

Why book choice matters for children and how to promote it in your classroom

Research evidence highlights the importance of children's choice around books. Here are some top tips to promote more choice and agency in the classroom.

Why does book choice matter and how does it help motivate children to read?

Evidence shows that allowing children to choose what they read – and helping them to make that choice – strengthens children's motivation to read, especially when readers feel their preferences are respected.¹ It also helps them to read more.

This is because:

1 It gives children a sense of autonomy, which encourages children to read for personal reasons rather than for external goals (e.g. earning rewards).²

Enhancing perceived autonomy, which is a basic psychological need, supports intrinsic motivation.³ Children's personal reasons for reading can be wide-ranging, from curiosity, escape, imagination through to emotional connection.

2 Being able to choose allows children to select books which align with their own personal interests and identities.

Aligning book choice with personal interests boosts the likelihood of 'positive affective experiences' such as pleasure, amusement and fascination, all of which build positive attitudes to reading.⁴

3 When children choose books they understand and enjoy, they are more likely to find reading the book easier.⁵ This sense of success fuels their belief that they are capable readers.

Self-efficacy – the belief that they are capable readers – supports children to internalise the identity of being 'a reader'.⁶

4 Repeated choice further enables children to shape and articulate their own reading identity (who they are as a reader),⁷ and children with a strong reader identity are more likely to self-motivate themselves to read.⁸

Making choices over time has a self-reinforcing effect, and readers' preferences are also shaped by cumulative positive experiences with books – both increasing their enjoyment and fostering a sense of reader identity.⁹

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What influences children when they're making book choices?

There are multiple contributing factors that can influence a child's book choice.

In a study¹⁰ where children were asked how they select their next book to read, most children (56%) chose simply by browsing the shelves. 32% then said they would choose a book by the same author/writer, and 21% went by a friends' suggestions.

Peer interactions can also boost engagement, particularly in Key Stage 2, as social approval becomes more important in shaping identity and interest.¹¹

Other influencing factors¹² include:

- Perception of genre (including importance of humour, and the specifics of the genre)
- Previous experiences (including previous experiences at school, at home, of the author, and links to experiences through other media). Younger children especially may look for books they've read previously¹³
- Perception of own reading skills
- Reflection of own interests
- Representation of self (both explicit and implicit)
- Engagement with blurb
- Importance of image design



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Evidence informed top tips to bring more choice and agency into the classroom

Here's some practical tips to support children's book choices:

1. Use your knowledge of your students to help match them up with books they'll enjoy

Teachers who bring together their knowledge about books with their knowledge about students can help motivate children to develop reading habits by helping to find books that suit them.¹⁴ Continuing to take a responsive approach, offering affirmative feedback and guidance once a child has started reading the book they've chosen can also further support the child in their reading journey.¹⁵

2. Keep a varied and up-to-date collection of books available for children

The more access children have, the more personally meaningful choices they can make. Including a variety - as Prof Teresa Cremin (Open University) suggests - of 'old but gold' and 'new and bold' books can best engage students.¹⁶ Keeping abreast of the ever expanding range of children's books helps to keep your collection 'fresh'. BookTrust's booklists, including our Great Books Guide, can support and inspire you.

3. Help to support reading choices so it's not too overwhelming

All children will benefit in some way from support over their reading choice¹⁷ but this is especially true for less confident readers, where overwhelming or unstructured choice without adult support can discourage or lead to disengagement.¹⁸

4. Create multiple book choice moments

Offering several different opportunities where children can sit down with a book of their own choice can make children more comfortable reading on their own terms, without fear of assessment.¹⁹

5. Present books in an appealing way in your classroom

Presenting books in ways that makes it easy and fun to choose may encourage children to want to select books. You might want to think about how books are presented in a bookshop for inspiration. This could include putting books at eye level, presenting books face-out, or organising titles by length.²⁰

6. Try out different ways to support positive peer influence

Children are often influenced through peers when choosing books - through recommendations, shared excitement, or wanting to belong.²¹ Ways to support positive peer influence might include: having reading ambassadors, where highly engaged children are supported to help influence their peers on what to read²² or creating 'pupil recommendation shelves', where students can select books that they had previously read to be displayed on a classroom shelf, to encourage other students to read books their peers had enjoyed.²³

To inspire you to provide the widest range of choice in the classroom, view our Great Books Guide and booklists at booktrust.org.uk/primary.

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To explore more practical ideas for developing children's choice and agency visit the Open University Reading for Pleasure website at ourfp.org.



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