

Junior Secondary Guidance Officer – Anna Willis

Parents at a loss to find activities for their children during COVID lockdowns can encourage them to escape into a book



New research shows how reading books can help young people escape from their sources of stress, find role models in characters and develop empathy. Recent media reports have highlighted a concerning [rise in severe emotional distress](#) in young people. [Isolation and disruption](#) of learning in lockdown have increased their anxiety. Given the recent [surge in COVID-19 cases](#) and lockdowns in Australia, parents and educators may look to connect

young people with enjoyable activities that also support both their wellbeing and learning.

A lot has been written about the role of regular reading in [building literacy skills](#). Now, my [findings](#) from a BUPA Foundation-funded research project on school libraries and wellbeing provide insight into how books and reading can help young people deal with the wellbeing challenges of the pandemic. The findings suggest books can not only be a great escape during this challenging time, but also offer further wellbeing benefits.

Escaping from a world of stress

We know that adults who are avid readers enjoy being able to [escape into their books](#). Reading for pleasure can [reduce psychological distress](#) and has been related to [mental wellbeing](#). Reading-based interventions have been used successfully to support children who have [experienced trauma](#). In a [recent study](#), around 60% of young people agreed reading during lockdown helped them to feel better. My research project confirms young people can use books and reading to escape the pressures of their lives. As one student [said](#):

"If you don't know what to do, or if you're sad, or if you're angry, or whatever the case is, you can just read, and it feels like you're just escaping the world. And you're going into the world of the book, and you're just there."

Connecting with role models in characters

If you enjoy reading, there's a good chance you have favourite characters who hold a place in your heart. The project found young people can find role models in books to look up to and emulate, which can help to build their resilience. [A student described](#) her experience reading the autobiography of young Pakistani activist and Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai:

"I thought it was incredible how no matter what happened to her, even after her horrific injury, she just came back and kept fighting for what she believed in."

Other research has linked connecting with characters to [mental health recovery](#), partly due to its power to instil hope in the reader. Building relationships with characters in books can also be used as "[self-soothing](#)" to decrease anxiety. Young people also celebrate their [affection for book characters](#) in social networking spaces such as TikTok, where they share their enjoyment of the book journey with favourite characters.



Developing empathy through reading

Research supports the idea that reading books [builds empathy](#). Reading fiction can improve [social cognition](#), which helps us to connect with others across our lives. My [previous work](#) with adult readers found some people read for the pleasure they get from developing insight into other perspectives, to “see the world through other people's eyes”. In the project, [a student described](#) how reading books helped him to understand others' perspectives. He explained:

“You get to see in their input, and then you go, ‘Well, actually, they’re not the bad guy. Really, the other guy is, it’s just their point of view makes it seem like the other guy’s the bad guy.’”

Your teacher librarian can help you

If parents are not sure what books will best suit their child's often ever-changing interests and needs, they can get in touch with the teacher librarians at school. Even during lockdown they are usually only an email or a phone call away. The library managers in the project played an important role in connecting students with books that could lead to enjoyable and positive reading experiences. For example, a library manager explained that she specifically built her collection to make sure the books provided role model characters for her students. She based her recommendations to students on their interests as well as their needs. To support a student who had a challenging home life, she said,

“I recommend quite a number of books where we’ve got a very strong female character [...] in a number of adverse situations and where she navigates her way through those.”

Fostering reading for pleasure is a [key part of the role](#) of the teacher librarian. They create [spaces and opportunities](#) for students to read in peace. They also encourage them to [share recommendations](#) with their peers. In challenging times, many parents are looking for an activity that supports their children's wellbeing. And as reading is also linked to strong literacy benefits, connecting them with books, with the support of their teacher librarian, is a smart way to go.

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