How to get teenagers to read

Reading for pleasure has proven benefits in other areas of academic and vocational life. Children are heartily encouraged to read in their early years of school. However, once students have mastered this skill and they move from learning to read, to reading to learn, the role of pleasure in the activity can be forgotten.

If reading is just seen as a tool for learning, the will to read may not be fostered in young people. Recreational book reading involves voluntary reading for pleasure, and research suggests that students in Australia and internationally are reading less over time.

Why is reading important?

Regular recreational book reading is one of the easiest ways for a student to continue developing their literacy skills. The ability to read fluently is by no means the end of development of literacy skills.

Reading for pleasure has been associated with a range of benefits, including achievement across a range of literacy outcomes, with literacy levels linked to advantages for academic and vocational prospects. Regular recreational reading also offers benefits for cognitive stamina and resistance to cognitive decline, the development of empathy, and even achievement in other subjects, including mathematics.

What is aliteracy?

While much of the discussion around reading is concerned with skill acquisition, which usually (but not always) occurs during the early years of schooling, there is little focus on will acquisition, where students who have developed the skill to read continue to choose to do so.

Students with the skill to read, but without this will, are deemed aliterate. They exclude themselves from the range of benefits conferred by regular reading, perhaps without ever understanding the consequences of their recreational choices.

The West Australian Study in Adolescent Book Reading (WASABR) examined adolescent attitudes to reading and how often they do it, as well as how teachers, schools and parents can contribute to supporting it. The WASABR found that the most common reason for infrequent reading was related to preference for other recreational activities.
Whose job is it to encourage teen reading?

Teachers and parents may cool off in encouragement once students have demonstrated that they can read. Research suggests that adolescent illiteracy may be inadvertently perpetuated by withdrawn encouragement from both parents and teachers.

Teens may stop reading because of a lack of encouragement.

Parents may assume that once the skill of reading has been acquired, their job is complete. They may assume the role of encouraging further literacy development lies with the school.

Teachers may struggle to find time to encourage reading within the demands of a crowded curriculum, which focuses on reading skill, without recognising the role that reading for pleasure plays in fostering reading skills. The WASABR study sought to provide insight into how teachers and parents can successfully continue to encourage recreational book reading into the teen years.

What can teachers and parents do to encourage regular reading?

- Take students to the school or community library and encourage them to take self-selected reading materials home
- don’t curtail reading aloud to young people at secondary level — this practice is enjoyed by teens, too
- explicitly teach strategies for choosing books – don’t assume that this has been learned in primary school
- be a model – read and show an interest in reading
- find out what your young people like to read so that you can connect them with books of interest to them
- talk about books in class or at home, not limiting the discussion to course texts
- allow and encourage an aesthetic response – love characters, loathe characters, give up on books halfway through, re-read favourite books. Share what it means to be a passionate reader
- communicate the value of the practice by putting aside class time or time at home for reading books for pleasure
- finally, don’t assume that equipping them with an e-reader will automatically lead to increased engagement in reading. Research does not yet support the popular contention that young people prefer using e-readers. Thus continuing to provide access to paper books is important.

There may be confusion about what to read to experience literacy benefits. Books are the text type most consistently associated with literacy benefit; neither comics nor web pages have been associated with the same level of benefit at present.

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