

CREATING BOUNDARIES WITH PATRONS: 12 Library Visitors Who Need to Follow the Rules



Presented for PCI Webinars
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“On the whole human beings want to be good, but not too good, and not quite all the time.”

-- George Bernard Shaw



OUR MOTTO

*We can accept the person without
having to accept his or her
inappropriate behavior.*

SOME THEMES . . .

What is the impact on the library business?

Why do we rationalize unacceptable behavior?

Are these “profiles” or “behaviors”?

Is our goal “peace” or “justice”?

What should asking for help mean?

Do your job or do your job safely?

How do we align with patrons?

If there are no consequences . . .

Acting skills? Patience? Proof of change?

THE 12

The Patron Who Monopolizes Staff Time

The Harassing Patron

The Stalking Patron

The Lonely Patron

The Entitled and Rude Patron

The Homeless, Mentally Ill, Substance-Abusing Patron

The Tweenaged Patron

The Technologically-Confused Patron

The Elderly or Disabled Patron

The Hygiene-Challenged Patron

The Patron Who Misses the “Old Days” at the Library

The Patron Who Hogs or Misuses the Internet

THE PATRON WHO MONOPOLIZES STAFF TIME

Behaviors: Otherwise known as the “Patron With 1,000 Questions.” They don’t seem to be satisfied with your answers or ideas. Can be a little passive-aggressive.

Reasons: Lonely, confused, bored, entitled; they like the attention. They may do this at other places too.

Tools: Be patient, but set limits on what you can and will do. Use the “Rule of Three” as to how many solutions you will provide. Say, “I need to move on to help other patrons” or “I need to do other parts of my job.” Connect them with other staff who may be a better fit.

THE HARASSING PATRON

Behaviors: Physical, verbal, sexual, or racially harassing actions; creates a hostile work environment using intimidation, size, space-invading, fear, humiliation, embarrassment.

Reasons: Learned behavior; past behaviors that have worked; their need to keep people one-down to them; either unaware or don't care about gender, cultural, or diversity differences.

Tools: Tell them to stop, early. Report it. Call out the behaviors, enforce consequences, use supervisor interventions, suspensions, expulsions.

THE STALKING PATRON

Behaviors: Overly-involved with certain targeted staff members, bordering on obsessive personal interest. Gathers personal information about people, may have multiple targets.

Reasons: Entitled, aggressive, mentally ill, lonely, immature, doesn't recognize social boundaries. Likes to control people, by using fear, intimidation, veiled or conditional threats.

Tools: Reveal no personal information. Report their behavior and stop it early. Don't manage this situation alone. Get the police involved if necessary. Biggest risk is if there was a previous love relationship; less prone to violence if not. Use patron discipline policies.

THE LONELY PATRON

Behaviors: The library is a source of human connection. They can be nice and needy or rude and needy. Your “frequent fliers.”

Reasons: Age, lack of social skills, failed relationships, friends and family moved on or passed away, new in town. Could be “The Starer.”

Tools: See them for who they are, with empathy and patience. Connect them to others and activities that will expand their social circles.

THE ENTITLED, RUDE PATRON

Behaviors: “I pay your salary!” is one of their favorite phrases or mindsets. They can be dismissive if you don’t help right away. They ignore the rules, refuse to cooperate; no patience for others. They use verbal or physical intimidation, aggressive; demeaning in conversations.

Reasons: It works for them in other life encounters. They have low self-esteem, which they mask with obnoxious bravado.

Tools: Provide firm, fair, and consistent service. Acknowledge their impatience. Praise them when they act appropriately. Use alignment. Ignore their comments. Don’t argue or try to change their minds.

THE HOMELESS, MENTALLY ILL, SUBSTANCE-ABUSING PATRON

Behaviors: Some patrons are one, two, or all three. They can monopolize staff time and raise safety and security concerns. They can be unreasonable, uncooperative, and unwilling to follow the rules. They can be cyclical in their thinking and behavior. They can be victims or victimizers. Progress with them is slow.

Reasons: All three life situations are interrelated, leading to a series of failed relationships and a domino effect.

Tools: See them as human beings and be empathic. Enforce the rules in a firm, fair, reasonable, and consistent way. Bring in social services or the police.

THE TWEENAGED PATRON

Behaviors: Rude to staff in front of their peers; more cooperative alone. Intentionally breaks or doesn't follow rules to see what they can get away with. May be the pack leader or a follower in groups.

Reasons: Trapped by peer pressure, hormones, immaturity, and the need to be in control or save face.

Tools: Talk to them away from the group if possible. Use the "Introduce-Explain-Ask" approach. Reward their compliance with praise. Send them out for the day if it's pervasive or severe. Choose the staff member with the best alignment. My two phrases? Call their parents?

THE TECHNOLOGY-CONFUSED PATRON

Behaviors: Asks a lot of questions about how to use the computers, Internet, and library machines.

Reasons: They either didn't learn, don't know, learned and forgot, or learned and just like the attention from staff. Some older patrons seem to almost resent advances in technology, preferring the "old days and old ways."

Tools: Be patient, use and provide checklists, cheat sheets, templates. Find the staff member with the best alignment. Praise them when they get it right, without your help. Suggest classes? Partner them with a mentor?

THE ELDERLY OR DISABLED PATRON

Behaviors: They may have significant mobility and/or cognitive issues, based on age or physical conditions. They can be angry, sad, depressed, entitled, impatient, out of touch with reality, or even victimized by their “caregivers.”

Reasons: Age, accidents, congenital, diseases.

Tools: Be respectful and patient. Talk to them in an adult voice, using simple questions and answers. Provide enough space for wheelchairs, if necessary. Ask them how specifically you can help them. Be aware of potential abuse issues; contact APS, social workers.

THE HYGIENE-CHALLENGED PATRON

Behaviors: Infrequent showers, teeth brushing. Body and mouth odors, unclean clothes, worn repeatedly. Their personal hygiene is noticeable and impacts others.

Reasons: Health-related, laziness, religious beliefs, depression, medication-driven, distracted by life issues, revenge on others.

Tools: Have the necessary “care-fronting” conversation and discuss the impact on others. Don’t judge; set expectations and ask if you need to make accommodations.

THE PATRON WHO MISSES THE “OLD DAYS” AT THE LIBRARY

Behaviors: “This place is too noisy! It’s like Starbucks in here! Too many kids! Too many programs and not enough peace and quiet! Where is the card catalog?”

Reasons: Stuck in their desire for a nostalgia that won’t return. They may have legitimate concerns or are just cranky about the speed and pace of life today.

Tools: Agree with them and be supportive and patient. Remind them that it’s still about books, periodicals, research, and learning. Don’t try to change their minds with too many examples of what’s new, fun, and different.

THE PATRON WHO HOGS OR MISUSES THE INTERNET

Behaviors: They ignore time limits or the needs of other patrons. They monopolize the PCs, under the cover of doing “work.” Or they watch porn and delight in making staff, children, parents, or other patrons angry or uncomfortable.

Reasons: Selfish for the first type; odd, eccentric, narcissistic, predatory, compulsive, immature for the second. They seem to like antagonizing people.

Tools: Enforce your rules and Code of Conduct. Use discipline, including expulsion for repeated events. Call the police for actual or suspected illegal sexual behaviors.

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