

The reality of reluctant readers

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I know of a boy who almost didn't pass fourth grade because he struggled with book reports. He could take apart a radio and put it back together (with no parts left over), but literature vexed him. That boy reminds me of my son, whose body and mind have trouble slowing down for the pace of print.

I have to work a little harder with Seanie than with his nose-in-a-book sister. This became apparent when he began reading chapter books independently. Before that, he relished my oral renditions of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* or our dramatic paired reading of *Old Hat, New Hat* by Stan and Jan Berenstain. Things changed when much of his reading became a one-boy show.

For parents in the same boat, *99 Ways to Get Kids to Love Reading (and 100 Books They'll Love)* by Mary Leonhardt offers practical tips for sparking a love of books and dealing with reading resistance. (I had to laugh when I read Tip 16—"Don't read aloud to your children so much that they become too dependent on you for reading entertainment.") Leonhardt, who also wrote *Parents Who Love Reading, Kids Who Don't*, uses her expertise as an English teacher to help children of all ages.

As a classroom teacher, I dispensed all sorts of advice when my students' parents expressed similar concerns. When reality set in with my own son, I went to his teachers, who offered the following suggestions:

- Choose books at your child's independent reading level. Reading experts recommend that a child's independent reading selections fall into the categories of "easy" or "just right." "Challenging" books may appear to be the remedy for reading ills but the opposite is true. Children need as much experience as possible with fluent reading.

How does one determine if a book is too challenging? Seanie's teacher used the "five-finger rule." If five words on any page are unrecognizable (and the meaning can't be determined by reading surrounding

words), the selection is better suited for paired reading with someone who can read it fluently.

Also, look for the grade level listed on the book. Many paperback chapter books list the reading level on the back cover. "RL 3" indicates the book is written at about a third grade level, or for the 7- to 10-year-old range.

Another tip to remember—children like to read about kids near their age or older. This tendency increases with age, which explains why the classic *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* isn't likely to be found in any 11-year-old's backpack.

- Look for books with predictable plots. Predictable plots abound in books that are part of a series, which can be a bonanza for reluctant readers. The authors of *Encyclopedia Brown* and *The Boxcar Children* series continue to crank out stories that especially appeal to the not-ready-for-classics bunch. Other popular series include *Pee Wee Scouts*, *The Bailey School Kids* and *The Magic Tree House*.

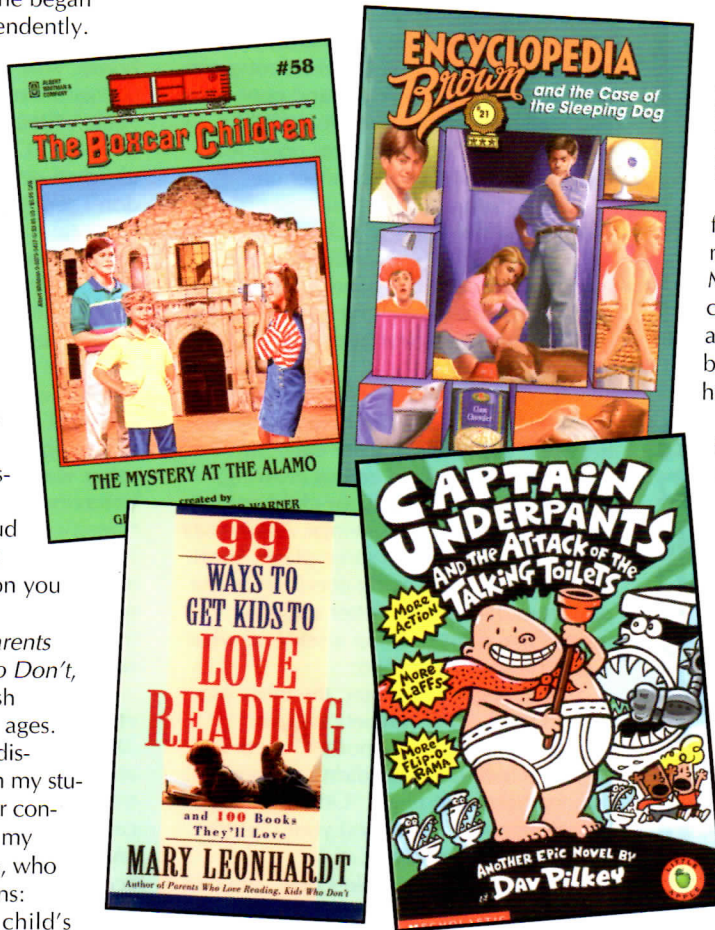
Children gravitate toward the familiar and series books can offer a non-threatening reading experience. Many contain a mix of boy and girl characters and they often revolve around solving a mystery. One series book leads to another as a reading habit starts forming.

Perhaps the kingpin of books for reluctant readers is the *Captain Underpants* series. This new bunch of books by children's humorist Dav Pilkey (author of *Dogzilla* and *Kat Kong*) is a hot commodity for readers ages 7 through 12, although younger readers can be found totting them around. As much as the title *Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopyants* grosses me out, the humor appeals to kids.

Jim Trelease, author of the ever-popular *The Read Aloud Handbook*, says many people don't read because they have no "pleasure associations" with reading. These books can serve as a

bridge to more complex plots and richer literature in the years to come.

That boy with book report phobia eventually found those pleasure associations. I know this from seeing piles of Analog science fiction books by his bedside as I grew up. My dad, who was an engineer, finally found characters he could relate to and plots that piqued his scientific interests. He offered me an adult model of reading for pure pleasure as well as hope that his grandson will one day follow in his footsteps.



- Find characters to whom your child can relate. This is especially true for boys. As a rule, boys like to read about other boys, although girls will read about both genders. Two books written by Kathleen Odean, *Great Books for Girls: More Than 600 Books to Inspire Today's Girls* and *Tomorrow's Women* and *Great Books for Boys: More Than 600 Books for Boys 2 to 14*, are sources for selecting great literature for each gender.