

5 Ways to Help Your Reluctant Reader Binge on Books

By Paul Westmoreland

Every parent's been there: the point where reason and all words fail and you find yourself on the brink of screaming, 'Just read!'

But the truth is, young children won't just read. Left to their own devices they will they would much rather play on their own devices. And the more you ask politely, cajole, nag, bribe and actually scream, the less they want to put their tablet down and pick up a book.

So here are five things that helped turn my six-year-old thoroughly reluctant reader, into a little boy who's hungry to binge on books.

Number 1. Crawl, Even if You Can Walk

As much as children need to read in their time outside school, forcing them to do will inevitably become a fight. No great revelation there, sure, but bear with me . . . Pretty much anything can spiral into all-out war at the end of the day. But while even the most obstinate child will eventually get used to putting on their pyjamas, arguing about reading will build a mental barrier between your child and books that could take years for them to overcome.

When this barrier appeared on our horizon, I sidestepped it by letting my little reader stick to basic books, even the silly ones. I also, dare I whisper it, let him ditch books he wasn't enjoying and read something else. This is about reading, not *finishing* books. And this made him feel like I was on his side.

This helped because young readers need to be encouraged rather than pushed into reading longer, more advanced books when they're not ready. Advanced books aren't just longer, either, they have complex storylines, character nuance and subtleties that get missed when you're new to reading.

So while other children in his class were sailing away on a tide of *Harry Potter* and other classics, he felt reading was easy and concentrated on building his confidence. He was engaged and began to enjoy it. And in the early years, reading a hundred short books is just as good as reading one long one. As his confidence develops, he'll naturally look for more challenging and advanced books, and the classics aren't going anywhere!

Number 2. Stick with Pictures

Another major barrier that holds back young readers is the fact novels, with their pages crammed full of tiny text, seem daunting. Even if the story is gripping, life-affirming and extraordinary, it doesn't look like that to your average six-year-old. All they see is a long slog and slow progress. It's a hundred times worse if they're used to reading picture books. This is where books like my new Rudy series come in. They're about six times longer than the average picture book and have illustrations on very almost every page. While the drawings help bring the story to life, they also break up the text into manageable chunks. I've also kept the sentences short, so the chases feel fast and the conversations sticks to the point. This keeps the story moving so there isn't a moment when a young reader is left wondering, '*What's happening now?*' or '*What's the point of this bit?*' All this has the effect that before even the most reluctant reader knows it, they're turning the page and reading the next. It's a small thing but to young readers it feels like a big achievement—and soon they're ploughing through entire books!

Number 3. Take it in Turns

Another simple trick that helped my little reader get over the hurdle of reading page after page and built his confidence was to take turns in reading. It's as simple as that: he read a page, I read a page . . . Sharing the load like this helped him feel like he wasn't doing all the work. Listening to my pages also helped stoke his interest in the story, and before too long he felt like he was zipping through his books. Seeing how quickly I could read a page also gave him something to aim for and helped him see that 'an entire page' wasn't such a mountain to climb.

Number 4. Resist the Temptation of Tie-ins

It's a perfectly logical conclusion: *my reader likes this game or that movie etc., so they're bound to read a book about it.* But I've reached the conclusion that tie-in books are best avoided early on for a number of reasons.

Firstly, even though they come with a cast of cool characters, a wealth of background knowledge and some familiar storylines, they're often, unfortunately, pale imitations of the franchises they're based on, which young readers would rather be enjoying. Secondly, a lot of the characters, place names and bits of mythology will trip up the most advanced readers and can leave young readers feeling flummoxed at the first sentence. Thirdly, despite the fact young readers come to these books with a lot of prior knowledge, these books have sprawling worlds that are big stalls to set out, so for young readers they can often feel hard to get into and slow to get going.

It's a shame. Tie-ins have the potential to be a brilliant gateway into reading, but in my experience they end up doing more to turn young readers away than get them binging on books.

Number 5. Find a New Reading Place

The lure of the iPad is a strong one. But if it's not there it can't distract a youngster from their books. I found going out of the house to read was really helpful. Most coffee shops have sofas but you can go anywhere – the park, a café, your local library is ideal! Reading in a library is also brilliant because you can pick up and put down dozens of books in no time, so you're bound to find something that even a reluctant reader will be interested in. Even if you spend more time going there and getting settled than actually reading, it makes reading more of an event than a chore, and that has to be a good thing. You can even get yourself a coffee. Adding this sense of occasion to reading also helps to build it as a special, enjoyable pass time that will stay with young readers and even develop the feeling that reading a book is a warm, pleasurable thing to do.

Of course, if I could wave a magic wand and turn every child into a binge reader, I would've! (What children's author wouldn't?) But these ideas helped my son get over the initial barriers and basic issues that made him a reluctant reader, and now his confidence has grown he's looking forward to reading longer books that will, I hope, lead to novels and a world of reading he'll enjoy for the rest of his life. Reading should, after all, be enjoyed in the early years as much as any other time, if not more so. And I hope these suggestions helps you too.

Paul Westmoreland is the author of the *Rudy* series for children aged 6-8,
published Oxford University Press

For more articles like this visit www.paulwestmoreland.com

© Paul Westmoreland 2022