



Is this book the right fit?

HOW TO CHOOSE AND EVALUATE READING MATERIALS FOR YOUR CHILD

Finding a book at the right level for your child is not always straightforward. A book might look appropriate but turn out to be too hard. A book your child picked themselves might be too easy to offer much benefit. And for children with disabilities, standard grade-level recommendations may not be useful at all. This brief is meant to help families make that call, whether you are choosing something new or trying to figure out whether what your child is already reading is working for them.

When your child is reading at the right level, they can actually focus on what the text is about. They can follow the story or the information, react to it, and stay interested. A book that is too hard pulls all of their effort into getting through the words themselves, and meaning is the first thing to go. A book that is consistently too easy may not be doing much for them either, though as we will explain, "too easy" is more nuanced than it sounds.

This applies across reading situations: a book you are reading aloud to your child, a book you are reading together, a book your child is reading on their own, a book they want you to buy, or a worksheet that came home from school. The question is the same. Is this text at a level where your child can get something out of it?

Signs a Book is Too Hard

The clearest sign that a book is too hard is that your child cannot follow what is happening. If you stop after a page and ask what just happened and your child cannot tell you, the text is probably above their level. Dense vocabulary and complex sentence structure can block comprehension even when someone else is doing the reading aloud, so this is true whether your child is reading independently or you are reading to them.

Other signs include needing help on most words on a page, getting to the end of a paragraph and not knowing what was said, getting frustrated, shutting down, or simply asking to stop. If your child is reading on their own, you may notice them skipping over words, guessing wildly, or losing their place often.

The five-finger test is one quick way to check for independent reading. Have your child read a page and hold up a finger for each word they do not know. If all five are up before the page is done, the book is likely too hard for independent reading. This is a useful starting point, but it is one signal among several. A child can know most of the words on a page and still find the sentence structure or content too complex to follow, and a child can stumble on several words and still be enjoying and following the story. Use it as a check, not a rule.

Signs a Book is Too Easy

A book may be too easy if your child loses interest because nothing in it is holding their attention. They might say it is boring, or babyish, or read through it in seconds with nothing much to say afterward. That kind of disengagement is worth paying attention to.

A book is not necessarily too easy just because your child knows all the words. Reading materials they can move through with confidence has real value. It builds fluency, supports enjoyment, and can be especially helpful for kids who have had hard experiences with reading. Returning to favorites, reading something familiar, or reading something that simply feels good is a legitimate use of reading time.

The concern is when a child is consistently reading well below their level and that is the only thing they are reading. Over time, that limits the new vocabulary, ideas, and language they encounter through text. A reasonable approach is to mix in some books that offer more of a stretch alongside the easier ones your child enjoys.



What a Good Fit Looks Like

A well-matched book is one where your child can follow what is happening, encounter some new language without being overwhelmed, and stay engaged with the content. There are practical things to look for, especially in a setting like a library or bookstore where you are choosing on the spot.

Interest matters more than almost anything else. Your child will get more out of a book on a topic they are genuinely curious about than out of a better-leveled book that bores them. Prior knowledge also helps. A child who already knows about a subject can handle more complex language because their background helps fills in the gaps.

Illustrations and visual support make a real difference, particularly for younger children and children with disabilities. Good pictures help a reader follow the story, anticipate what is coming, and make sense of unfamiliar words from context. This applies to picture books, graphic novels, illustrated chapter books, and nonfiction with photographs and diagrams.

Format matters too. Short chapters, clear structure, and a predictable layout make a book more manageable than a dense unbroken block of text, even at a similar vocabulary level.

A simple on-the-spot check: read the first page or two together and watch what happens. Is your child asking questions, making predictions, reacting to the content, or wanting to keep going? Those are good signs. Are they staring blankly, asking to stop, or unable to say anything about what just happened? Maybe not.

Alternative Formats to Increase Readability

Not every reader needs the same kind of book. Several specific formats can be especially helpful depending on where your child is.

Decodable Books

Decodable books are written using only the phonics patterns your child has already been taught. For a child early in phonics instruction, these books let them practice sounding out words they have actually learned, rather than running into letter combinations they have not been introduced to yet. They build confidence because your child can apply what they know directly to the page. If your child is receiving phonics instruction, the school can usually tell you which decodable books align with what they are currently working on.



Hi-Lo Books

High-interest, low-level books (often called hi-lo books) are written for older readers at a simpler reading level. They are designed for kids whose reading skills are below grade level but whose interests and life experiences are appropriate for their age. A middle schooler who would feel insulted by a picture book but is not yet ready for a typical middle school chapter book is exactly who these books are for. Topics include sports, mystery, adventure, and other content that holds an older reader's attention. School and public librarians can usually point you toward them.



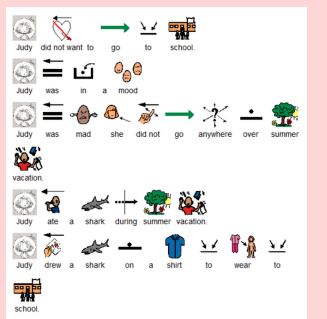
Audiobook Pairings

Audiobooks paired with print allow your child to follow along in the text while hearing it read fluently. For children with dyslexia or other decoding difficulties, this can open up books that would otherwise be out of reach. Your child is still engaging with the text, building vocabulary, and building comprehension. Many libraries lend audiobooks for free, and some platforms are specifically designed to allow this paired listening and reading.



Adapted Texts

Adapted texts are modified versions of books designed for readers with many different needs. Adaptations might include simplified language, repeated phrases, picture or symbol supports alongside the text, large print, or braille. They let children experience age-appropriate stories and content even when the original version is not accessible to them. Schools and online publishers are good sources for adapted texts.



If you have tried to figure out whether a book is the right fit for your child and you are not sure, or if you are not sure where to start in the first place, your child's teacher, reading specialist, or case manager is a good person to ask. They can tell you specifically where your child is and what kinds of texts make sense for them right now. They may also be able to recommend specific titles, series, or formats that align with what your child is working on at school.

Key Takeaways

- Families are not expected to diagnose a reading problem or deliver a reading program at home. The most useful role is to notice patterns, write them down, and share specific examples with school staff.
- The right level is one where your child can follow the content, encounter some new language, and stay engaged. Too hard means meaning breaks down. A book that consistently feels too easy may not be offering much, but easier reading is not automatically a problem if your child is enjoying it.
- Interest in the topic is one of the strongest predictors of whether your child will engage with a book, and it often matters more than the reading level alone.
- For children with disabilities, specific formats including decodable books, high-interest low-level texts, audiobooks paired with print, and adapted texts may help make reading accessible and engaging.
- If you are not sure whether a book is a good fit, your child's teacher or case manager can help!

The BRIDGE Initiative

The Building Resources for Inclusive Development and Growth in Education (BRIDGE) Initiative is a partnership between Rutgers University and the New Jersey Department of Education Office of Special Education. BRIDGE works to strengthen the partnership between families and schools so that students with disabilities can make steady progress toward their learning goals. Research consistently shows that students do better when families and educators work together, and that is especially true for students who receive special education services. BRIDGE focuses on making that partnership easier, more informed, and more productive for everyone involved.

Families navigating IEPs, evaluations, services, and accommodations are often working with information that is unfamiliar, processes that can be complex, and a system that can feel difficult to navigate. Educators, in turn, want to engage families meaningfully but may not always have the tools, resources, or capacity to do so. BRIDGE works at the intersection of these two needs, building resources and technical assistance that help families understand and support what their child is working on at school and help schools build practices that bring families in as partners.

There are already resources out there about special education and family engagement, but it can be hard to know what is high quality, what to trust, and how to put any of it to use. The BRIDGE Portal brings together a growing collection of curated materials, all free and designed to be practical. To explore the BRIDGE Portal, sign up for our mailing list, or learn more about ways to get involved, visit cesp.rutgers.edu/bridge. New resources are added regularly, and we welcome feedback from families and educators about what would be most useful next.