



professional development

running a book club or reading group in your school



primary school



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The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon,

70 Merrion Square,

Dublin 2, Ireland

Children's Books Ireland/Leabhair Pháistí Éireann

First Floor, 17 North Great Georges Street, Dublin 1, D01 R2F1

Telephone: 00 353 1 8727475

info@childrensbooksireland.ie

www.childrensbooksireland.ie

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Children's Books Ireland is the national charity and arts organisation that champions every child's right to develop a love of reading. Our mission is to inspire a love of reading in children and young people in Ireland, to share our expertise and enthusiasm with the adults who guide and influence them, to champion every child's right to excellent books and live literature events and support the artists who make that goal possible across the island of Ireland.

Continue the conversation with us at [www.](http://www.childrensbooksireland.ie)

childrensbooksireland.ie where you will find more reviews, articles and up-to-the-minute news.

If you'd like advice about developing your reading culture, get in touch with our Education Outreach Manager, Becky Long on becky@childrensbooksireland.ie

Is é **Leabhair Pháistí Éireann** an carthanas agus eagraíocht ealaíon náisiúnta a thacaíonn leis an gceart atá ag gach páiste grá a chothú don léitheoireacht. Tríd an iliomad gníomhaíochtaí agus imeachtaí, tá sé d'aidhm againn suim i leabhair a spreagadh i bpáistí, tuiscint níos fearr a chothú ar a thábhachtaí is atá leabhair do dhaoine óga agus feidhmiú mar acmhainn thábhachtach do dhaoine a bhfuil suim acu i leabhair do pháistí in Éirinn. Is é an misean atá againn grá don léitheoireacht a spreagadh i bpáistí agus daoine óga in Éirinn, ár gcuid saíneolais agus díograise a roinnt leis na daoine fásta a bhíonn á dteorú agus ag dul i gcion orthu, tacú leis an gceart atá ag gach páiste ar leabhair den scoth agus ar imeachtaí litríochta beo, agus tacú freisin leis na healaíontóirí ar fud oileán na hÉireann a fhágann gurbh fhéidir an sprioc sin a bhaint amach.

Bí ag comhrá linn ag childrensbooksireland.ie áit a bhfaighidh tú tuilleadh léirmheasanna, ailt agus an nuacht is déanaí.



Running a Book Club or Reading Group in Your School

The Benefits of a Book Club

Book Clubs or Reading Groups as discussion groups can be hugely beneficial for every pupil; everyone from reluctant or struggling to confident readers can benefit from being part of a community of readers, where they can engage in book chat and informal debate with their peers. Book Clubs naturally support the development of the skills associated with reading alone and reading as part of a group, such as empathy and imagination, respectful listening and creative expression as well as offering pupils the chance to expand their knowledge. Book Clubs also augment pupils' social and emotional skills, teaching them how to engage in debate, form opinions, and develop their own preferences, whilst also respecting others. There's nothing like a disagreement over a book to illustrate the fact that we all have different interests and viewpoints! In this way, Book Clubs can be a wonderful expression of reading for joy in your school.

Setting up a Book Club in Your School

Book Clubs come in different shapes, sizes and formats and they can be adapted to fit your particular school context. Access to space, staffing and budget will all influence the kind of Book Club that you can set up. For maximum impact, your Book Club needs to be a long-term, sustainable project.

A Book Club in your classroom, especially if you teach a junior class, might simply be dedicated time set aside to recommend books to pupils that they can read during class and bring home to read. It could happen at the end of your organised read aloud/storytelling time and can be a wonderful way to introduce younger pupils to the concept of Book Talk and Chatter, where chatting about books and sharing ideas and responses is celebrated and encouraged.

Book Clubs can work on a school-wide level, especially if it's possible to hold meetings during lunch break. A Senior Book Club could be for fifth and sixth class pupils who already have a love of reading, and their enthusiasm might draw in friends who wouldn't normally see themselves as readers. If interest is high, you could rotate membership term by term, giving everyone a chance to take part. You could even think about themed Book Clubs, where readers might focus on fantasy books or on science fiction, or manga and graphic novels.

To kickstart your Book Club, you could sign your class or group up to become a Junior Jury for the KPMG Children's Books Ireland Awards. This is one of our unique programmes for schools, book clubs and libraries, designed to raise awareness and encourage enjoyment of contemporary children's books, in both English and Irish, by Irish and Irish-based authors and illustrators. Participating classes or book clubs can sign up in January and make their own selection of suitable titles from the books on the awards shortlist, which is announced in February. A specially designed activity pack is available free of charge to guide groups in their reading, and some additional supports are available for schools, including copies of the books and, for schools in Northern Ireland, in-person and virtual visits from the shortlisted authors and illustrators, thanks to support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

At the end of this process each group is asked to collectively score the books they have read. In May, the Junior Juries' Award is presented based on the cumulative scores from thousands of readers around the island.

The programme is suitable for all ages and classes and could be the perfect way to start your Book Club, with a readymade reading list and resources that you can use in your meetings. Groups can even attend the shortlist announcement in Belfast or the winners' ceremony in Dublin, or tune in online to watch the announcements live.

<https://childrensbooksireland.ie/what-we-do/kpmg-childrens-books-ireland-awards/junior-juries-programme>

Staffing

The first thing to consider in a busy school environment is who will run/facilitate your Book Club?

- Class teachers (possibly at lunchtime or after school).
- Classroom assistants.
- School librarians or literacy coordinators.
- Pupils, acting as group leaders within a larger classroom Book Club (this work would well with fifth and sixth class pupils).
- A local librarian, a parent or guardian, principal or deputy principal.

Once you've identified supervision and facilitation, you can look at formats that work across smaller and larger settings:

- If you teach in a smaller school, you can involve a whole class group in a Book Club to make it an inclusive, immersive experience. It can augment independent reading time, standing as a dedicated timeslot in your schedule for Book Talk. You could even team up with another class's 'Club' for key dates like Hallowe'en to recommend spooky books to each other, or at Christmas time to have book party!
- This whole-class approach often works for junior classes as well, where everyone is a member of the Book Club, and everyone will get the chance to talk about their favourite book or story as the term unfolds.
- If you work in a larger school, it might be more feasible to run a lunchtime Book Club, where readers can either read and discuss a book together or talk about their own reading. Membership of the group could rotate, so everyone in the class has the chance to take part.
- Again, in a larger class, you could split your pupils into multiple groups within the larger Book Club. This would work really well for a themed Book Club where each group might read a different book in a particular genre or around a subject they find interesting, all feeding into a central discussion group that you facilitate. This can be a lovely teaching moment for respectful listening, exploring leadership positions in a group, the idea of representing and articulating other people's opinions on their behalf, etc.
- If your school has a dedicated school library and a librarian or literacy coordinator who can facilitate Book Clubs for different classes, there's scope to have themed Book Clubs, or Clubs that focus on shorter reads to help boost the confidence of reluctant or struggling readers.
- Book Clubs should be about reading for joy and if you don't want to formalise your Book Club by choosing books that everyone has to read, you could try the Bring Your Own Book Club. Readers, both pupils and staff, read and talk about the books that they're reading, expanding on the idea of sharing their personal reading with the group. It can be a book they've just started or one they really want to talk to their peers about, even if they've read it ages ago. Everyone reads at their own pace, at their own level, and according to their own interests, while leaving loads of scope for recommendations and ideas for future reading. During meetings, the emphasis is on Book Talk and the big advantage of the Bring Your Own Book Club is that if a pupil misses a meeting, they won't be lost the next time they're able to join.

Book Clubs and Book Choice

The one golden rule for Book Clubs and Reading Groups – and the rule that should underpin the reading culture of every school – is that pupils must be offered a huge variety of books to make sure they have every possible chance to find the book that will hook them into reading and let them see it as something that can bring them joy. They need access to books that are quick and easy to read, books that are longer and more challenging, graphic novels, non-fiction books about topics that interest them, books that help them explore new ideas and cultures. For some pupils, reading and discussing a book with their peers in a Book Club or Reading Group will offer them the support and motivation they need to see themselves as readers. For more confident pupils, who already see themselves as readers and are actively reading independently, both in school and at home, the chance to be a part of a reading community can be empowering and stimulating and can help them continue their reading journey.

Not every book that's chosen for a Book Club, or for a pupil's own reading, will be a success – but that's ok! Encountering a book that they don't like or that doesn't capture their attention will help pupils figure out their reading preferences, and their friends' reading preferences, and they'll develop their reading identity as they read widely in an informal environment. Learning how to articulate why they don't like a book and what elements of the narrative didn't appeal to them is a really useful exercise in critical thinking and expression. Being able to talk about their reading experiences with their friends and with their teacher brings joy into their reading.

Teachers should never underestimate their influence as reading role models, and their capacity to act as promoters of good books. As adult readers, we often rely on and trust recommendations from our peers, which leads to the discovery of new authors and previously unfamiliar genres. The same is true in the classroom. Through their teacher, pupils can potentially access and engage with books that might never have been on their radar otherwise. Primary school teachers in particular are in a perfect position to say to one of their pupils, 'You should try this book, I think you'll really like it', precisely because of the meaningful relationships they can build with their class. Receiving a recommendation from a trusted adult who has taken the time to get to know their likes and dislikes can be incredibly impactful for a young reader.



How to Choose Books

There are numerous different ways to choose books for a Book Club, and these can often depend on the age of the participants.

- **Prescriptive choosing** involves the teacher or facilitator choosing all the books that the club or group will read. This has some obvious logistical advantages in that it makes sourcing books slightly easier, especially if you have a connection with your local library. It does, however, mean that pupils have no input into the selection so a knowledge of their likes and dislikes and the relative likelihood of their motivation to engage with a book is paramount. It's good to bear in mind that while this option might be logistically easier, it's less likely to succeed in appealing to reluctant readers or participants. You can make this method slightly less prescriptive but still efficient if you chat to your group beforehand about the kinds of books they like to read or survey them if you'd like a more in-depth insight into their reading habits (see the Open University Hub in the Further Resources section below).
- **Child-led choosing** puts the class and the individual pupil at the heart of the selection process. Each participant has a chance to choose a book for the whole group to read, with guidance if needed. Involving pupils in the selection process gives them a chance to exercise their autonomy and reflect their own interests in the books they choose, but those choices will need to be moderated for suitability. (You can make this easier by putting together a reading list that pupils can choose from).
- **Popular voting** can offer a good hybrid option. Teachers put four or five books onto a ticket for pupils to vote for. You can refresh the ticket every time you need to choose a book for the group, or you can use the results to determine the order in which you read the books. You could have a discussion about the least popular book before you read it and see if the group is willing to try it. This option works well where there are a number of class sets or multiple copies of particular books available to read from the school or public library.
- **Thematic choosing** can add a really dynamic element to a Book Club. Each session is built around a theme (family life, friendship, nature, etc.) or a genre (animal stories, fantasy, science fiction, adventure, mystery, non-fiction, etc.). Rather than everyone reading the same book, the Book Club members have a large selection of books to choose and discuss. One obvious advantage of this is that you don't need multiple copies of the same book, and the reading can often continue outside of the Book Club if individual pupils like the book they chose enough to recommend it to their peers. It can also be a great way to show young readers how different authors and illustrators can engage with the same themes.



General Tips for Choosing Books

- When choosing books, focus on what you know about your pupils and play to their interests.
- Think about chains of recommendations; in other words, books with similar themes, settings, character development, etc. ‘You liked this book, so I think you’d like this one, too ...’
- Explore books by the same author or illustrator, especially if your pupils like the narrative or visual style, being sure to engage with new and contemporary books.
- Have a Book Club noticeboard where you can keep track of the books you’re talking about, and where pupils can post their thoughts and responses.
- The best Book Club books are challenging reads, in a good way. That means that the narrative generates issues for discussion, such as the treatment of a particular character, the depiction of a moment in history, societal attitudes, or even just the way the characters treat each other or overcome a dilemma. Books with lots of cliffhangers are great, too!
- If you’re the one choosing the books, don’t focus too much on pleasing every reader in the class. Firstly, it’s often impossible but disagreement can be really productive in a discussion, and deciding why you don’t like a book is an important part of becoming a reader.
- Reading the first book in a series with a Book Club can be a wonderful way to encourage reading for joy outside of school – if the series is exciting and gripping, reading the first one won’t be enough for the group! You’ll find reviews, reading guides and reading lists on our website and pupils in senior classes can also browse the website themselves, both for ideas for the Club and for their own reading. <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations>



Peer-to-Peer Recommendations

Supporting children to share their book recommendations with each other is a huge part of building a reading community.

- Set up a recommendations section on your classroom noticeboard where students can share their latest reads.
- Help pupils to engage with the language of book reviews, talking them through phrases like ‘page-turner’, ‘fast-paced’, ‘well-written’, ‘hilarious’, etc., so they can really express their opinions on the books they read and encourage their peers to read them as well.
- You could have a Top 10 List of what your pupils are reading independently, both fiction and non-fiction, on the reading noticeboard in your classroom and this will give you inspiration for the books you might choose for your Book Club sessions.

The Book Club Meeting

The first time you meet with your Book Club, you might like to set aside time to establish a Book Club Code with your readers. This can be as simple as everyone pledging to give each book a go and promising to listen to each other respectfully, even if there are disagreements! A Code can give pupils a real sense of agency and responsibility, and it doesn’t have to be too formal, but everyone should be accountable to it.

General Tips

You can also use the first session to set expectations for your readers. It’s important that they know that the Book Club is all about reading for joy and helping them figure out what kind of books they like.

- See if your Club likes the idea of keeping a reading journal so they can keep track of what they’re reading and what they think of each book they engage with. This isn’t a homework task, rather it’s a tool that they can use to help them develop their reading identity. Being able to think about and reflect on the books we read and why we like or dislike them is part of the joy of being a reader.
- You can also use the first session to talk about the books that will be coming up for the Club as the weeks go by and what themes they might have in common – if you’ve picked the books yourself, you could give the Club hints and see if anyone can guess any of the books on your list.
- One of the most important things is to give the Club a name – brainstorming this might take up the whole first session so don’t be surprised if this happens!
- As a teacher or a staff member, remember that you’re more of a facilitator in the Book Club. In other words, your Club should be doing more talking than you, once you’ve kickstarted the discussion.
- For your own practice, you can keep a notebook to track the reaction to the selected books, who’s engaged, who might need extra support to get involved.
- Resist the urge to quiz your readers about the fundamentals of the book; this is not a reading comprehension task. What you want is for them to respond creatively and critically to what they’ve read, so ask them to think about the characters and the setting, how they would feel if they found themselves in a such a scenario, if they felt the writing was believable and why.
- Book Clubs are, first and foremost, about reading and enjoying books, but some groups might benefit from doing fun activities as well, especially if they find it hard to articulate their response to a book. They could:
 - think about what an alternative ending might look like,
 - write to the author or illustrator with any questions they might have about the story,
 - redesign the book’s cover,
 - invent new characters.

Anything at all to get them thinking about the story itself and how it’s made them feel! You can also check out the Resources section on our website where you’ll find Junior Juries’ activity packs and other dedicated packs that can give you some inspiration for discussion: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/resources-ideas>

Meeting Structure Suggestions

- You could start the meeting with everyone talking about their **personal reading**. This serves a couple of purposes. Firstly, you'll very quickly get a sense of what your readers like to read, whether they have a reading culture at home and, crucially, if they need a bit more support on their reading journey. It's also a chance to swap recommendations. Personal reading in this context should be as expansive as possible; some children like to cook or bake so they'll be reading recipes; others are avid gamers so they'll be reading a lot of dialogue or gaming magazines. Some might like to read comics or magazines. It all counts! Ultimately, you want everyone to value and enjoy the reading they do, and take inspiration from each other and from you.
- If you want reading aloud from the book to be part of your meeting, you might model it at the beginning of the Club, and encourage your readers to take over as the weeks go by. One very important rule to be implemented is that no one has to read out loud unless they want to.
- Book Clubs are all about productive book talk and as the teacher or facilitator, you want your readers to do most of the talking and to feel confident about sharing their opinions and perspectives. You can use open-ended questions to get the discussion going, and focus on characters (are they believable or not?), language (is it descriptive? Is it easy to understand? Were there any phrases you liked?), and plot (what was the most exciting part? What was the funniest?).
- Help your readers make comparisons and connections with other books. Even if you don't end up discussing the book you're supposed to be talking about, the book talk itself is so valuable because it's time dedicated to reading and being part of a reading community. It makes it clear to the child that just because they didn't like *this* book, they can still be a reader. You could use a combination of questions like these:
 - What do you like about the book? (general answers first, then get specific)
 - What don't you like about the book?
 - Do you see any patterns or themes in the book?
 - You've finished the book; do you have any questions for the author?



Next Steps

Once you've set up your Book Club, you can really start to lean into the community aspect of reading together.

- Talk about your Book Club on your school website or social media platforms. This can be as simple as writing a quick review of the book you're currently reading or putting up a quote of the week. It could even be a video review, to separate the process of talking about books for Book Club from any reading comprehension work which is curriculum-related.
- Depending on when your Book Club takes place, you could invite parents and guardians to meetings, so that children can share their favourite books and introduce the grownups in their lives to the idea of the Book Club.
- You could set up parallel parent and guardian groups to read the same books that you're reading with your Book Club. This could be an informal and pressure-free way to boost reading cultures at home and to give the adults in your pupils' lives the chance to enjoy some excellent children's books and boost their own confidence as readers. You could also encourage this group to link in with your local library, both for books and for a place to meet.
- Knowing about and enjoying children's books is really important for teachers and staff in a primary school, so you could set up a staff book club or reading group, emphasising the whole-school reading culture, and creating a community of practice that can focus on the joy of reading for joy!
- Sign up to the Children's Books Ireland Schools newsletter to keep up to date with events, reviews, webinars, and workshops on reading for joy and choosing books. <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/>



Further Resources

When it comes to choosing books, Children's Books Ireland have reviews, reading lists and reading guides that you can access for free: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations>

You can download Daniel Pennac's The Rights of the Reader poster here: https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/HO4_Rights_of_the_reader.pdf

The Open University's Reading for Pleasure Hub is a great source of information, research, and resources, especially for reading surveys, which you can adapt to your class: <https://ourfp.org/2023/01/26/pupils-reading-surveys/>



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