

Getting kids addicted...to books

By Kate Tapping

Teaching a child to read is one giant step in the literacy challenge. But once they have mastered this skill and are independent readers, how can they be kept interested and engaged in reading?

Numerous studies conducted in the area of childhood literacy point to the key role of parents and carers in reading to babies and pre-school children as critical to fostering a love of books.

In later years, the adult's role in assisting children is just as vital, says City of Kingston Libraries Youth Services Coordinator Alcina Barrett-Kilby. "Libraries, in general, run a host of activities for primary school aged children; all with the aim of encouraging children to come in to the library and see it as a comfortable place to be. We run a monthly book club, a summer reading club, a chess club, and support initiatives such as the Premier's Reading Challenge and the MS

Readathon."

"But at this age, children are depending on their parents, or other adults, to support them to attend these activities," says Barrett-Kilby.

Laura Nardo is the owner of Enchanted By Books, a speciality bookshop for children zero to 14 years, and she says she sees two main groups of customers. "Parents with enthusiastic readers who want to support that passion, and parents with reluctant readers looking for advice on how to encourage their children to read more."

So what can parents, grandparents and carers do to encourage early independent readers to keep on reading?

Nardo advises that the most critical element is subject matter. "The first question I ask a child looking for a book is 'what are you interested in?'. It's pretty obvious – if you give a child a book on a subject that they are not interested in, chances are they are not going

to enjoy it."

Another important consideration is the text size. For example, less able readers can perceive a large text size as too babyish, and therefore embarrassing. However, those readers may not have the necessary reading ability to move up to a higher reading level with smaller text sizes. Smaller text size and books with many pages can also appear daunting.

Less able readers, or children who don't like reading, can gain a sense of accomplishment through reading books that allow them to achieve smaller milestones.

"A book choice with fewer words on a page, or fewer pages, can allow less confident readers to gain a positive sense of achievement. They can say 'I finished the chapter' in five or ten minutes, which is more achievable for them, and hence a more positive experience, than finishing a whole chapter in a much longer book," says Nardo.

Some books, such as the *Boy versus Beast* series, have been specifically created to help reluctant readers. On the *Boy versus Beast* website, creator Susannah McFarlane says she and co-creator Louise Park spent a lot of time with teachers and young boys with the aim of creating a series for the youngest and most reluctant of



Photo: John Morgan

An early start with books can lead to a life-long appreciation

readers.

The books have larger type, lots of small chapters that allow for a sense of achievement, illustrations that provide reading breaks (but not too many – they are still 'real' chapter books) and a small number of words on each page.

As children get older their motivation for what they read and why may change.

Barrett-Kilby says that initiatives like the Premier's Reading Challenge and the MS Readathon are useful for this younger group. "They are a great motivation for early primary school children."

Nardo says as children get older they become more interested in what their peers are reading. "Last month I had a girl come in asking for one of the *Cherub* books by Robert Muchamore. Over the next few weeks she told her friends about it and I had more children from her class coming in to buy copies too."

Literary memories that stick: five of Australia's well-known authors recall their favourite childhood books

"My favourite book at nine was *Jock of the Bushveld* by Percy Fitzpatrick. It was about a small fox terrier named Jock who was the author's devoted hunting companion in the African bush. Jock was fearless and saved his master several times from almost certain death. Later I would write *Whitethorn*, a novel about a fox terrier named Tinker set in the same part of Africa. Maybe it was just a coincidence?"
Bryce Courtenay, Author

"I was crazy about the *Billabong* books by Mary Grant Bruce. I wanted to be Norah, galloping around on her horse, with an adventure every day."
Alison Lester, Children's Book Author

"I was always more interested in American comic books. My heroes were Marvel superheroes like Spider-man, the Fantastic Four, and Nick Fury Agent of Shield. They were the base of my fantasy life, and remain a big part of my childhood memories."
Mark Dapin, Author, Journalist and Columnist

"I loved the Spike Milligan poems as a child. They took me to strange surreal places. They always made me laugh. Still do!"
Dorian Mode, Author, Musician and Composer

"There's a book called *That Was Then, This Is Now*, that Mick Molloy suggested I might like when we were in primary school together. It was the one that got me reading for fun, not torture. It's a coming of age novel. At the time it really resonated with me – I must have been coming of age, too."
Andrew Daddo, Children's Book Author and Presenter



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Librarians advise hooking them young

Barrett-Kilby notes that as children get older – late primary school or early high school – their use of the library can drop off.

"We start seeing the older children only when they have assignments, and perhaps not

, even until they have children of their own. Our aim is to get children comfortable in the library in primary school so they keep coming back. What we are ultimately aiming for is life-long use of the library."

Keeping them hooked: top tips from parents with book-addicted kids

1 Make a set time when children know the accepted activity is reading. For example, when children are awake in bed but it is too early to get up and start the day.

2 Continually look for new characters or books in the child's areas of interest. There are books available for early independent readers about AFL teams, cricket, ballet, ponies, fairies, pirates, spies, mermaids and even Lego.

3 Ask children to recommend any good books they've read. Read them yourself and then start a conversation about what characters you liked or specific parts you enjoyed.

4 Model the behaviour – a good excuse to sit down with a book yourself, or if you are in a book club talk to your children about what you do at book club and why you enjoy it.

5 Ensure there is plenty of age appropriate reading material available to children. Libraries are an amazing source of a plentiful supply of children's books at no cost.

6 Foster a love of fiction by telling stories to your children yourself. If you run out of inspiration adapt an adult's story for children's ears – *Life of Pi* is a great example of a book written for adults that makes an exciting and engaging story to tell to children.

7 Limit the competition by designating certain days to be digital free for the children. For example, no playing computer games or DS, or watching TV, from Monday to Thursday.

8 Take advantage of activities offered by libraries and local book stores including children's book clubs and reading challenges.

9 Think back to books you loved as a child and recommend them to your own children.

10 If in doubt on suitable book choices for your child's reading level – ask their teacher, your local librarian or a passionate and knowledgeable bookshop owner, for advice.



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