

The phrase 'Reading for Pleasure' has been bandied about so regularly in schools these days, it's as if the connection between the two had just been invented. However, the fact, that for many children reading might not be connected to a pleasurable experience, is desperately sad and worrying, so this emphasis is absolutely crucial, not just at school but at home as well.

I am delighted about this incentive, since it underpins everything we do here at Norfolk Children's Book Centre. As Michael Rosen has said "children should read widely and often" and it's clear that the more children explore books, the more they discover and the better they become at choosing titles which give pleasure.

Although we have 60,000 books here, I'm in no doubt – and especially since I am a former children's librarian – that it is the public library that is the essential environment for supporting developing readers. Children need regular access to books in order to become enthusiastic readers. Where else can children be offered the opportunity to regularly select for themselves ten random items which they can take home and enjoy? Children may have books of their own but these titles have often not been selected by them but by parents, grandparents, godparents, etc. Learning to choose is fundamental and libraries offer a golden opportunity to hone this important skill. Family trips to the local library emphasise to children that reading is an activity that many people enjoy, and offers them the chance to browse and discover new titles. Wonderful books like Shaun Tan's *Arrival*, Vivienne Schwartz's *Is there a DOG in this Book?*, Kes Gray's immensely funny *Oi Frog*, the astonishing picture books of Jackie Morris, Colin Thompson, David Wiesner and others, along with a variety of enticing non-fiction titles, might be randomly discovered on display stands which discerning librarians have filled with a tempting variety of delights.

At Norfolk Children's Book Centre we try to emulate the atmosphere of a wonderful children's library. You can browse, discover delights, chat about favourites and stay all day, relax, read, eat biscuits and pet our magical and mysterious black cat, Daisy.



We emphasise that the development of the reading habit should begin very early so that babies identify books with pleasure and when the experience is combined with a cuddle and the undivided attention of a parent or carer it becomes a delight for every child. Without regular and early access to books, it's clear that children approach reading at school at a huge disadvantage. We reinforce to parents how valuable

reading aloud is in those early years – and indeed throughout childhood – not only for entertainment or for bedtime comfort, but to develop concentration skills and language development, to introduce a wide range of vocabulary, grammatical constructions, to encourage questioning, to explore conflicts and emotions. Hearing stories enables children to predict outcomes, to identify with characters and to be curious about new concepts and experiences explored in stories.

Reading for some children is mostly associated with those ubiquitous characters Biff and Chip but, however much children relate to the exploits of this pair, it is unlikely that they are going to develop into voracious readers unless their reading experience is enriched by a wide variety of wonderful books. When we suggest that reading for pleasure is the key to developing readers, and that the teaching and reinforcing of decoding skills should be left largely to the professionals in school, many parents are often relieved, and encouraged to continue sharing and enjoying books with their children well





I'm very much aware that some of the children who are brought to our shop by their parents are already confident and avid readers who have an expectation that a book should fulfil their requirements. It's very telling that many of these children have lots of books at home, use school libraries stocked with an excellent collection and are regular public library users – nevertheless they widen their search by using every opportunity to discover appropriate reading material to feed their addiction.

For others, their visit might be the first time they have been in a place dedicated to the joy of reading. We encourage schools to bring classes of children to the shop, and we also take collections out into local schools where teachers give us the opportunity to talk about favourites, read aloud and identify fantastic new titles.

into the Junior School years and beyond, thereby laying down the foundations of a life-long love of reading.

The hilarious exploits of Mr Gum, Tom Gates' diaries and Jeremy Strong's comic stories, the madness of Philip Ardagh, the wonderful Toraq in Michelle Paver's brilliant *Wolf Brother*, family tears shed over *Goodnight Mr Tom*, *Dogger*, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *War Horse*, and *Wonder*, memorable characters like Kayley and Hal in *One Dog and His Boy*, Lara in *Northern Lights*, and members of the irresistible Casson family – what rich pickings there are for children to discover. At the end of the day at Norfolk Children's Book Centre, the coffee table is covered with piles of books we have recommended, enthused about and indeed read aloud to visitors young and old.



We have many authors visiting the shop each year, and our bookshop walls are scrawled with authors' signatures, poems and jokes, along with wonderful illustrations by the likes of Chris Riddell, Michael Foreman, Nick Sharratt and many more. The excitement of a young fan when he realises that he is standing on the piece of carpet that Michael Morpurgo stood on to write his name on the wall, or that Charlie Higson or Andy Stanton really did that drawing or wrote that joke is unforgettable.

Supporting readers and the reading habit is our primary purpose here at NCBC and observing the children who visit us. This provides a fascinating insight into how children approach reading. Here in the shop, children sprawl on the floor, wedge themselves in unlikely corners, lie on the settee clutching *Hugless Douglas*, curl up next to the cat. Teenagers often hide away completely, round the back of the teen section. They often gather a pile of books before settling down, recognising that some titles won't meet their needs – and indeed some might not bear the scrutiny of anxious parents – so they select a variety to explore in peace.

This is a place for children who know about reading, delight in the pleasure, understand the special relationship between reader and book, but we make sure it's also a place of discovery and exploration where children can realise – maybe for the first time – that there really is something to be said for this reading business.

