

No to Age Banding

Comments from Relatives

As a home-educating parent of several avid readers, I see how my children approach books. Sometimes they pick up books which are "too old" for them - sometimes the subject-matter is too difficult, or the text too small, or the prose too complex. They briefly try a few pages, then set the book aside and choose another. Often, a few months or years later, they return to the same book and read it cover-to-cover.

Sometimes they pick up books which are "too young" for them. Sometimes these are books they've known for years, and they simply want something easy and familiar. Sometimes they read these books swiftly, then move on to something else.

To tell them that certain books are for children younger or older than them would interfere with this natural process of learning to love books in general and certain books in particular.

DL, Home-educator and parent

Parent of three reluctant boy readers who wouldn't dream of reading anything with an age other than their own on it!

SM, parent

I want my children to read what they want, what entertains them and what makes them happy, not what they are expected to read.

RG, parent

Age banding, in my opinion and from what I have observed as a mother, columnist and a community arts manager, serves no purpose apart from helping lazy parents and educators match books to children. Anyone who loves reading will know that it doesn't work that way.

DL, mother and children's book columnist

My girls are free to explore their reading - books, newspapers, websites etc. and it is my responsibility as a parent to contextualise it and guide them when needed.

NG, parent

I cannot say that I always agree with my daughter's choices, but it always gives us a chance to discuss the whys and wherefores of our differences of opinion. Any restriction of that would only restrict the relationship that we both have with books.

AP, parent

I am a mother of four and a grandmother of two and am appalled at the thought that books should be age banded. All my children have enjoyed books and I encourage my young grandchildren at every opportunity to enjoy them too. Age banding is completely unnecessary and could be harmful since a child coming slowly to reading is likely to be put off if they find themselves only able to cope with a book banded for a younger child.

ET, grandparent

The best guidance of all is for parents to encourage children to read what they are interested in and to read regularly. This must continue past the early years and into teens. Age banding adds nothing other than a likely additional cost to the books and may have discouraged my son from reading up and terrified my less capable daughter.

BS, parent

In an age where more and more children would rather play computer games than pick up a book - do we really need to steer them further in that direction? Surely the 'powers that be' can see that age banding books is lunacy? We have all coped without it for many, many years - so why start now - especially as it serves no valid purpose that I can see. I am appalled at the thought of it - as a mother and as the wife of someone with dyslexia!

EC, parent

My daughter has watched both my mother and me ignore everything around us whilst having our 'head in a book', and the pleasure we get every Christmas/ Birthday from a huge pile of book presents. She is also a keen reader and has often been slightly above her age for reading as she reads mine.

My son, however, has struggled all the way through school with reading - and we've struggled trying to interest him in books. The only interest he showed was in 'Harry Potter', and he still hasn't finished book 4. He was diagnosed a year ago as dyslexic, which partly explains the problem. Even now, he rarely reads for pleasure.

Age banding books is not the way forward. Educating the staff in shops selling books is a better idea, or adopting the method used in Waterstone's (for example) where the age banding is on the shelf, not the book. Alternatively, why don't they just ask the child / parents what they're into and buy something related!

TK, parent

I am writing to add my name to the list of those not in favour of age-banding. I do this as a researcher of children's literature, and as a parent of three sons. All of them are enthusiastic and capable readers but none of them would benefit from having their reading categorised by age. If this happened, my 18-, 16- and 13-year olds would fall into the approximate age bands of 43 - 45, 10 - 20 and 5 - 12. Would knowing this enhance their reading? I think it unlikely.

KW, parent and PhD student specialising in children's books

I do not agree that age banding is good, unless you look at it from a business aspect, and people will buy more instinctively. Quality however, not quantity, is how to ensure our youth read more. Cheap books with an age band will put potential readers off, and directly parents, grandparents will stop buying them because, just like the inspired drive to market toys the response will be, "You have lots of books you never read - it's a waste of money."

MY, parent

The argument from the Publisher's Association that it is about helping parents choose is entirely spurious; in fact it must be a lie. Any good bookshop clearly 'age-bands' books already; there is a shelf for 9-12, another for young teenagers and so. The only explanation is that it is part of the drive for prescription and conformity which we are in the grip of at the moment. No doubt in some way they think it will help increase sales too.

I recently bought a book for my niece. I took the trouble to read a couple of pages of the book in the shop and I checked for myself that it was likely to be at about her level. That is, I made a little effort; in this system presumably I should just have picked the nearest book which had her age stamped on it?

I hope you cripple the publishers involved.

JW, Uncle

Children should be encouraged to read books whatever their age.

JM, parent

Publishers' marketing departments already can and do guide booksellers to place books on age-labelled shelves in bookstores, to help parents, but having the age printed on the book is a BAD, BAD idea. I hope this idea is abandoned before my baby son is much older!

BW, parent

Two out of my three boys struggle to read at their age level. The likely outcome of this proposal is that they will not read again.

DM, parent

This is yet another attempt to standardize an area of life. Children (and adults) are varied; their skills do not conform to a pre-determined table.

My daughter's reading skill was always well above her age group but she was still reading the *Bunty* comic whilst at university, where she got a first class honours degree in English. If you want to foster a child's love of books but are uncertain which to buy, either ask the parents or give a book token, which is a store full of possibilities.

MT, grandparent

Will this make schools nervous about allowing children to read books when the child is younger than the age band for the books? Imagine the stigma for less able readers whose books will be younger than they are. Children who have difficulty reading are already challenged enough and don't need any more to cope with.

SM

An utterly ridiculous idea. How many wonderful books will our children miss out on reading because they feel they are "too old" for them at the point they discover them?

KS, mother

I have just spoken to my 10 year old son about this proposal and he thinks it is a bad idea. He's very clear and so am I that we would NOT want to have someone decide for us which book he can read. Part of the skill of reading is being able to judge which book is appropriate. We use the '5 words or more' rule taught at school (if you can't read more than 5 words on a page then the book is a bit above your level). Putting an age range on the outside of a book means children will stop thinking for themselves and may miss the opportunity to be so engaged in a book that they read beyond their expectations. There are much better ways of increasing sales of books than this method. Any marketing department worth their salt should be able to offer a few ideas.

TC, parent and psychologist

When he was about 6 years old, my son read, and loved *Eagle of the Ninth*. At the time, we could not get hold of the sequels, but then saw them in his school library. The teachers told him he could not borrow them as they were for an older class, and would not let me, his mother, borrow them during a holiday so he could read them. Fortunately, they were then republished, so he got to read them, but he still thought adults were idiots! Fortunately, he is now Home Educated and for the last two years has absorbed books both childish and adult, fun and challenging, and from fiction to particle physics.

Age banding books is damaging to both ends of the spectrum, to those less advanced and to those like my son. It will also give moral justification to those who thought my son should read 'appropriate' books - how I now regret all those wasted years when he was forced to read pathetic books instead of wonderful ones, not just the classics but those being produced by some of the writers of today.

JA, parent

We need more involvement not less. Perhaps we could actually learn something, simply by having a healthy exchange with our youth about our own expectations and their curiosities, instead of a number guiding our decisions.

Reading is its own sort of freedom, of liberation. And it is different for everyone of us. There is never a need to stifle this.

MI, parent

In fact, I'm hard pressed to think of any "good" reason for instituting these labels at all, and will absolutely NOT purchase books that are labelled in this way for my family.

AM, parent and librarian

As a GP and mother I feel very strongly that there should be no age banding on books. Aren't we controlled enough already? My children still enjoy many 'too young for them' books and I would hate anything to spoil that. What about the children with special needs? What messages does this pass on to them?

Dr KM, parent

Putting an age range on books will mislead children and parents alike - every child is different and should be allowed to select a book that appeals to them and let them discover for themselves if they find it suitable or not. Isn't that part of the fun? Read the short description on the back, look at the cover and make your own choice!

KB, parent

As a mother of a dyslexic 9 year old who is, as his primary school constantly points out, "reading below his age level", I strongly disagree with age-banding. I'm just happy he is now able to read and enjoys reading. When he goes to a bookshop or the library and chooses a book that he really wants to read for the sheer fun of enjoying the text and pictures, I don't want him to be reminded that he isn't as good a reader as he could be: his school does a good enough job of destroying his confidence with colour-coded reading levels. Publishers, please note.

VM, parent

This misguided scheme could severely limit the range of books chosen.

PW, grandfather

I've never heard of such a stupid idea as this.

SC, parent

It is a huge turn-off.

BL, parent

What a ridiculous idea. Having just watched my (very intelligent) teenage daughter and friend joyfully re-visit their favourite childhood books last week, I was once more reminded that books are ageless.

KW, parent

I would like to lend my support to your campaign. I'm an avid reader and an aunt-in-law who very much wants to encourage my nieces to read as widely as possible.

NP, Aunt-in-law

I would like to sign your petition as a concerned Aunt who struggled to learn to read as I have dyslexia, which is enough of a stigma without having to read book with an age stamped on them.

LB, Aunt

I will decide with my children what is appropriate for them to read and I do not need someone else's opinion on the "age" of a book to decide for me. If this had been in place when I was a child, I would probably have been prohibited from reading some of the most influential books of my lifetime. I hope this effort will get this misguided attempt stopped.

SAL, parent

The best age for children to read a book is when they want to read it, not when an adult, least of all someone who can't possibly know them, decides it is suitable for them.

RJ, parent

There are so many reasons to say no. My son is six and is reading. My husband and I have always been involved in cultivating that innate love for reading and all the loveliness that comes with experiencing a good book. One of the largest issues I see with implementing "age guidance" is that it gives some people another reason to not participate in their child's (or any child's) growth. The idea that this would never become over-used or get out of hand is ridiculous. Perhaps, if some would just take the time to have a healthy exchange with our youth about our personal expectations countered with their curiosities and desires, this sort of issue would not have to be addressed. We need more of our own involvement not less. I find the mere idea of this to be nothing less than appalling.

MI, parent

I would just like to add my support to your valuable campaign against the bizarre idea of putting recommended ages on to books. I certainly cannot subscribe to the idea that this scheme would in any way enhance the sales of books - one can only imagine the devastating and abortive effect that 'age-suitable' banding would have had on the 'Harry Potter' phenomenon for example.

AB, parent

It's a bad idea! If adults want help with choosing books for children they can ask the bookseller or librarian. But the best idea would be for them to take along the child to choose for him/herself. As a grandparent I have been doing this since the children were able to sit up. You soon get to know what sort of thing they will like next.

DF, grandparent

I think it is wrong that age banding is happening, and hopefully with enough support, we can put an end to it. I am in total support of this cause.

MD, parent

Surely part of fostering a love of books and the pleasure of reading comes from being able to browse collections, book shelves, libraries and finding something new, challenging and exciting? Only being encouraged to read books from a particular 'section' or from a 'recommended list' can only stifle imagination and creativity.

EG

Books need to be made accessible to all and this guidance does not do that.

TW, parent and home-educator

Children should be encouraged, even challenged, to read widely and above their perceived capabilities. If parents are worried about the content of the book, perhaps they should take a greater personal interest in what their kids are reading. The most constructive thing a parent can do is engage with their kids about the book. This age-banding nonsense is a ploy to get the reading public to surrender their freedom to choose - and to deprive writers of their creative freedom.

JT, parent

I am completely against this proposal. Children read what they are ready for, when they are ready - and, indeed, revert happily to earlier favourites when they feel the need.

AS, grandparent

I completely agree that age banding is a ridiculous and potentially damaging idea.

SK, parent

I have to say - as an ex-teacher - that I think this is a very bad idea. I thought it was bad enough when I took my twins to Waterstone's in Inverness on Saturday to spend the book tokens they had won at their school's prize giving, and each section of shelves had a large green card affixed to it with the chirpy words, 'For confident readers,' and 'For the less confident reader' etc. It was very noticeable that my twins - who are very good readers - avoided the shelves for 'the less confident reader' even though some of their favourite authors had been put there so goodness knows what will happen when the books themselves have stickers on them.

EG, parent

Do parents have to produce proof of age to buy books now?

FMcK, parent

Both as the aunt of eleven-year-old twins, and a writer of adult fiction myself, I think this has to be the craziest, most counterproductive, idea anyone could ever come up with. All that will happen is that children will feel they are being stigmatised as 'dunces' if they should happen to enjoy authors whose books somebody - it's always that anonymous 'somebody' - has decided were written for children younger than they are, or labelled 'nerds' if they read books which are supposedly for older children.

As adults we all read across the board, dependent upon whether we want escapism, or something deeper. Would we, as adults, want our books age-banded, which is simply a thinly disguised euphemism for, *How poor a reader are you?* I think not, so why should we inflict this on our children?

Dr M G, aunt

I am a writer and artist but also a grandmother and I believe age-banding on books is absolutely ridiculous.

BR, grandmother

I do not believe that books should carry a restrictive label like alcohol and cigarettes! Reading all sorts of things opens the mind, and we have enough closed minds in the world today as it is. Each child finds its own level of reading and should not be restricted. When I was at school, our house was populated with many books that were not run of the mill children's books, but they encouraged my interest in the world around me, what I could not see - history, geography, science and so on. If one talks about "unsuitable reading" I would ask who is it that wishes to play God in this respect. Everyone's tastes differ, and let's face it, if a child wants to read something they shouldn't, they will find a way to anyhow!

CT, grandmother

Just butt out of our lives and let us be parents/grandparents, etc, to OUR children. I say "NO" to age-banding of literature. We are not clones, we are individuals with individual reading skills and expectations.

EC, grandparent

I am the grandmother of a beautiful intelligent dyslexic 9 year old. I give her occasional tutoring to help with her reading which I estimate is about 6 year old level. ... She loves books and hates that she has so much difficulty reading. I know that if the cover said suitable for 6 year olds she would be too embarrassed to even be seen to be reading them. There are conversely young children in her school who have been reading novels such as *What Katy Did* since they were only six or seven. Anyone buying a book for a child has only to open the book and read the first lines to know whether it would be appropriate for their child and if in doubt could ask the bookseller.

Therefore I am totally against the labelling of books into age groups and don't feel it will in any way increase sales of books.

MH, grandmother

The majority of parents, I would think, can tell what books are 'suitable' for their child's age, and can also tell if a book that they can manage with their reading ability is really one they should be reading. I have to be careful when reading news and so on because she can read it too. Please add our names to the petition, as concerned parents who want our children to enjoy reading, and not have what they can read dictated to them. Surely it is important that children read. Whether some bureaucrat thinks it is 'too easy' or 'too difficult' is irrelevant. It is up to the parents, teachers, etc to decide what is suitable for the children that they know.

KN and CN, parents

In my daughter's class at school there is nearly a year age difference between some of the children and I know that there is a lot of difference in their reading ability. As a parent of a 6 year old girl who loves books and reading, I agree that there should not be age banding on books. I think that if there is enough information on the cover about the contents in the book, and looking through the book, it should be easy enough to decide if it is suitable for your child or not. As children get older they will be able to decide themselves what books they like and will look out for them.

R-AS, parent

I have a daughter who is an avid reader and has Down's Syndrome. She is now twenty-five and I am sure age banding books would have been detrimental to her reading progress. I am also a childminder and although we wallow in gorgeous picture books throughout the day I do like to add the occasional challenging story or poem. I would hate to see age ranges allocated to any books.

MG, parent and childminder

My severely dyslexic daughter reads the *Divine Comedies* because they fascinate her, but worked towards that massive undertaking via the 'Rainbow Fairies' range when she was about 12-13 years old. They gave her joy in reading and, thankfully, no one ever suggested they might be aimed at children 4 years younger! Joy in reading is the important thing not age banding!

LB, parent

I have two children of different reading ages: 6 and 8 years old. Every night their reading interest ranges from the picture books to the 7-9 guidance on the library shelf. They just follow their instinct associated with a day event, or reflecting a personal mood or even tiredness. I just encourage their freedom of choice.

AC, parent

As a parent who has worked very hard to get my children to read sometimes in a younger category than they should be at I think this idea could be very damaging. I am all for the age sections in bookshops and libraries as a guide but actually on books is a potential turn off for children.

DL, parent of dyslexic children

As a mother of a diagnosed dyslexic, who has gone on to get a 2-1 degree and is a successful teacher and about to make me a grandmother, I fully support the initiative to stop age banding books for children.

MH, parent

At school the national curriculum has ensured that children no longer have a rounded education, but are factory-farmed to pass test after test. They are very aware how well of how poorly they are doing at school in literacy and numeracy through streaming, no matter how subtle it is. For goodness' sake, please keep this out of reading for pleasure because that is what books are all about - pleasure - and it is a personal thing which should not be made public. If age-banding goes ahead it will deny some children the pleasure of reading because it has the potential to stigmatise. It may not affect the most confident readers but it is likely to affect the reluctant readers - and they are the ones we need to encourage to pick up a book.

AG, parent

As a parent and former children's librarian, still with a keen interest in children's books, I just want to say how much I support your stance on age banding. It seems an unnecessary move by the publishing industry, one that will create a barrier for children (and those choosing books for them) to be free and flexible in their reading.

LJ, parent

Why do we think that there is no law to say, for example, what age children have to be babysat for, or may be left alone? Because age does not always denote stage of development or maturity, and when it is safe is up to the parent's knowledge of what his or her child is capable.

JF, grandparent and Children and Families Social Worker

It will serve to stigmatise children who are outside their predicted age range which can only cause further difficulties throughout their education.

JB, parent

I feel that age banding will begin to halt children's progression and ability to expand their young minds.

CG

As the mother of a ten year old dyslexic boy, I am very much against the idea of age banding a book. The reality is that if he had the slightest hint that a book was perhaps "too young" for him, i.e. a younger age band, there is no way he would be persuaded to read it. He is already sensitive about his reading level and this would be the final nail in the coffin.

FB, mother

I too think that age banding books is a terrible idea, both as an English teacher and as a mother of a dyslexic boy who is trying so hard.

MEH, parent and teacher

I read what I want to read and always have done and often share the books I enjoy with my children and grandchildren. Age is not a factor nor should it be.

DF, grandparent

Some of my grandchildren are nearly the same age in years, but not in understanding or reading ability. ... They will also dip into some of their past favourites, enjoying both equally.

MR, grandparent

Age restrictions are ludicrous. I was reading well above my age level by the time I was 5. Would you really want to stop a child from reading great books? Leave it to the PARENTS to decide what book is or is not appropriate for their children. We know our kids better than you do!

JF, parent

As a parent and now a grandparent I love reading with my family. I always read books which were considered 'unsuitable' and do not wish my grandchildren's opportunities to read to be limited.

JH, grandparent

Years ago whole families would have sat down and been read to from classics, which the youngest members of the family had little hope of understanding fully, but could enjoy the experience and sound of the words and thus begin their journey; surely we should be broadening horizons and not limiting them.

JC, parent

As a mother of a reluctant reader, I think age banding would be disastrous. My son would only want to read books aimed at his age, but because of his poor reading experience these may at present be inappropriate. Leave the choice to the individual.

CO, parent and teacher

What worries me most about proposed age-banding is the effect it might have on children like my son - aged 10 - who is dyslexic. His self-esteem at school is already rock bottom. Imagine how being handed a book branded "suitable for a five year old" might make him, and others like him, feel? Many adults with a specific learning difficulty might feel equally mortified at being given a book with 11-13 years branded on it. Surely we should be encouraging people to read anything at all, not dictating! I do not understand what benefit this proposal would have? If people are unsure about whether a book is "suitable" or not, give a book token instead and let the child choose!

RG, parent of child with dyslexia

As an aunt and godmother of many, I would like to say no to overzealous age-branding on children's books. To use my nine-year-old nephew as an example: he loves Roald Dahl and has just read *Stig of the Dump* with huge enjoyment, but he also still loves the Mr Men and sometimes picks up his baby sister's books and reads those too. I would not want his catholic tastes to be squashed by becoming self-conscious because of a large number on the back of a book. Do any other women remember being cross as a girl when a book said on the back 'suitable for boys'? Isn't this being prescriptive in just the same way? Please could we just give children access to books of all kinds and trust they can make their judgements about them?

KH, aunt and godmother

I think this must be important, because when I read "everything about a book should seek to welcome readers in and not keep them out" it made me cry.

Home-educating parent

The concept of age-banding, stigmatising child development in a way that promotes conformity to some abstract dogmatic nonsense, is perhaps another step in humanity's clueless headlong stumble to drone-like oblivion.

I do hope you can make a difference, best of luck.

M, parent

Let us all be left alone to enjoy our books without this ridiculous interference.

BS, mother

What about children like my daughter, who cannot bear to read about cruelty or torture? Is she supposed to feel a fool and a wally because the Horrible Histories (which can be hugely upsetting, and set off massively damaging nightmares for sensitive and imaginative children of both sexes) would be labelled 9+, or whatever, and she cannot bear to open them?

AF, parent

This very morning my 9-yr-old son was reading one of those book-sale magazines that he'd brought home from school and out of the blue (totally unprompted) he complained: "That's silly. How can [book X] be suitable for 7 year olds? They won't get the jokes... and why is 'Dr Who' for 11+ - I've already read lots of those and I'm only 9."

MT, parent

As an author and mum of a learning-disabled child, I've found age suitability is irrelevant and contributes to the drop in readership among pre-teen readers - both LD and non-LD.

EMC, parent

Age banding is ridiculous. I have two children. One (12 years old) I almost have to bribe to read fiction and the only fiction books he will read are Mathew Reilly, science fiction or books forced on him at school. The other (9 years old) will read anything at any time. There is no reason why any child should not pick up any book and as long as they enjoy reading, that is the most important thing. In my experience if there is something "unsuitable" they will skip it, put it down or quite rightly ask for an explanation. The whole point of reading is fun, learning, escapism and relaxation.

PK, parent

My grandsons, aged 14 and 11, were furious when I told them. The eldest made the point that it's fine to have age limits on games and movies, because you're at the mercy of someone else's imagination. With a book you use your own, with the help of the author. The younger one said he was slow to start enjoying reading and he would have been put off if someone was telling him what to read. He started seriously reading with 'Mr Gum' and Darren Shan, read alternately! What about dyslexics or other special needs children, or those with English as a second language? Should 30 something women only read chic-lit? As you can tell, I'm incensed.

CH, grandparent

We have been reading quite adequately for centuries without age labelling of books. Some children are quicker than others in learning to read and some become avid readers while others can get through life without much reading. As long as they can read well enough to enjoy other subjects they will prosper. Please do not allow age banding.

BS, parent

My son is roughly at a level which is age-appropriate after a few years of struggling to read. Visible age-banding would have shattered his confidence when he was reading at a lower level than his classmates. It is such a bad idea.

PC, parent

I have daughters that range in age from 10 to 4 years of age and only one of them reads books from 'their age group'. They are free to read any book that appeals to them and this should be open to all children, without fear of ridicule from their peer group because they are reading from a different age group.

LN, parent

My son, who is 10 was a reluctant reader until we found the author Steve Cole and his excellent 'Astrosaur' books. These are aimed at younger readers. However my son adores them and they have encouraged him to read and shown him that he can enjoy books. If they had been labelled for much younger readers it is unlikely that I would have been able to encourage him to read them in the first place, or to continue reading them so avidly.

HW, parent

Having two very different sons who came to one writer 'early' from eighteen months to three years and 'late' at age seven to nine years, I hate the idea of one being thought of as 'precocious' and the other as 'backward' when they both derived an enormous amount of pleasure from the stories and characters created by the same writer at totally different ages.

AP, parent

It's really simple. I'm a home educating mum. If they age band books, I won't buy them. I will go to the charity shop to find them instead.

RT

My own daughter (an eight year old who devours books at an alarming rate) skips happily between books such as Harry Potter, Northern Lights, Watership Down, Just William and then will spend a couple of days rereading her picture books from her earlier childhood - Clarice Bean, The Tiger Who Came to Tea etc. I have been completely forbidden to get rid of any of her books that she has accumulated over the last eight years! The beauty of it all is that she is completely oblivious to being either too young or too old for anything. She also loves Tintin, Asterix, Just William and so on. Put an age band on a book and children, who are easily shaped into what's wrong and right, might well decide that they mustn't read a certain book.

HK

I'm nine years old and I want to tell you that I think book age ratings are wrong. If a 12-year-old boy wanted to read a 7+ rated book, he would think it would be too babyish. And vice versa: a five-year-old would think a book that was 7+ would be too old for him. I think people should be free to choose whichever books they want.

AP

I'm a mother to special-needs children and one gifted child, so this issue has me spitting mad.

SP

As we do not have the resources to go back to everyone quoted here for permission to use their names in this way, we have given only initials, and occasionally edited out details of particular libraries, publishers, bookshops, etc. If there are queries about any quote, we can go back to the person concerned to ask for permission to pass on further details.