

Turning the Page

by Fiona Pepper and Sajithra Nithi



- 1 In the age of TV on demand, social media and video games, it can be hard to get teenagers to switch off the screen and pick up a book instead. Hard – but not impossible. Holly Godfree, a teacher librarian at a public school in Canberra, says books have many drawcards – like their ability to provide an emotional experience. “There’s something about literature and a story, and the fact that it explores the human condition, which fills a really important need,” Ms Godfree says.
- 2 Still, one recent UK study found as few as 10 per cent of teenagers choose to read in their spare time. Margaret Merga, a senior lecturer in education at Edith Cowan University, is “alarmed but not surprised” by the results. She says the problem isn’t that teenagers think books are uncool, and notes that book and film collaborations like *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* have helped cement reading as “a socially acceptable pastime”. The issue, she says, is with the number of competing demands for a teenager’s time. She adds that, unlike video games and social media, books often don’t provide an instant “dopamine¹⁾ reward”. “When we go to apply sustained cognitive attention to a task such as reading it’s actually harder to get into it,” she says. “It’s harder for them to get into that reading experience if they haven’t already built that capacity for cognitive stamina.”
- 3 So how do you get a teenager excited about reading? Ms Godfree says her main strategy involves “oozing enthusiasm” about books. She reads “really widely” so she can always recommend fresh releases, and engages with books on a deep level “so that I can have that emotional connection”. That way, she says, she can speak about the book with authenticity and sincerity. The responsibility of getting teenagers into reading, of course, can’t rest solely on the shoulders of teacher librarians.
- 4 Dr Merga believes both the school and home are offering less encouragement to read, and that needs to change. Part of the solution, she says, could be if parents continued to read to their kids for as long as possible. “We’ve found that reading to children has been cut around the point of skill acquisition,” she says. “So once children have learnt to read, parents have thought to themselves, ‘oh thank goodness, we can tick that off’.”

- 5 It's also important to link reading with pleasure, rather than school and testing. "The children just kept saying 'we know it's important because it's something that we're tested on' but when I brought around the topic of pleasure they were really not sure at all," Dr Merga says. "It's seen as something that needs to be measured and they're not having that opportunity to really see reading as something that can compete in terms of pleasure with things like social media and the like."
- 6 Dr Merga also emphasises the importance of being a good role model when it comes to reading. "When they talk about their parents' reading and their parents' expectations for their reading, many students turned around and said 'well you know, Mum expects me to read but I don't see her pick up a book'," Dr Merga says. Dr Merga says it's crucial that children see parents reading, and feel comfortable talking about books and expressing their evolving interest in different genres. "Children's tastes and interests change over time so we need to keep that dialogue open with them so that we can keep trying to match them with books that meet their current interests," Dr Merga says.

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noot 1 dopamine = een stofje in de hersenen dat een rol speelt bij genot