

Podcast 23

Do you want to increase your child's reading motivation? Learn how to motivate kids to read with tips from dyslexic tutors.

Description: Parents ask us how to motivate kids to read. This episode explores how to rebuild reading motivation in middle and high school students and discusses the unique challenges that older kids face. We're talking honestly about :

- Why older readers lose reading motivation
 - how to help teenagers rediscover their confidence.
 - Why kids lose reading motivation
 - How to improve reading motivation in kids
 - How to motivate kids to read
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Hook:

Are you a parent of a teenager who struggles to read?

You've tried everything...from encouragement to consequences.

But your child still avoids reading, or refuses altogether.

It's not that they don't care. It's that reading has slowly become a place of failure for them.

Welcome to **The Literacy Keys** — I'm your host, Tracy. It's so great to be with you. Parents of older children are always asking how they can get their child to read more. They don't see much reading motivation happening in their kids and they wonder what they can do to ignite that motivation. If you're a parent of a middle or high school student who's struggling with reading, today's episode is for you.

1 | Opening — Setting the Scene

I recently come across an article that really mirrors what I see in my tutoring practice. It's from **Education Week** titled "*Secondary Students Are Struggling With Reading, Too. A Look at the Landscape.*" It's a powerful reminder that reading struggles aren't reserved for younger kids. The article shares that **58% of educators** reported that a quarter or more of their middle- and high-school students have difficulty with basic reading skills. ([Education Week](#))

In this episode, I'll walk you through some of the key points from that article, unpack how older struggling readers are different from younger ones, share a little of how I specialize in helping older students, and then give you some practical tips for how you as a parent can do. For any tiger parents that are listening, I'll also reference the book **Know Better, Do Better** by Meredith & David Liben, which offers some great insights relevant to older readers.

Let's dive in.

2 | What the Article Says — Older Students & Reading Struggles

Here are some of the major take-aways:

- The problem is **widespread**. As the article notes, more than half of the surveyed educators said that a **quarter or more** of their secondary students were struggling with basic reading skills.
- Two major factors they point to: **motivation** and **fluency**. The educators listed lack of motivation as a top reason that older students struggle to read, and about 1 in 5 pointed to students' limited fluency (reading too slowly, not automatically) as a problem. So students are struggling to read, they aren't reading automatically and we wonder why they aren't motivated to want to read.
- Part of the fluency issue revolves around longer, multisyllabic words that show up in science and math vocabulary. The article says many older students who struggle "often have difficulty cracking the multisyllabic words that make up the specialized vocabulary specific to each subject."
- Ironically, teacher supports drop off in the secondary years. Almost 40% of teachers received no training on how to remediate older readers.

What this tells us is: Struggling readers don't magically catch up simply as time passes. They face unique challenges in the secondary years, and they need targeted support. I've been saying this for a long, long time.

3 | How Older Students Who Struggle Are *Different* from Younger Students

Let's pause and think about how older secondary students who struggle with reading are different.

- **Higher stakes and academic demands:** In middle and high school students are asked to do far more reading of complex texts, across a wide range of subjects (social studies, science, literature). The vocabulary is more advanced, the sentences more complex. The article highlights that secondary schools expect

students to “use their reading muscles in unique ways.” But many of these kids have been raised on a literary diet of fast food and don’t have much reading muscle.

- **Psychological/emotional layer:** Older students may feel embarrassed or ashamed to admit that reading is hard. Motivation will dip if they see themselves as “behind” or that reading is “not for me.” Yes, the article mentions lack of motivation as a big reason but honestly a lot of information lies behind that word “motivation.”
- **Decoding and fluency issues persist:** One might assume that by middle school students have basic decoding down but that isn’t the reality.
- **Fewer supports:** Unlike younger grades where reading intervention at school is common, older students often get *less* to no intervention time. There are fewer screening assessments, and fewer staff dedicated to helping student address reading issues.
- **Need for age-appropriate materials and engagement:** An older student reading a picture-book or a children’s short passage may feel disconnected, unmotivated. Their interests, identity, peer concerns are different from 6 year olds. So the way we teach older struggling readers must reflect their age, their interests, their identity as adolescents.

Because of all that, older readers need a different mindset and approach than younger children learning to read for the first time.

4 | My Specialization: Helping Older Students Read

You may know me as a tutor for dyslexic students, which is true, but I focus on **middle school and high school students** who have been struggling with reading. I joke that the older students get my sarcasm. There really are several reasons for this focus:

- I believe it’s **never too late** to become a better reader. The brain can change and skills can grow. I recently taught a student who had already graduated from high school . By the end of 6 months (through an intensive 3-4 lessons per week) she improved 6 grade levels.
- Because age matters: the materials must be **age-appropriate**. That means I choose texts that *match* their maturity level — not baby-texts, not irrelevantly easy materials that feel demeaning. A friend Larissa Philips wrote the decodable book *City Stories* to teach adults how to read. Let’s face it, a 16-year-old doesn’t want children’s stories. They need materials that honor their age, interests, identity, yet still supports them where they’re at.
- The focus of the lessons changes. Often it focuses on *fluency, vocabulary, decoding multisyllabic words, reading volume, engagement, and motivation*. For older students, reading more widely is important — but if they’re stuck in slow decoding they’ll get frustrated so it needs to be supported.

- Students also need a shift mindset: instead of “I should read better by now” we slowly shift to “I *can* get better from here.” That shift unlocks possibilities but it takes time.

In short: yes, I specialize in older students that struggle to read — and yes, part of that specialization is making sure the materials are age-appropriate in **content**, **interest**, and **tone**. But it’s also a promise that I can make them a better reader. I don’t sugar coat the message. I let my students know that it’s hard work! A lot of hard work. That is the perfect segway to the next section.

5 | What Parents Can Do — Practical Advice

If you’re a parent of a middle or high schooler who’s struggling with reading, here are some things you can do:

a) Talk openly about reading challenges.

Let your student know you see them, you believe in their potential, and you’re in this together. Acknowledge it’s not easy, but it *is* possible to get better with hard work.

b) Choose materials together that respect their age and interests.

Let go of feeling that they must “start back at children’s books.” Choose articles, short novels, graphic novels, teen-interest nonfiction. Help find things they *want* to read. You can even use AI to create reading passages around their interests.

c) Keep reading.

Encourage daily reading. Older readers still benefit from building reading stamina, exposure to vocabulary, and seeing themselves as readers even if it’s only 10-15 minutes a day. Have them read to you out loud so you know if there are fluency and decoding issues. You can help by:

- Pre-teaching key vocabulary (especially subject-area words if they’re reading non-fiction).
- Use repeated reading: have them read the same passage twice, then a third time, to build speed and confidence.
- Model reading: read aloud together or listen to an audiobook then follow along in text, helping build automaticity.

f) Consider targeted tutoring/intervention if needed.

Because older students often have persistent gaps (especially in multisyllabic word decoding, fluency, vocabulary), a specialist who knows older readers can make a big difference. If your child has been behind for a while, don’t wait and hope proactively get the support. Often, once we fill in the foundational skills they make rapid progress.

Figure out which tips work for you and your child. At the beginning of this episode, I mentioned a book that has an entire chapter on how to improve fluency. The book is *Know Better, Do Better* by Meredith & David Liben. It shares what they did to create a school where all students could read. In the sixth grade, the school had an influx of students from other elementary schools with weak fluency skills. The book has an entire chapter sharing what they did to improve fluency by addressing accuracy, rate (speed), and expression (prosody).

Their basic insight:

- Accuracy means reading the words correctly.
- Rate means reading at a speed that allows meaning to be grasped (not so slow the working memory forgets earlier words, not so fast you gloss over meaning).
- Expression means reading with natural phrasing and emotion — showing that you *understand* what you're reading.

For older readers who struggle, this trifecta is still hugely relevant. If they'll read accurately, with faster pace (but not rushed), and with expression, their comprehension improves and their confidence grows. Using repeated readings, reading along with a model, encouraging expressive reading — these are strategies you can use at home too. Even though the Libens' book is often cited for K-8 reading, the fluency chapter speaks directly to older struggling readers as well.

7 | Inspirational Close — It's Never Too Late

And now, parents, for the heart of this episode:

If your child is in middle school or high school and struggling with reading — this is *not* a hopeless situation. Far from it. Yes, the demands are higher, the challenges real — but your child still *can* grow as a reader. You still *can* help them become a stronger, more confident reader. Age does not lock you into being “behind forever.” As I say in my tutoring work all the time: the brain remains plastic, skills can improve, identity can shift.

Your child *can* move from “I’m not good at reading” to “I *am* a reader who works to get better.” Your child *can* choose texts that reflect their age, interest and still build fluency and comprehension. You *can* partner with them — not as a teacher, but as a coach, encourager, supporter.

Remember: improvements might feel slow at times. But small consistent steps add up. A little volume of reading today, a fluency check tomorrow, a discussion next day — these compound. And the change looks like increased confidence, fewer stops during reading, deeper comprehension, more willingness to engage with text.

To every parent listening: you are the key piece of your child's reading journey. Your belief in them, your patience, your partnership with them matters. And to your child: you're not defined by where you are now. You are defined by what you do *from here*. Choose to move forward — even if the steps feel small. Choose to read. Choose to grow. Choose to believe in yourself.

Thank you so much for tuning in today. I hope you found this episode of The Literacy Keys helpful, encouraging, and actionable. If you'd like to dive deeper into resources, I'd love to point you to a few more: the article from Education Week I referenced (link in the show notes), the Liben book *Know Better, Do Better*, and if you'd like, reach out and we can talk about materials or tutoring designed for older struggling readers.

Until next time remember: it's never too late to become a better reader.