



### **Bridging the Summer Reading Gap**

**A break from books can mean big losses for at-risk readers, but schools can help keep pages turning and minds sharp.**

By Anne McGill-Franzen and Richard Allington

December is fast approaching and you can feel the heat of summer in the hallways. Days are longer, attention spans are growing shorter, and everyone is ready for a break. Teachers are planning for their holidays. Children are ready to shrug off the mantle of "student" for the break, along with the backpacks, the math homework, and the quizzes and tests. But just because school is out, it doesn't mean that reading and learning should stop. Teachers know that many children can't afford to take such a long break. Young readers who don't continue to read over the summer – especially those who are reluctant or at-risk – are likely to lose crucial ground. One summer off can sometimes mean a whole school year of struggling academic performance.

### **Summer Reading Loss**

Regardless of other activities, the best predictor of summer loss or summer gain is whether or not a child reads during the summer. And the best predictor of whether a child reads is whether or not they own books. While economically advantaged kids often have their own bedroom libraries, disadvantaged kids usually depend heavily on school and classroom libraries for books to read.

Understandably, summer reading loss or "summer setback" is a bigger problem for children from low-income families. Their reading achievement typically declines an average of three months between December and February, while that of typical middle-class students improves or remains the same. This means that a summer reading loss of three months accumulates to a crucial two-year gap by the time kids are in middle school, even if their schools are equally effective.

Children need to read outside of school. Research clearly shows that the key to stemming summer reading loss is finding novel ways to get books into the hands of children during the summer holidays.

### **Libraries Fall Short**

With schools and their libraries closed for summer, public libraries might seem like a logical solution. Even when public libraries are open, disadvantaged children may lack transportation. Research shows that public library use among disadvantaged children drops off when a library is not within walking distance of their home.

We also know that teachers and librarians in depressed communities, are the least likely to allow children to check out books because these schools can't afford to risk the loss of the few books they have. While economically advantaged schools are able to buy multiple copies of favourite books, deprived schools face serious limitations.

### **Motivation Matters**

Limited access to books is only part of the reason for summer reading loss. While we know that the more children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, it is less clear how to motivate children to read. Put simply, children whose reading skills are not strong – who have a history of less-than-successful reading experiences – simply aren't as interested in voluntary reading as are those children with a history of successful reading experiences.

Lower-achieving readers are typically asked to read books that are too difficult. Without books that can be read easily with good comprehension, these less-skilled readers will not improve. All of their cognitive energy is devoted to trying to figure out unknown words – which produces a laboured, word-by-word reading with little understanding of, or engagement with, the books in their hands.

These disjointed reading experiences fail to help children consolidate skills, and perhaps most significant, such experiences make children feel unsuccessful. They offer little incentive to persevere and, ultimately, participate in the world of readers. Children don't just need books; they need the right books. Providing children with books that match their skill levels and their interests is an important first step in encouraging voluntary reading. See [www.scholastic.com.au](http://www.scholastic.com.au) for information on Lexile Framework and matching readers to books. Or call us toll-free on 1800 021 233.

### **Holding Their Ground**

While the statistics on summer reading loss seem discouraging, there are answers. Studies suggest that children who read as few as six books over summer maintain the level of reading skills they achieved during the preceding school year. Reading more books leads to even greater success. When children are provided with 10 to 20 self-selected children's books at the end of the regular school year, as many as 50 percent not only maintain their skills, but actually make reading gains.

### **Summer School Reading**

In our current research, we are looking for the most effective ways to support the summer reading of children who struggle with high-stakes assessments and are at risk of failing in school. Our work suggests that if children have opportunities to listen to, discuss, and read books on topics that they select, or books about characters that they love, they develop extensive background knowledge that can scaffold their independent reading and sustain their engagement.

### **Getting the Books Out**

School and classroom book collections are typically the largest and nearest supply of age-appropriate books for children. When teachers and school libraries can find ways to share books with students over summer, the gains can be notable. This low-cost, low-intensity intervention obviously can't address the many and varied reading needs of all students. But it is a starting point. With planning, there are simple ways to ensure that books become available to any child at any time of year – but especially in summer, when the reading should be easy.