

Promoting Reading for Pleasure: A Student/Learning Supports Perspective*

Reading for pleasure is not merely a literacy outcome – it is a critical component of student engagement, development, and well-being. Students who read voluntarily demonstrate stronger reading achievement, broader vocabulary, and other outcomes. They also report higher levels of engagement, better mental health, and increased feelings of well-being (Anderson & Fielding, 1988; Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Mak & Fancourt, 2020; McQuillan, 2019; Sahakian, et al. 2023; Sullivan & Brown, 2015).

Beyond literacy, voluntary reading contributes to cognitive development, motivation, identity formation, social understanding, and emotional well-being. From a student/learning supports perspective, these outcomes reflect the combined influence of intrinsic motivation, equitable access, and supportive environments.

At the same time, reading for pleasure declines as students move into adolescence (Bone et al., 2025; Scholastic & Fluent, 2022), suggesting that many do not experience reading as meaningful or enjoyable. Addressing this decline requires moving beyond instruction to reduce barriers and strengthen engagement.

Key Considerations in Promoting Reading for Pleasure

A comprehensive approach to reading for pleasure focuses on the conditions that support engagement:

1. *Prioritize Intrinsic Motivation* – Promote reading as a meaningful, self-directed activity by:
 - Expanding student choice
 - Reducing emphasis on testing and extrinsic rewards
 - Encouraging personal connections to texts
2. *Ensure Equity of Access and Opportunity* – Actively reduce disparities by:
 - Providing diverse, culturally relevant materials
 - Expanding access across school, home, and community
 - Ensuring all students have time and opportunity to read
3. *Create Supportive Reading Environments* – Foster a positive reading culture through:
 - Dedicated time for independent reading
 - Comfortable and inviting reading spaces
 - Opportunities for social interaction around books
4. *Address Barriers to Engagement* – Recognize disengagement as often reflecting barriers:
 - Reading difficulties or lack of confidence
 - Emotional or environmental stressors
 - Limited prior positive experiences
5. *Connect Reading to Identity and Relevance* – Offer reading that reflects students’ lives:
 - Value diverse genres and formats
 - Build on student interests
 - Support identity exploration through reading
6. *Foster Adult and Peer Modeling* – Students are influenced by what others value:
 - Staff and families modeling reading
 - Peer sharing and recommendations
 - Reading as a shared social experience

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Students are most likely to read when reading is experienced as voluntary, meaningful, and enjoyable – not as a task tied to evaluation or compliance.

Understanding Barriers to Reading for Pleasure

Disengagement from reading often is a signal that barriers are present – not that students lack interest or potential. From a student/learning supports perspective, lack of engagement in reading is best understood not as student disinterest alone, but as a reflection of barriers that limit motivation, access, and opportunity. When reading becomes associated with pressure, comparison, or failure, students are more likely to disengage – even when they have the ability to succeed. Promoting reading for pleasure therefore requires a comprehensive approach that identifies and addresses these barriers while creating conditions that foster curiosity, choice, and enjoyment.

Barriers to reading for pleasure are multifaceted and often interconnected, spanning individual, instructional, environmental, and systemic factors.

Initially, disengagement from reading is better understood as a reflection of barriers rather than lack of interest. These barriers are often interconnected:

- Student-related: reading difficulties, low confidence, limited exposure, competing media, emotional concerns
- Instructional: overemphasis on evaluation, limited choice, insufficient reading time
- Access and equity: limited books, lack of relevant materials, resource disparities
- Environmental: lack of time, competing demands, limited modeling of reading
- Systemic: emphasis on performance over engagement, fragmented supports

Addressing such barriers is essential to promoting reading for pleasure and ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities to develop positive reading habits. It includes interventions that strengthen both skills and motivation while ensuring equitable opportunities to engage.

The following exhibits provide a framework and examples for addressing barriers to and promoting reading for pleasure.

Exhibit 1: **A System-Oriented Framework for Action***

Promoting reading for pleasure requires:

1. *Ensuring Supportive Environments* – Normalize reading as voluntary, enjoyable, and socially supported
2. *Strengthening Intrinsic Motivation* – Increase autonomy, relevance, and reduce performance pressures
3. *Enhancing Equity of Opportunity* – Expand access to diverse materials and protect reading time
4. *Identifying and Supporting Struggling Readers* – Provide early help while maintaining dignity and confidence
5. *Engaging Families and Communities* – Outreach to problem-solve and connect resources across contexts

*See <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html> for a discussion of how this fits into broader efforts to transform a school's student/learning supports system.

Exhibit 2: **Examples of Activities to Promote Reading for Pleasure**

Promoting reading for pleasure requires opportunities across settings that emphasize choice, access, social connection, and low-pressure engagement.

At School – Schools play a central role in normalizing reading as enjoyable and meaningful.

>Dedicated Independent Reading Time

- Regular, protected time for self-selected reading
- Opportunities for sustained silent reading related to academic subjects
- Prioritizing engagement and minimizing completion

>Student Choice and Personalization

- Access to diverse, high-interest classroom reading material
- Opportunities to choose from a variety of genres and formats
- Teacher support in matching reading material to interests and skill levels

>Reading as a Social Experience

- Informal time for book chats and peer recommendations
- Partner or small-group reading
- Book clubs or interest-based reading groups

>Events and Schoolwide Initiatives

- Book fairs focused on exploration and access
- Author visits and reading celebrations
- Participation in class exploration of library holdings

>Welcoming Reading Environments

- Comfortable, inviting reading spaces
- Displays reflecting student interests and identities
- Opportunities to read in varied settings and online

>Integration with Relationships and Support

- Staff modeling enjoyment of reading
- Reading used as a context for connection and mentoring
- Additional support for students with limited positive reading experiences

At Home – Family environments strongly shape how children perceive reading. Effective activities are flexible, low-pressure, and part of everyday routines.

>Shared Reading Experiences

- Reading together regularly, even briefly
- Alternating reading aloud if it is not too pressuring
- Informal conversations about books

>Encouraging Choice and Ownership

- Allowing children to select what they read
- Including comics, magazines, and digital texts
- Building on personal interests

>Creating a Reading-Friendly Environment

- Keeping reading materials accessible
- Visiting libraries or community book events
- Making reading visible and routine

>Modeling Positive Reading Habits

- Adults reading for enjoyment
- Sharing what they read and value
- Demonstrating reading as meaningful

>Integrating Reading into Daily Life

- Reading everyday texts (menus, instructions) together
- Connecting reading to hobbies and interests
- Encouraging storytelling and discussion

Expanding Access Through Community Supports – Community programs and partnerships help reduce inequities in access to reading materials. Examples are book distribution initiatives, community book fairs, bookmobiles and lending programs, and digital reading platforms.

If only one change can be made:
Ensure daily, protected time for independent reading with student choice – supported, but not monitored for performance.
This single step addresses access, autonomy, and engagement simultaneously.

Concluding Comments

Promoting reading for pleasure is not simply about improving literacy – it is about fostering engagement, supporting well-being, and enhancing the overall development of students. From a student/learning supports perspective, meaningful and sustained reading emerges when schools, families, and communities work together to reduce barriers, expand access, and create environments that prioritize choice, relevance, and enjoyment.

When reading is experienced as voluntary and personally meaningful, it becomes a powerful vehicle for learning, connection, and growth. By embedding reading for pleasure within a comprehensive and equitable system of supports, educators can strengthen not only academic outcomes, but also students' motivation, identity, and lifelong relationship with learning.

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