
Using the Books

Learning to read using little books

The types of books available here at Mustard Seed Books are often called “little books.” A number of publishing companies (Rigby, Sundance, Kaeden, etc.) publish extensive libraries of little books. Little books are designed to go immediately into the hands of even the most struggling readers. These books include a series of scaffolds or built in supports, that help a child read successfully. One significant goal of a well designed series of books is that almost any child could start with level one books, and with limited assistance, work their way up the levels.

Here at Mustard Seed Books, there are nowhere nearly enough titles currently available to make this possible. We use a leveling system that ranges from level 1 (for kindergarteners or seriously struggling 1st grade readers) to level 20 (roughly the equivalent of end of 1st grade reading level). A good set of books would have at least 10 titles/level. We’re working on getting more and more books available and increasing the quality of the books we have.

Given my background as an educational researcher, I start with a bit of theory about using little books (hopefully written in an accessible and interesting manner). After the theory, there is a list of **13 important strategies** for getting started using little books with kids.

Increasingly Complicated Microenvironments

This might sound like an unnecessarily complicated framework for talking about simple books, but the books are built around a theory, outlined by educational researchers Richard Burton, John Seely Brown and Gerhard Fischer. Interestingly enough, they describe their theory in the context of teaching people to learn to ski. The basic idea is setting up the environment so that as much as possible, people learn to ski by skiing. Short skis that are easier to turn used on nicely groomed “bunny slopes” enable beginning skiers to learn the basics of skiing while skiing. As a skier progresses, the ski length, the incline of the practice location and the degree of grooming can be changed as needed to provide an appropriate level of challenge. This idea of a gradually increasing degree of challenge across a range of factors is a model for designing a collection of books that can serve a similar purpose — helping kids learn to read by reading.

Appropriate Level of Challenge (Zone of Proximal Development)

Quite a bit of research has been done on the relationship between success and learning. Imagine you are learning to ski but a friend takes you to a fairly steep hill with icy snow and moguls. How successful do you think you’d be? How do you think that might affect your desire to continue learning skiing? The issue is quite similar with learning to read. When students spend most of their time attempting to read books that are too hard for them, it doesn’t end up inspiring diligence and perseverance, it tends to produce students who don’t enjoy reading and who see reading as not for them.

Give a student a book that is interesting and accessible, and you frequently get the opposite result. Lev Vygotsky, an early 20th century Russian

psychologist developed an idea he called “the zone of proximal development.” The idea is that a child is capable of doing some things on their own, some things with help, and some things are just too hard. Make it too easy and a child gets bored. Make it too hard and they get frustrated. Instructional activities designed so that a child can accomplish the task with a bit of help tend to be the most productive. Jerome Betts, an educational researcher in the 1930’s, came up with a way of thinking about how hard a book is for a given student. If a student can’t read 90% of the words in a book successfully, the book is too hard for them. At first pass, that might seem extreme, but 10% or 1 word in 10 in this text you’re reading here would mean every line, you’d encounter multiple words you couldn’t read.

A second aspect of this rule is that just because a student can figure out a word doesn’t mean it counts on the good side of 95%. If a student has to “solve” (i.e. use some strategy to figure out, decode, use the picture, etc.) too many words, their reading becomes laborious, their errors tend to go up, their comprehension tends to go down and enjoyment goes out the window. These books are designed to help a child learn to read by enabling them to read successfully, confidently and enjoyably and gradually extend their capabilities.

13 quick ideas for getting started using little books:

1. **Learning to read with little books is pretty different than most other reading programs.** I put this first mainly to encourage you to come to these books willing to try out some new ideas, some new ways of thinking and to see what comes out of it.
2. **It’s ok to read a book that’s too easy.** Reading success is a great experience for struggling readers. The images and ideas in these books will still be fascinating for students and “easy” books build confidence and excitement for more reading. Don’t make a child who is ready for chapter books read every book starting at level 1 book before they get to see the harder level books, but don’t be worried about ease and success.
3. **If a book is too hard or not interesting, it’s much better to put it back than struggle through it.** The goal is never to “make it through” a book – that kind of idea leads to frustrated, soon to be ex-readers.
4. **A book introduction can help a child read successfully on their own later.** A book introduction can show a child a word they might not know, help them get a language pattern that will be helpful, prime them to pay attention to some information that will be helpful. The goal isn’t to prop up a child to enable them to read a book that is too hard, but as a limited support to help the child be successful on their own later.
5. **It’s great for a kid to get sidetracked by questions about the content of a book.** Some teachers are so focused on “reading instruction” they discourage questions and conversation about books. These books are designed for the opposite strategy. If a book doesn’t elicit some type of conversation or engagement, it’s probably not the best book for that child.
6. **Re-reading is essential.** Educational tv discovered during the 80’s that kids wanted to watch episodes of a show multiple times before they wanted to see a new episode. Children don’t learn everything in a single exposure, things sink in over time. Rereading a book gives a child a chance to fix earlier mistakes, focus on content and make higher level connections and inferences.

7. **Little books are designed to be gone through quickly.** Expert skiers can handle runs stretching for miles, expert readers can read War and Peace. Beginning readers are helped by books they can move through quickly. Just because a child doesn't spend a lot of time on a book, doesn't necessarily mean they aren't getting something from it.
8. **Don't fix every mistake.** This one is huge and deserves its own 20 page article explaining why, but here are three quick reasons: 1, the goal is for the child to develop expertise, including expertise in figuring out if something is wrong. 2, since things sink in over time, a child will often fix their own mistakes (or notice a mistake they made) during re-readings. 3, it's a lot less fun reading if someone is constantly pointing out your mistakes. If the child is making a ton of errors, it's the wrong book, but if it's only a few, try holding back on pointing out mistakes you hear and see what happens by the second or third reread.
9. **If you're going to fix a mistake, be patient and pick an important one.** If you're a beginning skier learning to ski, odds are you're making tons of mistakes. It just isn't that helpful to have the instructor point out every one, often the same mistake over and over. Be patient, listen for a while, and after some thinking, try picking out one mistake the child made that you think if the child figured out, would be the most helpful.
10. **If one book reminds a kid of a different book, encourage that.** Throughout the series of books, pictures get reused, animals get revisited, story lines get developed (or will as we design more books). All of this is part of the bigger goal of reading—making sense of the things we read. If a child is looking at a picture of a tiger and remembers a different book with a picture of a tiger, see if you can find it and let the child describe what triggered their thinking. If the child notices that tomatoes become seedlings and that reminds them of watermelon seedlings, that is the type of conceptual development we've designed these books to encourage.
11. **It doesn't take great literature to help a kid learn to read.** Yes Goosebumps and Captain Underpants can be annoying, but a critical piece of this system is understanding that these books are temporary supports for developing a life long skill. If you learn to ski and you like it, you take yourself off the well groomed bunny slopes to go find new terrains. But bunny slopes and short skis help beginners get started.
12. **Writing and reading go very well together.** If you're printing your own books, try printing one sometime without the text, or cut out some key words – turn a reading activity into a writing activity. The two systems are incredibly mutually supportive. Letting a kid make their own book using their own words is a great way to ensure interest and help them get the connection between oral language and text.
13. **In case you're nervous, little books are not "whole language"** . Obviously, there's not a lot of literature content in a book that says, "a fish, a dog ...". The books here are designed to support decoding, attention to print, learning high frequency words—they just do it while emphasizing meaning, coherence and accessible language and content at the same time. The goal is a set of books that support a balanced approach to literacy development rather than a set of books designed to support skill development.