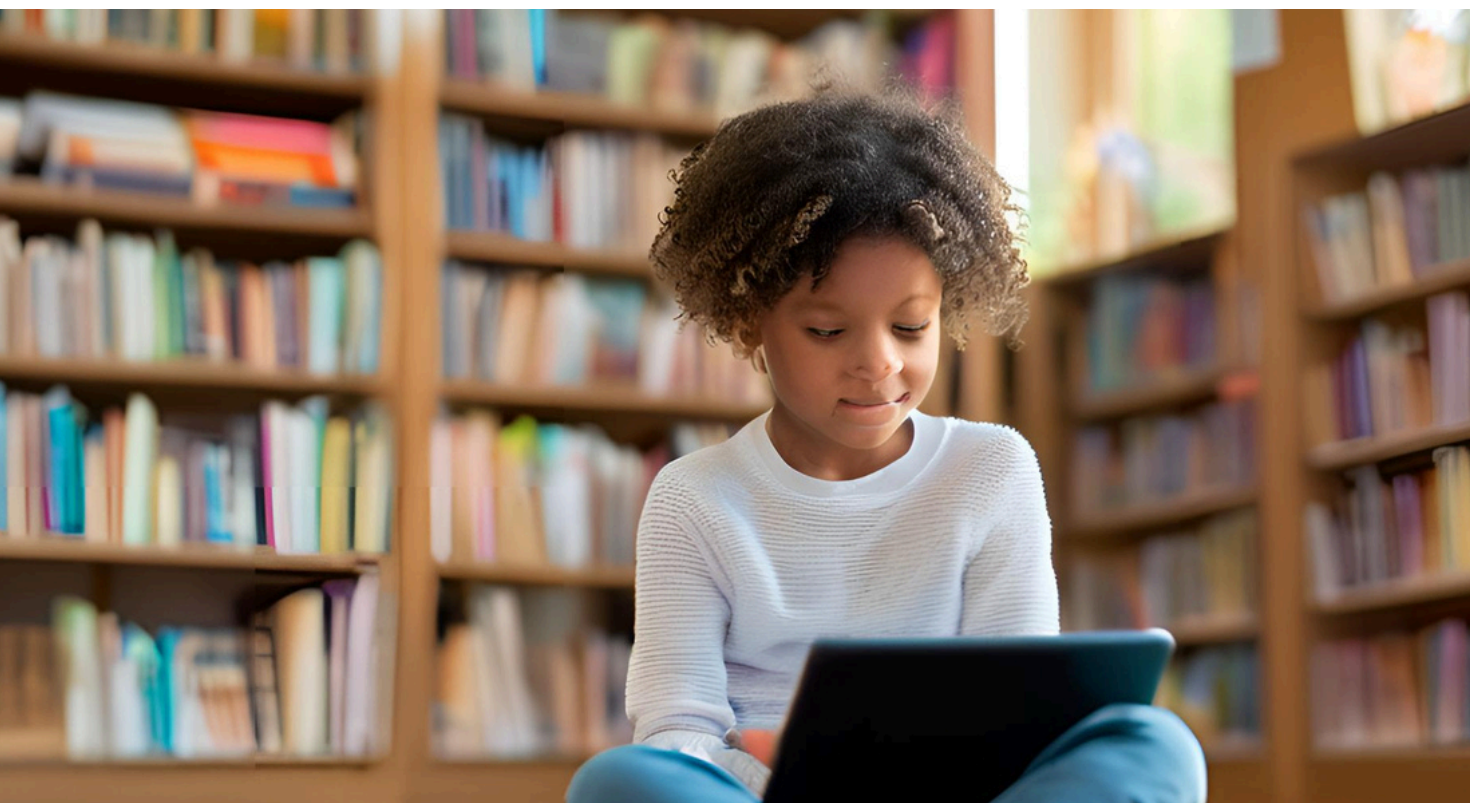


# Re-engaging young readers

How Pageticker might play a part in reversing the alarming downturn in children's reading



A white paper authored by  
Tom Minor and Nicola Chilman

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# The State of Reading

We are all reading less. Much less. But particularly, and most alarmingly, children. The National Literacy Trust's annual reading for pleasure surveys have been conducted since 2005, but 2024 marked the lowest reading enjoyment levels in its history, with just 35% of children enjoying reading. This marks an astonishing dip from 43% the year before - the previous low.

We can only speculate as to why this is. Explanations fall around the same three recurring themes:

- The socio-economic pressures families face. Undoubtedly, these pressures are substantial, but regardless of this, one positive that came out of the National Literacy Trust's 2023 survey was that an increasing number of children - 8% more than 2022 - were reporting a supportive home environment when it came to reading.
- Lack of access to books. The fact that the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (Cipfa) estimates that nearly 800 public libraries have closed across the UK since 2010 is the tip of the iceberg; in 2023, the Primary School Library Alliance found that 17% of UK schools do not even have a library area, and that library budgets had been slashed by 16% year-on-year. Not only does this restrict access to books, it also makes books seem unimportant: government policy seems to increasingly treat reading as a subject to be taught, rather than the skill for lifelong learning that it is.



- Increased use of digital entertainment. Short-form, on-demand media such as Tiktok and YouTube Shorts have become the default entertainment choice for children; the consequent impact on attention spans means that books do not necessarily provide the quick dopamine fix that we have become accustomed to in today's world..

Regardless of the reasons, given the immense benefits of reading, the decline in reading is an alarming trend.

## Why should we read?

As we conducted our research, we were astonished by the number of studies linking regular reading to a multitude of benefits. They make a compelling case for us all reading more:





These reasons-to-read are recognisable to us all. But for us, as two former teachers, perhaps the most significant study we came across was that by PISA in 2002. This not only drew a powerful link between reading engagement and academic success, but also showed it to be the biggest predictor of academic success - even more so than socio-economic class.

## Our solution

We believe that through the judicious use of technology we can help improve children's engagement in reading. As former teachers and parents of three children, and in light of the fact that, in our view, technology is at least partly responsible for the decline in reading, we are very aware that this may sound contradictory! Hence the use of the word 'judicious', and the following caveats we have put around our platform, Pageticker:

- The end-users of Pageticker will primarily be parents and teachers, not children
- It is not our intention to hog a user's attention. Whilst the Pageticker app (the parent-facing part of our tech) is designed to be used daily, most sessions - those of logging reading - are designed to require less than a minute of a user's time.

Put simply, we want our technology to help parents and teachers support children to read more books - as an alternative to spending more time on technology.

So how do we achieve this? We have drawn on our previous experience with education technology (as founders of DoodleMaths), and the extensive research that exists in terms of motivating readers, to come up with a three-stage journey that we want to take children and their parents on.



## **Stage One: Building the Reading Habit**

Initially, Pageticker helps children develop the habit of regularly reading through a set of extrinsic motivations. These features can include reading streaks, targets, badges and other gamification features. However, although these rewards are achieved by children, they are presented to parents and teachers as they are the end users of our product. They are required to pass on the news of the reward. Is this an issue? We believe not - in fact we see it as a positive: a parent or teacher saying "Well done, you've read every day this week, I'm so proud of you!" is much more powerful than a child reading it on a screen.

We are aware, though, that extrinsic motivation can only get children so far along their journey to becoming an engaged reader. There are numerous studies that highlight the negative consequences: children can become obsessed with their page count and they read simply to stay ahead of the competition, rather than the innate pleasure that comes from simply opening a book. Extrinsic motivation plays a part in motivating emerging readers in Key Stage 1, but as children progress into Key Stage 2 and choose their own literature, long-term motivation requires a different approach.

Our own internal research, supported by numerous academic studies, shows that capturing the initial enthusiasm of early readers and their families is key in developing a regular reading habit.

As the original designers of DoodleMaths, we are fortunate to have gained a strong understanding of designing habit-forming educational products, and this experience has come to the fore with Pageticker. An easy-to-use mobile application, combined with thoughtful push notifications and a bunch of motivational features means that pilot studies are reporting significantly more parental engagement through the app than through paper-based reading diaries.

As former teachers, we understand how important that EdTech genuinely saves teachers time. Consequently, our teacher dashboard gives an easily-digestible overview of a whole class's reading over the last week, with intuitive deep-dive information layered on top - so much quicker than trawling through 30 reading diaries that may or may not have been filled in.

## Stage Two: Internalising the Reading Habit

Over time, extrinsic rewards develop into intrinsic motivations. We've worked hard to build into the app the kinds of features that parents can share with their child to build in them a powerful, internal desire to read.

For example, as children work their way through books, the number and variety of books in a child's bookstack, and the pride they take in this, should become more important than the number of pages read or their reading streak.

Furthermore, the excitement of browsing and discovering new books is a hugely significant intrinsic motivation to keep reading. As Pageticker gathers data on what children have previously read and enjoyed, we will be able to offer highly-personalised book suggestions for the parent or teacher to discuss with, or recommend to, the child. Our unique, proprietary suggestion engine is designed to take into account preferred genres, sub-genres, subjects and book forms, but also, importantly, a child's reading ability. Very few alternatives for children exist in this area. Accelerated Reader's Bookfinder allows for search by key word, but little more. Part of the wonder of books is discovering, and being recommended, new titles to read (or not!) Ultimately, we'd like this side of our product to match the joy of visiting a library or really good bookshop. Only Goodreads have come close to achieving this digitally, but in the new era of AI, we can achieve it for children too.

Finally, social conformity is an immensely strong intrinsic motivation. The community features of Pageticker will play into this - and this also leads us to the third stage of the journey.



### **Stage Three: Creating Reading Evangelists**

As the child, with the support of their parent or guardian, becomes more autonomous, engaged and confident in their reading, they have the potential to become reading evangelists. By writing reviews, sharing books they've enjoyed and making recommendations to others, they motivate others to read whilst finding their own voice too.

When a child sees themselves as a reader, hopefully by the end of their journey through primary education, it's a view of themselves that they hold for a very long time.

## **In conclusion**

We're confident that Pageticker can contribute to improving children's reading engagement - and in our ability to deliver it - but not so deluded to think of it as a panacea. Circling back to the root causes of the reading engagement problem that we defined at the start of this paper, then undoubtedly, improved access to books, the restoration of school librarians, and the placement of restrictions on the use of short-form video by under-fives will certainly help more. But hopefully, Pageticker will provide a small piece in a jigsaw of solutions that will help us reverse the rapid, alarming decline in reading that we are seeing.

**For enquiries:**

[tom@pedalogic.com](mailto:tom@pedalogic.com) / [nicola@pedalogic.com](mailto:nicola@pedalogic.com)