

Building Reading Communities with Lovemybooks

Since its launch in 2015, Lovemybooks has been used widely by schools to support their home school reading programmes, to help promote reading for pleasure, and a creative approach to literacy learning. We are particularly pleased with how much the website was used during lockdown. Already popular, from March to July we saw a steep rise in visits to the website. Schools drew on our resources for creative book-based reading activities when looking for home learning tasks and parents used the website for guidance in book selection and ways to engage their children. We are delighted that we were able to provide much needed help and support to both schools and families during school closures.

What is Lovemybooks?

Lovemybooks is a free web-based resource designed to encourage parents and children to enjoy sharing books together. As literacy experts (formerly the senior education team at The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) we wanted to share our knowledge and experience of children's literature and creative teaching approaches and recognise that parental involvement is key to children's progress.

The website includes over 200 book-based activity pages based on carefully chosen books for children aged 0-11. There are old favourites such as *Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell and *Charlotte's Web* by EB White and also a wide and expanding range of engaging, recently published books such as *Look Up!* by Nathan Bryon and Dapo Adeola for younger children and *Beetle Boy* by MJ Leonard for older children. Visitors to the site can search for books and ideas by age group (0-3, 3-5, 5-7 and 7-11) or by theme, with a wide range of topics including space, toys and our world.

Each book-based activity page has an introduction, advice on how to share the story, how to start a conversation about the book, ideas for role play and arts-based activities, and research opportunities. The emphasis is on play and having fun with the story. There are links to online resources and author videos or publisher trailers. The books for older children include downloadable activity booklets.

The website also has a 'how to' section with instructions for making simple puppets and folded books. One recently added page, which has proved very popular, describes how to make a home reading den. We have 'Top Ten' lists which include new picture books, books about children living in conflict situations, books with girl power and many more. General information and advice for parents on 'becoming a reader' and 'reading with your child' is also a feature. As a response to the need for online resources for home learning during lockdown we expanded our resources for over 7s, including more novels and adding narrative poems such as *The Highwayman* and *Macavity the Mystery Cat* with creative activity ideas.

Headteacher Julian Grenier describes how they used the website during Lockdown:

'Lovemybooks was central to our programme during Lockdown to support families whilst children were at home. It is so simple to share with links which could then take parents into all sorts of different directions with their children's learning. Every week a member of staff was videoed reading one of our core books, and also a link to LMB so that families could follow through further suggested activities together. We used WhatsApp broadcast groups. Whilst levels of broadband and computer ownership are low in our area, there is a higher than average ownership and use of Smartphones so this proved a very effective way of reaching families. A short message and a link on WhatsApp works way better than a traditional newsletter with suggestions of activities to do at home. We evaluated our home learning programme in the summer and found an increase in the number of parents sharing books and 50% of parents surveyed spending more than 30 mins reading chatting or playing with children.'

Why is Lovemybooks needed?

Research has shown the positive impact that parents can have on children in terms of their interest in books and reading, and the impact of reading for pleasure on children's cognitive development, future success and wellbeing (Knowland.V & Formby.S 2016: NLT; Sullivan,A. & Brown,M. 2013, UCL; 2002:OECD) Yet in our experience of working with parents we have found they often underestimate their potential impact on their child's reading, lack

confidence in being able to help and welcome advice on choosing books and how to share them and are surprised at how pleasurable it is too.

On our 'Dads sharing books with children' page a small group of dads talk about reading with their young children.

I love reading with Luke, it's a great way of sharing an experience together, a privilege really. Some of my earliest memories of Luke as a baby, looking back, are of reading to him. That always felt good, when you are a new parent and you are still trying to work out what you are actually meant to be doing, what your role is, reading to him always felt like a good thing, like somehow you knew what you were doing. (Joe, a dad)

What sort of approaches are recommended?

Lovemybooks emphasises reading aloud to children, booktalk and playful approaches. The power of reading aloud to children is often underrated in terms of its potential for switching children onto the joys of reading, building language, developing the imagination, empathy and cementing bonds through shared pleasurable experiences. (Roche.M : 2019). This is not only important with young children but also when they learn to read for themselves. (Knudsen et al 2019)

We provide simple guidance in developing booktalk based on the work of Aidan Chambers, encouraging adults and children to share opinions and explore puzzles as two readers together, rather than quizzing children on their retrieval skills.

Our activities involve active engagement aimed at triggering children's imagination, enabling them to step into stories and explore them from the inside through role play or retelling a story with simple props or puppets. This approach is informed by our own research into the *Power of Reading* project (UK Literacy Association, 2010) which demonstrated the importance of capturing children's imagination and making links with children's play.

'For children, reading needs to be an active pleasure, it isn't just about saying the words on the page. It is important to unlock the pleasure of reading and get children to see you can play inside the book, that the

book is saying something interesting, that you can have a relationship with the story and the characters. This is what Lovemybooks is all about.'

(Olivia O'Sullivan one of the co-founders of Lovemybooks)

Building reading communities with Lovemybooks

Increasing numbers of schools are embedding Lovemybooks in their reading programmes. Head teacher Alex Law explains why:

Lovemybooks is a treasure trove of well researched guidance on books and reading. Book choice and reading for pleasure are prioritised. It's practical, clear, easy to find things, supportive and inspirational. The knowledgeable team at Lovemybooks have done the groundwork and as a school we can just run with the ideas. Although it is online there is definitely a focus on the sharing of stories and books in nurturing way, developing a love of story and the joy of a book. The guidance for parents is informative but really manageable. The make and do section is great and the resources can be easily found or don't cost much.

Many schools and settings that are recommending Lovemybooks to parents, introducing the website to new parents at induction meetings or during home visits and providing regular links in newsletters or via social media.

Some schools are going further, such as Hill Mead School in Lambeth, south London, which has built Lovemybooks into its reading support programme, via parent reading cafes using our resources and guidance.

Deputy head Becky Lawrence says,

'Lovemybooks is special because the resources and ideas have been developed for parents. We have relaunched our parent reading cafés as Lovemybooks Cafés to promote reading at home as fun and creative. This has transformed them, parents are so engaged, they recognise Lovemybooks is a resource made especially for them.'

We hope that as schools move out of 'lockdown' they will continue to make good use of our resources to build links with their families, and to help build parents' confidence in supporting their children's reading development. We hope that Lovemybooks will help to build whole school communities with reading for pleasure at its core.

Sue McGonigle Co-Creator www.lovemybooks.co.uk

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