



# ***Building Home Reading Habits***

Behavioral Insights for Creating  
and Strengthening Literacy Programs

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## | About ideas42

At **ideas42** we believe that a deep understanding of human behavior and why people make the decisions they do will help us improve millions of lives. We use insights from behavioral science to create innovative solutions to tough problems in health, education, consumer finance, safety and justice, environmental sustainability, and ending poverty and inequality. We're a non-profit that has a wide range of partnerships with governments, foundations, NGOs, and corporations. Our impact is global with more than 100 active projects in the United States and over 35 countries around the world.

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## | About Stand for Children

**Stand for Children** is a non-profit education advocacy organization focused on ensuring all students receive a high quality, relevant education, especially those whose boundless potential is overlooked and under-tapped because of their skin color, zip code, first language, or disability. Stand partners with parents to support their children's education journey and to become strong advocates. The organization advocates, mainly at the state and local level, for proven policies and funding primarily focused on: helping students reach make-or-break milestones in early literacy; high school graduation, college/career training and readiness; and ensuring that the changes Stand fights for reach classrooms and directly support students.

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# INTRODUCTION



## What are behavioral science and behavioral design?

**P**eople who create programs, products, services, and policies are ultimately designing something that other people will interact with—something that may impact their lives in meaningful ways. Oftentimes, they design for people who are “rational” decision-makers; that is, people who calculate the costs and benefits of every single choice they make and consistently follow through on their intentions. For instance, policy-makers may think providing parents information about free, quality preschool will lead all those interested to enroll their children. Educators may believe telling parents about the importance of early reading practice will prompt them read out loud to their children more often. Of course, providing information is important, but it is rarely enough to change behavior.

These assumptions are understandable—but also flawed. Though we may wish to be, humans are not always perfect decision-makers. We all rely on fallible rules of thumb when making decisions. We procrastinate and struggle to resist temptations. Our plans are diverted by seemingly minor hassles. Our actions are influenced heavily by how our friends and neighbors behave. These are common biases, tendencies that most people share, and yet research has shown that these and many other influences on our behavior are frequently overlooked in program and policy design despite being predictable, systematic, and often changeable. Design matters: the context in which we make decisions influences how we make those decisions and, ultimately, our actions.

Fortunately, we can design—or redesign—programs that work for real people. The study of how humans behave and make decisions in the real world is called behavioral science. Behavioral design is an approach to program and policy design that leverages the insights produced by this research. This approach can improve outcomes and change lives by accounting for the psychological factors and contextual features that impact decisions and actions. We can deliver better results by considering these influences and using them to design programs and policies that account for the ways people actually behave.

## How can behavioral science support home reading habits?

Many refer to education as the great equalizer, but children across America receive fundamentally unequal qualities of education and opportunities to learn. One of the biggest gaps is in literacy: students from lower-income households are significantly less likely to read on grade level than those from higher-income households. Children who reach third grade without being able to read proficiently are more likely to drop out of high school, reducing their earning potential and chances for success.<sup>1</sup>

Many educational interventions to change these outcomes target the classroom. These interventions are important, but they miss a significant portion of where children spend their time: at home. The simple act of parents reading with their children can boost literacy skills, but merely telling parents this is unlikely to spark a surge of at-home reading. Using a behavioral lens, we can identify the psychological barriers that prevent parents from helping their children develop strong reading habits, and then design interventions that help them overcome those barriers.

In the spring and summer of 2018, ideas42 worked with Stand for Children to design and implement a behaviorally informed family literacy program. To identify behavioral barriers to reading, we conducted an extensive literature review of existing research and interviewed parents. We piloted the program, and the observation and evaluation of the pilot produced additional insights. In this report, we summarize our insights and offer program design guidelines for others creating or evaluating literacy programs.

## Who should read this report?

This report presents behavioral barriers to building and maintaining strong at-home reading habits, along with design recommendations for behaviorally informed solutions to those barriers. Our hope is that school administrators, service providers, and innovators will use these insights and guidelines to connect families with effective support and resources for at-home reading. Whether you are looking for guidance in selecting the right family literacy program for your community, creating a new program from scratch, or are simply interested in how we can help children build a love of reading—there are insights in this report for you.

# How can you use this report?



## **CHOOSE THE RIGHT PROGRAM FOR MY COMMUNITY.**

*Are you a school administrator or service provider who wants to offer a family literacy program to your community?*

### **»» START WITH SECTION 1**

*“What Gets in the Way of At-Home Reading?”*

This section describes 16 behavioral barriers families face when building and maintaining home reading habits. After you review it, think about which insights resonate most for the people in your community, and choose a home reading program that can directly address those barriers.



## **CREATE A HOME READING PROGRAM.**

*Do you want to build a family literacy program from scratch or update an existing one?*

### **»» START WITH SECTION 2**

*“Design Principles to Support Home Reading Habits”*

This section presents eight design principles that program designers can use to help families overcome barriers to at-home reading. The first four are about how to make the task more manageable, and the last four are about how to prepare parents for the challenge.



## **LAUNCH A PROGRAM THAT’LL WORK.**

*Are you ready to implement a program?*

### **»» START WITH SECTION 3**

*“Guidelines for Providing Book Access”*

This section presents a framework for comparing digital and non-digital book access solutions, as well as nine key features of any book access solution. They are divided into three prioritized sections: must have, nice to have, and avoid.

# SECTION 1 *What Gets in the Way of At-Home Reading Habits?*



**T**hrough our research we identified three categories of **behavioral barriers**, with a total of 16 insights. Some barriers may be more relevant than others for a given community, and effective family literacy programs should seek to directly address the most relevant barriers for their target communities.

<b>1 Forming the intention</b>	<b>2 Setting up for success</b>	<b>3 Building the habit</b>
<b>1a.</b> Parents don't see their child's education as their personal responsibility.	<b>2a.</b> Parents don't know how much is enough.	<b>3a.</b> It's hard to find time to sit down and read.
<b>1b.</b> Commitment to reading varies between caregivers.	<b>2b.</b> Getting "just right" books can be inconvenient or costly.	<b>3b.</b> Opportunities to read come and go without anyone noticing.
<b>1c.</b> Parents believe that readers are born, not made.	<b>2c.</b> Children disengage when their reading skills are insufficient.	<b>3c.</b> Parents don't face immediate consequences if their child doesn't read.
<b>1d.</b> Typical rewards and punishments often backfire.	<b>2d.</b> Parents don't always select on-level books for their children.	<b>3d.</b> Reading isn't the default activity for many families.
<b>1e.</b> Parents who don't see themselves as readers struggle to model ideal behavior.	<b>2e.</b> Children don't have sufficient independence in picking books.	<b>3e.</b> Parents and children think reading will be unpleasant.
		<b>3f.</b> Parents incorrectly assume they won't enjoy reading with their children.

## »» 1. Forming the intention

*Parents may struggle to make at-home reading a top priority.*

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Most parents want the best for their children, and that includes a good education. What happens at home can impact a child's education: changeable features, such as how many books are in the home or whether parents take an active role in encouraging their children to read, are an even stronger predictor of children's reading success than demographic factors like family income.<sup>2</sup> But even with so much potential, it can be hard for reading to compete with other priorities like jobs, childcare, or providing regular meals. On the following pages, we present five barriers that parents face when deciding to make reading a top priority for their family.



## 1a. Parents don't see their child's education as their personal responsibility.

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Even though most parents want their child to have a good education, some may not see this as their direct personal responsibility—or they may view it as something they can't control. If their child struggles with reading, parents may see it as a failing of the teacher or the school, or even the child's abilities. It may be true that children need more support at school, but parents are not powerless to impact the situation. In fact, **parent involvement is one of the best predictors of academic achievement**, especially for students in urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

One reason parents might distance themselves from education is they feel they don't have the skills or knowledge to help their children learn. It's uncomfortable to put themselves in a situation where they aren't clear on what to do, and leaving it to the experts is one way to reduce the cognitive dissonance, or mental discomfort, created by wanting the best for their children yet feeling incapable of providing it. Even if a parent's knowledge is inaccurate or incomplete, the perception of knowing what to do helps parents feel comfortable stepping up and taking an active role in their children's education.

In addition, when children go to school they are entrusted to someone else's care for a period. It can be a relief for busy parents to feel their children are getting what they need—safety, stimulation, education—but the perspective that education takes place only at school can remove them from being actively involved with their child's learning experience. Literacy programs should strive to reframe school as a learning opportunity that requires collaborative involvement between students, teachers, and parents.

## 1b. Commitment to reading varies between caregivers.

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For children to build a habit, they need to have consistent direction and reinforcement. But when there are several authority figures in a child's life, it can be difficult for all of them to be on the same page about rules and expectations. Many children split their time between multiple households, and there are often multiple caregivers within a single household: grandparents, older siblings, or other family members may take turns being in charge. This means that it can be difficult for one parent to have absolute authority over a child's reading habits and behavior.

Consistency is especially difficult when caregivers have complicated or strained relationships. In one family we spoke with, the child's primary caregivers were his two grandmothers. One was the driving force behind his reading habits. While the other generally followed her lead, it can be hard for in-laws to be completely aligned. Other times, children may spend significantly less time with one parent, who may then feel extra pressure to earn their child's affection and approval during that limited time. This can lead them to be present biased and prioritize short-term benefits over future payoffs, like watching a movie together rather than engaging in reading time.

It can also be hard for caretakers to deviate from their assigned roles. Parents may find it helpful to “divide and conquer” responsibilities at home, but this approach can lead them to restrict themselves to only those tasks. Soon enough, reading is “your mother’s thing,” and a father with less experience reading out loud may not feel capable or responsible for it at all. This is a missed opportunity; given the complexity of support systems and childcare networks, a single adult should not be solely responsible for driving a child’s reading habits.

### 1c. Parents believe that readers are born, not made.

When speaking with parents, we commonly heard that some kids love reading and are good at it, and others are just going to be the sort who struggle. This reveals what is known as a “fixed mindset,” in contrast to a growth mindset, which holds that anyone can become a better reader with time and effort.

Children who adopt growth mindsets about their own reading ability and intelligence perform better and learn more than those who are exposed to fixed mindsets.<sup>4</sup> People who hold fixed mindsets are less likely to put in the effort to change, because they don’t believe that it’ll make a difference. Families with multiple children may be especially likely to see reading skills as fixed: different siblings often have different aptitudes for reading, and parents may interpret those differences as set traits rather than areas for growth. Parents with personal experience as struggling readers may also see their own story as confirmation of the “once a poor reader, always a poor reader” narrative.

#### » Growth Mindsets vs. fixed mindsets

One way to think about the difference between these two mindsets is whether a person interprets a failure as a reflection on their ability or their effort. With a fixed mindset, failure means that you may not be capable of doing any better; with a growth mindset, failure means that you didn’t have the skills or resources to succeed that time, but there’s room for you to learn and try again later.

It has a positive effect on long-term success when children develop growth mindsets, and when their parents believe their children have the ability to improve. **Timely feedback on performance can help people develop a growth mindset, because it allows them to see concrete evidence of their changing ability.** In particular, positive feedback can foster feelings of competence, enhance intrinsic motivation, and improve performance.<sup>5</sup>

### 1d. Typical rewards and punishments often backfire.

Oftentimes parents give children small rewards for doing something good, and small punishments for doing something bad. While well-intentioned, these methods of incentivizing reading can undermine their children’s own motivation. Parents may push disinterested children to read by creating clear, external consequences. Not reading means no TV time; reading means a trip to the dollar store. These approaches may be effective in the moment, but they don’t help children understand why reading is important.

Punishments and rewards can both be problematic because they position reading as a means to an end. It is easy to become dependent on external motivators; without them, a child won't get as much out of reading and they may question the point of reading without any direct cost or compensation. Rather than rely on external rewards and punishments, parents should aim to foster their child's intrinsic motivation to read—learning about a favorite topic or feeling the suspense of an exciting story—and position reading as virtuous and valuable.

Parents should also consider their own incentives, because their perspective can impact how they talk about reading and, ultimately, their children's own motivation. For example, parents might want their child to do well on a test so they don't have to go to summer school, because that would pose extra logistical challenges. However, performance-based goals, such as hitting a certain test score, are external consequences just like rewards or punishment. They can trigger negative emotions like frustration, while goals that promote learning and improvement are associated with more positive emotions, like pride.<sup>6</sup>

While real-world constraints often foster performance-based goals, parents should still strive to communicate the importance of reading outside of these short-term considerations. A successful reading-based program should **provide parents tips on how to encourage their children's intrinsic motivations and remind parents of the broader importance of reading.**

## 1e. Parents who don't see themselves as readers struggle to model ideal behavior.

Children look to their parents as a model for how they should behave, so it is not surprising that parents' attitudes toward reading help shape their children's views. **Parents who demonstrate interest in reading can boost a child's own reading engagement, and parents who express discomfort with or disinterest in reading can inadvertently discourage their children from reading.**

There's a strong correlation between a parent's enjoyment, prioritization, and encouragement of reading and their child's reading habits and motivation.<sup>7,8</sup> Parents may see reading as an opportunity to share a favorite hobby with their child, or habits like weekly trips to the library may already be in place because of their own preferences. Active and intentional parental modeling of reading behavior provides a solid blueprint for how parents can demonstrate reading is a priority for the family.

However, not all caretakers enjoy reading; people who struggled in school may avoid reading in adulthood, which can send a message to children that reading is difficult or unenjoyable. These individual perceptions of reading are reinforced over decades, starting in school and continuing through adulthood, and can therefore become calcified and hard to change. There may be space in some family literacy programs to support development of parents' reading skills, as well as those of their children.

## »» 2. Setting up for success

*Parents may struggle to provide a good reading environment.*

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A strong intention to read matters, but the details of actually sitting down and reading can get in the way even when families have decided to read more. Each time, a child needs to think through all the logistics: Is there somewhere quiet to read? Can they find the book they were reading last time? What do they do when they get stuck on a difficult word? For all of these details, parents play a large role in setting their children up for success. These questions become less top-of-mind once reading becomes a regular habit, but only because they've been answered so many times before. The biggest logistical barrier is having easy access to quality books, and in Section 2 we present some guidelines for designing a good solution to that barrier. Here, we discuss five related barriers that make it difficult for parents and children to create the ideal reading environment.

## 2a. Parents don't know how much is enough.

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Many parents know that their children should be reading, but they may be less certain on the specifics. How often should the child read? How long should the child read each time? And if reading every day for 20 minutes isn't feasible, are there marginal benefits to lower amounts of reading or is it "all or nothing"? Ambiguity around these details can lead parents to give up before even starting.

First, parents may anchor on unrealistically high goals. **Challenging goals help people grow, but it's discouraging if goals are too high.** Why work toward a daily reading goal if you know there's no way you'll succeed? Reading programs should meet families where they are and encourage them to take the next step, rather than asking them to go all the way immediately. It's also important to give people opportunities to reset, so that if they miss a couple days they don't feel like it's impossible to get back on track.

It's also hard to know how much to read when there isn't a clear connection between effort (minutes spent reading) and results (literacy growth). In the moment, there's no clear difference in impact between reading for 5 minutes or for 30 minutes, or between reading once a week and reading daily. It takes time for the benefits to add up enough to be visible to parents and children, and it's easy to justify skipping a day when there aren't concrete consequences. Reframing the goal as building a regular reading habit (rather than just reading enough to get better at it) can help parents understand the importance of individual reading sessions.

## 2b. Getting "just right" books can be inconvenient or costly.

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For children to build a robust at-home reading habit, they need to have easy access to good reading material. "Just right" books fit the child's interests, are at the right level (not too easy, but not too hard), and cover a variety of age-appropriate genres and topics. However, it can be difficult for families to have convenient, affordable, regular access to books that meet these criteria. If finding a book to read poses a challenge, parents and children may be dissuaded from the entire endeavor.

### » What makes a book "just right"?

1. Not too hard and not too easy
2. Matches the reader's interests
3. Age-appropriate content

Some families may rely on schools or other local programs to provide books. When implemented properly, these programs can make a real difference. However, these options are very location-dependent, meaning many families are still independently responsible for providing their children with books. People acquire children's books at yard sales, at multi-purpose stores, from others as gifts, through Scholastic 99-cent book orders, and from the library. None of these methods are perfect: yard sales require a significant time investment, purchasing new books may be expensive, and the inexpensive books available at convenient store locations are often of extremely poor quality.

The library seems to be a near-perfect solution, but it also imposes costs on families. The quiet environment of a library isn't always welcoming for families with young children, and parents without a history of going to the library may be unsure how to behave or be uncomfortable in such a codified environment. Many libraries are working to offer more interactive programming and to be more explicitly welcoming, but concerns over appropriate behavior can still make families reticent to rely on libraries.

Even if families feel comfortable at the library, it can be difficult to get there. Going to the library means knowing how to get there, coordinating transportation, being available during opening hours (which are often limited during the summer), and having a valid library card. And if any of these challenges mean a book is returned past its due date, the resulting late fee can be discouraging. We know that **small barriers, or hassle factors, can have outsized impacts on preventing behavior or follow-through**, and these difficulties may prevent families from even attempting to go to the library.

## 2c. Children disengage when their reading skills are insufficient.

The success of a reading program is directly related to a child's ability to focus on the reading material and read productively. Unfortunately, children may find it hard to maintain their focus when reading. Often, the issue is that the book isn't at the right level. When children read books that aren't at their own reading level, their engagement will suffer.

To willingly engage in a task, you have to believe that there's at least some chance of succeeding: a child must believe that they will be able to read a book in order to try to read for themselves.<sup>9</sup> Rather than push children to read books that are overly difficult, parents should strive to find books in their child's zone of proximal development. In this zone, a child is challenged but has the necessary skills. Reaching beyond our current abilities is how we develop mastery, as long as we have the skills to attempt that reach.

Successful reading programs should offer enough books for parents and children to be able to find appropriately leveled titles, and they should also encourage parents to direct their children to books that meet their child's individual abilities.

Alternatively, digital tools like audio read-aloud or built-in dictionaries can make hard books a bit easier, so that children can productively read a wider range of materials.

### » What is the zone of proximal development?

Tasks in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) are too hard for people to do without any help, but not too hard for them to accomplish with support. As your ability improves, your ZPD moves out further as well. Working at this level is the best way to grow and learn productively.

## 2d. Parents don't always select on-level books for their children.

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As mentioned in the previous insights, it's important for children to have access to books that match their reading ability. When children are challenged but still able to read the material, they're more likely to be interested and engaged. However, parents don't always select on-level books for their children to read even when they have an accurate understanding of their children's reading ability.

It can be frustrating for parents when their children aren't reading on grade level, and they may feel pressure to change that situation. This sometimes manifests in parents pushing their children to read "age appropriate" books, even if the child doesn't have the skills yet. When situations don't align with our expectations or preferences, the resulting discomfort can drive people to find ways to resolve that conflict. One strategy for reducing the dissonance of a child reading below grade level is to simply give them only grade-level books. This can actually be detrimental to a child's growth. **When children are forced to read books beyond their abilities, they become frustrated, disengaged, and even less likely to build reading skills and become stronger readers.**

A second contributing factor is that some parents interpret the thickness or length of a book as a proxy for its difficulty. While there may be some correlation between these two measures, they are not interchangeable. Focusing on the thickness of a book rather than its difficulty can lead parents to recommend books that are either too difficult or too easy.

## 2e. Children don't have sufficient independence in picking books.

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Limited independence is a hallmark feature of childhood, and independent choice of reading material is no exception. **Parents may intentionally or inadvertently select books that prioritize their own interests or preferences over what the child is interested in reading, overestimating how much their child's preferences align with their own.**

Other parents who see reading as a required chore will deemphasize the fun elements of reading and view any age-appropriate book as equally valid reading material, regardless of their child's interests.

Ignoring children's preferences and interests can negatively impact both their motivation to read and also learning ability. Cognitive choice, such as the ability to choose between books, is important because it can increase a child's feelings of autonomy, which is correlated with increased levels of interest.<sup>10</sup> Providing children with meaningful cognitive choices can also promote deep learning, flexibility, and other positive learning processes.<sup>11</sup> Interest drives engagement, which is associated with achievement, so offering children the ability to choose their own reading material can catalyze a positive feedback loop that promotes learning.<sup>12</sup>

However, there are limits to how effective self-determination can be for promoting reading. Children who don't have strong interests in any given subject<sup>13</sup> or do not fully understand their options<sup>14</sup> won't benefit as much from selecting their own books. In addition, when children have too much independence, they may repeatedly select a single book or genre, which limits the opportunities for growth. An effective reading program would provide enough selection for **children to choose books that appeal to them, reminders to parents to encourage their children's existing interests, and support for selecting a range of topics.**



## »» 3. Building the habit

*Parents may struggle to build and maintain strong at-home reading habits.*

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Even parents who care a lot about reading and have everything they need can struggle when it comes to building a strong habit. Reading habits are made up of many individual reading moments: to build a strong habit, you need to make reading happen not just once, but over and over again. In each moment, there are opportunities to slip, and each missed step makes it harder to build that long-term habit. These last six insights are barriers that parents face when deciding to read in those moments.

### 3a. It's hard to find time to sit down and read.

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With busy—and at times overwhelming—schedules, it can be difficult for parents to find the minutes in a day for their child to read. Irregular job schedules, long commutes that rely on public transportation, and complicated childcare schedules all contribute to making it difficult to set aside time for reading. Schedules get even tighter as children get older and add sports, friends, and more of their own interests to each day. While we cannot add more hours to the day, we can examine how contextual features exacerbate this constraint.

First, many parents find that they have to be directly involved for their children to actually sit down and read. Sometimes this is necessary to remind the child to start reading or to keep them focused and engaged, but other times parents need to help their children with the mechanics of reading. This latter instance is especially common when children have low reading skills or learning disabilities. It's hard enough for children to have a quiet 20 minutes when they can sit down and read, but when they're unable to read independently, finding time in the day to read requires both the child and the parent to be available. This can be especially hard when parents have multiple children: parental time and attention is a finite resource, where giving it to one child means taking it away from other children in that moment.

***With many pressing demands, families experience a context of time scarcity, where they focus on what is most urgent even when there may be other important but less time-sensitive tasks.*** It can be very easy for other activities to take priority over reading in any given moment, even for families with fairly strong, established reading habits.

### 3b. Opportunities to read come and go without anyone noticing.

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Many parents hold a strong intention for their children to read, and they may even develop a plan for when they will sit down and read throughout the week. Even then, it's easy for there to be a gap between good intentions and concrete action; moments and days can slip away without anyone noticing, creating missed opportunities to sit down and read. This is a classic example of prospective memory failure, which happens when people forget to do planned actions. ***Without a cue to explicitly distinguish intended reading time from other moments, people are likely to automatically continue doing whatever they had been doing before.***

It's especially important for parents to be the ones to find these moments because without already-strong reading habits, children are unlikely to read on their own without being reminded. If the adult forgets about reading, it is likely that the child has also forgotten; and if the child does remember, they may be unlikely to speak up if they find reading frustrating or unpleasant.

#### » What do specific reminders look like?

For at-home reading, specificity means that reminders should encourage the parent to take an actionable, concrete step such as going to the library, reading with the child for 20 minutes, or asking the child what her favorite part of a story was.

Simple reminders can help, but they should be specific and come at the right time. Notably, reminders are necessary insofar as the action is not yet automatic; they may not be the most effective solution for families who already have regular reading habits but may struggle with other aspects, such as the child’s motivation or reading ability.

### 3c. Parents don’t face immediate consequences if their child doesn’t read.

With many pressing demands, parents face a constant series of tradeoffs. When not everything can be done in a given day, parents rely on heuristics (or mental shortcuts) to evaluate what gets cut. It’s easy for reading to be one of the first things to go.

When evaluating what must get done, parents may first consider the penalty for not doing a given task. Showing up for work, paying bills, providing meals, and getting children to bed at a reasonable hour are all tasks with concrete, immediate consequences if they aren’t completed. There are few immediate negative consequences for failing to read.

Parents may also prioritize activities that are more pleasant (people often prefer activities that are more pleasurable in the short-term, even if this decision contradicts their long-term goals and preferences). Unfortunately, **the benefits of reading are far-off and hard to visualize**. Becoming a “good” reader takes regular effort over many years, and it can be hard to see how 20 minutes right now will make a difference. With low visibility of a student’s progress and no immediate, positive results of remembering to read, it is easy to choose a different activity. Low visibility can be an even greater problem during the summer, since many parents depend on teacher feedback or grades to determine whether or not their child needs to be reading more at home.

### 3d. Reading isn’t the default activity for many families.

Given a choice between two activities, people typically default into doing what they usually do. Especially when they’re busy, people get through their days with minimal deviation from their standard routines and behaviors. One significant driver of this preference is automaticity: people often go on auto-pilot and make decisions without thinking about them explicitly.

Automaticity is adaptive, because it allows us to get through our days without low-level details constantly occupying our minds and taking up mental energy. If reading is part of a default routine, then low-level details such as what book to read, where to read, how long to spend reading, or how to convince a reticent child to sit down and focus can all be addressed through automatic habit; they don’t need explicit, extra attention. However, if these questions haven’t already been answered before, even a simple activity like reading for 15 minutes can seem complex and overwhelming. Additionally, deviations create the opportunity to say no; it’s easier to choose not to do a one-off task than to drop something from a daily routine.

**When reading has a clear place in a regular schedule, then it becomes part of the status quo.** One way to set reading as a default is to tie it into other activities that are likely to happen, either positioning it as an activity that happens immediately afterward or as a clear alternative. For example, maybe reading happens as soon as dinner is over, or instead of playing video games.

### 3e. Parents and children think reading will be unpleasant.

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As discussed earlier, parents often make quick mental calculations about the costs and benefits of each activity. If there's limited time, what gets cut? Or when a whining child would much rather play outside than be forced to read, is it worth the fight? We spoke to parents who recalled having to fight with their children "tooth and nail" to read or do homework. These arguments are taxing for both parents and children.

Present bias suggests that not only do people prefer activities with immediate benefits, but that they also want to avoid immediate costs. For many families, at-home reading is an exhausting, frustrating experience; it's easy to see why people would want to put it off. It's unpleasant to struggle, and **children have enough experience to know when their reading skills are falling short of the expectations of their parents, their teachers, or themselves.** This can be embarrassing to children, especially if they see others—perhaps younger than themselves—reading without difficulty.

When a task has low anticipated utility, or emotional value, the feeling of dread leading up to it can spill over into other activities. Just as the excitement leading up to a vacation can be as invigorating as the time actually spent on vacation, the negative feelings of anticipation leading up to a dreaded task can be just as unpleasant as the task itself. Children may assume they won't enjoy reading even without considering the specifics of a given book or if the task itself has been made easier or more fun. When considering how to improve at-home reading experiences, it is just as important to address the anticipated costs as the actual experience.

### 3f. Parents incorrectly assume they won't enjoy reading with their children.

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Reading can be frustrating for children who don't have the skills to read fluently, and many benefits of reading don't show up until much later. And often parents also see reading as a negative experience. They may assume that children's books are not interesting, they anticipate that their children will complain or fidget, or they view reading as a chore.

However, there's an immediate benefit to reading that many families don't anticipate: **parents are often surprised to find that they enjoy reading with their children.** Predictably, children enjoy the dedicated attention and one-on-one time they get with their parents when reading together, and their positive reactions encourage parents to do so more frequently.

It can also be satisfying for parents to see their children learn and develop new interests. When families turn reading into a bonding experience rather than a chore to check off a list, it becomes more enjoyable for both children and parents.

It is common for negative aspects of an experience to hold disproportionate weight in our mental models, so even if reading is mostly positive for a family, the times when it was negative can be more salient and impactful in forming perceptions. It's important to help parents update that belief, because inaccurate expectations (that reading won't be fun) make parents less likely to want to read with their children.

# SECTION 2 *Design Principles to Support Home Reading Habits*



A successful home reading program should be designed to address the behavioral barriers that are most relevant for the families in the community that will use it. However, there are some components that can be applied generally because they address common barriers. This section presents eight **design principles** that program designers can use to help families overcome barriers to at-home reading—as well as some pitfalls to avoid.

## **1** *Bring the task down to size*

## **2** *Build parents up*

**1a.** Encourage parents to make plans

**2a.** Normalize at-home reading

**1b.** Provide just-in-time reminders

**2b.** Empower parents

**1c.** Offer helpful tips

**2c.** Give positive reinforcement

**1d.** Help parents set goals

**2d.** Stay in touch

# » 1. Bring the task down to size

Building and maintaining a strong at-home reading habit is such an important task that it can become intimidating. The ultimate goal—becoming a strong reader—is far off and vague, and it’s hard to connect individual minutes spent reading to that broader goal. These design ideas help make the task more manageable and approachable for parents.



## 1a. Encourage parents to make plans

*When will you read this week?*

### DO

- ▶ Ask “**What’s one day you can make sure your child reads this week?**” This creates a forced choice moment that makes reading seem expected.
- ▶ Follow up and **ask when reading** will happen that day. Make the plan as concrete as possible.
- ▶ **Pair reading with other regular activities.** For example, suggest that a child reads as soon as they get home from school, or while waiting to pick up an older sibling.

### DON'T

- ▶ **Don’t** suggest that having a plan means you can’t read at other times.
- ▶ **Don’t** encourage parents to make complex plans.



## 1b. Provide just-in-time reminders

*Don’t forget!*

### DO

- ▶ **Be specific** about what parents should do so they don’t have to figure it out on their own.
- ▶ **Offer an actionable next step** to make it easy for parents to follow through.
- ▶ Send reminders **at the right time**: with enough notice to adapt plans, but not so far in advance that they don’t seem urgent or relevant.

### DON'T

- ▶ **Don’t** send so many reminders that parents get annoyed or feel like you’re nagging them.
- ▶ **Don’t** use the same template every time. People may start to ignore reminders that seem repetitive.



## 1c. Offer helpful tips

*Did you know...?*

### DO

- ▶ Leverage research from learning science and **educational best practices** to give parents the best tools for supporting their children.
- ▶ Connect parents to **existing resources** in their schools and communities. Make sure that they aren't being given contradictory information.
- ▶ **Concretize key information.** Reduce ambiguity and make it easy for parents to follow through with recommendations. For example, suggest that children read labels at the grocery store rather than telling parents to practice sight-reading and build vocabulary skills.

### DON'T

- ▶ **Don't** use jargon that parents might not know.
- ▶ **Don't** overwhelm parents with too many required tasks.



## 1d. Help parents set goals

*How many times do you want to read this week?*

### DO

- ▶ Encourage parents to **choose challenging goals.** People improve with goals that are a little hard, even if they don't always achieve them.
- ▶ Direct people to select **effort-based goals** (like reading three times each week) rather than performance-based goals (like reading five books each week). This gives them more control over whether or not they succeed.
- ▶ Keep the goals fairly short-term and give people plenty of **opportunities to reset.** For example, starting each month with a clean slate can help people feel like they have a new chance to reach their goals without being weighed down by previous failures.

### DON'T

- ▶ **Don't** suggest goals that are too challenging. Failing to meet a goal too many times in a row can be discouraging.
- ▶ **Don't** set goals for people. They should select their own goals, with support.



## » 2. Build parents up

Making sure that a child becomes a strong reader is a significant responsibility, and parents might not feel capable of tackling such an important task. This is especially true for parents who have insecurities around reading themselves. These design ideas help empower parents and build them up to the challenge.



### 2a. Normalize at-home reading

*Everyone's doing it.*

#### DO

- ▶ **Emphasize that many families read together at home.** At-home reading is a private act, and parents might not know how their behavior compares to others'. If many families in your program are reaching their reading goals, emphasize that progress.
- ▶ **Spotlight diverse families and reading habits.** Encourage exemplars to talk publicly about their reading habits and the challenges they've faced. Show people that reading might look different for different families, and there's no one right way to succeed.

#### DON'T

- ▶ **Don't** emphasize that many children don't read.
- ▶ **Don't** make reading seem hard or tedious.



### 2b. Empower parents

*You're up to the challenge!*

#### DO

- ▶ **Appeal to parents' identities as their children's first teacher.** Appeals to identity ("be a teacher") rather than actions ("read with your child") can help parents feel capable and responsible.
- ▶ Remind parents that their children's **reading will improve over time with dedication and hard work.** It's normal to struggle, especially at the beginning, and that doesn't mean they don't have the potential to grow.

#### DON'T

- ▶ **Don't** make parents feel guilty for things they haven't done in the past.
- ▶ **Don't** overwhelm parents with responsibility. Instead, offer support and remind them that they're not alone.



## 2c. Give positive reinforcement

*You're doing a great job.*

### DO

- ▶ **Offer motivation and encouragement.** Reading can sometimes be stressful or frustrating, and children aren't likely to thank their parents for their efforts. Fill that gap and tell parents that their work matters.
- ▶ **Congratulate parents and children for their hard work,** not just their results. This will help build resiliency in the face of future challenges.
- ▶ **Thank parents for what they've done so far** to help them see that they've already made progress. The more evidence of progress you give, the more motivated they'll be to keep trying.

### DON'T

- ▶ **Don't** gloss over failures; it can seem disingenuous.
- ▶ **Don't** let parents become complacent after early successes.



## 2d. Stay in touch

*Hey, it's me again.*

### DO

- ▶ **Partner with a trusted, local source to send messages.** Parents are more likely to trust a person they know than a generic organization. Work with local organizations or teachers to develop new relationships.
- ▶ **Make it personal.** Tailor messages to the recipient, and encourage local program leaders to reach out to participating families and build one-on-one connections.
- ▶ Use **accessible communication channels** to make it easy for parents to stay engaged. For example, exchanging text messages is easier than asking parents to show up for in-person events.

### DON'T

- ▶ **Don't** send irregular messages with large time gaps in between. Regular messages help keep the relationship active.
- ▶ **Don't** ignore questions. Being responsive builds trust and makes parents more likely to engage.

# SECTION 3 *Guidelines for Providing Book Access*



In addition to the eight design principles presented in Section 2, literacy programs should make book access easy. While some of the behavioral barriers presented in Section 1 may be more or less relevant in different communities, book access is a fundamental barrier anywhere: if children don't have books to read, then no amount of additional support is sufficient. This section presents a set of **guidelines** for developing or evaluating book access solutions.

## **1** *Must have*

**1a.** Sufficient quantity of “just-right” books.

**1b.** Easy access.

## **2** *Nice to have*

**2a.** Child autonomy in book selection.

**2b.** Recommendations.

**2c.** Learning tools.

**2d.** Tracking capabilities.

**2e.** Native language content.

## **3** *Avoid*

**3a.** Unnecessary burdens.

**3b.** Overly restrictive access.

## » 1. MUST HAVE .....

**1a. Sufficient quantity of “just-right” books.** Children should have access to books at their reading level that match their individual interests and have appropriate content. Children are likely to become bored if they only read books that are too elementary, and they can become frustrated and disengaged if books surpass their reading abilities. That is why it is important to first identify a child’s reading ability and then provide books at and just above that level (in their zone of proximal development). Tools like embedded dictionaries or read-aloud can help increase a child’s reading capacity, but their books should still be at an appropriate level, particularly for children with learning disabilities.

The book content should also be age-appropriate (which may not necessarily align with level-appropriate) and children should have access to a variety of genres and types of books. Children frequently tunnel in on a favorite book or series, but it is important to push them beyond their comfort zone and expose them to new material because different reading skills are developed when reading different genres.

**1b. Easy access.** Even small barriers or challenges can have outsized impacts on preventing families from acquiring books. To be successful, it’s critical that book access solutions fit as seamlessly as possible into a family’s routines.

This is a primary reason we prioritized offline access when we decided to offer a digital reading library in our home literacy program. If providing digital books, they need to be available to families who don’t have reliable internet access at home or who are wary of increasing their data usage costs.

Additionally, because at-home reading is a recurring habit and not a one-time event, solutions need to be sustainable over time. Children will continually require more books, and their individual needs and preferences will change.

## » 2. NICE TO HAVE .....

**2a. Child autonomy in book selection.** Children are more motivated and engaged when they are involved in choosing what they read, when they read, and how they read. Allowing children to select their own books also increases the likelihood that they are interested in the material. Parents may have incomplete or inaccurate perceptions of what their children enjoy reading, and they may push their own preferences or beliefs on what their children “should” read over children’s individual interests.

However, children should not have absolute independence in selecting their own reading material. Accommodating their interests and fostering feelings of self-determination are important, but grade-school aged children are not always equipped to make the best decisions for their long-term literacy growth. Book access solutions should provide space for children to have independence and autonomy within a set of quality recommendations.

**2b. Recommendations.** When people have many options, they often experience choice overload and either avoid making a decision at all or fall back on heuristics, or mental shortcuts, that may not lead them to the best choice. While book access solutions should aim to provide families with sufficient quantity of books and to meet each child's individual interests and reading level, this can result in an overwhelming number of books to choose from. Choice overload can be mitigated through providing personalized recommendations, by making the choice set smaller (i.e. providing a small number of books monthly rather than making them all available at once), or by providing another clear direction (i.e. giving an ordered reading list). Families should have the ability to choose books outside the recommendations to guide choice without limiting it.

**2c. Learning tools.** Tools to support at-home reading could be a set of questions to prompt close reading, a dictionary to look up new words, audio read-aloud, or a set of tips for what to do when you encounter a word you can't sound out. Providing extra assistance is especially useful for parents with limited reading ability, families with limited time for helping their children read, and for children with learning disabilities or other difficulties reading (i.e. English language learners).

**2d. Tracking capabilities.** Tracking children's reading activity and lexile growth is helpful for internal reporting and program evaluation, providing families with feedback on their progress toward reading goals, showcasing short-term goals and accomplishments, and program improvement. In addition to tracking how many minutes or pages a child reads, consider whether the book access solution provides insight into what types of books children are reading, whether they are reading on-level, how frequently they use built-in learning tools, and whether they struggle more with reading consistently or with reading for long enough each time.

**2e. Native language content.** Children with emerging literacy skills should learn to read in their native language; it is easier to learn how to read another language after first developing literacy skills than to initially acquire those skills in a foreign language. This is especially true for children whose parents are less familiar with English. Consider whether a language other than English is commonly spoken at home in a given community, and try to provide reading material in that language to encourage and facilitate parent engagement.

## »» 3. AVOID .....

**3a. Unnecessary burdens.** Even the most well-intentioned solutions can have unexpected consequences. For example, free e-readers can give families easy access to thousands of books, but they may make reading more difficult for some families. Parents may be worried about their children breaking the tablets or using the internet unsupervised, so they might restrict tablet use. Ultimately, children could have less independent access to reading material than if they'd been given paper books.

In a second example, book logs are a common way of tracking reading activity, but they also add extra work for families (and it's an additional administrative burden to collect them and manage data entry). Furthermore, self-reporting is commonly biased; if parents believe a certain level of performance is expected and their reading activity could reflect on their own perceived success, they may be inclined to overreport.

**3b. Overly restrictive access.** It's beneficial to point families and children toward optimal reading material, but a program structure should not incentivize reading only the suggested material or imply that other material should be avoided. This is both overly paternalistic and also counterproductive; while some books are better than others, any book is better than no book.

## Digital vs non-digital solutions

There is no clear research evidence indicating that reading print text is better for students than reading digital text. In contrast, digital text may have the potential to actually enhance learning and engagement, especially among students with learning disabilities, those who are English Language Learners, or those in families with low socioeconomic status. This is likely due in large part to increased student motivation to read digital content; when students are more excited about what (or how) they are reading, they are more likely to be engaged in the process and have an easier, more enjoyable time reading. In addition, digital texts often have features like built-in dictionaries or read-aloud, and these tools are especially helpful for students with lower reading abilities.

Both digital and non-digital books are valid options from a learning perspective, and programs should consider which would work best for them. Several key dimensions for comparison are summarized in the table below:

Dimension	Digital	Non-Digital
<b>Cognitive scaffolding</b> (leveled recommendations)	Often automatic and responsive to user progress	Requires a separate program structure
<b>Motivational scaffolding</b> (reminders, goal setting)	Often integrated; high potential for integration	Requires a separate program structure
<b>Evaluation &amp; Reporting</b>	Often built-in with admin reporting capabilities	Requires self-reporting and separate data logging
<b>Implementation Cost &amp; Logistics</b>	Device + platform + one-time distribution/collection	Books + recurring distribution

# CONCLUSION



The insights in this report were developed as part of a larger body of applied work, in which we designed a family literacy program and piloted it in multiple communities throughout 2018. Our goal was to help parents help their children build and maintain strong at-home reading habits. To support parents, we gave them tablets with access to myON, a digital library. They also received personalized tips and reminders over text message, because while book access is a necessary consideration for any family literacy program, it is often insufficient on its own for successful behavior change. The guidelines in this report can help others design and implement solutions for those remaining barriers and create provide effective book access solutions. Though some of the insights and guidelines sound like common-sense best practices, others are more nuanced or may even seem counterintuitive. **We hope that every educator or service provider who reads this report will discover something new and valuable for their work on literacy and family engagement.**

Despite robust efforts to support literacy by educators, policy-makers, and national nonprofits, nearly two-thirds of fourth-grade students cannot read at grade-level—and this figure has remained largely unchanged since 2015.<sup>15</sup> Reading difficulties follow children throughout school and into adulthood, so it's critical to address literacy skill development as early as possible. Parents and other family members can have an especially strong impact on children's reading skills. When parents are involved, their children become stronger readers—regardless of pre-existing reading difficulties or family income level.<sup>16</sup> **For program designers trying to drive at-home reading and parent engagement, changing habits and behaviors can be just as important as implementing educational best practices.** We hope that the insights and program design guidelines in this report will help people create and evaluate literacy programs with a behavioral lens. A child's education starts at home, and we believe that programs informed by behavioral principles can support and strengthen that foundation.

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