

Fostering Book Love in Older Readers

By Jennifer McMahon | Categories: Reading Intervention and Acceleration, Reading

For some of us it is hard to imagine a world without books: stories of incredible people overcoming unimaginable odds, lands we explore without leaving our chair, or tales of fantasy that transport us to places only found in dreams. Time traveling through books is how many of us discovered new ideas and found ourselves in the process.

This incredible relationship with reading and books is what I wish for all students, but for some, this seems as much a fantasy as the stories I long for them to discover. Book love is an ultimate goal, but what can we do along the way, especially to support older readers? Here are a few thoughts on the topic.

Foundational Skills Open Doors

There is no shortcut that can replace systematic instruction in foundational skills. There is a myth that seems to be accepted by too many school systems that if a student doesn't learn to read by the end of third grade, then we have missed a magic window.

While it is certainly true that we want to find and close reading gaps as soon as possible, this does not mean that students *can't* learn to decode, comprehend, and become fully literate beyond the primary years. So, no matter the age, if students struggle with decoding and foundational skills, then they absolutely need intervention that is systematic, strategic, respectful, and offers opportunities to apply these skills in connected text.

In my experience, *SIPPS* (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) Plus and *SIPPS* Challenge can make a significant difference.

High Quality Books about Topics of Interest

SIPPS Plus offers *Dreams on Wheels*, controlled-vocabulary text that allows an older reader to apply what they are learning immediately to connected text. But once students have mastered single-syllable decoding and moved beyond *SIPPS* Plus (instruction focused on the alphabetic and spelling-pattern phases) into *SIPPS* Challenge (instruction focused on the highest phase of decoding skills, the polysyllabic/morphemic phase), it can be very difficult to find appropriate reading material.

I found that the Hi-Lo Fluency Libraries from Collaborative Classroom offered a solution. These high-interest books cover topics that speak to older readers, but at the same time are accessible to students still working on mastering the complexities of decoding.

A unique feature of this curated collection for independent reading is targeted libraries for a number of different grade bands. Content offered to students in upper elementary is not the same as that provided in middle school, and that differs from what is offered to high school students. Other book sets I have purchased in the past are marketed for a huge grade range: grades 4–12. While it is very possible a fourth grader is working on the same decoding skills as a senior in high school, I do not think anyone would argue that the two students should be reading the same content. The closely targeted grade bands in the Hi-Lo Fluency Libraries help address this concern. The best part, of course, is that the books across the collections are engaging and motivating for students.

Book Talks

When I first introduced the Fluency Library to students, I was met with some resistance. I can completely understand why students resist. For me, a book is an invitation to a new world. For students who have struggled to get print off the page, a book is an invitation to humiliation, anxiety, and frustration.

So, I have found the best thing to do is not waste time convincing them. Instead, I jump in immediately and show them they have the skills to read these books. First, I hook them with the promise of what's inside. It doesn't take much. I choose a few books that I think will appeal to the students. Then, I read them myself. Once I have some of my own favorites, I talk about them to students.

I have started to refer to these as "Ninja Book Talks" because I stealthily will mention I am reading one of the books, and I will take a second to share a little about it. Then, I will leave it on the table. When it is time for students to read independently, I watch as the book I mentioned gets picked up and read.

Some students need the experience of success with a book to begin to see themselves as capable readers. When introducing the libraries, I sometimes have to find a way to have the students read a couple of pages to build confidence. Now that students are beginning to trust their own abilities, they are more willing to just pick up the books based on my mini-book talks. I am finding that students are recommending books to one another as well.

Remember to Shower Them with Love

Fragile—this is the word that comes to mind when I think about older readers. For so many of these students, their fears and insecurities are standing in the way, and I am coaching them to take a huge risk. I am asking them to do something they have not been successful doing many times before.

For this reason, I am careful to ensure that I am providing them with conditions for success. This begins with very strong and systematic instruction in the foundational skills they are missing, combined with many opportunities to apply those skills in connected text where they can see for themselves that they are capable of reading.

I encourage, I guide, and I make sure that my instructional decisions both challenge and support students. Much thought must go into creating the needed scaffolds, while at the same time nudging the students toward success.

Book love is the goal, but before students can fall in love with books, they have to be convinced that reading is for them. Strong instruction coupled with engaging texts designed for older readers help clear a pathway and encourage students to take that first step on the journey to literacy.

If you enjoyed this blog by Dr. Jennifer McMahon, check out her blog "SIPPS Plus for High School Students: The Critical Elements for Growth and Success."