



ISTOCK

## A new report shows reading for fun declines between ages 8 and 9. How can we stem the tide?

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Studies have shown that proficient readers are more likely to be successful in school and life, partly because better reading skills make it easier for students to access curriculum in all subjects. So the Kids and Family Reading Report issued this week by Scholastic, which showed a significant decrease between ages 8 and 9

in the number of children who think of themselves as frequent readers, is somewhat discouraging.

According to Scholastic's 2018 survey of more than 1,000 pairs of children ages 6 to 17 and their parents, 57 percent of 8-year-olds say they read books for fun five to seven days each week. But only 35 percent of 9-year-olds report similar reading habits. Another aspect of this "decline by nine" is the number of kids who say they love reading, which goes from 40 percent of 8-year-olds to 28 percent of 9-year-olds.

“When I read that finding, I felt this pit in my stomach, because that age can be a truly magical time for readers, when they are making the leap from struggling with phonics to using reading as a gateway to explore learning,” says Lauren Tarshis, author of the “I Survived” books and senior vice president and editor-in-chief/publisher, Scholastic Classroom Magazines. “For kids who are struggling at that point, the expectations of learners ratchet up....”

“The focus shifts from reading for fun to suddenly there’s a pressure to make sure that kids can read in a manner where they can demonstrate proficiency.”

There are also increasing demands on kids’ time as they get older, whether it’s sports and other extracurricular activities or the lure of technology, including addictive video games. The high-stakes tests and academic pressure aren’t likely to disappear any time soon, so it’s up to parents and teachers to convey to kids that reading isn’t a chore. We need to teach them that it can be a fun way to explore different places and life experiences, or that it’s a simple escape from everyday life.

*[I wanted my kids to love books. So why did I stop reading them myself?]*

We sought guidance from Mary Alice Garber, a buyer in the children and teens department at Politics and Prose in the District, on how to do that. Here are her suggestions for keeping kids engaged with books as they get older.

**Focus less on the reading levels of books.** Parents tend to fixate on a child’s reading level and insist on choosing books based on that. But what they are reading isn’t as important as the fact that they are reading, Garber says. Parents should encourage free-range reading, and let children choose whatever interests them. She also suggests enlisting a librarian or bookstore employee to help your child choose books that will engage them or take them in a new

direction.

“That person can help guide or redirect or encourage your child, and say, ‘Could you read this book and come back and tell me what you think?’” Garber says. “That gives the child a sense of power, a feeling that their opinion counts. Those relationships are really important.”

**Don’t censure their choices.** Garber says parents may be tempted to disparage their children’s choices in books, particularly when kids gravitate to graphic novels or series. But that is a mistake, she says. Graphic novels can be appealing to kids at this age, in particular, because they are a sort of hybrid between picture books and more advanced reading, and can help kids make the transition. They also require readers to synthesize images with text. And devouring a series is no different from an adult seeking more books by an author they’ve enjoyed, Garber says.

Parents who are looking to expand their child’s reading list can also use a subject from a series or graphic novel as a segue for introducing some nonfiction on that topic. It’s also a good time to expose them to new authors by taking them to hear illustrators and writers speak locally. These events, which allow children to interact with the people who create books, can pique a reluctant reader’s interest in the material, Garber says.

**Read broadly.** Scholastic’s report shows that about half of kids ages 9 to 17, and parents with kids ages 6 to 17, say they wish there were more books available to reflect the diversity of the world we live in.

“We still have a long way to go, but we’ve definitely made progress,” Garber says, pointing out that books are becoming much more inclusive. She recommends parents seek the winners of the Walter Dean Myers Award, the Pura Belpré Award, the Sydney Taylor Book Award, the Coretta Scott King Book Awards, the Newbery, the Michael L. Printz Award and the Robert

F. Sibert to find more diverse authors and characters in children's literature. Novels told in verse form, such as Elizabeth Acevedo's "The Poet X" or Thanhha Lai's "Inside Out and Back Again," feature diverse characters and are a great way to introduce kids to poetry, Garber says.

**Resist the parental imposed/required reading over the summer.** Each school and school district handles this differently. Some schools provide lists of suggested reading for the summer break, broken down by grade level. Others have specific books kids and teens are expected to read and write a report on before returning to school in the fall.

"You can't avoid it, there's no way to," Garber says of prescribed summer reading. "But I wonder if it's a

shared experience, if that might help." Garber suggests getting an audio version of the text to listen to as a family on a long car trip, and using it as a way to spark a conversation about the book. Let kids choose some leisure reading (remember those graphic novels and series?) as a break from required material. She also likes the idea of selecting books that are enjoyable at different levels: one that is a fairly easy read, something in the middle and one that is challenging, to take some of the struggle out of the mandatory reading. After all, summer is supposed to be more laid back.

"I feel like you've been strapped to your desk all winter long, and it's refreshing not to have a requirement," Garber says.