Welcome, Reader

BY PEOPLE WHO LIKE TO READ NOW BUT DIDN’T ALWAYS

If you’re reading this, you no doubt no a reluctant reader or two. You’ve heard the excuses (a thousand times...two thousand?). You’ve had the fights. Maybe you’ve pleaded, bargained, offered to sell your soul. Anything to get that kid in your life to pick up a book and actually read.

Whether you’re a reader yourself or just a tired parent/teacher/librarian trying to make their way in the world, this Guide can help.

What you’ll find inside are tips on identifying issues with struggling readers as well as advice for how to help overcome those struggles, strategies for motivating reluctant readers, and a wealth of resources for how to get books (sometimes for free) and get them into the hands of kids.
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WHAT IS A RELUCTANT READER?

One of the most memorable things I hear is when someone tells me that my books got a reluctant reader to read. -- Suzanne Collins

What is a Reluctant Reader?

A reluctant reader is any individual who consistently resists reading books, whether for school or for pleasure.

Reluctant readers fall into three categories:

- Those who lack basic reading skills
- Those who lack the motivation to read
- Those who possess disabilities or impairments that impact their ability to read

If you're a parent of a reluctant reader, you know the drill. Cue the music...
What is Decoding in Reading?

Decoding is the foundation of reading: memorizing the alphabet, identifying phonemes (the sounds letters make) and understanding how to combine them, and grasping the relationship between writing and speaking.

If a reader struggles with decoding, it looks like this:

- Struggle sounding out words while reading
- Don’t identify words outside of particular context
- Confuse letters with the sounds they represent
- Read slowly word-by-word

Reluctant readers generally have no problem letting you know they hate reading. But figuring out exactly why they hate it isn’t always that easy. Between working and raising children and dealing with life, most parents haven’t had time to also become literacy experts.

Which is fine. That’s what we’re here to help with. Identifying why your child (or a child you work with) isn’t so hot on reading...and what to do about it.

Reluctant Readers vs Struggling Readers: What’s the Difference?

Think of Reluctant Reader as a category. There are different types of reluctant readers, one of which is the Struggling Reader. Struggling readers lack basic reading skills, which makes reading a frustrating and difficult task.

If a kid lacks basic reading skills, enjoying reading isn’t going to happen. Simple as that.

Luckily, reading skills can be taught. They can be learned. They can be mastered.

You’re reading this, after all. Right?

The 3 Types of Struggling Readers

Struggling readers commonly fall into three categories:

- Children struggling with decoding
- Children struggling with fluency
- Children struggling with comprehension

Do not understand or completely ignore punctuation while reading

If identifying each and every word in a sentence is an uphill battle, then understanding that sentence is going to be unlikely. And having fun? Please.

How to Help Struggling Readers With Decoding

Mastering decoding is about practice, repetition, patience and focusing on the fundamentals: the alphabet, sight words
See & Say
Spell Reading
Arm Tapping
Air Writing
Table Writing

There is an endless parade of early reading materials, workbooks, lesson plans, etc. out there on the internet. Much of it is quality. We recommend materials and strategies that make the connection between hands-on learning and memory.

Alphabet magnets, wooden letters, stickers, flash cards, as well as materials made at home (such as flash cards made from letters your child cuts from a magazine) are all excellent choices.

How to Teach Sight Words to Struggling Readers

Sight words are annoying. They're rule-breakers. Instead of being sensible like other upstanding English words, sight words don't follow the basic rules of spelling or even simple syllable rules.

So they're a pain in the rear for kids to learn.

Which is why literacy experts for decades have encouraged kids to simply memorize them on sight. Forget sounding them out or breaking them down by syllables. Nope. Just memorize them whole and avoid the pain and anguish.

The two most common sight word lists come by way of Dr. Dolch (the Dolch Sight Words) and Dr. Fry (the Fry Sight Words). Dolch hit the scene first, and Fry came along later and expanded Dolch's original list. Both lists are perfectly fine.

There are many simple strategies for memorizing sight words:

- See & Say
- Spell Reading
- Arm Tapping
- Air Writing
- Table Writing

You can enhance such activities with a hands-on approach, like writing words on Jenga blocks for your child to arrange.

Step up to the next level by having your kid read through short paragraphs and highlighting or underlining all the sight words. This can be done with magazines or newspapers, or you can purchase Sight Word Fluency Passages.

When it comes to reading, many Dr. Seuss books are built almost entirely of sight words, which is great because they're good teaching tools and they're fun to read.

Phonics Strategies for Struggling Readers

Phonics is the teaching of the sounds letters make and how those sounds combine into words. There are lots of ways to teach phonics and a lot of helpful materials online.

We recommend seeking out materials that align with the main goals outlined at Learning At the Primary Pond:

- Systematic and explicit
- Based on multi-sensory practice
- FUN for kids – and included activities for word work/centers

You're NEVER too old, too wacky, too wild, to pick up a book and read to a child.

- Dr. Seuss -
Specific phonics instruction strategies include:

- Tracing letters (in the air, in sand, in shaving cream, whatever)
- Letter hunts (cutting letters out of old magazines, newspapers, etc.)
- Sorting objects by letter sounds (pen, paper, and puzzle piece all go in the same container)
- Cut apart sentences and put them back together again
- Teaching CVC words (Consonant / Vowel / Consonant) like C-A-T and B-I-G
- Teaching word patterns (Him, Trim, Dim, Slim, etc.)

**What is Reading Fluency?**

Fluency is the ability to read quickly, accurately and not like a zombie. To pull off this trick, you have to have mastered the fundamentals first.

Kids struggling with fluency look like this:

- Read very slowly and stop often at unfamiliar words
- Don’t recognize sight words
- Don’t understand the meaning of words
- Don’t get the meaning of sentences or how words relate to each other
- Read like an undead zombie

To be fair, a lot of adults read like undead zombies too. So we should cut kids some slack.

Kids struggling with fluency look a lot like those struggling with decoding. The difference? These readers know their phonics and can sound out words successfully. Where they stumble is with memorization and comprehension.

**How to Improve Reading Fluency (Or: How Not to Read Like a Zombie)**

Practice, practice, practice.

The more a kid hears and sees how words and sentences are put together, the more they learn about how English works. You can’t become a great shooter if you’re only on the court a few times a week, and becoming a great reader is far more difficult than shooting a basketball.

Improve fluency by:

- Reading aloud to your kid
- Providing ample reading materials in the home (books, magazines, comics, etc.)
- Reading and memorizing poetry
- Practicing and mastering decoding skills

Strategies like echo reading, choral reading and repeated reading might make you, the Adult, want to claw your eyes out, but they are incredibly helpful to readers struggling with fluency.

Poetry can be a great strategy for improving fluency. Authors like Shel Silverstien, Jack Prelutsky, AA Milne and Dr. Seuss are fun to read and highly engaging for younger readers. If you dread the idea of reading poetry, there are a number of poetry videos on YouTube that can help get things going:

- Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me Too by Shel Silverstein
- Creature in the Classroom by Jack Prelutsky
- Alone by Edgar Allan Poe
- The Lorax by Dr. Seuss
- The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost
- Disobedience by AA Milne

Audiobooks are also great if your kid can follow along with a physical copy of the book. This allows them to connect the written word and the spoken word.

**What is Reading Comprehension?**

Reading comprehension is understanding what sentences and paragraphs actually mean and how what you read relates to the real world.

Kids struggling with comprehension look like this:

- Don’t get what happened in a story
- Can’t figure out what a character was thinking or feeling
- Can’t summarize what they’ve read
- Don’t get why events happened in a story the way they did
- Don’t understand how what they just read relates to real life

Even as adults it’s often difficult to figure out how what we read relates to our lives. Let’s be real. Sometimes it doesn’t.
How to Improve Reading Comprehension

At this level, improvement is less about practicing memorization and more about reflecting and introspecting. You know: thinking.

Which is why one of the most powerful ways to improve reading comprehension is simply to ask questions about what your child read:

- Why did a character do what they did?
- How do you think that made the character feel?
- What happened in your life that made you feel the same way?
- Are there other books or movies where things like this happened?
- Are there words you don't understand?

Questions can be literal (what happened) and imaginative (what might happen after the events of the story or what might have happened before the story began).

Comprehension depends a lot on vocabulary. Expanding the number of words your child knows will go a long way. Keeping lists of unknown words your child runs into while reading will allow them to look up those words and learn their meanings. Flash cards can be made at home or bought online (check out Barron's 1,100 Words You Need to Know).

Mistakes to Avoid With Struggling Readers

Moving Too Fast

Learning to read doesn’t happen quickly. You have to build a solid foundation and reinforce it over and over again. Rushing ahead will only lead to problems later on, so make sure you take the time for your child to master each skill along the way.

Putting on the Pressure

Reading is not a natural process. It’s a tremendous challenge that literally restructures the brain. So cut your kid some slack.

Struggling readers need support, patience and encouragement. Don’t set unrealistic goals or pile on high-stakes consequences. These only make the journey that much more difficult.

If a struggling reader starts to sense that they will never succeed and the pressure is simply too much, they are far more likely to throw in the towel. There’s a reason most inmates in prison have a fourth grade reading level. It’s because that’s when many struggling readers decide they’re too far behind to ever catch up.

Taking the Parent Out of the Equation

There’s a lot of fancy apps and programs out there, as well as teachers and tutors and workbooks galore. But nothing is more important to reading development as a devoted parent.

Children model themselves on their parents. If you value reading, they will value reading. If you work at developing their literacy skills, they will follow your lead. They’ll fight you along the way of course. They’re still kids.

But the message will get through.

Even if you hated reading when you were a kid and don’t read a whole lot now, don’t sell yourself short. Your involvement is crucial.

Readers With Disabilities

Some kids are reluctant readers because in addition to the fundamental challenges of reading they must also contend with a specific disability or impairment that affects their ability to read.

These include:

- Dyslexia
- Visual impairment
- Slow processing
- AD/HD
- Autism

Kids with disabilities can learn to read. Absolutely. If your child has a disability or impairment, reach out to their teachers to determine the best path forward.
Does It Really Matter?

Feeling guilty about your kids watching too much TV? Turn on the captions and hit mute. Boom! Now they're reading.

What You'll Find:

- Why Reading Makes You Smarter
- Reading Makes You Immortal (Ok, Maybe Not Immortal, but It Helps)
- Dangers of Illiteracy

Does It Really Matter?

Cause really, we all know there are subjects that mattered in school but haven’t mattered all that much since (I’m looking at you, Calculus). So does it really matter if your kid doesn’t much like to read? Are there really any benefits or is it all a bunch of hooey?

Well, as it turns out, there are and it does.

The Top 5 Benefits of Reading Books

1: Reading Makes You Smarter

Yeah, really.
Reading has a direct physical impact on the brain. It alters the neural pathways and the actual matter of the brain.

**Readers have thicker corpus callosum**, indicating that greater amounts of information cross from one side of the brain to the other.

Readers have longer verbal memories and a wider pattern of brain activity when hearing language.

In addition to enhancing brain function, **reading also slows cognitive decline**.

### 2: Reading Reduces Stress

Readers see a **reduction in stress indicators** equal to a half hour of yoga. And you don’t even have to have fancy mat or spandex pants.

Researchers compared systolic and diastolic blood pressure, heart rate and other factors and found that reading books had a direct positive impact on all of them.

### 3: Reading Lengthens Lifespan

A Yale study followed 3,635 patients to determine if reading made you live longer. After adjusting for factors like age, sex, education and race, they concluded that readers did indeed enjoy longer lives.

In fact, **book readers saw a 20% reduction in mortality** compared to non-readers.

### 4: Reading Increases Empathy

A **2013 study** found that readers who get sucked into a novel become more empathetic than folks who only read non-fiction. This was true whether they read a Nobel prizewinner or James Patterson. The only catch was they had to be truly transported by the story.

If the book didn’t engage them (ie: it was boring as hell), there was no increase in empathy. In fact, the opposite occurred.
When readers didn’t connect with the story, empathy actually went down.

Which is something to consider the next time a teacher assigns your kid something they don’t enjoy reading.

5: Reading is a Key Determiner of Success

In spite of what you may have heard, the Successful College Dropout who goes on to become a billionaire (Gates and Zuckerberg) is basically a myth.

In one study of 11,745 leaders in both the public and private sectors, 94% of those leaders had completed college, half of them at elite schools.

And while many skills are important to success, reading is the most important skill of all. After all, you’re not going to get far in any skill if you can’t read.

The Danger of Illiteracy

Illiteracy sucks. Time and again it has been linked to things you’d avoid: poor health, low-paying jobs, criminal activity, etc.

- 82% of prison inmates dropped out of school
- 88% of high school dropouts struggled to read in early elementary school
- High school dropouts earn 42% less money
- Illiteracy is linked to higher levels of hospitalization
- 33% of juvenile offenders read below the fourth grade level

Are there jobs out there for kids who don’t go to college? Of course! And many of them are good jobs too. But the less education you have, the more vulnerable you are to unemployment.

In one study of the recent COVID pandemic, the unemployment rate of high school dropouts shot as high as 53%. Those with only a high school diploma saw spikes up to 40%.

Those with bachelor’s degrees, however, saw unemployment levels of only 21%, and those with advanced degrees peaked at 18%.

Does it matter? Yes it does.
Earlier we mentioned there are three types of reluctant readers: those who struggle with basic skills, those who have specific disabilities and impairments, and those who simply aren’t motivated to read.

So what about the third group?

Many kids have the skills but don’t care much for reading. They’d rather do something else. For these kids, the issue is usually that they haven’t found any books that engage them in ways they enjoy.

That is a problem that can usually be fixed.
Books at Home

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU DON’T HAVE A LOT OF BOOKS (OR ANY)

You can’t master reading without books, and books at home are far more important than books at school. Sadly, 61% of low-income families have no books in their house at all. For many families, books are a luxury, something they might like to have but that are simply not as important as food and clothes.

Still, books are not only a luxury. They're an investment in a child's future.

In one meta-analysis of 275 literacy studies conducted over 30 years, researcher Jeff McQuillan concluded that access to print materials was the single biggest factor in reading success.

“The availability of books to read — and the subsequent amount of reading done — appears to be as critical...in determining success in reading as classroom instruction,” McQuillan noted in his book The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions.

So how does one get their hands on books when they don’t have a lot to spend in the first place? Thankfully, there are low-cost alternatives to buying brand new books. And libraries.

3 Websites That Sell Cheap Books

Buying books doesn’t have to break the bank.

Thriftbooks

Thriftbooks rocks. They have a huge selection, a filter system that allows you to find the exact edition you want, and you can earn points towards free books.

AbeBooks

AbeBooks is an open market for anyone who wants to sell books. Like Thriftbooks, they have a vast selection with booksellers all over the world, and their Advanced Search allows you to home in on exactly what you want.

Ebay

Unlike other retailers, eBay sellers usually post pictures of the books they’re selling. Many sellers offer discounts, and you can also find unique “book lots” (sets of multiple books, usually for a specific author or genre) that bring the price per book down very low.

3 Apps That Let You Read eBooks for Free

If ebooks are your gig, then these apps are worth checking out.

Libby

Libby is run through OverDrive and requires a library card, but once you're signed up you have access to millions of books for free.
Kobo

Kobo offers both paid and free ebooks, as well as their own line of eReader tablets.

OpenLibrary

OpenLibrary is an interesting resource where each book has been scanned and uploaded into their system, rather than transferred into an eReader format. Books can be checked out for free.

Are Mom & Dad Readers?

Parents don’t have to be titans of reading. Not up for crashing the waves with Moby Dick or battling the front lines of War and Peace? No problem.

But if Mom and Dad never crack open a book, why would their kids?

Reading has to be modeled at home. When parents make time for reading, it communicates that books and literacy matter. Dedicated lifelong readers rarely come from illiterate homes where no one ever picks up a book.

Along with stocking the house with books to read, it’s often a good idea to designate special places to read. Maybe that’s a particular room in the house. More likely it’s a favorite chair or couch. Maybe it’s near a well-lighted window, or perhaps it’s in a corner under a good strong lamp. The where doesn't matter as much as the fact that the place exists.

Establishing dedicated reading time can also be valuable. An hour in the evening or on a Saturday morning devoted to reading is a good way to communicate that books are worth setting time aside for.

Let Your Kid Choose Their Own Books

Want to kill a kid’s love of reading? Take away their choice of what to read.

(Really, this applies to anybody, child or adult. Who likes to be told what to read all the time? Sheesh).

Of all the advice we could give, this is probably the most important. The research connecting choice and reading development is both clear and substantial.

For over fifty years now experts studying reading across the world have come to the same basic conclusion: letting kids choose what they want to read leads to a love of reading, which leads to reading more, which leads to increased skills all around.

The other way is death.

Take one meta-analysis of 41 different studies in which researchers concluded that when kids had a choice over their tasks it improved intrinsic motivation, effort, task performance and perceived competence.

But if I let them choose their own books all they'll choose is junk.

Maybe si, maybe no.

Parents often worry about the quality and genre of the books their kids choose on their own. Books that are too easy. Books that are too hard. Books with too many pictures. Books with cussing and drugs and sex. Oh boy.

But here’s the rub.

You can’t excel at what you don’t practice. And you don’t practice what you don’t enjoy.

What to Do When You Hate the Book Your Child Chooses

Well, you could just throw the book in the trash (please don’t if it’s a library book).

That takes care of that.
Or, hey, you could talk with your kid about it.

- Why did you choose this particular book?
- What appeals to you about it?
- What do you like about the writing and the story?
- Are other kids reading this book or books like it?
- Are there things in this book you don’t understand?
- Is there anything in this book that makes you uncomfortable?
- Do you think you’d read more books by this writer?

Some of the answers might surprise you.

There's nothing wrong either with telling your kid why you object to a book. That's a good conversation to have too (unless of course it ends in screaming and calling the book immoral trash and chucking it into the garbage).

Conversations like these matter.

- They communicate your values to your child
- They help your child understand your concerns about their reading
- They illuminate what your child finds engaging about books and reading
- They communicate that books and reading are worth talking about
- They connect books and reading to the real world

**What to Do When the Book Your Kid Chooses Isn’t Part of AR (Or Another School Reading Program)**

If your school has adopted a program like Accelerated Reader (AR) or Reading Counts (RC), then let's stop here for a moment of silence and quietly remember the good old days when every book in the universe wasn't assigned on a point scale.

... Alright.

It's not unusual for kids to come across books that aren't in their school's approved reading program. And when they do, well...it sucks.

You can either cave to the System and tell your kid to pick another book, or stick it to the Man and tell them to read it anyway and who cares about points and all that hoo haw.

Or you could talk to their teacher.

I was a teacher once. They're pretty decent people. And once they know you, the Parent, aren't there to scream in their face, they're generally pretty dang helpful.

What you want to get across:

- You're working hard to support your kid's reading
- Your kid is already a reluctant reader (the teacher no doubt knows this already)
- You're encouraging your son or daughter to choose their own books
- You understand why the school has a specific reading program (okay, this may be a lie, but a little diplomacy goes a long way)
- But you wonder if an exception can be made in this case

Teaching is fast and furious. There's little downtime. Good teachers often put in 60-hour weeks wearing a range of different hats: educator, coach, therapist, counselor, ringmaster of a three-ring circus.

Programs like AR take a little of the burden from their shoulders, which is why schools often adopt them. But every teacher knows the limitations of AR and RC. And no teacher wants to be the reason that a budding reader's interest in literature curled up and died.

Almost always, a short talk is all it takes for a teacher to make an exception.

**I Gave My Kid Choice and Now All They Want Is To Read Comics**

Comic books and graphic novels get a bad rap.

In a 15-week study of 5th graders, researchers found no difference in reading comprehension and vocabulary between kids reading traditional books and those reading exclusively comics.
Another study of 12 to 17 year old boys agreed, finding that when the boys were allowed to choose their own books (including comics) reading scores shot up 18%.

Students reading traditional books only saw a gain of 8%.

A lot of people snub their nose at comic books, but the average comic has just as many words in it as the average short story, and reading is reading, no matter the content.

What leads people to dismiss comics is what librarian and author Nancy Pearl calls trying to keep up with the reading Joneses (picking books so you look smart and hip).

But what’s the goal here? Having your kid lug around books that make him look smarter than all his friends? Or having your kid actually read something and enjoy it?

But Mom, I Just Don’t Have Time to Read

Even kids are busy these days. No surprise then that many reluctant readers claim there’s no time in their day for reading.

And maybe they’re (sorta) right. Maybe there aren’t large chunks of time for them to sit and read. But here’s the thing: even very busy adults find time to read.

They just find it in small chunks throughout the day.

Literacy expert and reading guru Donalyn Miller encourages kids to carry a book with them everywhere they go (a practice also encouraged by novelist Stephen King). Why?

Cause there’s a lot of downtime in the average day: back and forth on the bus, before and between classes, waiting in the doctor’s office, etc.

Avid readers take advantage of these small windows of time to snatch ten minutes here, twenty minutes there. And those minutes add up.

Using a Reading Itinerary

Another suggestion from Donalyn Miller: keep a Reading Itinerary for one week. A Reading Itinerary is a record of:

- When your kid read
- Where your kid read
- How long your kid read

A Reading Itinerary is not for proving that your child did their reading.

Instead, it is used to make your kid aware of their own preferences and the obstacles that might prevent them from reading. It should be used as a starting point for a conversation about their reading.

After one week, sit down with your son or daughter and ask:

- Where do you spend the most time reading?
- What do you like about reading in this particular spot?
- Do you read more at school or outside of school? Why?
- Is it easy to find time to read or hard? Why?
- Describe in detail your perfect reading place
- What did you learn by keeping a record of your reading?

This conversation will help your child be more aware of when and where they enjoy reading, as well as how long they’re reading in specific places.

I Gave My Kid Choice, But They Still Can’t Find Anything to Read

All the books I read are boring.

Books are stupid.

I’m just not a reader, Mom. Get over it.

Reluctant readers often struggle to find something they enjoy reading. This is generally because they’ve had few (if any) positive reading experiences.

Chances are, your kid might honestly believe there are no good books out there anywhere.

But there are. You just have to know what to look for.
FINDING GREAT BOOKS

I have always imagined paradise will be a kind of library.
-- Jorge Louis Borges

Finding Great Books

Let's say you decide one day to get into hiking. You've never hiked much before. You look around for hikes in your area, their difficulty levels, the equipment you'll need, etc. What hikes do you think you'd start with?

Twenty-mile treks straight up the tallest mountain? How about hikes that require scaling rock walls and repelling down cliffs? Maybe hikes deep into uncharted wilderness where you stand a decent chance of running into wildlife like bears and cougars?

What? No?

Reading is like hiking. When you're just starting out, the best choice isn't going to be the longest, hardest, most arduous books around.
Is Harry Potter fantastic? Of course it is. But reluctant readers take one look at Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix and often throw up their hands.

It's so long! And look at how tiny the font is! And how long the paragraphs are!

Right now we are living in a glorious era for avid hardcore readers. There are tons and tons of books out there for them. Many of them are great.

But if you're skeptical of reading, if you struggle with reading, then it's easy to feel like you were invited to the wrong party. Everything on the shelves looks too long, too complicated, too hard.

What to Look For in a Book: The Reluctant Reader Books Philosophy

1: Short Books

Long books are intimidating, just like long hikes. The publishing world is obsessed with trilogies and sagas that span thousands of pages, but asking a reluctant reader to go on that journey is like asking a couch potato to be up for 50-mile haul across the Cascades.

Sorry, no.

Books between 100 and 200 pages are ideal for reluctant readers. They appear doable, not impossible.

2: Short Chapters

The end of a chapter is like a rest stop. A place to catch your breath and relax. Avid readers are more comfortable with long stretches between stops, but reluctant readers such breaks are a comfort.

Short chapters divide books into easy, manageable chunks and provide plenty of opportunities to put the book down and take a break.

3: Focus on Action & Momentum

Let's be real. When kids say that books are boring, a lot of the time they're right.

Many books are centered around character development and language and have long sections where not much happens. This is perfectly fine for readers who like such things, but for reluctant readers these are often just literary rocks to stumble over.

Books that focus on fast moving and adventurous stories generally connect better with reluctant readers.

4: Cliffhanger Chapter Endings

The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Tom Swift and The Bobbsey Twins were all created by Edward Stratemeyer, a book publisher who used ghostwriters to write all the books in each series he created. One of the requirements for ghostwriters: cliffhanger chapter endings.

Stratemeyer sold millions and millions of books and revolutionized children's literature because he knew how to keep kids interested.

Later in the 20th Century, another children's writer would take up this same idea: RL Stine. Stine's Goosebumps series has sold hundreds of millions of copies, making him the bestselling children's novelist of all time.
Cliffhangers are often poo-pooed by “serious” writers, but the truth is they keep pages turning. A good cliffhanger plants a hook in the reader’s brain, making it so they just have to know what happens next.

And that leads to more reading.

5: Relatable Everyday Characters

Stephen King once pointed out that books fall into two categories: stories about extraordinary characters in everyday situations, and stories about everyday characters in extraordinary situations.

Extraordinary characters are cool. No doubt about it. But books that focus on extraordinary characters have to spend more time developing character and less time on keeping the plot moving.

Hence the reason many reluctant readers find them boring.

Books That Match Our Philosophy

So long books with long chapters that have quirky characters suck, right?

No, of course not.

And you may find that your kid does connect with books that don’t align perfectly with our own philosophy. That’s the nature of reading. It’s entirely subjective.

We simply believe that for most reluctant readers, the ideal book is one that aligns with the points above. And our goal is to publish high-quality novels that match that philosophy.

Goosebumps by RL Stine

Stine’s series embodies our philosophy perfectly, and it is no wonder to us that he is the bestselling children’s writer of all time. Goosebumps is easy-to-read, thrilling, and constantly engaging.

The Hardy Boys Casefiles by Franklin W. Dixon

There have been many versions of the Hardy Boys: the original series, The Hardy Boys Mystery Stories, The Hardy Boys Digest, The Hardy Boys: Undercover Brothers, and The Hardy Boys Adventures.

Our personal favorite though is The Hardy Boys Casefiles, which were published from 1987 to 1998.

Casefiles is like Indiana Jones for young boys. Explosions, close calls, car chases, gunfights, the works. Non-stop action and plenty of mystery in every book.

Plus great cover art.

Sadly these are out of print, but they can still be found online at places like AbeBooks, Thriftbooks and eBay.
PART FOUR: FINDING GREAT BOOKS

The Time Warp Trio by Jon Scieszka

Scieszka is best known for his Guys Read anthologies and his picture books The Stinky Cheese Man and The True Story of the Three Little Pigs.

But he also wrote an amusing series about three boys who have hilarious and often ridiculous adventures traveling through time.

Scieszka has a gift for both humor and for keeping the plot moving. Shorter and funnier than other books on this list, the Time Warp Trio series exemplifies our philosophy.

Alternatives to Traditional Books

Comic Books & Graphic Novels

You hear comic books and immediately think of Spider Man and Superman, but the world of comics is enormous. There are stories out there for everyone, not just kids interested in superheroes.

A Few of Our Favorites:

RL Stine

Stine is experiencing a renaissance these days, and part of that is due to the explosion of his works adapted into graphic novels. Check out his Just Beyond series and the range of Goosebumps graphic collections.

Stranger Things

The Stranger Things graphic novels expand the ST world beyond the central story of the Netflix series, covering events before and after the show. These stories are also a great way to show your kid how different mediums (TV, graphic novels, books, etc.) can explore the same characters and situations.

The Witches by Roald Dahl and Pénélope Bagieu

One of the advantages today is that so many classic novels have been given the graphic novel treatment, from The Giver to The Hobbit to A Wrinkle in Time to this engaging rendition of Dahl's best novel.

Audiobooks

Skeptical that listening to books can actually improve reading skills? One study of dyslexic students found that listening to audiobooks instead of reading print novels improved reading accuracy, reduced unease and behavior disorders, and increased academic performance and motivation.

Bam!

Audiobooks are great for reluctant readers. They reduce the intimidation factor (no small text or long block paragraphs to be found). And they provide cover for kids who are embarrassed to be seen reading.

Ideally, your kid would listen to the book and follow along with the physical copy. Then they can make the connection between the written word and how it is spoken.

Magazines

There's more out there than Seventeen and Teen Vogue. In fact, there's magazines for everyone.

General Interest

- Anorak
- Illustoria
- Cricket Magazine
- Jack and Jill

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Help! My Kid Finally Found a Book They Liked, But Now They Want More Books Just Like It

When your kid finally connects with a book, there’s reason to celebrate. But now you’ve got to deal with a new pressure: finding more books just like the one they enjoyed.

Most of the time, if a kid likes a mystery novel, you try to track down another one. If they liked a fantasy novel, we try to find another one of those.

But librarian and author Nancy Pearl suggests there’s a better way. Instead of focusing on genre (mystery, adventure, etc.), Pearl says we should look at what type of story your child connected with.

Pearl calls these types **Doorways Into Reading**: 

- Story Doorway
- Character Doorway
- Setting Doorway
- Language Doorway

Obviously every book has each of these things, but every book tends to focus on one doorway more than the others. Pearl’s insight is that we enjoy stories across genres. We like horror stories and mystery stories. We like comedy stories and romantic stories.

But most readers are drawn to certain types of stories in each genre.

For example, Dean James’s Cat in the Stacks cozy mystery novels and Gillian Flynn’s Gone Girl belong to the same genre (mystery), but they appeal to very different readers.

**Books Focused on STORY**

This is the doorway we focus on most at RRB. It’s the one reluctant readers are most willing to step through.

- Goosebumps by RL Stine
- Monster Street by JH Reynolds
- My Teacher is an Alien by Bruce Coville
- The Last Kids on Earth by Jack Sullivan
- James and the Giant Peach by Roald Dahl
Books Focused on CHARACTER

- Henry and Beezus by Beverly Cleary
- Harriet the Spy by Louise Fitzhugh
- Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli
- Starring Sally J Friedman As Herself by Judy Blume
- Matilda by Roald Dahl

Books Focused on SETTING

- The Giver by Lois Lowry
- The City of Ember by Jeanne DuPrau
- The Chronicles of Narnia by CS Lewis
- Hatchet by Gary Paulsen
- Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl

Books Focused on LANGUAGE

- Anything by Roald Dahl
- Barbara Robinson (The Worst Christmas Pageant Ever)
- Rodman Philbrick (Freak the Mighty)

Because children’s books are generally written in simple straightforward prose, it is harder to find examples where the language is a main attraction. This isn’t because children’s books aren’t well written (they are), or because their authors don’t care about language (they do). It’s simply the nature of writing for children.

Notice we’ve included books by Roald Dahl in every doorway to demonstrate how a writer can produce books that fit in each category.

Wait…One More Doorway? Books Focused on STRUCTURE

We decided to add one more door to Pearl’s list (it’s our Guide, right, we can do what we want).

Sometimes the main appeal of a book is its unique structure. These books are rare, but the few that work tend to be very successful with reluctant readers.

- Choose Your Own Adventure Series
- You Be the Jury Series by Marvin Miller
- Escape From a Video Game Series by Dustin Brady
What You’ll Find:

COOL PEOPLE WE TRUST TO RECOMMEND BOOKS

BOOK RECOMMENDATION SITES

BOOK LISTS

THE END (YES, REALLY, IT’S FINALLY OVER)

What's Next?

Hopefully the resources you've found here in this guide are useful to you in working with the reluctant readers in your life. But reading is an ongoing journey, and the few recommendations we've provided are a starting point rather than an end.

Readers have to seek out books over and over again, which is why it is good to have trustworthy guides who can help steer you in the right direction.

Or maybe just the direction you like to go. So much of discovering good book recommendations is simply discovering someone who understands what type of books you like.

Thank you for reading this far, and we hope these additional resources keep you deep in the stacks for many years to come.
More Resources

WHERE TO FIND THE NEXT GREAT READ

People Whose Recommendations We Trust

Colby Sharp

Colby Sharp is a 5th grade teacher, co-founder of Nerdy Book Club, author and rock star promoter of literacy. He compiles an annual list of Best Books that include picture books, middle grade novels and young adult. In addition, he runs a YouTube channel where he also reviews books.

- Colby Sharp’s Awesome Books of 2021
- Colby Sharp’s Awesome Books of 2020
- Kid Lit Book Mail YouTube Channel

Matthew C Winner

Matthew Winner is an elementary school librarian, Head of Podcasts at Kids Book About and the host of The Children’s Book Podcast where he interviews writers every week. His podcasts cover a wide range of diverse authors and literature and are always entertaining and insightful.

You can find him on Twitter (@MatthewWinner).

Ms. Yingling

Ms. Yingling is a librarian who has been reviewing middle grade books on her blog, Ms. Yingling Reads, since 2006, and she is a voracious reader (her 800 books per year goal on GoodReads puts us here at RRB to shame). Her reviews are thorough and insightful, providing full breakdowns of strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to reviewing current middle grade books, Ms. Yingling also reviews books published in earlier eras. You can also check her out on Twitter (@MsYingling).

John Schu

Jon Schu is a librarian, writer and Ambassador of School Libraries for Scholastic. His fantastic Twitter feed @MrSchuReads is crammed full of recommendations and useful articles and references.

He also manages an excellent blog where he reviews children’s books for all ages.

Laurie Evans

Laurie Evans is a Library Media Specialist and author of Blazer Tales, a fantastic book blog dedicated to books for kids. In addition to reviews, she does book talks, first chapter readings, and book trailers. You can find her on Facebook and on Twitter (@laurieevans27).

Book Recommendation Websites

- Epic Reads
- Penguin Teen
- Tor
- Which Book
- The Children’s Book Review
- Your Next Read
- Reading Rockets

Book Lists

- The Great American Read
- Time Magazine 100 Best Books for Children
- 91 Middle Grade Books to Read in 2021
- Time Magazine 100 Greatest Novels
- The Ultimate List of Middle Grade Books
- NPR 100 Best Children’s Books
- BookTrust 100 Best Books for Kids

Paid Subscription Boxes & Book Clubs

- Comic Book Mystery Box
- The Comic Garage
- Atlas Obscura Book Club
- Crate Expectations