



## Using books with older children and teenagers

### Introduction: the reading journey

From the moment we show children their first book of stories or rhymes, they begin a reading journey. This journey covers their initial experience of hearing words read to them; their early interest in print; their growing ability to read for themselves; the emergence of their own reading tastes; the formation of a reading habit as adults; and their eventual bequest of this to their own children. The journey is supported by many others along the way: perhaps by their parents at first, and grandparents too; then through other siblings who read to them and with them; then through early years' workers and school teachers; through their school friends with whom they share reading interests; and perhaps through staff at local libraries and bookshops.

Some of these 'companions on the road' may be with them briefly, others for a longer time – including those parents who manage to stay in touch with their children's reading, and those librarians and teachers who may become 'reading mentors'. Children in the eight to 11 age range are developing true senses of identity and their own reading tastes emerge, and it is at this stage, more than others, that they either turn away from reading for pleasure, or become lifelong readers. The transition from primary to secondary school should further develop their leisure reading, but all too often it impedes it, as their studies take over. By the time children enter the teenage years, much of their reading pattern has been set, and although good teachers and enthusiastic librarians can still 'turn children on to books', their success is really dependent on all those who have been 'fellow travellers' in the past.

During the teenage years, young people need to be introduced to adult books and authors that will interest them, as (with the help of teenage authors as a 'bridge') they make the leap into adult reading. Both teachers and librarians should help this to happen, and parents have a role too. This stage is often neglected, and sometimes we conspire unwittingly to keep children in their 'comfort zone' of familiar children's and teenage authors. We serve them best by moving them onwards, as we have done at every stage before on this journey. The time from the age of eight through the teenage period is an exciting one. Children are developing true senses of identity; finding new interests; experiencing puberty; and planning their future lives, both in terms of jobs, and of personal relationships. Their reading can be a vital support to them at this time, both to give information, to help form their own feelings, and to explain the behaviour of others. Fiction raises children's horizons, shows other ways of behaving, and challenges their thinking. At the same time it lets them join a community of readers around the world –and reading in English opens up one of the largest reading communities of all. From preserving the past, through myths and legends, to forecasting the future through science fiction, fiction presents a virtual world for those whose own surroundings may be more limited and, through humour and fantasy, provides entertainment and escape from the confines of everyday routines.



### **Choosing the best**

A large number of books is available for children from eight upwards, ranging from award-winning titles, challenging novels, hugely popular mass-market series, 'quick reads' and illustrated books. In total, nearly 10,000 children's titles are published annually in the UK, and although this includes many editions of some titles (abridged versions, 'television tie-ins', and others), it still leaves a large number for this age group alone. There are still areas where libraries and schools would like to see more titles – original stories for newly emergent readers for example, and more books for older readers that have a simpler reading level – but we have a wealth of good-quality writing from which to choose. In making such choices, help and advice can come from a number of sources:

- the British Council's own personnel, including teachers and library staff
- other reading-related websites: [Achuka](#), [National Literacy Trust](#), [BookTrust](#), and others
- websites aimed at young readers themselves: [Stories from the Web](#), [The Children's Poetry Archive](#), and others
- reviewing magazines, such as [Books for Keeps](#), and [Carousel](#)
- review sections in national newspapers, for example the [children's library on the Guardian's website](#)
- books such as [The Ultimate Book Guide](#), [Who Next?](#), and others
- booklists, such as those from the School Library Association and the Rough Guide series. Monthly lists were published to mark the National Year of Reading in England on the [School Library Association website](#)
- shortlists and winners lists from children's book prizes, such as the [CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Awards](#), and the [Guardian Children's Fiction Prize](#)
- good bookshops and libraries.

### **Sharing stories**

It's saddening to hear parents say: 'We used to read to her when she was little, but now she's learned to read, we don't bother.' First, none of us ever finishes learning to read – even as adults, we're encountering new words, and we need to develop reading stamina. Second, children still need the experience of being read to at the same time as they are learning to read; this reminder of the pleasure of reading is all the more important if children are struggling with print. Sharing books enables the important combination of the words on the page, together with the spoken words used by those who share the story, and even in this older age group, it has a part to play. Books with pictures, for example, enable an adult to share even more easily; they do not need to have read all the text to be able to talk with children about what they can both see in the pictures. In this way, adults can model the use of English, by extending from the text alone into book-inspired conversation, and give children the confidence to do this among themselves.



### **The child as reader**

Most of the books used with children in this age range are stories, and the narrative drive of stories is a powerful way to engage children – wanting to turn the page to see what will happen keeps them reading, and shows the power of books to hold one's attention for a long time. Children may well respond to other kinds of book, and it's important to have a variety available to present different possibilities. In the UK, research indicates that boys who are reluctant readers respond to non-fiction, or short stories, and illustrated biographies. Modern poetry is a popular category in UK public libraries, and children often enjoy the performance aspects of poetry, as they do of simple play scripts. It's important to respect children's own tastes, and to value what they have chosen to read, rather than to urge them up some assumed 'quality ladder'. As adults, most of us mix challenging reads and classic texts with light reading and browsing, and children will do this too. Teenagers, in particular, will often swing wildly between adult reading and comforting books from their earlier years; successful readers almost always follow a zigzag pattern, rather than a steady gradient.

### **Wider reading, or genres?**

One characteristic of children's reading in the eight to 11 years stage is the emergence of fiction genres as a major element in their choice. Children will often stick to one or two favourite types of fiction – funny stories, animal stories, scary stories, science fiction, and so on. Respecting children's reading choices sometimes means allowing them to 'read their way out of a category', and activities that force children to read more widely are often, in the end, counterproductive.

Much work has been done in the UK recently to provide children with advice of the 'if you liked that, you might also like this' kind, and this can be used both to move children on from a fixation with a single author, and also to 'jump genres', by finding books that bridge such categories.

### **Issues and controversies in children's books**

It's unrealistic to expect contemporary novels for teenagers not to reflect today's society, and in order to make stories realistic, authors often touch on topics such as sex, drugs, and race. It may be that this is done sensitively, but the book could still offend in certain cultures; seek advice if you are unsure.

The same applies to language used in books for young people, which is likely to reflect spoken language in all its forms, including on occasion strong language or swearing. As with the topics above, this can be seen less as a danger as an opportunity to talk about the issue – subsequent discussion can include the 'rights and wrongs' of subjects, and the context in which language might be used.

Teenage novels continue books' contribution to emotional literacy that began with picture books; older novels can examine topics like bullying, or disability, in such a way as will help children come to their own conclusions.



### **The role of illustrations**

As in the early years, illustrations in books for older children offer additional context clues that assist in the learning of English. They can show children objects or scenes that may be hard to describe without resorting to complex language or jargon. They may also show subtle expressions on characters' faces – sarcasm, suspicion, and so on – which may support understanding of the text.

Pictures also add a great deal of additional information not described in the text, which can particularly help to explain the UK cultural background – a row of terraced houses and gardens in the background to a Raymond Briggs comic-strip-style picture book, for example. Illustrated books help a parent with little or no English to share stories with an English learner by following the story through the pictures, and devices like speech balloons, captions and exclamations are an attention-grabbing way to introduce idiomatic English, and colloquial language.

### **Moving up through school**

This stage of reading usually coincides with children moving from a primary to a secondary school, and it's important that schools from both phases of education liaise about reading, if at all possible. There are huge benefits to a continuity of reading, with secondary schools building on what primaries have done, and good practice here can avoid the frequent dip in reading that this transition often brings.

If English teaching is additional to school work, remember that fiction is useful in preparing for moving school (look for stories involving change, for example), and it can be a form of escape for any associated anxiety.

### **Getting boys to read**

The UK is one of many countries where the decline of leisure reading among boys is a cause for concern, and there are a number of ways in which this can be challenged:

- engage with boys themselves, to find out what material would attract them to reading
- expose them to a wide variety of materials, including non-fiction, books of jokes, poems, and 'fun facts'
- identify the fiction genres that are successful, e.g. fantasy, science fiction and sports stories
- use graphic novels and manga material, and extend this to other illustrated books
- identify male role models, including peers and celebrities, to promote reading
- use boys' interest in ICT as a way of promoting reading.



### **Reluctant readers**

‘There is no such thing as a reluctant reader,’ wrote New Zealand author Paul Jennings, ‘a reluctant reader is a child for whom an adult has not yet found the right book.’

It does us all good to challenge our thinking sometimes, and this usefully puts the onus back on to us, rather than too easily pigeon-holing the child. UK publishers [Barrington Stoke](#) has produced a range of titles to reach children with genuine reading difficulties, as well as inspiring those whose difficulty is simply motivation. These books use a slightly larger text size, and make use of illustrations to break up the text. They include ‘hi-lo’ material, which combines a high interest age with a low reading age. These books are well worth considering for English language teaching, since they avoid the frequent problem of books where the reading level is appropriate, but where the content is too juvenile.

There are a number of non-fiction series that also use this ‘hi-lo’ approach, and include topics with child-appeal (trail bikes, skateboarding, rock music), where daunting blocks of text have been replaced by extended captions. Some use the differentiated text approach, where extra panels of text offer a higher level of detail.

### **Using ICT**

There is a range of websites that feature books and reading, and these can be used to motivate children to read, and to extend their reading. They can also allow children to join the worldwide community of readers in English, and encourage children to send e-mails to authors, write reviews, and contact other readers. Websites include general ones featuring reading, such as the UK’s [Stories from the Web](#) and, in addition, many children’s authors have lively websites of their own, enabling children to find out more about the writers they enjoy.

### **For parents**

In the first few years of a child’s reading journey, his or her books will have been largely chosen by the adults in his or her life. As children mature, parents can still play a role in advising, but it’s important to let the child develop his or her own reading tastes, and parents must be sensitive to when their help will be useful, and when they need to let children make their own choices.

It can still be useful for parents to introduce new books, perhaps by reading the first page or two, and then leaving their child to finish carry on by him- or herself; this can get over the psychological barrier if children are reluctant to start a new story. At the same time, children may enjoy reading a page or two to their parents (though don’t expect this, or it will seem a chore), and might be persuaded to talk about what they’ve been reading. Be receptive and welcoming to this, if it happens.



Even though children may prefer to read for themselves, parents can stay in touch and show support by retaining an interest in their children's reading. Try occasional questions such as: 'What are you reading at the moment?', 'Are you enjoying it?', 'Have you read any more by that author?', and 'Do you think I'd like it?'. Remember to respect their own choice of reading, even if it seems 'too easy' or not an author that you would choose for them yourself. Praise children about their reading whenever you can. 'You read how much?' or 'Well done, you've finished the whole chapter' is much better than 'You're not going out to play until you've finished that chapter'.

If you're worried about children's reading, don't let that communicate itself to the child; talk to your child's teacher, or the local librarian about your concerns. Parents who keep up with children's reading can share 'the same frame of reference' when they're talking with children at other times – 'It's just like what happened in that book, isn't it?'. In a way, this is a development from the refrains and choruses parents may have chanted with their children when young, to integrating books into everyday life.

Make sure you keep reading too. It's important that you have books around at home, and model reader-like behaviour. Let children have a bookshelf of their own books, and encourage relatives to buy books or book tokens for presents. Ultimately though, it's not just about having lots of books at home, it's about spending time with your children, and letting them feel that both you and they are part of a 'community of readers'.

Contributed by Alec Williams, freelance trainer and storyteller