

How to Choose Books for the Kids in Your Life

Literature can be the window that transports us to new realities, allowing us to wrestle with a new truth or alternative view of the world. Books have the power to change our minds, and with that our world.

Alisha Berger, our resident children's books expert, directs Room to Read's worldwide publishing program of 120 fiction and nonfiction children's books per year in nine countries, as well as 30-60 titles for other special projects around the world. Her background is in children's publishing at some of the big publishing houses in New York where she edited bestsellers and books that won the Newbery Honor, Stonewall Book Award, and Batchelder Award for Best Book in Translation. Like we said, she's an expert! So we asked her a few questions about how to choose books for the kids in your life.



Q: How can you tell if a book is age appropriate? When does a kid graduate from picture books to chapter books, and on?

A: Age appropriate can be a relative term—it depends on the reading level of the child, their interests, and especially how you want to share the book with the child. There are some early chapter books that a child might read independently, but that same child would likely enjoy a longer picture book that you could read and share with them. You can also read that longer picture book to a child who can't read yet, to give them a more sustained listening experience, which is great for burgeoning readers!

Very generally, board books are for babies- age 3, picture books for ages 3-8, early chapter books for ages 6-8, middle grade for ages 8-12, and Young Adult (YA) for 12up or 14up—there is a wide variety of content for YA. Note that a lot of picture books are made into board books for parents and families who want to share stories with their babies (rather than basic opposites, colors, numbers, etc.). This way, the child won't chew or rip it up beyond repair, and you can enjoy a story with a little more meat to it.

Remember, the key factor for any child to love reading is motivation—what will motivate your little one to fall in love with books? What are their favorite topics? What feeds their little brains? Just like adults, kids have varied interests and it's great to introduce a wide variety of genres and types of books early on.

Q: What books would you recommend for a child who hasn't yet developed a love of reading? What would get them hooked?

A: It depends entirely on the child! There are so many different genres and styles of wonderful books—from wordless picture books where children can feel like successful readers and engage by making up their own stories, to mystery stories which often appeal to children who want to read towards some kind of clear pay-out. (The great site Book Riot has some good mystery suggestions.)

Graphic novels have also grown enormously in popularity and availability—in our extremely visual culture, kids love engaging with longer stories in both words and pictures. The topics available vary widely, from coming-of-age, navigating school, fitting in, fantasy, memoir—it's an incredible genre. Some of my favorites: *Rollergirl* and *All's Faire in Middle School* by Victoria Jamieson, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Yang, *Dog Man* by Dav Pilkey, *El Deafo* by Cece Bell.

Q: Say you have a 9-year-old niece who reads a lot. What's a good way to choose something she probably hasn't read but would enjoy?

A: If you know something she already loves, the Amazon "people who bought this also bought" is extremely useful. I find new books this way often—Amazon's incredible wealth of data can turn up some fun new books. Of course, the very best way is to ask your local bookseller or librarian, who are living, breathing catalogs of "you would also enjoy." Most independent booksellers, especially those who run the children's department, love nothing more than to pair a child with a new favorite book.

Q: Some children's books look lovely for adults but seem like children may not be all that wowed by them – how can you tell the difference between a book kids will really get into vs one that just looks pretty?

A: It's about knowing the child. Some kids love the literary books that win awards, some kids are not as caught up in language and want action. Think about what kids want to read in the same way you think about what you want to read—consider the individual. As a parent, there can also be the strong desire to get your kids to read something "classic" or that you find wonderful. In that case, what about reading the book together? Or consider the power of audiobooks—many performances these days are fantastic, and they're great for car rides. This way, you can talk about the book together. It can be a powerful way to relate to one another.

I've been listening to James and the Giant Peach with my 5-year-old, and it makes our drive to school a joy. The reader does so many voices, and we get to talk about accents and words that are different in British English compared to American English, as well as just laughing together. If you want to start sharing the Harry Potter books, even with kids of different ages, the audio versions are incredible. For teenagers, sharing an audiobook that speaks to the headiness of these years can become a springboard for great conversations.

Remember, your local public library most likely has streaming audio books you can easily access. This is a great resource!

Q: Any last tips for our readers?

A: I highly recommend checking out this list of outstanding international books from 2019 recommended by the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY). Room to Read and IBBY share a lot of goals when it comes to international children's literature, and these are wonderful books from around the world published in English, vetted by the most passionate librarians and teachers in the business.

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