

How to encourage teens to read

School resources

Encouraging teenagers to read more outside school, and providing opportunities for sustained reading experiences within school, can offer benefits for students. However, these benefits may not be well-understood and prioritised in all contemporary homes and schools.

When we talk about **reading for pleasure**, this refers to the reading of self-selected materials for the purposes of enjoyment, rather than assessment¹. Regular reading for pleasure can enhance student performance in literacy, as well as support their growth and attainment in a range of other areas². However, the importance of reading for pleasure may not be recognised in schools in recent times, with opportunities for reading for pleasure declining as students move through the years of schooling³, easily replaced by competing curricular demands⁴.

There are so many demands on students' time, both within school and beyond, and it is easy for reading to fall by the wayside as students move into the teen years. Around half of 15-year-olds in New Zealand do not read for pleasure, with around a quarter viewing the practice as a 'waste of time'; New Zealand teens' attitudes toward reading are declining over time⁵. Teens typically read for pleasure less often than younger children⁶, though the decline in reading frequency may begin earlier, in primary school⁷.

This review shows the relationship between reading for pleasure and a range of benefits for students. It highlights some of the barriers to reading for pleasure that teens identify, as well as proposing research-informed solutions and resources to encourage teenagers to read more. It seeks to give teachers confidence and motivation to actively advocate for their school culture to become a reading culture, where young people are encouraged to become life-long readers.

How does regular reading influence literacy?

So much of what we do in everyday life involves written or verbal exchanges that are mediated by our command of literacy skills. Whether we are texting a friend, reading a bus timetable, or trying to convince a prospective employer to offer us a job, we are drawing on our literacy skills all the time. We want students to have strong literacy skills, which will influence their academic performance in most school subjects⁸, as well as help them to achieve their vocational and social goals⁹. Literacy skills also influence our ability to understand vital public health messages¹⁰, which are important for securing both individual and societal health and wellbeing.

Students who read more frequently can enjoy a range of literacy benefits from the practice, with regular reading having a positive effect on reading achievement¹¹. Regular readers will be exposed to far greater vocabulary than their non-reader peers¹², and more frequent reading for pleasure, particularly of books, is related to better reading comprehension¹³. Like many other skills in life, literacy is a skill that we lose if we do not use it. We know from US research into reading skill declines over the summer vacation period that literacy skills can slide when opportunities to maintain them through practices such as regular reading are lost¹⁴. While New Zealand students have reading literacy levels that are higher than the international average, students' reading literacy levels have declined over time¹⁵, just like their attitudes toward reading.

Why does motivation matter?

Unsurprisingly, how students feel about reading influences their reading frequency. Enjoyment of reading is related to literacy achievement¹⁶, and there is a positive link between secondary students' reading enjoyment and literacy skills such as their reading comprehension¹⁷. When we spend time and effort encouraging young people to read, we are fostering motivation to become a life-long reader.

Teachers and parents may inadvertently communicate to teens that reading is no longer important once they know how to do it. As children move from **learning to read** to **reading to learn**, once they have acquired independent reading skills, both parents and teachers may stop encouraging children to read for pleasure, known as **expired expectations**¹⁸. Parents may assume they have played their part, and withdraw encouragement, while teachers may have also shifted their focus away from encouraging reading for pleasure. This leads to this encouragement becoming an **orphaned responsibility**¹⁹, because no one is taking responsibility for it. Both expired expectations and orphaned responsibility impact on young people's motivation to read, so it is important that supportive social influences in their lives continue to both encourage and expect teenagers to read²⁰.

What are the other benefits of reading?

The benefits of regular reading for pleasure extend beyond literacy and improved performance in other learning areas. Researchers have found that reading fiction can build social skills such as empathy²¹. Regular reading for pleasure can also offer cognitive and behavioural benefits²², building the stamina needed to apply sustained attention to completing complex tasks. This ability is a beneficial life skill that can help students focus, and we cannot take for granted that young people have opportunities to develop their cognitive stamina.

Reading can also support wellbeing. It can provide a pleasurable and immersive escape from stressors²³. Young people have described using reading for the purposes of regulating their emotions and coping with challenging times²⁴.

Should they just read anything?

Young people are reading all the time, consuming diverse texts from YouTube and comments on social media posts to Discord messages. This might lead to questions about why it is important to encourage them to read more, if they are already reading. However, research suggests that when it comes to literacy benefit, not all reading is equal. The reading of fiction books is most closely associated with literacy benefits, unlike magazines, text messages, emails, newspapers and comics²⁵.

Of course, students can benefit from reading a range of text types. For example, reading a non-fiction book on depression can support students' health literacy both at and beyond school²⁶, reading translated graphic novels can build cultural understandings, and reading the comments on Booktok can connect young people with book recommendations²⁷. However, if we are encouraging teens to read for literacy benefit, it is important that fiction books that match their interests be part of their literary diet.

Why aren't they reading books?

There are a lot of good reasons for young people to keep reading books beyond the early years. As explained above, expired expectations and orphaned responsibility play a part in teenagers not reading. Research has found that young people who understand the importance of regular reading are more likely to read often than those who do not²⁸, so we need to keep conveying to young people that reading is important, beneficial, and pleasurable.

It has been suggested that young people do not read because they do not like reading, but it is rarely this simple. While research suggests that young people's attitudes toward reading are in decline²⁹, recent research with reluctant teen readers found that there were many reasons for not reading. While 78% of these readers would rather do other things with their leisure time, students also indicated that they were affected by time constraints, physical and cognitive factors, gaps in literacy skills, and issues with access and choice of reading materials³⁰.

Recent research conducted at 20 high schools in Australia found that many young people struggle with a lack of good **strategies for book choice**³¹, and similar findings emerge from research with children in upper primary³². Teenagers and children need strategies to support them to select a book that can motivate them to apply the sustained attention needed to read for pleasure.

Teens also described related issues with **accessing attractive, relevant, and diverse books**³³. Students sometimes struggled to find books that resonated with their unique experiences and interests. Some described wanting to read books about characters they could personally relate to, so it is important that books with protagonists from diverse backgrounds be available to all students. Sometimes students lack access to **well-resourced school libraries** during class time³⁴, and this makes it hard for them to access an appealing selection of books from which to choose. When teens do not have access to a school library during class time, they may also lack the support of school library professionals who are trained in supporting students' choice, and providing readers' advisory services for young people³⁵.

Other students felt that they struggled with **time availability** for reading. Despite enjoying reading, schoolwork, paid work, work within the home, and other leisure pursuits including competitive sports prevented them from reading³⁶. As regular reading offers greater benefits for students than regular homework³⁷, schools could consider reducing the volume of homework and encourage teens to read instead. Some teens recognised that their **time allocation**, which led them to preference other pursuits, was the key barrier to their reading more. Some students also talked about struggles with **concentration**, with others feeling that they would read more if they received greater **encouragement** to prompt them to do so³⁸.

Research-supported strategies and resources to encourage teen readers

Given what we know about teens' reading engagement, there are a range of research-supported strategies and resources schools can use to encourage teens to be readers.

First and foremost, schools need to provide class time for **silent reading** for pleasure, and not assume that teenagers have the time, resources or inclination to do this at home. If teachers **model positive attitudes** toward reading, promote the ongoing **importance of reading**, and give students a chance to build the **cognitive stamina** needed to read deeply, we can increase the chance of students choosing to read beyond school³⁹. Research has found that even in primary school, many students do not see their teachers as keen readers⁴⁰, so it is important that teachers take their potential as key social influences seriously. In addition, given the focus on **reading for the purposes of testing** in schools, it is important that schools communicate that reading is also something that can be done for the purposes of enjoyment⁴¹.

Building the **social status of reading** within the school is important, because teenagers who see reading as socially acceptable are more likely to read for pleasure⁴². Dedicating class time to the **discussion of books** allows students opportunities to share recommendations and encourage each other to read⁴³. Schools need to create supportive environments where readers are supported and not stigmatised.

School libraries and **professional library staff** are key resources for fostering engagement in teen readers. Students need to be given **regular access** to books and professional staff trained in readers' advisory who can support their **book choices**. School library professionals are also trained in engaging reluctant and struggling readers⁴⁴. Research has linked access to well-staffed libraries to student literacy performance⁴⁵, though libraries are underrecognised as a key literacy resource for schools, which can lead to budget cuts, staff losses, and library closures⁴⁶.

While many teachers and parents stop **reading aloud** to students once they have independent reading skills, research suggests that young people often enjoy being read to beyond this point⁴⁷. Reading aloud offers literacy benefits for teenagers⁴⁸, and it can encourage them to view books and reading in a positive light, while also creating a shared opportunity to enjoy reading⁴⁹.

Schools also need to invest effort into recruiting **parents** to be ongoing supports of their teenager's reading. Research suggests that parents can play a powerful literacy supportive role in the teen years, and that teens may look to their parents for encouragement and recommendations. Supportive parents respond to their child's individual taste and interests. Rather than just expecting their children to read, they model keen reading themselves. They also provide recommendations for their children, and facilitate access to books⁵⁰. Parents do not have to be highly literate to be positive influences themselves. Parents who are struggling readers, but who are seen to prioritise reading, can make a powerful difference⁵¹. It is essential that schools communicate to parents the value of their role, and how it can be enacted to encourage teens' reading engagement.

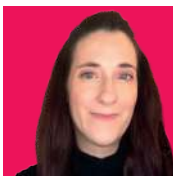
Endnotes

- 1 Merga, M.K. (2018a). Reading engagement for tweens and teens: What would make them read more? ABC-CLIO.
- 2 Merga, 2018a.
- 3 Merga, M.K. (2013). Should Silent Reading feature in a secondary school English programme? West Australian students' perspectives on Silent Reading. *English in Education*, 47(3), 229-244.
- 4 Merga, M.K. (2018b). Silent reading and discussion of self-selected books in the contemporary classroom. *English in Australia*, 53(1), 70-82.
- 5 Medina, E., & McGregor, A. (2019). PISA 2018: Reading in New Zealand. Ministry of Education.
- 6 Merga, M.K. (2014). Are Western Australian adolescents keen book readers? *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 37(3), 161-170.
- 7 Merga, 2018a.
- 8 Merga, M.K. (2022a). Every teacher needs to be a literacy teacher – but that's not happening in most Australian schools. *The Conversation*.
- 9 Haasler, S., Müller, N., Nonnenmacher, A., et al. (2019) The interplay between education, skills, and job quality. *Social Inclusion*, 7(3): 254–269.
- 10 Ferguson, C., Merga, M., & Winn, S. (2021). Communications in the time of a pandemic: the readability of documents for public consumption. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 45(2), 116-121.
- 11 Allington, R. L., & McGill-Franzen, A. M. (2021). Reading volume and reading achievement: A review of recent research. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 56, S231-S238.

- 12 Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (1998). What reading does for the mind. *American Educator*, 22, 8-17.
- 13 Torppa, M., Niemi, P., Vasalampi, K., Lerkkanen, M.K., Tolvanen, A., & Poikkeus, A. M. (2020). Leisure reading (but not any kind) and reading comprehension support each other—A longitudinal study across grades 1 and 9. *Child Development*, 91(3), 876-900.
- 14 Allington, R. L., & McGill-Franzen, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Summer reading: Closing the rich/poor reading achievement gap*. Teachers College Press.
- 15 Medina & McGregor, 2019.
- 16 Lupo, S., Jang, B. G., & McKenna, M. (2017). The relationship between reading achievement and attitudes toward print and digital texts in adolescent readers. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 66(1), 264-278.
- 17 Rogiers, A., Van Keer, H., & Merchie, E. (2020). The profile of the skilled reader: An investigation into the role of reading enjoyment and student characteristics. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 99, e101512.
- 18 Merga, 2018a.
- 19 Merga, 2018a.
- 20 Merga, 2018a.
- 21 Stansfield, J., & Bunce, L. (2014). The relationship between empathy and reading fiction: Separate roles for cognitive and affective components. *Journal of European Psychology Students*, 5(3), 9–18.
- 22 Mak, H. W., & Fancourt, D. (2020). Longitudinal associations between reading for pleasure and child maladjustment: Results from a propensity score matching analysis. *Social Science & Medicine*, 253, e112971.
- 23 Merga, M.K. (2017). What motivates avid readers to maintain a regular reading habit in adulthood? *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 40(2), 146-156.
- 24 Merga, M.K. (2022b). *School libraries supporting literacy and wellbeing*. Facet Publishing.
- 25 Merga, 2018a.
- 26 Merga, 2022b.
- 27 Merga, M. K. (2021). How can Booktok on TikTok inform readers' advisory services for young people? *Library & Information Science Research*, 43(2), e101091.
- 28 Merga, M.K., & Mat Roni, S. (2018). Children's perceptions of the importance and value of reading. *Australian Journal of Education*, 62(2), 135-153.
- 29 Medina & McGregor, 2019.
- 30 Merga, M.K. (2014). Western Australian adolescents' reasons for infrequent engagement in recreational book reading. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 22(2), 60-66.
- 31 Merga, M.K. (2016a). What would make them read more? Insights from Western Australian adolescents. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 36(3), 409-424.
- 32 Merga, M.K., & Mat Roni, S. (2017). Choosing strategies of children and the impact of age and gender on library use: Insights for librarians. *Journal of Library Administration*, 57(6), 607-630.
- 33 Merga, 2016a.
- 34 Merga & Mat Roni, 2017.

- 35 Merga, 2022b.
- 36 Merga, 2016a.
- 37 Merga, 2018a.
- 38 Merga, 2016a.
- 39 Merga, 2018a.
- 40 Merga, M.K. (2016b). "I don't know if she likes reading": Are teachers perceived to be keen readers, and how is this determined? *English in Education*, 50(3), 255-269.
- 41 Merga, 2016b.
- 42 Merga, M.K. (2014). Peer group and friend influences on the social acceptability of adolescent book reading. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 57(6), 472-482.
- 43 Merga, 2018b.
- 44 Merga, M.K. (2019). How do librarians in schools support struggling readers? *English in Education*, 53(2), 145-160.
- 45 Lance, K. C., & Kachel, D. E. (2018). Why school librarians matter: What years of research tell us. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99(7), 15-20.
- 46 Merga, M.K. (2021). The role of the library within school-level literacy policies and plans in Australia and the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, DOI: 10.1177/09610006211022410
- 47 Merga, M.K. (2017). Interactive reading opportunities beyond the early years: What educators need to consider. *Australian Journal of Education*, 61(3), 328-343.
- 48 Westbrook, J., Sutherland, J., Oakhill, J., & Sullivan, S. (2019). 'Just reading': The impact of a faster pace of reading narratives on the comprehension of poorer adolescent readers in English classrooms. *Literacy*, 53(2), 60-68.
- 49 Merga, 2022b.
- 50 Merga, M.K. (2014). Exploring the role of parents in supporting recreational book reading beyond primary school. *English in Education*, 48(2), 149-163.
- 51 Merga, M.K. (2017). Becoming a reader: Significant social influences on avid book readers. *School Library Research*, 20, 1-21.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Dr Margaret Merga

Dr Margaret Merga (Twitter: [@MKMerga](#)) has written more than a hundred [peer-reviewed and research-informed publications](#), including five non-fiction books on literacy, libraries, research methods and research communications. Her 2018 book [Reading Engagement for Tweens and Teens](#) has been influential in supporting teachers, parents, and school library professionals to maintain young people's reading engagement beyond the early years, and her 2022 book [School Libraries Supporting Literacy and Wellbeing](#) highlights her research on the relationship between libraries, reading, and wellbeing. As of 2022, Margaret is an honorary adjunct at the University of Newcastle, and she runs [Merga Consulting](#), working with schools, professional associations, and government departments on a range of literacy and research projects.