

FAMILY MEDIA/BOOKS

Pushing Back Against the 'Decline by 9' Trend in Reading

Experts weigh in on helping kids develop a love for books

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When Scholastic released its ["Kids and Family Reading Report"](https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/Downloads/KFRRReport_Fir) (https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/Downloads/KFRRReport_Fir) in June, it caused a lot of panic. It found that when kids are about age 9, the critical measures of childhood literacy decrease dramatically and don't rebound as kids move through adolescence.

"An important part of being a lifelong learner is finding texts that you connect with. A lot of what we know about other ways of doing comes from what we read. Having access to information and new points of view is something that helps us as a society to thrive," says Teresa Sherwood, a teacher at Bellevue's Stevenson Elementary School who specializes in English language learning (ELL) and special education. Reading helps us understand the people and events in the world around us; enhances creativity and imagination; and even [provides health benefits](https://www.piedmont.org/living-real-change/health-benefits-of-reading) (<https://www.piedmont.org/living-real-change/health-benefits-of-reading>). Research shows that reaching reading proficiency by third grade is a clear predictor of academic success. So what can parents do to prevent their child from becoming a literacy statistic?

“There’s some really scary statistics about kids who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade, and the best way to get kids reading on grade level is to hook them on the joy and the pleasures of reading,” says Jeanette Hitch, a teacher at Seattle’s Fairmount Park Elementary School.

Lost literacy

In the 25 years that Hitch has been teaching third and fourth grades, screen time has risen dramatically. It’s estimated that American children ages 8–12 spend from four to six hours per day.

(https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF_Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx) looking at screens. College admissions have become more competitive, leading to overscheduling at ever younger ages (<https://slate.com/life/2024/05/smartphone-children-youth-sports-activities-overscheduled.html>). All of these factors compound the challenge of a major literacy hurdle kids face at around age 9.

“Between ages 8 and 9, children are transitioning from picture books to chapter books. Chapter books require a bigger cognitive lift that can be intimidating for kids,” says Hitch.

Literacy rich

One of the most valuable things parents can do to help kids meet that challenge is to create a literacy-rich environment in the home, which signals to kids that reading is a pleasure, rather than just an academic challenge. Make sure that your child has access to lots of books at home, take them to browse used-book stores and raid Little Free Libraries wherever you see them.

“Getting to know your local librarian can be a life-changing thing. Not only can they do some pretty magical things for connecting your child with books on a topic that they’re curious about, but they can come up with resource lists on adjacent topics,” says Sherwood, pointing out that they do all this while catering to a child’s reading level, and even generating new reading ideas based on your child’s past preferences.

And of course, you can set an example by reading for pleasure yourself.

“I don’t think that kids are seeing their parents pick up books and read as much. That behavior isn’t being modeled. I’m guilty of it in my own home. When I have a few minutes in the evening, I’m just as likely now to pick up my phone,” says Hitch.

Sherwood points out that even if you are reading the news or a professional journal article online, “Our kids don’t necessarily see that as reading. From their point of view, we’re just looking at a screen and that could be YouTube.”

Modeling also includes reading your child bedtime stories or reading books to them that are too difficult for them to read themselves. You can listen to audiobooks together in the car. And don’t forget nonfiction.

“How often has your kid asked you something and you don’t exactly know the answer? Those kinds of questions are really fun to research as a family,” says Hitch.

Give reading a nudge

Sherwood suggests “strewing,” or setting things out for your children to discover, as a gentle approach to encourage reading. Without commentary, “You just sort of casually leave some books around, maybe on the coffee table or at eye level. They won’t pick up every book that you share with them that way, but they might discover some new interests if they have the agency or choice over what they’re looking at.”

But if your kid isn’t soaking up your bookish atmosphere, it’s okay to intervene — to a point.

“Some kids just really need a little external motivation to jump through that hurdle to start reading on their own,” says Hitch. “I would do everything short of requiring kids to read.”

Summer reading programs, such as the ones at [Seattle Public Library](https://www.spl.org/programs-and-services/fun-and-games/summer-of-learning/2024-summer-of-learning) (<https://www.spl.org/programs-and-services/fun-and-games/summer-of-learning/2024-summer-of-learning>) and [King County Library](https://kcls.org/summer/) (<https://kcls.org/summer/>) or competitions like the [Global Reading Challenge](https://www.spl.org/programs-and-services/fun-and-games/global-reading-challenge) (<https://www.spl.org/programs-and-services/fun-and-games/global-reading-challenge>), can be very motivating for some kids. Parents can institute their own challenges with prizes for reading books, or try one of Hitch’s favorite tricks: a grace period in which “lights out” can be delayed by independent bedtime reading. What works for one child may not work for another. One kid might take pride in seeing the list of books on their reading log grow longer, while another might be discouraged by the challenge of writing down all the book titles.

That’s why Sherwood recommends, “Sometimes just asking kids directly, ‘Hey, what would make you want to read more?’ can be an excellent opener to a really interesting conversation.”

Reading rules

Taking a punitive or prescriptive approach can backfire and make kids dislike reading.

“As kids get older, there tends to be more of an emphasis on reading as an elevated pursuit. I think when we take a heavy-handed approach to literacy, we start to lose a lot of the joy of it,” says Sherwood.

That’s why both teachers firmly advise letting kids choose their own pleasure reading.

“Most of us, as adults, read what interests us. We don’t always read things that are exactly at our reading level and the most challenging possible texts that we could. Sometimes we just read for pleasure and to relax.”

That also means kids should be allowed to change their minds.

“I come down firmly on the side of ‘no’ for requiring kids to finish books. Reading should be enjoyable, and slogging through a book that you are just not interested in is not enjoyable. There is so much fantastic children’s literature out there, there’s just not enough time to read books that you are not interested in,” says Hitch. Sometimes a child may not be enjoying a book because they are not ready (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/why-school-libraries-need-lgbtq-books>) for the themes it addresses, or because it is too far above their reading level.

“The biggest mistake that I see is pushing for reading material that is too difficult,” says Hitch. “Children develop at their own pace, and their interests might be different from yours.”

Better books?

The books that are best for helping kids over the hurdle from picture books to reading hundreds of pages of text don’t always look like literature to parents.

“Those beginning chapter books that are highly predictable and follow the same plot pattern are great for kids who are just getting into middle-grade books. It’s interesting because they are often the books that parents kind of roll their eyes at. I don’t know a single parent that’s super excited to buy their kid a whole bunch of ‘Captain Underpants,’ but these are the kind of books that help our kids cross that hurdle between picture books and chapter books,” explains Hitch.

Hitch likes to use a nutrition metaphor for different types of reading.

“In class, I’m going to introduce them to a lot of fantastic literature that is going to give them the nutrients to help them become better readers and better students. I tell the kids, ‘You are welcome to read junk-food books. It won’t give you the nutrients you need to become a better reader, but it’s fun and enjoyable.’ It’s important to balance those two,” says Hitch. “One of the great things about being an adult who likes to read is that I have agency to pick exactly what I want to read, and I want students to experience that agency also, especially when we’re talking about reading for pleasure.”

It’s developmentally appropriate to obsess over cookie-cutter series about magical kittens or devour everything the library has about sharks. But if you suspect your child is intimidated by the challenge of reading something new, Hitch recommends getting kids hooked on stories that motivate them. Ask your child’s teacher about your child’s instructional reading level and which books at that level other children are enjoying. You can look online for more ideas of “nutritious” books that are at the edge of your child’s skill level. Then revisit the gentle strategies of strewing, audiobooks and reading together.

“I am a huge fan of taking the first book of a series and reading it out loud. Something such as ‘A Series of Unfortunate Events’ that’s going to be really high interest. Read the first one together, and then I say, ‘If you want to know what happens next, you’ve got to read them by yourself!’” says Hitch.

Deeper issues

If you've created a literacy-rich environment, and your child enjoys audiobooks and the stories you read to them, but they still won't pick up a book on their own, or they don't seem to understand the books they read as well as the books they hear, they might be dealing with a deeper issue. Decoding issues, learning disabilities, developmental issues such as ADHD, and even vision impairment can all interfere with a child's ability to read at grade level or enjoy reading.

"If you have concerns, bring it up to your child's teacher right away, because they are going to be a fantastic resource for you. Know that especially in these first four years of school, teachers are constantly assessing children for reading difficulties," says Hitch. The information they learn from you about your child's experiences with reading at home can be very helpful in identifying learning or developmental challenges. Many parents grew up with a stigma about "special ed" that makes them nervous about seeking extra academic support.

"Early intervention can be really empowering for kids," says Sherwood, who has seen students catch up to their peers in as little as one semester. "These days, kids get extra support for lots of things, and it's viewed very positively. I've had a lot of kids feel jealous and left out that they weren't the chosen ones [for reading support] because it felt like special attention from an extra adult."

Together, you, your child's teacher and, if necessary, a reading specialist can help your child discover the lifelong joy and pleasure of reading.

Book series that will hook young readers

What makes for a nutritious early chapter book? Jeanette Hitch has put together these lists to help define such reads.

For readers who might be intimidated by the challenge of chapter books, try these predictable series supported by pictures:

"Ivy and Bean (https://www.amazon.com/Ivy-Beans-Secret-Treasure-Books/dp/0811864952/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Wayside School (https://www.amazon.com/Wayside-School-4-Book-Box-Set/dp/0063092093/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Magic Tree House (https://www.amazon.com/Magic-Tree-House-Boxed-Books/dp/0375849912/ref=sr_1_5?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Mercy Watson (https://www.amazon.com/Mercy-Watson-Boxed-Set-Adventures/dp/0763657093/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Bink and Gollie (https://www.amazon.com/Bink-Gollie-Completely-Marvelous-Collection/dp/0763675369/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Mia Mayhem (https://www.amazon.com/Mia-Mayhem-Collection-Superhero-Learns/dp/1534446400/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

For children who are reluctant to read for pleasure, these are high-interest, funny series with lots of graphics that can be used to hook kids on a reading habit:

"Fly Guy (https://www.amazon.com/Collection-Complete-Boxed-grade-children/dp/B0D78161YN/ref=sr_1_6?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Captain Underpants (https://www.amazon.com/Captain-Underpants-Colossal-Color-Collection/dp/1338603329/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Big Nate (https://www.amazon.com/Collection-Lincoln-Peirce-Biggest-Strikes/dp/9124079596/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Diary of a Wimpy Kid (https://www.amazon.com/Library-Diary-Complete-Collection-Paperback/dp/B0BVK38K67/ref=sr_1_5?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Dog Man and Cat Kid (https://www.amazon.com/Dog-Man-Collection-Creator-Underpants/dp/1338602195/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Lunch Lady (https://www.amazon.com/Lunch-Lady-Book-Paperback-Collection/dp/0922443424/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

"Baby-sitters Little Sister (https://www.amazon.com/Baby-sitters-Little-Sister-Graphic-Novels/dp/1338790927/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)"

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