

Why we should all take time to read for pleasure

Learning Resources Manager at Downe House, Mrs Jenny Hill discusses the benefits of reading for pleasure and why everyone should make time to read.

Time is our most valuable commodity. We live in a high-speed world where technology controls, tracks and takes up an ever-increasing amount of the 86,400 seconds that we are allotted each day of our lives. According to OFCOM, 15 to 24-year-olds now spend four hours of every day on their smartphone and check them every 8.6 minutes.¹ The use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram is at an all-time high with mounting evidence that it can seriously affect our health and wellbeing – there's now a recognised mental health condition called social media anxiety disorder. In addition, teenagers have to face the inevitability of tests and exams that may well determine the opportunities they will have in the future. Commitment to academic study and revision is essential for success, but that's yet another time-eater and stress-inducer.

So how do we ensure that we stay healthy and mentally well, that we find some calm and peace in this frenetic world, but equally, that we perform academically to the best of our ability? We all know the benefits of exercise, eating healthily and having face-to-face social interaction with friends and family but have we stopped to consider the very real benefits of taking time to pick up a book?

Why reading for pleasure is good for your academic achievement

Reading for pleasure has been defined by the National Literacy Trust as 'reading that we do of our own free will, anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading'.² It is really important to be making a choice to read because of an intrinsic desire to engage with stories and learning, not because of extrinsic factors such as your teacher or parent giving you a reward for doing so. It's when we develop that love of books, that desire to curl up and get lost in other worlds and lives that magic starts to happen. According to research carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on education and reading, reading for enjoyment at the age of 15 is a strong factor in determining future social mobility.³ In an earlier report they found that reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status.⁴ A 2013 study from the Institute of Education found that children who read for pleasure, or who read at home, do much better in spelling, vocabulary and even maths tests right up to the age of 16⁵ and a key review of research literature in 2006 by Clark and Rumbold identified these main benefits:

- Reading attainment and writing ability
- Text comprehension and grammar
- Breadth of vocabulary
- Positive reading attitudes
- Greater self-confidence as a reader
- Pleasure in reading in later life
- General knowledge
- A better understanding of other cultures
- Community participation
- A greater insight into human nature and decision-making.²

The body of research that support the academic benefits of reading for pleasure is compelling, but the benefits don't end there.

Why reading for pleasure is good for your mental health

A study by Dr Josie Billington, the Deputy Director at the Centre for Research into Reading at the University of Liverpool, in conjunction with Quick Reads, concluded that regular readers feel happier about themselves and their lives.⁶ Her study explored the emotional, social and psychological benefits to adults of regularly reading for pleasure and showed that books can not only educate but inspire and motivate us to make positive changes in our lives. The study also reveals that reading can lead to a more tolerant and empathetic society where we have a deeper understanding of and respect for other people and cultures. This makes perfect sense when you realise that each time you pick up a book, you imagine what it's like to be that character and compare their reactions to how we imagine our own would be in similar circumstances. Billington also refers to reading as the ultimate stress remedy and highlights the significant effect that a good book can have on our feelings of contentment and fulfilment.

“The positive effects that reading can have on society are widely documented and what has been made abundantly clear by this research is that books can help us to enjoy the little things in life and be happier in ourselves; a useful and timely reminder for all of us to draw on the many benefits that only reading can deliver.”⁶

There is also growing evidence that regular reading can reduce the symptoms of anxiety and depression and that it can even be effective in lowering the risk of dementia in later life.⁷

Making time to read

Overwhelmingly, the most common reason that people give for not reading is lack of time. It's seen as an indulgence rather than a necessity. Yet, as discussed, the evidence for the benefits of reading for pleasure is overwhelming – just half an hour every day (30 minutes less of scrolling through Instagram or one less episode of a favourite TV show) will reap untold rewards.

Choosing a book

The quality and range of fiction and non-fiction available for young adults to read has never been better. Some of our best contemporary authors - Malorie Blackman, Suzanne Collins, John Green, Veronica Roth to name but a few – all write in this genre and address many important coming-of-age issues. Bullying and popularity, sex and pregnancy, racism and exclusion, drugs and violence and dysfunctional families are all addressed but in a safe environment between the pages of a book and without embarrassing or patronising adults getting involved. The days when young readers graduated from Enid Blyton and C.S.Lewis to Agatha Christie and classics like Dickens, Hardy and Austen are, thankfully, long gone - there has never been a better time to be a reader.

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August 2019

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