



What is reading for children with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties?

Reading can usefully be divided into two areas for children with S/PMLD.

1. To read letters, words and symbols or pictures (i.e. decoding)
2. To **discover by reading**

The focus on teaching early reading in schools is heavily weighted towards developing the first area, and the Department for Education have laid out their *Reading Framework* [here](#). This guidance states that 'reading engagement is not possible if children struggle with the basic mechanics of reading' (DfE, 2021). Some children with S/PMLD will be beginning to decode print using phonics or whole word reading strategies and you can find guidance about ways to support this on our website [here](#).

For many of these and other children with S/PMLD though, becoming a fluent reader may not be in their future. A key question for practitioners is therefore what does a meaningful reading curriculum look like for children with S/PMLD? And what might they discover by reading?

Why should children with S/PMLD read for pleasure?

Robinson and Harris (2019) define readers with S/PMLD as "equally important, active consumers of books who have much to gain from reading for pleasure".

These gains include, but are not limited to:

- Reading supports children to develop shared attention with another person or group of people and to enjoy a "gratifying social exchange" (Robinson and Harris, 2019, p. 25). This has a positive effect on their wellbeing.
- It supports and extends language and vocabulary development.
- With the exception of some sensory story formats, books are in the same format for all children, regardless of the extent of their additional learning and development needs. For this reason, they have a special place as "ordinary artefacts of literary citizenship" (Robinson and Harris, 2019, p2).
- For many children, reading for pleasure supports them to encounter worlds beyond their own that they would not otherwise experience.
- Perhaps most importantly, children with S/PMLD have the right to access reading for pleasure as part of a broad and balanced curriculum, and as part of the ordinary life that we must aspire for them to enjoy.

What should they read for pleasure?

It is important to value all forms of reading for children with S/PMLD. A 'text' can be a visual prompt or timetable, the child's name card or signs around the school. However, high quality picture books (sometimes with a simplified text and/or supported by sensory props) occupy an important place in reading for pleasure for these learners.

- Stories that focus on events, people and activities that are already familiar to the child are a good starting point.
- Stories with a predictable, repetitive and/or rhyming structure support children to anticipate what is coming next, and to join in with the story.
- Books that incorporate interactive elements such as flaps, textured pictures and sound buttons support early engagement with books and enable the child to be a more active participant.
- Stories that provide a more accessible experience of a text that the child's peers are reading (particularly in upper Key Stage 2) can support meaningful inclusion in the class literacy curriculum. For example, if Year 6 children are studying 'Macbeth' by William Shakespeare, '[Meg and Mog](#)' by Jan Pienkowski provides a rich and concrete experience of the language of witches and spells.
- Stories that provide links with the key words and topics the child is exploring (Our [topic plans](#) always include lists of linked high quality picture books).
- There is a starter set of books to support reading for pleasure that feature many of these elements included at the end of this handout, some with hyperlinks to sensory story plans and other linked activities.

How can we support reading for pleasure for children with S/PMLD?

For most readers with S/PMLD, their early access to reading for pleasure will be entirely dependent upon support from a trusted adult reading partner, with whom they can co-construct the story. This adult can be thought of as the "bridge" between the child and the text (Robinson and Harris, 2019, p. 23).

- When we as adults appreciate the value of reading for pleasure alone, the quality of the child's reading experience is significantly improved. Choosing quality picture books that will appeal to the child based on our knowledge about them is crucial, as well as making sure we as adult supporters are clearly enjoying the story too! This may include using different voices, talking to the child about what we see in the pictures as well as what the words say and being playful by turning the pages slowly to build anticipation or using a loud/soft voice as appropriate.
- Allowing the child to choose which story to read often builds engagement. For all children with S/PMLD it is a great idea to build up a collection of books that the child prefers and to keep these together in a basket or box.
- Finding a good time for reading is important, and this will be different for every child. For some children, reading for pleasure while their peers in class are doing the same thing will be important, while for others having regular reading times across the day may support the child to relax and make the transition to another part of their day.
- Choosing the right location for reading for pleasure is also very important and will differ for different children. For some learners, sitting with an adult on cushions in the class book corner may be the best place while others may prefer to share a book at their table.
- For many children at the earliest stages of reading for pleasure, one of the greatest joys is to share the same story several times over, and to be able to read it every day. This will also support them to become more involved in the act of reading as they anticipate what is coming and begin to join in.

Further sources of information

<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/booklists/1/100-best-0-5/>

<https://www.booksfortopics.com/topics>

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/24001/8/Harris-ImpactBooksSocial%28AM%29.pdf>

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A starter set of picture books to support anticipation and enjoyment for children with Severe Learning Difficulties.

