

No to Age Banding

Comments from Book Trade Professionals

It is recognised that children vary greatly in both reading ability and level of interest in a topic, and that they do not like reading a book said to be for a younger age group. As a result, many publishers consider it counterproductive to put an age range on a book. ... If the need for some broad guidance on age ranges is generally felt, it is agreed that it should be unidentifiable by the child, for whom it could well act as a deterrent.

The Bookseller, (article on the Working Party Report on the classification of children's books, 1987)

As part of the service we offer our local schools, I find that an increasing amount of my time is spent searching out books that have a high interest level yet can be directed to lower level readers. These are not children to whom who can always attribute learning difficulties or special needs. Mostly they are students who have little or no parental involvement or guidance and simply cannot be bothered to read. The teachers and librarians are facing an uphill struggle just to encourage them to look at a book. I have to source books that appear interesting to teenagers without making them feel stupid. If more labels, especially age banding, are applied to books, this will reduce the range of books that I can select from. No street-wise 14 year old is going to be seen with a book aged 8-12 years. It is hard enough to get children reading once they leave primary school without the basic skills. This motion is just another barrier to climb.

LV, Bookseller

As a foreign distributor of English children's books, a further point I feel has been ignored by UK publishers is the export situation. We currently import a large number of children's books from the UK (and countries much larger than us no doubt import much more!) However, the levels of reading of English in foreign countries tend to be slightly lower than the UK since English is a second language. Having ages printed on books will suddenly make all UK children's books "wrong" in foreign markets.

CP, Foreign Distributor

I don't believe that additional sales will be forthcoming. Once again, despite the experience of the past 10 years, publishers believe that supermarkets will help them grow sales. The facts say that while unit sales increase (not a bad thing) the value is flat to declining, so there is no extra money coming into the trade as a whole.

PW, Bookseller

The wonderful books that I have published are technically picture books, yet appeal to all ages from 6 to 106 because they are funny and witty and attractive and nostalgic. Labelled 5+, 70% of kids who love them would be put off.

AJ, Publisher

This is yet another way that publishers are limiting markets instead of expanding them, at a time that the market for books is already in no small amount of trouble.

HM, Reviewer

For forty years I was employed by what was at the time of my retirement the largest public library bookseller in the UK and by far the biggest purchaser of children's books in any sector of bookselling in the entire UK. ... I was head buyer for many years before becoming managing director for the last eight years of employment. I have been retired for 12 years. I'm sure that

children haven't changed so much in this relatively short period of time. However I can believe that crazy 'progressivists' have become crazier. It seems to be quite an industry.

DT, Former Head Buyer

Any bookseller worth their salt should be able to recommend a good book to a customer based on their description of the child they are purchasing for. After all, almost all booksellers I know are also voracious readers.

NH, Bookseller

Every person is different, every story is different, and every book is different. Guidelines are certainly appreciated but age banding printed on the book's cover will only bring frustration to the parents, and most importantly, the kids.

AG, Bookseller

The book trade's idea of corralling books into age ranges that are printed on the covers will limit rather than extend children's reading. Who is to say, anyway, which age range a particular book belongs in? Even the writers don't think of them in this way.

AG, Bookseller

I ran a floor of a bookshop until a few weeks ago. I have always loved books and reading anything I can lay my hands on. I can honestly say that had this ill-advised scheme been in place when I was a child I would have been denied some of the most delicious and life changing reading experiences I've ever had.

TM, Former Bookseller

This is a terrible idea. Parents have been buying books for their children all this time with no problems. Who has the right to start telling us what we should or shouldn't be letting people read?

PG, Former Bookseller, Publisher

I agree that the age-banding proposal is an ill-considered step that will not be of assistance to young readers or their parents.

TA, Reviewer

I find this proposal really quite frightening.

CP, Publisher

Age banding ... helps the chains 'whack out' books into sections quickly and without thought. Why should a boy of 12, who is being encouraged to read by his Granny (who absolutely understands how incredibly important it is for his future life to engage him on this) be discouraged/embarrassed because his book is 'age banded' for a 7 year old. It may make for neat/homogenous children's departments in large chain bookstores, but it does nothing to motivate and enthuse young readers who develop at vastly different paces... and hopefully create a reader for life.

VD, Bookseller

Anything that will get in the way of children reading is not good! And that is surely what will happen if "reluctant readers" see their book is recommended for a child of a younger age.

JA, Bookseller

Please add my name to your list as someone who opposes this apparently market-driven nonsense.

CH, Literary Festival Co-ordinator

It seems crazy to try and pigeonhole children as readers. I can understand the need to give age appropriate books so that children will get full enjoyment out of reading and for gift-buyers not to buy the "wrong book", but age banding is not the solution.

ED, Bookseller

I think that age banding is totally unnecessary. Surely if buying a book for a child you can ask the advice of one of the book shop assistants. This of course does not work if buying from a supermarket, but then anything done to encourage people to use a good, specialist book shop instead of supermarkets in the current environment is good.

SM, Bertrams

I give my unequivocal support to your condemnation of this ridiculous and un-thought-out idea!

DB, Bookseller

I support the campaign against age banding vehemently. As P.L. Travers (author of 'Mary Poppins') said: "we have no idea where childhood ends and maturity begins. It is one unending thread ..."

SR, Retired Children's Bookseller

I remember this age banding being tried in the 90s and it didn't work then. How can there be any hard and fast rule? Well-loved books become lifelong friends and while anyone can be instrumental in introducing new companions, no one can dictate which friendships will make lasting connections.

PM, Children's Bookseller

I am a Children's Publishers Sales Representative. I have been for 12 years. I do not speak for the publishers I represent but for myself. I have a five year old child and age ranging would not help us at all. I am currently reading books to him at night that he cannot read himself but is really enjoying ('Horrid Henry', 'Dirty Bertie' and various others). I imagine these would have a 7+ on them and would therefore put people off. What age would have been put on Harry Potter, Philip Pullman or Meg Rosoff - and then alienated a huge amount of potential readers? The publishers who are keen to publish "cross over" titles and get some books stocked in adult sections would surely struggle to do that with an 8+ or 12+. What about the publishers who specialise in books for reluctant or struggling readers? Barrington Stoke publish books for children with a low reading age but with older interest subject matter. How would these be labelled?

SB, Publisher's Sales Representative

I'm startled and disappointed to see that such a proposal could even gain credence, let alone be in danger of implementation. I love each and every opportunity I have to talk to a child about their reading interests and find them a book that they will enjoy, unhampered by age or gender labels.

MH, Bookseller

"Age-banding seeks to help adults choose books for children, and we're all in favour of that; but it does so by giving them the wrong information. It's also likely to encourage over-prescriptive or anxious adults to limit a child's reading in ways that are unnecessary and even damaging."

For the above reason I am against age banding, I see it so much in book shops, parents buying books to push children's reading ahead of their age group. I have a son who didn't enjoy reading for many years, so we stayed "below his age bracket" so he didn't have to struggle with reading books his "correct" age.

NH, Book buyer

Reading ages are mixed. If a 17-year-old wants to read a 10-year-old's book, it would be nice for

them just to enjoy reading it - if they have reading difficulties, they feel bad enough without having people knowing "that book is for 10-year-olds and YOU are reading it!"

If an 8 year-old sees 10+ on a book he/she might not pick that book up, whereas it might be just right for them. Parents too might be unconsciously limiting their kids' reading if they are looking at age bands My children are grownups, and one has kids of her own. My kids read whatever they felt like reading, and so do my granddaughters. They are unlimited.

JL, Editor

The policy of age-banding children's books is a crude attempt to boil them down to basic commodities, so they can be ordered by computer and stacked on shelves like tins. Books are not Beans!

DJ, Publisher

As a published author, presently writing material for children and editing such books for other authors I am appalled at the concept of age banding. No child is going to be seen dead with a book proclaiming it is for a younger age range. Have those publishers pushing the concept ever talked to a child, ever watched a child selecting a book, have they ever seen a child?

The imposition of banding is ill-conceived. It will deter sales. There are enough rules and regulations in our lives. That a 'free' industry like publishing should seek to ban some of its own sales is far beyond plain wrong. It gallops towards utterly stupid.

JR, Literary Agent

35 years of bookselling has taught me that you can never pigeon-hole readers.

WA, Bookseller

I think children should feel free to read what ever books they enjoy, regardless of whether it's in their 'age group'. I would feel very uncomfortable about dictating to my customers what age each book should be for.

SH, Barefoot Books stallholder

I'm a bookseller with Waterstone's. I can't believe they're thinking of putting age banding on kids books. When I was wee I was reading at a much higher level than I 'should' have been - I can't see anything good coming from age banding. How is a child who is struggling at their 'prescribed' level going to feel? Not all children develop their reading levels at the same time, and working in a bookshop, it's glaringly obvious that if you have a group of children at the same age, they won't all be reading the same thing! I don't know what good publishers think could come from this, but it's a bad idea, and it's only going to cause problems and damage children's development - and put other children off reading completely.

SC, bookseller

Age banding is possibly one of the worst ideas I've ever heard of. I work as a copy editor at the moment and absolutely love reading children's books. My brother is dyslexic and finding something he enjoys can sometimes be a huge task, but it's something we do together and enjoy. He's very proud, and age banding may well put him off reading for good.

KP, Copy Editor

I am a bookseller and I agree, many people take things like age requirements too seriously and it could seriously cage a child who has a mature understanding of books. For a child that can read well above the norm of their age group, it can hinder rather than help them.

KW, bookseller

I agree that age banding has the effect of narrowing readership, an effect which is surely anathema to all authors.

RM, Editor

I agree wholeheartedly that printing age bands on book jackets is a ludicrous idea which will put children off choosing certain books and probably turn some children away from reading entirely. I also support the campaign as Regional Testing Co-ordinator of (a) Children's Book Group and can confirm that some children (or their parents on their behalf) will choose not to read books if they think they are 'too young' or 'too old' for them. I hope enough support can be garnered to stop this policy in its tracks!

CW, Federation of Children's Books Groups

As far as I can see the arguments are irrefutable. From my experience with my own three children and the children and young people I am in contact with through the activities of the Federation of Children's Book Groups, it is clearly evident that reading choices are entirely personal and individual, and that identifying books by age is very likely to have a negative effect on large numbers of young readers by restricting those choices.

AC, Former FCBG Group Liaison Officer

Personally I think that we should give children the respect they deserve and allow them to make up their own minds if the book is appropriate!

SM, Seven Stories, Centre for the Children's Book

This is a ridiculous suggestion, made by people who do not understand or promote literature to children correctly. Children must be inspired by words and not restricted by concepts adults enforce.

GF, Publisher

Having been a children's book reviewer for many years, and at various times a school librarian, and specialist children's bookseller, I feel passionately that printed age-bands would be a backwards step. There are plenty of specialist booksellers, librarians and reviewers out there all capable of giving sound advice to adults buying for children - would they all become redundant with these simple, pat age-ranges printed on the book?

FL, Editor, Good Book Guide

I often recommend books that might be considered "too old" for children who are clearly ready for them. Age banding also ignores the wonderful tradition of the bedtime story. Our father read my brother and me *The Thirty-Nine Steps* at 8 and 6, and I know we enjoyed every minute, regardless of what we understood. How awful for younger children to be restricted to the stories they can read, rather than those they can enjoy.

TS, Specialist Children's Bookshop Manager

Most of our children's books are U.K editions and we definitely don't want them printed with an age group slapped on them.

SJ, General Manager, Australian bookstore chain

Age banding has nothing to do with helping children's reading, and will work against it in many instances.

JH, Retired Bookseller

Is supermarket selling really going to be allowed to lead on how we choose books for young readers? If an adult is stumped for a book to buy for a present, then they probably don't know the child very well and in this case a book token is the best option. Give a token, enjoy a trip to a proper

bookshop and encourage children to choose their own books.

NG, Editor

How could anyone who has any contact with children or any memory of their own childhood possibly think this was anything other than philistine and even cruel? Do these people not remember being kids?

FF, Freelance Editor

The idea of "age-banding" books would be terrifying if it wasn't such an obviously laughable non-starter.

PN, Editorial Manager for Publishing Imprint

I am absolutely horrified by this plan and cannot believe that anyone who knows anything about children's books could support it.

VR, Publisher & Bookshop Owner

If the only reason to label the books is money, my simple argument is that the customer will leave with a book regardless, and I trust myself and my sections headed "9 - 12" etc. to assist in choosing but not dictate which.

JPS, Bookseller

As a Children's Book Dept Manager, I work with children and adults daily as they purchase books for themselves and others. I've witnessed the effects of age ranges on in-store signage and how detrimental it can be. Just because a sign says "Young Readers, grades 3-6," I've seen both 2nd graders and 7th graders steered away from the section by well-intending parents. I have found adults are extremely literal with age recommendations, school recommended reading lists, book leveling and reading levels from standardized tests (such as Lexile ranges). I feel putting ages on books is extremely limiting and can, in fact, harm sales rather than enhancing them.

AMD Bookseller

Are we talking about reading level or interest level here? They are two different things. Many children's non-fiction books are deliberately written at a lower reading level than interest level - just so that they can be tackled by slow readers.

JV, Editor

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