



GETTY IMAGES

# Why Kids Stop Reading for Fun by Age 9 (and What to Do About it)

**MICHELLE WOO**

3/25/19 4:45PM

A national reading survey by Scholastic reveals something they're calling the "decline by nine." According to the report, the percentage of kids defined as frequent readers—those who read books for fun five to seven days a week—drops from 57% among 8-year-olds to 35% among 9-year-olds. Between ages eight and nine, the number of kids who say they love reading plummets from 40% to 28%. What happens during this year, and more importantly, what can parents do to keep their young readers reading, *willingly*?

Lauren Tarshis, publisher of Scholastic Classroom Magazines and the author of the bestselling *I Survived* children's series, tells me that kids become increasingly autonomous starting in the third grade. And there's now so much competing for their attention—schedules become packed with sports, extracurricular activities, social events and homework. Also during this time, they no longer have adults reading to them or curating books to fit their growing tastes and interests. "As kids get older, fewer see reading as something to do just for fun, and more as something that's expected of them," Tarshis says. "The joy begins to fade, and it becomes a chore." (Third grade also just happens to be the age

when most schools begin standardized testing for reading, though the study doesn't point to this fact.)

As a parent, it can be hard to see your kids' love for reading dwindle, especially if it was something that once gave them joy. But you can—and should—step in. Here are some ways to prevent the decline.

### **Don't stop reading to your kids once they learn how to read**

Once kids learn how to read on their own, parents often end the ritual of reading stories aloud. But there's no reason to—in fact, continuing to read to already-proficient readers can be beneficial. For one, it can help them devour more complicated plots. Explains Jim Trelease, the author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, on GreatSchools: People often say to me, "My child is in fourth grade and he already knows how to read, why should I read to him?" And I reply, "Your child may be reading on a fourth grade level, but what level is he *listening* at?" Also, being part of their reading experience can help you navigate tough topics with them, such as peer pressure and body image.

### **Use the in-between moments**

As kids get older, life gets busier. You can't expect your kid to get an hour-long stretch of leisure reading time every night before bed—it's just not realistic. Still, there are opportunities for them to read throughout the day. If you have a kid who always gets ready the fastest in the morning, pull out a favorite chapter book for him to read while the rest of the family catches up (just make sure to sell it as a reward, not a punishment). If you arrive at Tae Kwon Do class ten minutes early, capitalize on those moments, too. A secret is to keep books everywhere—in your bag, in your glove compartment and in every room of your house. Says Tarshis about carving out time to read: "Even if it's just for a few minutes, those minutes count, and they add up."

### **Start a book club with your tween**

One of my favorite ideas for helping kids continue their love of reading comes from Lifehacker writer Geoffrey Redick, who suggests starting a book club with your tween. It's a fun, low-pressure activity he does with his daughter—if she comes to him with a book she's just read and he can tell she's excited about it, then he'll read the book, too, so they can discuss it. "Our talks are informal," Redick writes. "I don't ask her to explain symbolism or justify her opinions. We walk, and we chat. Sometimes, she'll just say the name of a character who died or turned evil. I know what she means. I couldn't believe it either." Bonus: Talking about the stories helps the two of them connect in a way that asking "Hey, how was your day?" never could.

### **Remember that comic books are books**

There's still a notion that comics aren't "real" literature, or that they're simply a gateway to help reluctant readers transition from picture books to chapter books. But they can be so much more. If your kid likes them, encourage them to go even deeper into the format. Help them explore genres they might be interested in, such as fantasy, classics or even nonfiction. The *New York Times* Book Review features new graphic novels that will keep kids reading, geared for readers starting at age 8.

### **See technology as a bridge—not a barrier—to reading**

Yes, screens may play a role in the decline. But Tarshis says "technology doesn't have to be the enemy." For kids who love their computers, phones or tablets, she suggests using them as an aid to open new portals. For example, if they follow YouTuber Mike Wilson (formerly known as Coma Niddy), who raps about math and science, look for books on the topics he explores (string theory or how to find water bears, perhaps?).

## **Model reading**

This may be the most important step. “If kids aren’t surrounded by people who encourage them to read and who read themselves, why would they value it themselves?” says Tarhis, who herself is “a mother to reluctant-turned-voracious readers.” Make an effort to read in front of your kids—books, newspapers and magazines. Read aloud whatever you find interesting. When I was a kid, my mom was always reading some

celebrity tabloid at the kitchen table, and she would eagerly share with us the “news” she just discovered (most of it involved Elizabeth Taylor). No, it wasn’t quality literature, but I was still able to catch the excitement she got from words. Read what you like to read, and your kids will find what they like, too. Start early and your kids won’t see reading as a task, but simply a thing that your family does.