



ABINGDON

Independent reading and your child: a guide for parents of Lower School and Third Year students

INTRODUCTION

Abingdon School places great emphasis on independent reading. This guide discusses the importance of independent reading for academic success, wellbeing and wider personal development; the widespread decline of independent reading amongst secondary school students; how Abingdon encourages, supports and guides independent reading; and how the parents of Lower School and Third Year students can help their child(ren) develop and maintain a habit of regular and frequent independent reading.

DEFINING 'INDEPENDENT READING'

'Independent reading' refers to reading that students have chosen to do themselves, rather than being compelled to do by others. It is also known as 'free, voluntary reading', to use the term preferred by reading expert Stephen Krashen. Independent reading can include texts identified and recommended by teachers, librarians, booksellers, etc. as well as texts chosen by students; it seldom means 'unsupported reading'. It does not draw a distinction between fiction and factual texts: either can be appropriate for independent reading.

WHY INDEPENDENT READING MATTERS

Regular independent reading is strongly associated with enhanced vocabulary and critical thinking, both of which are vital to academic performance. [Recent groundbreaking research](#) has discovered that regular reading in childhood and early adolescence leads to improved cognitive performance, ability to regulate behaviour and overall sense of wellbeing. In turn, these enhanced capabilities reflect significantly increased development of the brain areas associated with cognition and emotional self-regulation.

The evidence of a causal link between independent reading in childhood and brain development helps substantiate the findings of earlier studies. In 2020, the Centre for Longitudinal studies analysed the reading behaviour of 6,000 members of the 1970 British Cohort Study, an ongoing survey monitoring the progress of people born in the UK during the week of 5–11th April 1970. The study found that ["children who read for pleasure made more progress in maths, as well as vocabulary and spelling, between the ages of 10 and 16 than those who rarely read."](#) The cognitive advantage gained by regular readers was "four times greater than the advantage children gained from having a parent with a degree."

In 2021, a study carried out by the Reading Agency, a UK charity supporting literacy, suggested that regular "self-directed" reading also helps develop curiosity, empathy and imagination, all of which are increasingly recognised as important skills and character traits in personal and professional life.

READING DECLINE AMONGST TEENAGERS

Many young people, however, lose the reading habit as they proceed through secondary school. Regular independent reading tends to decline significantly from the age of thirteen, and the decline is most pronounced amongst boys. A survey of 2,000 UK children and teenagers published shortly before the Covid pandemic reported that [“a third of 15-16 year-olds said they never read”](#), compared to just 5% of 9-10 year-olds. The same survey indicated that boys were twice as likely as girls to “never read”. Although the pandemic saw an increase in reading amongst young people during the first lockdown, there is no evidence that this has resulted in a sustained change. [The Reading Agency’s latest Annual Literacy Survey](#) of young people aged 5 to 18 found that “gains made during the early part of the pandemic had completely eroded by 2022.” The same survey noted that boys were less likely than girls to report that they enjoyed reading (45.6% compared to (54.9%); only 26.5% of boys reported reading daily, and the likelihood of regular reading was strongly associated with whether young people reported enjoying reading. Abingdon School is, unfortunately, not immune to the forces driving these trends.

Data collected by the school library between 2014 and 2017 showed a substantial decline in reading as students progressed through the school. The number of books borrowed annually fell from an average of eight books per student in First Year to four in Third Year and just two in Fourth Year; since 2017, the decline has been less steep, due to a programme targeted at Third Year students, but remains substantial. While borrowing from the library is not identical with independent reading, as many students will be reading books from other sources, the suggestive evidence of decline is backed up by the statistics for Abingdon’s yearly Summer Reading Challenge. Over the past eight years, the average number of books reviewed for the Summer Reading Challenge halves between Second and Third Year and then more than halves again between Third Year and Fourth Year. The number of students participating is also in long-term decline.

These average figures conceal substantial differences between students; while some are reading a great deal, many more are not reading anything beyond what teachers require them to (for example, a core text for English GCSE). Reasons for the decline, cited by our students as well as indicated by wider research, include young people [replacing reading time with other activities](#), such as gaming, social media and YouTube, and [struggling to find books which interest them](#).

HOW ABINGDON ENCOURAGES, SUPPORTS AND GUIDES INDEPENDENT READING

The library and the English department, in consultation with other academic departments, are committed to helping all students develop and maintain a habit of regular and frequent independent reading. Their efforts are focused most of all on Lower School and Third Year students, as these are the most critical years: students who are reading regularly at the end of their third year are likely to persist with the habit long term.

All first and second year students are encouraged to carry a book for personal reading at school, enabling them to take advantage of opportunities for voluntary reading. Opportunities include the first 10-15 minutes of Reading & Research lessons, when the librarian will also talk to boys about their reading choices and offer recommendations and other advice. The prep for Reading & Research lessons is always 40 minutes of independent reading; students can choose between a single 40 minute session or two 20 minute sessions.

Likewise, **all third year students** are encouraged to carry a book for personal reading. In addition, third year students are *required* to bring a book of their choice to the English lesson in which they do silent reading each week (they will be notified which lesson this is). Failure to bring a book to a silent reading lesson will result in a sanction. Students who struggle to find a book they enjoy will be encouraged to get advice from the librarian.

At the start of every term, the librarian visits all **third year English classes** to talk about the value of reading and to introduce and recommend a range of books, chosen on the basis of their capacity to help strengthen vocabulary development and stimulate thought as well as their storytelling power. In the Michaelmas term, the focus is on the relationship between reading and academic success. In Lent, the focus is on reading and wellbeing. In summer, the focus is on how reading can help personal development. Since this programme of visits began in 2017, decline in reading over the course of the third year has slowed significantly. Yearly loans to Third Year students are more than nine times higher than they were before the programme started, and many students borrow books throughout the year, so are clearly doing more than just going through the motions.

To help boys find books they want to read, the librarian has created [lists of recommended books tailored to different year groups](#). Some lists focus solely on fiction; others focus on factual titles, either reflecting a particular theme or supporting a particular area of academic study. Many of the books on the lists are popular amongst boys who do still read regularly or that otherwise display characteristics likely to make them particularly appealing. Others have been chosen by subject teachers. All lists can be accessed on the library's web portal, which enables students to find out more details, check ratings and reviews, and to reserve books for collection at the library desk.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

Many parents are understandably keen to play a direct role in helping their child develop and maintain good reading and research habits. Research suggests that parents can be hugely influential when it comes to independent reading, but providing appropriate encouragement and support can be challenging. As most parents work out very quickly once their child gets to secondary school, simply telling them to read more or offering material incentives tends to be ineffective. With that in mind, here are seven strategies proven to make boys aged 11-14 more likely to read independently and view reading positively.

Help your child identify a regular time to read. The key to maintaining and developing a good reading habit is 'regularly and often'. The more independent reading is an integral part of the day or week, the more likely it is that your child will maintain the habit. Aim for slots of no less than 20 minutes at least four days a week; don't insist on more, particularly if your child is not already reading regularly and enthusiastically. Identify and discuss potentially suitable times, such as immediately after dinner or before bed.

Help your child identify good places for reading. Discuss where your child thinks they are most likely to be able to read comfortably and without interruption or distraction; if they struggle to identify anywhere, make constructive suggestions. Discuss how they are going to ensure they aren't distracted by their phone (this is particularly important if, as is likely, a place for reading is out of your sight). Ideally their phone will be off or 'beyond use' during reading times; otherwise it will be very hard for them to resist the ping of notifications or the

urge to scroll through a social media feed. At the same time, try not to let such discussions turn into heated arguments about 'books versus screens', which can be counterproductive.

Take a non-judgemental interest in what your child is reading. What young people like to read and what adults think they should be reading rarely coincide. Don't pass judgement on what your child has chosen to read, even if you think it's far from ideal; the motivations behind reading choice can be far from obvious and negative comments can backfire. It's more productive to demonstrate that you respect the fact that they're reading. (If you are concerned that your child is choosing inappropriate books, the school library is happy to advise.) Ask your child whether they're enjoying what they read; if it's a book you're familiar with, trade on your insider knowledge; if not, a few minutes of research can pay dividends. You could even try reading the same book your child is reading, to try and get a sense of why it appeals to them and to provide a common point of discussion.

Discuss reading choices with your child. Visit a bookshop with your child at least once a month, or browse the school library's web portal or an online bookseller together. Encourage them to pick out what looks appealing and to read reviews to find out what other readers are saying. Ask them what books they have already read and enjoyed, and talk about what influenced their choice. Avoid such conversations turning into 'you should read' lectures. If you are a keen reader, or used to be, talk about your own reading choices, past and present, giving your child a sense of how you choose (or used to choose) books.

Think of reading in terms of more than books and fiction. We often associate reading with books and fiction, but we shouldn't limit ourselves to this. Some young people (and adults) enjoy immersing themselves in a good story; others much prefer reading about factual subjects, from sports to science. If your child simply doesn't see the point in getting lost in a good story, consider alternatives rather than trying to force the issue. While factual books suitable for 11-13 year olds tend to be few and far between, magazines can serve as great sources of high-quality and appealing content.

Take advantage of reading recommendations. If the blizzard of young adult titles on the shelves of bookstores, physical and virtual, leave you wondering where to start, you're like 99% of parents. Don't be daunted: make the most of other people's expertise. The [school library's website offers reading recommendations](#) for all age groups, based on what other students have read and enjoyed. Most bookshops will be very happy to provide advice. The website <https://www.whatshouldireadnext.com/> can be very useful (although the adverts can be annoying). Just type in the title or author of a book your child has enjoyed - or get them to do so - and it will make recommendations that probably wouldn't have otherwise occurred to you.

Be seen reading. While as adults we often encourage (and nag) young people to read more, it can be a case of 'do as I say, not as I do'. If that's the case, then see if you can find time to be seen reading, because ultimately, in reading as in other matters, parents can be hugely powerful role models for their children. Whether you're already a regular reader or getting back into regular reading, if possible read in front of your child(ren) - for example, in a living room, where they are likely to at least pass through. If your own reading is effectively 'invisible' to your child(ren), they are unlikely to be aware that you're reading at all and so will not have the opportunity to pick up the habit from you. Above all, whenever and wherever

you can, make reading appear as a normal thing for you to do; that way, your child is more likely to follow in your footsteps.

Conclusion

The forces ranged against independent reading in the teenage years - biological, social and cultural - are formidable, but, as many Abingdon students demonstrate, decline (or, worse, abandonment) is far from inevitable. Concerted action, including demonstrating the benefits of independent reading, helping young people find the right times and places for reading, promoting the right books, discussing book choices and modelling reading in our lives, has the power to help children and teenagers develop and maintain a habit of independent reading - and thus realising the many rewards it can bring.

Dr Gardner, *Librarian*