

October 2025

“The hook, not the book” – harnessing interest pathways to engage new readers.

The reading for pleasure crisis among children and adults in England and the UK is well-documented. Just **1 in 2 adults regularly read for pleasureⁱ** and only **29% of 10-year-olds in England report that they like reading ‘very much’**, compared to an international average of 46%.ⁱⁱ Research conducted for World Book Day shows that **a fifth (21%) of children say they can’t find anything they want to read at home**, rising to 25% at school.ⁱⁱⁱ

This impacts educational attainment and life outcomes. One in four children hasn’t reached the expected level of reading by the age of 11. Many of these children will struggle to keep up at secondary school.^{iv} It is estimated that if all children in the UK read for pleasure almost daily, this could boost average lifetime earnings by £57,500. Over a generation it could raise the UK’s GDP by £4.6 billion annually. Both of these figures reflect the way that reading for pleasure can shape the likelihood of getting good GCSE grades, their subsequent employment options and even mental wellbeing.^v

What are interest pathways?

The Reading Agency’s proven method of harnessing the power of interest pathways^{vi} – topics, themes or existing hobbies and interests – to engage people with reading is an idea that is gaining traction more widely across the sector. The idea behind “the hook, not the book” is that children or adults should focus on finding a type or topic of book that appeals to them, and view reading the book as an extension of their existing interest, rather than reading as a chore, homework or something that only counts if it is “worthwhile literature”.



[i] The Reading Agency (2024) [The State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024 Report](#)

[ii] Lindorff, Stiff and Kayton (2024) [Progress in International Reading Literacy Study \(PIRLS\): National Report for England, 2021 p. 109](#)

[iii] World Book Day (2024) [Judgement and expectations are putting children off reading - World Book Day](#)

[iv] DfE (2024) [Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

[v] British Land (2021) [The Power of Reading](#); Yun-Jun Sun & Barara J. Sahakian et al. (2023) [Early-initiated childhood reading for pleasure: associations with better cognitive performance, mental well-being and brain structure in young adolescence](#)

[vi] Hicks (2024) [Crisis Intervention, The Bookseller](#)

Respondents to our 2025 State of the Nation adult reading survey were asked to choose up to 3 things that shaped their choice of reading content and "relevance to my other interests or hobbies" was in the top 3 (below genre and author/illustrator), selected by 20% of respondents.^{vii} In the 2024 survey, **38% of UK adults agreed that watching films or TV shows had got them interested in reading books, and 26% said the same for podcasts/audiobooks.**^{viii}

How does The Reading Agency's campaigns use interest-pathways to encourage adults to read?

The Reading Agency runs annual reading programmes focused on using thematic interest pathways to encourage reading and cultural engagement. Previously, these have included the Big Eurovision Read, Big Jubilee Read, Big Sporting Read and most recently, The Big Tasty Read, which is currently underway. These campaigns encourage libraries and readers to celebrate all things related to the theme, have curated book lists with reads on that year's topic and work with partners to bring together organisations, individuals and libraries.

Feedback from last year's Big Sporting Read campaign shows that the most common theme among survey responses related to how the campaign leveraged interest pathways. Sport acted as an interest pathway into reading, including for audiences who don't typically read or engage with libraries, such as students and young men. It also introduced reading as a pathway into sport for those who are less active. Selected quotes in line with this theme are highlighted below:

- "[The campaign] helped with the boys in the school who do not like reading as such."
- "I definitely noticed younger men who would only come to use the toilet spending more time under the display."
- "The book list engaged some students who love sport and don't usually like to read, but they did access these and it also encouraged the less active to read about sport too."
- "On the back of [the campaign] we included a sporting theme in our annual 'Festival of Words' and held two events that directly related to sport. This helped attract new audiences, especially men."

[vii] The Reading Agency (2025) The State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2025 Report (upcoming)

[viii] The Reading Agency (2024) The State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024 Report



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How does the Summer Reading Challenge tap into interest pathways?

Every year the Summer Reading Challenge has a new theme. While participants can choose any books they like to read, libraries run activities in line with the theme and put on displays of related books, which can help pull in children who may not be into reading, but are interested in the theme. It can also help readers to explore new hobbies and activities. These interest pathways can function in different ways.

For example, in 2023, over 1 in 6 parents/caregivers (17%) said their child's love of reading encouraged them to engage with that year's theme (sports and games), compared to 1 in 7 (14%) in 2024 (creativity). This suggests that while both themes supported children into trying out a new activity, the 2023 sports theme was particularly successful in drawing enthusiastic readers into physical activity. **One parent said that "the theme was great for not only encouraging children to read but to be more active as well. It was a good hook for those children who have an interest in sports but are perhaps more reluctant to read. My child loves reading and being active so this was perfect for her."**

In contrast, the proportion of respondents who said that their child's interest in the theme encouraged them to engage more with reading was 3 times higher in 2024 than 2023. This indicates that the 2024 creativity-focused theme may have been more effective at sparking reading interest among children who liked creative activities. One participant "was very excited by this year's theme as she likes doing arts and crafts, but after reading the books and taking part in the themed activities she became even more creative and loves to read at the library now!"

Our research

The Summer Reading Challenge is the UK's biggest reading for pleasure programme for children, and helps get approximately 700,000 children into libraries each year.

In 2024, 70% of children who took part said they now feel more confident reading.

[More Research](#)



During the 2024 Challenge, over **13 million** books were read and issued through libraries



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