will also refine and enhance our services through community consultation and strategic partnerships, increasing and diversifying opportunities for youth.

### Toronto's Youth

#### In 2016

390,530 youth aged 13 to 24:



#### In 2017



### III. VISION, MISSION AND OBJECTIVES



#### Our Vision

The Library is recognized as a trusted, progressive service provider and community partner for youth, dedicated to meeting developmental needs, celebrating and building on strengths and supporting youth as they transition to adulthood and become resilient and contributing members of society.

#### Our Mission

The Library plays a critical role in supporting healthy development as youth explore their identities and place in the world. Encouraging growth through learning, the Library engages youth to build positive outcomes for themselves and their communities. Welcoming and knowledgeable staff, diverse and responsive collections and innovative learning experiences combine to create a trusted community space where youth can grow and thrive while being themselves.



# Our Objectives

## Primary Objective

To create an evidence-based and youth-informed library service framework that will enable TPL to develop and deliver youth services across all its service pillars, providing a consistent experience that is equitable, inclusive, supportive and geared toward building assets in youth for future success.

### Toronto Public Library Service Pillars



#### Spaces

Youth embrace our welcoming, flexible and resource-rich physical and digital library spaces.



#### Staff

Youth benefit from the expertise of information service professionals and customer service leaders who respect and empathize with the unique developmental needs of youth.



#### Collections

Youth explore identity, interests and issues through deep and diverse collections that reflect their complex experiences and guide them along pathways that fulfill their personal, learning and employment goals.



#### Technology

Youth are supported in participating productively and safely in today's digital age and knowledge economy with access to digital technology and learning opportunities that help develop digital literacy skills.



#### Programs

By engaging youth in innovative, interest-driven and experiential learning, they are supported in their learning, recreation, volunteer and employment goals.

## Secondary Objectives

To provide opportunities for youth to experiment, get to know themselves and prepare for their futures.

To support youth, especially those with fewer opportunities, with community-informed services as they transition to healthy and productive adults.

## IV. SERVICE PRINCIPLES



### Core Principles Guiding Library Services for Youth

- The years from 13 to 24 include critical stages of development.
- Youth need supports from the entire community to build the personal competencies needed to transition successfully to adulthood.
- Caring adults outside the family play a vital role in supporting and motivating youth.
- Youth face many barriers and challenges and require support to bridge economic, social and digital divides.
- Youth have important strengths and skills to contribute and should be actively engaged as experts in their own interests and needs.
- Self-directed, interest-based and experiential learning contributes to a young person's skill development, well-being and future success.





## Three Factors Essential for Youth to Thrive

Extensive research on youth development and societal trends, along with direct feedback from youth and those working with youth, bring to light three factors essential for youth to develop into successful and resilient adults.

1. Youth need support in their overall personal development and well-being as they grow into independent and contributing members of society.
2. Youth face multiple barriers and challenges and not all youth have the same supports available to them, pointing to the need for equitable access to library resources, programs and services.
3. Youth require a variety of relevant learning opportunities to engage their interests and develop skills, both technical and soft skills, to meet their potential.





**“The more support youth receive, the more likely they are to engage in positive behaviour and avoid behaviour that puts them at risk.”**

### **Support for Personal Development**

Youth experience dramatic changes in their cognitive, emotional, social and physical development. Their capacity for reasoning and self-regulation is maturing as they explore their identities, relationships and place in the world and learn to navigate expanding social networks. They also face a number of important decisions related to their education, finding a job and leaving the family home.<sup>10</sup>

During these challenging years, youth must develop a sense of self-worth, agency, motivation and positive values. They must also experience clear boundaries and high expectations and have opportunities to learn and contribute.<sup>11</sup> Caring adults, who support and challenge youth to grow, help them see possibilities and realize their potential.<sup>12</sup> The more support youth receive, the more likely they are to engage in positive behaviour and avoid behaviour that puts them at risk.<sup>13</sup> Tasked with big decisions about their futures, youth need

exposure to information, ideas and experiences to help guide their thinking and inform their choices.<sup>14</sup> Resiliency develops when youth are supported to have healthy mind-sets and opportunities to grow, to “build skills, to belong, and to connect with peers and adults in positive ways.”<sup>15</sup>

Youth we consulted emphasized these needs, describing the challenges and decisions they face, including uncertain futures; pressure to achieve, conform and manage responsibilities; and lack of freedom to explore interests and relationships. Staff feedback reflected a vision and desire for library service that contributes to youth resilience. Staff strongly endorsed a strengths-based approach that focuses on developmental assets and relationship-building to help lay a foundation for future success. They prioritized a safe and welcoming library environment in which youth are accepted, valued and supported to be at their best. In such an environment, youth can explore their identities, interests and future possibilities while experiencing positive relationships.



## How the Library can support personal development for youth

The Library supports youth in developing resilience and transitioning to productive and successful adults by providing:

- inclusive, flexible and welcoming spaces that support youth to be themselves and experience the “physical and psychological safety” of a library<sup>16</sup>
- diverse collections, that reflect youth experience, helping to “alleviate some of the normal developmental stresses” they experience<sup>17</sup>
- information services to help youth answer questions related to personal development, goals and future plans
- programs and volunteer opportunities that encourage positive values and support youth to explore interests, try on different roles and connect and contribute to their communities, fostering a positive self-image and outlook on their futures
- supportive staff to motivate youth by exposing them to possibilities through collections, programs and volunteer opportunities that empower youth and make it clear “libraries are places where adults hold teens to high expectations,”<sup>18</sup> reinforcing the development of effective communication, self-regulation and social skills.

The Library will better support youth resilience by building on its customer service leadership and by using a strengths-based, relationship-building approach to continue to develop authentic and respectful relationships with youth. Through these relationships, staff will be able to:

- more fully understand and empathize with the experiences of youth and apply this knowledge to create welcoming environments in branches and online
- facilitate learning and skills development in ways that keep youth in the driver’s seat, supporting them in creating their own solutions and encouraging them to hold to high standards
- keep the unique developmental needs of youth front and centre, while finding more ways to make youth feel welcome, valued and engaged.





## Equitable Access to Services

The Library joins the City of Toronto in focusing on youth as an equity-seeking group that can experience barriers to safe spaces, housing, education, employment and civic and community participation.<sup>19</sup> It also acknowledges that some youth who identify with other equity-seeking groups have fewer opportunities<sup>20</sup> and do not benefit equally from library service. Youth who experience more vulnerability, defined by the City as a “service gap, context or situation,”<sup>21</sup> need improved access to opportunities and services to reach their potential. The Toronto Youth Equity Strategy identifies key barriers that affect youth access.<sup>22</sup> These include:

- gaps in service, especially during times of transition
- low awareness of services in part due to a changing network of services and fragmented delivery model
- barriers to accessing services, including geographic and financial
- lack of opportunities for youth, families and allies in advocating for, designing and evaluating programs and services
- under-resourcing of services, including frontline staff whose critical role as caring adults and mentors is not well-supported.

To improve access, barriers must be lowered for youth in every community. It became clear from listening to staff that youth experience is diverse and complex. Inclusion and access to the services and opportunities that the library offers are critical to addressing these barriers, especially for youth who are underserved.



## How the Library can ensure that all youth have equitable access to library services

The Library is well-positioned to support diverse youth across the city with its 100 branches, existing partnerships, and services geared toward promoting diversity and bridging social and economic divides. The Library's commitment to broad and equitable access is reflected in the depth and balanced nature of its resources, including:

- deep collections and rich resources, reflecting the diverse informational and recreational needs of youth and encompassing a range of different experiences and ideas
- varied programs and volunteer experiences, exposing youth to possibilities and opportunities to build skills for future success
- digital services, including connectivity, helping to foster digital inclusion for all youth in the city
- staff commitment to equity and diversity, making the library an inclusive and welcoming space for all youth.

The Library will continue to uphold its values including equity, inclusion and service orientation as it finds more ways to provide more youth, especially those who are underserved, with convenient access to library service.

Refining methods for involving and collaborating with youth will allow the Library to plan more accessible service, taking into account community need, location, time and promotion.

Focusing on partnership development will allow TPL to provide expanded as well as targeted programming that is responsive to local needs. By collaborating and better aligning goals with partners in the technology, arts, culture, social service and education sectors, the Library will:

- enhance its understanding of the issues that affect diverse youth and learn strategies to reach and support them, contributing to a more connected and accessible network of services community-wide
- create new collaboration opportunities for staff
- serve more youth by connecting with them in their neighbourhoods at their point of need.

**“The Library will find more ways to provide more youth, especially those who are underserved, with convenient access to library service.”**



## Relevant Learning Opportunities

Youth are engaged by hands-on learning that responds to their interests and needs, is socially embedded and helps them reach their goals.<sup>23</sup> The Library's interest-based programming and volunteer opportunities complement formal learning and encourage youth to "approach learning as something that happens at all stages of life, in all environments."<sup>24</sup> Youth we spoke with told us that while they use the library to meet their academic commitments, they also look to the library to pursue personal interests and goals.

Staff agreed that outside of school, most youth want interest-based workshops. Our interest-driven programming offers opportunities for youth to explore, take action, be among and collaborate with like-minded peers and access mentors and experts while developing skills and gaining experience.

In discussions about programming, staff said that including technology can motivate youth and make learning more engaging. When online communications and digital media are used in interest-based programming, opportunities for creativity, sharing and connecting to supports are

amplified.<sup>25</sup> The participatory and collaborative nature of the online environment has the potential to connect learners to expanded and non-traditional resources, including communities that share and hold knowledge about their interests.<sup>26</sup>

Youth benefit from technology-supported, interest-based and experiential learning by developing critical digital literacy skills in the background. Although youth are referred to as digital natives and seem to possess advanced digital literacy skills, research demonstrates this is not the case.<sup>27</sup> Most youth online activity is focused on accessing entertainment, socializing, creative expression and finding basic information.<sup>28</sup> Digital and media literacy is now essential to fully participate in life, make informed decisions and communicate.<sup>29</sup> Youth are preparing for a transforming workplace that requires different skills and mind-sets.<sup>30</sup> To be successful, youth must grow from enthusiastic users of digital media and technology into producers, developing related technical and soft skills.



## How the Library can provide relevant learning opportunities for youth

The Library has a long history of supporting youth learning by complementing formal education, and supporting self-directed, lifelong learning. Our staff, spaces, collections, technology, programming and volunteer opportunities combine to provide a flexible and resource-rich learning environment where youth can take charge of their own learning including what and how they learn. They can engage with:

- hands-on programs and workshops
- mentorship experiences
- online classrooms
- presentations
- library spaces to collaborate with others
- collections and digital resources for independent learning.

Recent investments in digital innovation will strengthen the Library's ability to support relevant learning opportunities by leveraging the creative and collaborative capabilities of digital technology.

The Library will better support interest-based opportunities for self-directed, experiential learning by expanding partnerships with youth-serving agencies, community groups, government, the arts and culture and technology sectors, and the innovation community. These partnerships will allow the Library to:

- offer expanded programs with valuable opportunities to access experts, mentors and unique cultural, education and social experiences, especially during unstructured times when youth are not engaged in education or employment
- increase access to new and emerging technologies.











## Spaces

Youth told us they want welcoming multi-purpose spaces, and staff told us youth need both dedicated zones and inclusive service in all library spaces. The Library will establish best practices for our branch and online spaces, recognizing the unique characteristics of each library and community as well as the online environment.

### Actions:

- Set a baseline for service to youth as established in TPL's Library Spaces Vision that includes inclusive space, relevant collections, useful information and excellent customer service across the library's 100 branches.
- Welcome broad use of library space by youth while developing specialized zones, spaces and services of particular interest.
- Involve youth in animating our online spaces and channels.
- Provide opportunities for youth to explore digital innovation and maker spaces.

### Outcomes:

- Youth are more consistently supported in their personal, education and employment goals by dedicated staff, rich resources and access to emerging technology in welcoming, youth-friendly spaces across TPL's branches and online spaces and channels.

Branches and online spaces are accessible, flexible, safe and welcoming environments, rich in resources, including collections and technology. Youth engage with supportive staff, peers and other community members and connect to needed city-wide services and opportunities in a variety of library spaces, including Teen Zones, Youth Hubs, Digital Innovation Hubs and online at the Library's website and spaces designed specifically for youth.







**Youth borrowed 1.25 million physical items in 2017**





## Collections

Youth told us they view collections as core to library service and staff as trusted navigators who can provide assistance discovering the breadth of available resources. Staff told us a deep and diverse collection is essential in service to youth. To help youth access collections and support their love of reading and learning, we will focus on curating and sharing content to meet a wide range of interests.

### Actions:

- Encourage broad use of collections by youth, supporting diverse information and recreational needs.
- Improve discoverability of youth collections.
- Foster communities of readers by providing resources and platforms with youth leading the conversation.

### Outcomes:

- Youth discover the breadth of library collections that respond to their information needs and recreational interests.
- Youth experience and engage with more accessible and discoverable collections expertly curated by librarians in collaboration with youth.
- Youth regard the Library as an authentic and informed voice in the literary community that can connect them to authors, publishing news and communities of readers.

Youth learn, explore interests, education and employment paths, and examine issues and trends affecting their lives through the Library's extensive and balanced collections. These collections offer multiple viewpoints, represent the diverse experiences of youth locally and globally, and promote critical thinking and personal development. Youth discover the depth of the Library's collections through targeted promotion including The List, an annual booklist of 100 great recommendations for youth.











## Programs

Youth told us they want more programming that supports school achievement and practical life skills development. Staff told us culturally responsive programming that engages youth and their families is an emerging need. Programs support youth in learning, developing their interests, building skills, socializing and connecting to their community. The Library has been most successful delivering programming that supports self-expression and creativity in teens. We will expand on our programming success and develop a coordinated approach to ensure consistency, quality, diversity and relevancy in programming for youth.

### Actions:

- Develop a vision for youth-driven programming based on principles of positive youth development that is inclusive and culturally responsive and answers to local needs.
- Offer programs that support academic achievement and life skills development, including opportunities for parents to learn together with their youth.
- Expand user-centred, interest-based programming, with a focus on digital literacy and digital media creation.

### Outcomes:

- Youth develop their interests, build skills and literacies, improve social and leadership skills and connect to their communities in engaging learning experiences.

Youth explore interests, develop workplace and life skills, access experts and mentors, experience positive relationships with peers and adult allies and connect to community in library programs, events and exhibits. Planned drop-in programming at Youth Hubs, as well as arts and culture workshop series and performances that support creative expression and mentorship experiences, anchor the Library's multifaceted offerings for youth.







**"...relationships are the foundation of service to youth."**





Youth told us that they value the friendly and supportive staff who work to ensure that they have a positive experience at the Library. This is echoed by staff who recognize that relationships are the foundation of service to youth. Staff play a critical role in supporting positive youth development. It is essential that they have a solid understanding of the contemporary youth experience in order to provide relevant services and connect youth to resources in a meaningful way.

### **Actions:**

- Involve all library staff in providing positive outcomes for youth.
- Foster an invigorated community of youth services staff united by a shared vision.
- Support staff with expanded, flexible and meaningful professional development opportunities.

### **Outcomes:**

- Youth developmental needs are understood by staff who provide supportive, respectful and responsive service.
- Youth have their information needs met by responsive staff who understand the changing nature of information and data.
- Youth have positive experiences at the library facilitated by knowledgeable and empathetic staff who are supported in ongoing professional development and growth.

Staff develop and deliver information services and diverse and relevant programming, facilitate meaningful volunteer experiences and maintain youth-friendly spaces in branches and online. Everyone Serves Youth training engages all staff in a research-based, positive youth development approach to library service for youth.









## Technology

Youth told us that technology is central to their lives, but that there is plenty of room for them to learn more about technology's potential for creativity and communication. Staff pointed to a need to coordinate the Library's digital services for youth, including increasing digital literacy and inclusion. Youth who do not have adequate access to technology are more likely to experience challenges and barriers to academic achievement, employment, social inclusion and information access. We will raise awareness of TPL's tech and digital programs among youth, provide ongoing opportunities and continue to incorporate new technologies in our services for youth.

### **Actions:**

- Develop a coordinated approach to connecting youth to the Library's digital services through targeted learning opportunities and promotion.

### **Outcomes:**

- Youth easily access free Internet and Wi-Fi in library branches, reducing the digital divide.
- Youth confidently make use of the Library's digital services for their own purposes, including activities that demonstrate a high degree of digital literacy.

Multiple entry points to the Library's technology resources provide youth with access to the Internet, dedicated maker spaces and studios, leading-edge technology, digital media tools and eLearning resources. Programs support the development of collaborative communication and creative and critical-thinking skills.









## Outreach and Partnership Development

Youth told us to increase promotion and to involve them in raising awareness about the Library, and staff told us to take our service into the community. We will develop new partnerships and strengthen existing ones, engaging the community by telling our story and connecting with youth, especially those who have fewer supports.

### Actions:

- Develop a marketing plan with a multifaceted approach that articulates to youth, their families and the community the wide range of library resources and supports available.
- Establish a clear view of our partners in the community, align objectives and work together to coordinate services and provide more youth with impactful service.
- Develop more partnerships to tap into a greater variety of subject experts for program delivery.

### Outcomes:

- Youth have an expanded awareness of the range and relevancy of library resources.
- More youth engage with more of TPL's programs and resources.
- The unique needs of youth communities inside and outside the Library are identified and served by library staff.

Collaboration with schools and youth-serving agencies extends library service into community spaces where youth are. By finding alignment with these partners and with City and provincial priorities, TPL contributes to collective impact in communities. Partnerships with school boards strengthen student engagement. After school service in targeted locations, funded by the City's Poverty Reduction Strategy, provides enriched learning experiences.







## Volunteering

Youth told us they want more varied opportunities to volunteer and contribute. Staff told us they see strengths in young people that they want to help further develop. Youth gain valuable and positive experiences through volunteering. Volunteering promotes skills development, positive relationships, mentorship, civic engagement and workplace readiness. Library volunteer opportunities, such as Youth Advisory Group participation, meet diverse needs of youth and enhance library service.

### Actions:

- Actively promote existing youth volunteer opportunities, encouraging civic participation.
- Connect youth with a variety of volunteer opportunities outside the Library.

### Outcomes:

- Youth develop skills, experience and connections that improve their career and employment options.
- Youth are rewarded by the impact of their contributions.
- Youth feel valued as their needs and interests inform library service development.

Youth discuss with staff the creation, development and promotion of library service for themselves and peers as volunteers in Youth Advisory Groups at branches city-wide. Together with volunteers in the Leading to Reading, Reading Buddies and Cyber Seniors programs, youth account for the largest group of volunteers in the Library.





## Employment

Youth told us they want support in preparing for employment and careers. The Library helps prepare youth for future employment by connecting them with employment services and training opportunities, by providing needed resources and information to explore employment and education pathways, and by contributing to skills development through programming and learning opportunities, especially for youth who experience multiple barriers to employment. The Library is also an employer of youth, committed to ensuring that its younger employees have a positive work experience.

### Actions:

- Increase programming and supports related to career paths, employment and entrepreneurship.

### Outcomes:

- Youth feel supported by TPL in their personal, education and career goals.

Youth explore employment and entrepreneurial paths and related skills in specialized workshops and series on careers and job search, small business, computer training and personal finance.



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