



A social
book club
to engage
young
people



Introduction

The Social Reading Spaces research study, a collaboration between the School Library Association, Farshore and HarperCollins Children's Books, demonstrates that through offering space and time to engage with appealing resources, young people will be more motivated to read.

Many children see reading as a chore associated with the pressure of lessons and assessment. This research study found lifting the pressure and offering wide choice and free choice (a sense of agency and control) are important for motivating reading.

School Librarians, and indeed all those who work to support and encourage young readers, can use the evidence from this study to gain senior leader support for running similar book groups. We have developed this resource to provide you with the information and ideas needed in order to run a Social Reading Spaces-style book club and help you engage those young people in your school who might otherwise be hard to reach. We have used feedback from the students and librarians involved to inform this resource with all the suggestions drawn from our learnings.

We suggest reading through the entire study which can be found [here](#). This approach is based on the evidence from the study and is a route to success. Your professional judgement and opinion may mean you will need to tailor this approach accordingly.

The Evidence

Social Reading Spaces was a longitudinal 12-week trial of a social book club, aimed at disengaged readers in Year 8. Seventeen librarians and 404 students took part with readers in Year 8 having a timetabled book club 'intervention'.



Why Year 8?

Year 8 is a significant time for adolescents, marking the transition to teenage years; an age when many think negatively of reading.



Only
12% of boys and **23%** of girls
aged 12–13 choose to read 'every
day or nearly every day'



21% 'rarely or
never'
read for pleasure



56%
don't think
books are
cool



80% would rather
watch TV,
go online or play video
games than read books



65% of boys and **48%** of girls
'don't really enjoy reading books'

Whole class silent reading does not engage reluctant readers:

- On average 36% of 5-17s feel happy when given time to read a book of their own choice in class, rising to 63% among those who are keen readers¹: this approach appeals to those who already enjoy reading.
- Being told to read takes away the agency that young people want, even if it is their own choice of book; if they don't already enjoy reading, it is not likely to be a positive experience.
- By the time children reach Year 8, only 25% feel happy when given time to read a book of their own choice in class.

The wider context around growing up is an important consideration:

- Psychological reactance² – resisting and rebelling when we perceive we lack choice and autonomy or are being induced against our will – is prevalent in adolescents. In school, this can lead to decreased engagement and negativity. Young people need to have a sense of agency.
- Friendships and peer relationships become increasingly important during adolescence, when there is a strong need for social interaction and connection, to feel accepted and to belong.
- Adolescence is a time of increased emotional sensitivity and vulnerability to the development of mental health problems³. However, positive peer relationships do promote wellbeing⁴.

Taking all of this into account, the aim was to create a supportive, friendly, enjoyable environment that encourages social acceptance, a safe space 'to be yourself' and an opportunity for social interaction and fun.

"So it's very different from normal lesson because, yeah, we get to talk a lot more and we get to discuss the books. And it's not like we've been forced to read a book, and we get to actually pick it and it's more comfortable than being in normal lesson because in normal lesson, probably we'd get a detention for talking about something."

Girl _____

By giving students autonomy and agency we can go some way to removing the potential for reactance. A relaxed environment, far removed from the atmosphere and environment of a lesson, takes the pressure off.

The trial proved that by giving 12-13-year-old adolescents what they want and need through reading, we can change their ideas about reading.

Outcomes were:

60% of the students said the trial had made them **more interested in books and reading**

52% said that they were **reading more**

82% wanted social book club **to continue**

Librarians shared strategies and tactics that worked when they ran the book club, and this toolkit will enable you to set up a book club with a similar approach.

Running a Social Reading Spaces book club

Selecting students and setting up the book club

■ Make it an 'exclusive' experience

Students are more likely to feel excited about book club if it is 'sold' to them as a positive experience rather than a learning intervention. Make students feel special by emphasising the difference between the social book club and 'subject' lessons or interventions that address learning gaps.

"The students enjoyed feeling that they had been chosen for this project as it made them feel special. They liked that they were the only ones able to choose from the books that had been sent and all agreed that having time to actually look at them, rather than being with the rest of the class choosing books, made them more able to actually choose a book to read that they would want to actually finish."

Librarian _____

"It was very chilled fun and interesting. Overall it was a very fun atmosphere. I am more interested in books and reading. Let me do it again please!"

Boy _____

■ Pupil Voice

Encourage them to see this as an opportunity to use their voices, share opinions, thoughts, ideas and feelings, without the 'pressure' to perform or have learning tasks set for them. If you already have book clubs, consider using students who belong to them as advocates.

■ When to run the book club

Taking students out of lessons may be a challenge, but reluctant readers are less likely to choose to attend a book club in their own time. Bringing students from lesson or library lesson time, form time, or time currently set aside for initiatives like DEAR or ERIC can add to the feelings of positivity about the experience.

"I would say that an important element of running a club like this, specifically for reluctant readers, was having it take place during the school day, rather than expecting students to give up their time during breaks or after school. Being taken out of their regular English and library lessons elevated the experience for most of the students in my groups, as they felt special."

Librarian _____

If there is resistance from senior leaders and teaching colleagues, use the evidence that shows the incredible impact of this opportunity. We've produced [this helpful advocacy tool](#) to share with teaching colleagues.

Run sessions weekly or at least fortnightly, to create momentum, continuity and build relationships.

■ How many students?

Small groups work best, with six being an ideal number – but four or five works well too.

■ Which students should attend?

Consider what you know about your setting and your students in terms of who you include. Mixed gender and single-sex groups can both work, noting that sometimes, girls may be more inhibited in mixed groups.

Think about which students in Year 8 would most benefit – talk with your teaching colleagues to help guide your selection. Are there students who can, but don't, read? Are there students whose social engagement would benefit from support, as well as their reading engagement?

You could include a student(s) who enjoys reading for pleasure to 'model' reading behaviour and encourage reluctant readers. Enthusiastic readers can also help to get discussions going. Unlike most interventions which group students by ability, having a mix of reading abilities works well, noting that being significantly behind in reading age would be a barrier to participation.

If helpful, use the 'pre-trial questionnaire' to select students with negative attitudes towards reading. If you would like to use the questionnaire, it can be downloaded [here](#).

"My advice is to make sure the groups are really mixed and try not to pick students who are all low ability because then they'll feel like it's an intervention and it'll be much harder to get the group engaged."

Librarian _____

"Some students liked meeting others they wouldn't normally see in other lessons, so taking them from different classes (but keeping them with at least one person they are friends with) worked well."

Librarian _____

■ Managing behaviour

The mix of personalities is important, and although students' initial attitudes may be guarded, it's important to tackle antagonistic behaviour early and address clashes between students. Give students permission to leave the group if they don't want to be there after the first few sessions – this can sometimes turn around attitudes and behaviour.

"Removing one boy who was incredibly silly meant that we could actually chat rather than having to do behaviour management quite a lot."

Librarian _____

"I said to one girl, 'Look, we can't have that negativity. If you don't want to be here you can go. It's voluntary, you know, you don't have to stay.' But she chose to stay."

Librarian _____

Setting book club expectations

To enhance students' engagement, the following three principles are intrinsic to promoting reading for pleasure and enjoyment of the book club:

- 1 Book club mustn't involve learning tasks**, and students shouldn't be set homework to complete. Research indicates that children are far more likely to see reading as pleasurable if it isn't linked with learning or follow-up tasks.
- 2 Independent reading both at and between book club sessions must be voluntary.** Although students should be encouraged to read and praised for doing so, they shouldn't be offered rewards or prizes: reading should be inherently rewarding.
- 3 Students must be allowed to choose their book**, whether from a curated selection made by the librarian, from the entire library choice, or a book of their own. The only stipulation is that the book mustn't be part of a reading scheme, or one of the set texts in the school's English curriculum.



Start the conversation

The 'Rights of the Reader' sets out the differences between reading for pleasure and required reading. Use this as a starting point for your book club conversations.

We've provided a poster illustrated by Quentin Blake, and a letter by author Anna James reflecting on the Rights of the Reader. This will help introduce the concept of reading for pleasure, and give a sense of agency from the start.

Just as you would for other book clubs, agree the rules and guidelines for discussions. This may include:

- Respecting the opinions of others
- Listening, responding, validating
- Having the freedom to express your own thoughts and reactions



Remind students that reading, as well as being social, is also personal, and when expressing our responses to a book we've read for pleasure, there aren't right or wrong answers.

The importance of a welcoming space

School librarians and teachers are well versed in creating welcoming spaces in their libraries or classrooms. Marking out a space for the book club to take place will help create the sense of exclusivity and wellbeing which will contribute to the success of the club.

- **Find a quiet corner**, ideally in the library, where book club won't be interrupted by other students.
- **Try to avoid using a classroom or formal seating for sessions.** Allow students to choose whether to sit on comfy chairs, cushions, bean bags or on the floor.
- **Consider ways of involving students in personalising their book club space** or experience and creating a relaxing ambience. Fairy lights and even soothing background music to block out other sounds from the library can contribute to making the atmosphere different and appealing. Consider allowing students to wear a non-uniform item during book club, like a cosy jumper.
- **Snacks are always welcome!** Unsurprisingly, offering treats, biscuits, snacks, and drinks to students reinforces the 'fun' and the similarity between their book club and book clubs for adults. It's an effective way to signal this is not a lesson.



"We had a biscuit at the beginning and we had a biscuit at the end and hot chocolate in the middle."

"We kept the biscuits until the end of the session."

"We had one group who took it upon themselves to bring snacks to every session themselves, they called themselves 'the afternoon tea group' and they loved it."

Comments from Librarians _____

The books

With challenges around budgets and funding, it may not be possible to emulate the study by having brand new books to support the book club.

If you do have budget, then ring-fencing an amount to support the club and getting the students involved in selecting the books will establish agency from the start and create an air of excitement and engagement. An alternative route could be to use the evidence of the study to apply for additional library funds from senior leaders to support the club.

When the new books arrive, open the box with the students so they can participate in the 'discovery'.

If you don't have budget, then another route is to select a number of titles, minimum 50, stock permitting, that will suit a broad range of interests and abilities.

Depending on the engagement and interest of the students, they could also select the titles from the shelves, but be mindful not to overwhelm them with too much choice.

Books that share personal stories and insight can be transformational in helping students relate to the author, to build empathy for each other, develop compassion for themselves and build confidence in speaking about their own experiences. Use titles like this in your selection.



Whatever books you are using, keep these titles reserved for book club, and even consider boxing them up to have a special introduction to students in the club. Keeping the books solely for the book club supports exclusivity and the feeling of specialness.



The structure of book club sessions

Overall, the focus should be on easy conversation, looking at books, discussing them and helping students find books that will interest them, using a range of strategies:

■ Build relationships

Social reading is, by definition, relationship-driven, and this includes not just the interaction between students, but also between a trusted adult and the students. Take time to build relationships and get to know each other. Encourage students to talk about themselves and their lives, and then tailor activities and book selections accordingly.

"It is lovely to be able to form positive relationships with students that wouldn't normally choose to come to the library, in a no pressure environment."

Librarian _____

"I liked talking and interacting with friends and new people."

Girl _____

■ Starting the session

Invite students to share events from their past week, or what they did at the weekend, or talk about themselves, their interests and hobbies. This will settle the group, and help

you get to know them so it's then possible to steer them towards books that are more likely to appeal to them. Students are more likely to express opinions about books if they know and trust others in the book club.

"We can express our feelings about the book."

Boy _____

"The students liked having the social time (as that is how they saw it)."

Librarian _____

■ Share stories

Using titles that share stories of personal experiences will empower students to share their own and offer opportunities to relate. Encourage students to think about how the stories they read connect with their own lives.

■ Author letters

Letters from authors – some written for the study and some written for this toolkit – are a good prompt for discussion and to encourage students to try new books. The key is in choosing letters relevant to students' interests. If students don't like one, move on and try another.

These can be accessed here.

"I picked the letters that I knew I had books on, so that then I could actually bring the book along and we'd talk about the book as well."

Librarian _____

"We had a lot of kids who have struggled with reading and that's why they're reluctant and they've been told, oh, they're a bad reader. But actually, to read Sally Gardner's letter really touched them and it really helped them feel like they could relate to it."

Librarian _____

■ Read an extract(s) aloud

Invite students to select a book from which you can read an extract aloud. This might be based on the cover or the blurb. Introduce variety, using audio book clips if available, or even invite students to take turns in reading aloud (being mindful of student response to this). You could ask other older students to join a session – or even a teacher role model they might not normally associate with reading. Reading aloud will prompt discussion about preferences and reactions.

■ Decision making

As described, inviting students to be involved from the start will build trust and agency. Involve them in decision making throughout – for example:

- Students might vote on whether the librarian would continue reading from the same book as before, or they would choose a new book
- Students could suggest ideas for book-related activities and games

Encourage students to 'own' the sessions as much as possible.

■ Book selection in the sessions

Students may be daunted by selecting a book. Choosing from a curated selection based on interests can help, rather than giving full access to the library. Introduce activities to scaffold book selection such as:

- Ranking their interest in a selection of books based on the covers, and then again on the blurbs
- Choosing books for the librarian as a group
- Using a 'blind date' approach with students choosing books for each other and / or the librarian based on their interests

Once a book has been selected, discussion opportunities can follow with students giving explanations for their choices. These activities can be hypothetical so students don't necessarily have to then read what they have chosen/has been chosen for them – unless they want to!

■ Maintain structure and pace

Break up the sessions to keep students interested. Use activities and alternative resources to interject some fun and personal responses:

- Invite students to draw/illustrate in response to the extracts heard
- Introduce games: for example, 'one lie, one line', in which students read one sentence from a book, make up a sentence, and ask the group to vote on which is the fake
- Show film or video clips from film adaptations of books
- Show TikTok or YouTube videos of authors or poets talking or reading aloud from their own work. Carefully chosen podcasts can work well, too

Overcoming barriers to engagement

■ Persistence pays off

Fetch students for book club if they fail to turn up – they will be far less likely to ‘forget’ to turn up for future sessions.

■ Book handling

Overcome students’ resistance to handling books and get them used to touching them and looking at them as a first step.

■ Talk about it

Invite students to explain their resistance to reading. Book club is a ‘safe space’, and being able to talk about it will help overcome the stigma of reading.

■ Forming a reading ‘habit’

Use one session to discuss forming habits head on. Invite students to choose a habit they want to develop and discuss how they would do this. You can join in too and discuss how students can make a conscious choice to adopt reading ‘behaviour’ and foster an active reading ‘habit’.

■ Reading memories

If students have fond memories of picture books like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Gruffalo* and others. Rereading these in the group and reliving their recollections of why they loved the book reminds students that reading is enjoyable, and will encourage the group to bond over shared experiences.

Using childhood memories of reading can encourage positive thinking (but if your group includes looked after young people, be mindful of this). You can draw out the ‘fun’ in reading through sharing favourite books from primary school and use illustrated picture books as a talking point.

“They really enjoyed talking about books they’d read at primary school or the books their mothers read to them. One boy was going ‘Oh, *The Gruffalo*, it gives me a lovely warm feeling thinking about it because my mum used to read it to me.”

Librarian _____

■ Before, during and after

If you are able to track students’ reading ages before and after participation, this will help build further evidence for investing in the book club.

Keep your teaching colleagues and senior leaders updated with your progress and take opportunities to share feedback from students as book club progresses.

Invite students to share feedback on their experience of book club and use this to inform future clubs and recruit new members.

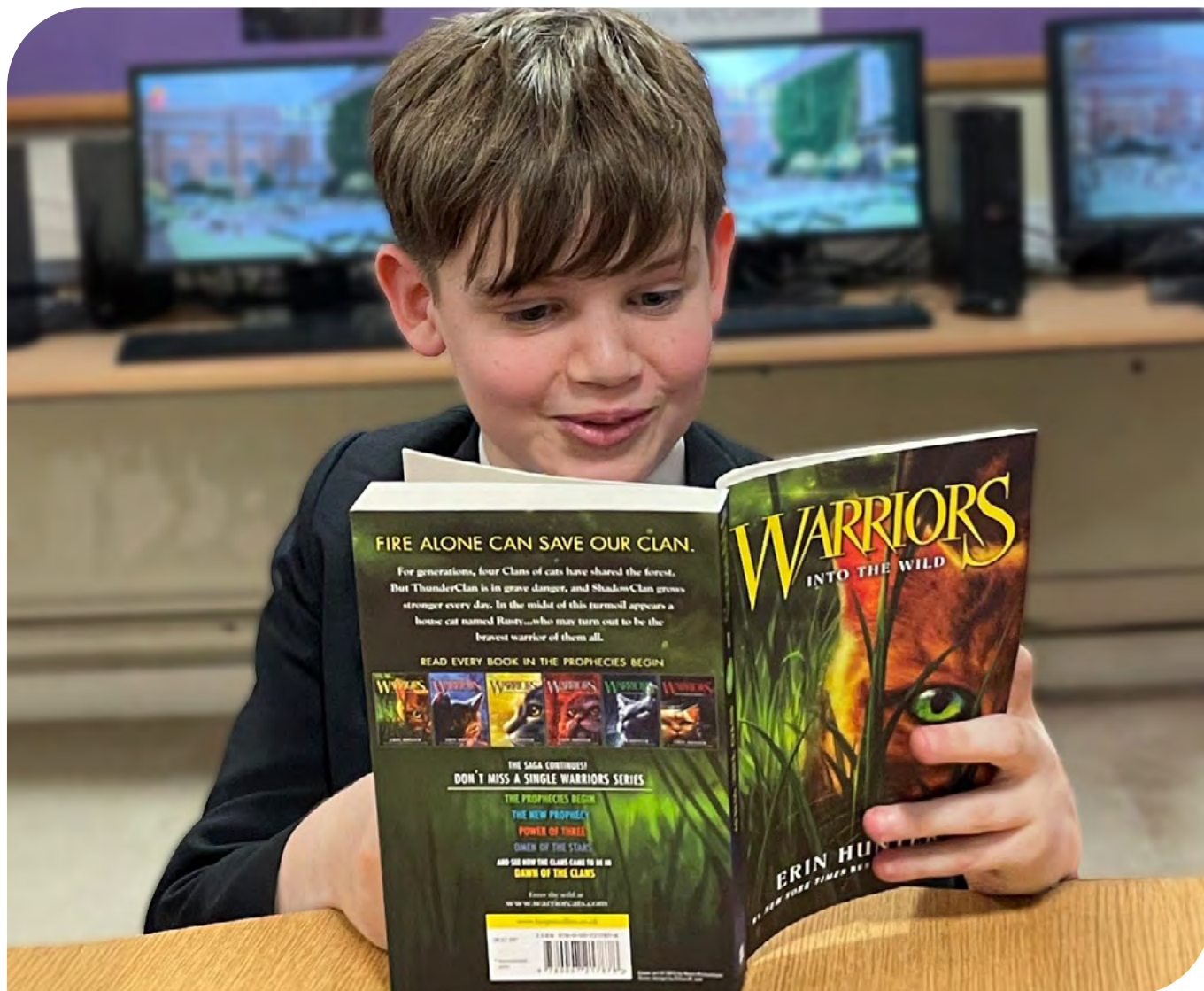
When book club ends, have a celebration session marking their successes.

¹ HarperCollins collaboration with NielsenIQ BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2024

² Brehm 1966

³ Blakemore 2019

⁴ Interpersonal risk model, Coyle et al 2021



Read the full Social Reading Spaces Study

Farshore, HarperCollins Children's Books, Barrington Stoke and Collins have teamed up to bring you the best books and resources for supporting reading for pleasure through the Book Squad website.



Find out more about the Book Squad >>>

School Library Association membership can help all schools create and sustain an inclusive school-wide reading culture.



Find out more about the SLA >>>

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