

CHAPTER 4

Books of Their Own: The Power of Book Ownership

“Books make great gifts because they have whole worlds inside of them.”

— NEIL GAIMAN

A National Trust survey of more than 18,000 young people from ages 8 to 17 identified a strong connection between students’ book ownership and their reading ability and motivation. Unlike their peers who do not own many books, children with sufficient book ownership live in homes with books, are more likely to receive books as presents, read more often and for longer time periods, express higher engagement and interest in reading, read more widely and in higher volume, find it easier to locate interesting books, and achieve higher levels of education attainment (Clark & Poulton, 2011). Ensuring all children own at least a few books must be a priority if we’re to provide equitable book access.

Book ownership is also an important factor in a child’s reading identity development. Children who own books are more likely to take personal ownership of their reading lives. When children have books at home, they possess on-demand access to those books, which they can read whenever they have a free moment—a key to home-reading momentum. Children are more likely to own books matching their individual reading preferences. While teachers and librarians strive to build collections, book lists, and text sets that appeal to a wide range of readers, children



See Donalyn and Colby discuss the importance of children owning their own books at [scholastic.com/GameChangerResources](https://www.scholastic.com/GameChangerResources)

and their caregivers can select books with individual and family needs and interests in mind. Home book collections provide young readers with customized access to books chosen just for them.

Donalyn offers the following suggestions for supporting families' book ownership.

- **Provide families with a student-created list of book recommendations.** Several times a year, Donalyn shared a Google sheet with families listing her fifth- and sixth-grade students' book-talk recommendations. When students gave book talks, a classmate entered the title, author (and illustrator), and genre of each recommended title into the Google sheet. The filled-in sheets provided a record of the authentic reading experiences and preferences of the children in Donalyn's classes from year to year. Peer recommendations hold more sway with kids than recommendations by adults—no matter how informed those adults may be about children's and young adult literature. After all, every book on the students' list was kid-tested and approved!
- **Share with families high-quality sources for book recommendations,** such as *A Mighty Girl* (amightygirl.com) and *Social Justice Books* (socialjusticebooks.org/booklists). Look for sources emphasizing readers' interests as book-selection criteria, not reading levels or curriculum connections. Seek out sources recommending a wide variety of books from different perspectives and experiences.
- **Promote public library literacy events and library sales.** Partner with your youth services librarians to provide information about upcoming programs and family events such as author visits, summer reading programs, and book drives. Many public libraries hold scheduled book sales of library discards, duplicates, and donations, and/or have an ongoing book sale during regular operating hours.
- **Host book fairs and book sales at school.** Without brick-and-mortar bookstores, many communities lack direct access to new books for children. We cannot assume that families have the ability to purchase books online or can afford new hardcover books. Bringing pop-up book shopping events into your school, such as book fairs and book sales, gives families (and educators) the opportunity to shop for low-cost new books, while receiving advice from teachers and librarians in selecting books for their children.

- **Give away books at family events.** Reinforce the importance of reading to your school community and support your students' book ownership by giving away books at all family events—not just literacy events.
- **Apply for grants or solicit community funding for book donation programs.** Reading Is Fundamental, one of the largest nonprofit organizations providing books to low-income families, offers Books for Ownership grants to schools and community organizations. Talk with representatives at your local small business organization or Chamber of Commerce about the importance of book ownership in your community and solicit their support. Create a Google sheet of grant sources and encourage colleagues to add to it as they discover new ones.
- **Create and stock Little Free Libraries, book baskets, or take-a-book stations wherever families with kids might gather.** Investigate opportunities to provide families with books by visiting apartment complexes, laundromats, daycare centers, and doctors' offices. Where are the book deserts in your communities? How can you increase physical access to books in them? Determine ahead of time how and when you will refresh the books, or sign up school or community volunteers to sponsor a location for book distribution and check it periodically to make sure it's clean and well stocked.

While book swaps and book drives are important initiatives, they tend to redistribute books from families that have many books to families that don't. When the only books children own are someone else's discards and hand-me-downs, it can affect their self-esteem and their perception about books and reading.

So consider initiatives that provide children with new books whenever possible. Even one or two a year can make a big difference. Every child should own at least a few, new self-selected books.

Brigid Hubberman, founder of Children’s Reading Connection, a national literacy organization working to support literacy efforts in communities, offers additional suggestions for lifting up children and families through book gifts and celebrations.

CHANGE IN ACTION



Brigid Hubberman

Belong With Books

The gift of books builds bridges between families, schools, and community.

Four-year-old Xuan Kim was new—new to the country, new to the culture, and new to the community, as was his family. As if navigating all of that wasn’t enough for a young Vietnamese child who had been in the United States for four weeks, he was leaving his family for the first time and going off to pre-kindergarten where all of the words surrounding him—spoken and written—were completely new. As Xuan Kim boarded the bus, his family felt some of the same anxiety he did.

Then one day Xuan Kim’s teacher presented each of her students with a special gift, a copy of *The Bus for Us* by Suzanne Bloom. He couldn’t believe it was his to take home—that the book was his to keep always.

The gift of that beautiful book, coming at that important time in his life, meant so much to Xuan Kim. It gave him pride of ownership, especially since there were few things he could call his very own. What is more, he felt a special new connection to his pre-kindergarten classmates through their shared book experience. He felt a new and warm sense of belonging.

The book also carried another wonder. Imagine Xuan Kim’s surprise and delight to find the story’s words in Vietnamese, alongside those in English. His reaction to seeing his family’s home language, “his” words, in such an unfamiliar world, was to hug the book. Realizing that his copy of the book had been personalized with his name on a label made him feel known and valued.

Xuan Kim continued to turn the pages and delighted at the simple and comfortably predictable story featuring children waiting for the school bus. He smiled when he realized each page depicted a new vehicle. He paused to touch the page on which he noticed there was a little boy who looked a lot like him, waiting for the bus.

Xuan Kim's copy of *The Bus for Us* was his welcome into school and into a community of book owners and readers, giving him a new way of participating in the world. It was also a beautiful bridge connecting every child who read the book, for learning to read and loving reading.

Xuan Kim rushed home that day excited to show his family his beautiful new book, and he couldn't wait for his family to read it to him. His father described feeling deeply touched and honored by the gift bridging their cherished old world and exciting new world with a story in both languages. He went to the school the next day for the first time to thank the teacher, and he let her know how many times they had already read *The Bus for Us* together and how much it meant to Xuan Kim and his whole family.

Xuan Kim was one of 1,200 new pre-kindergartners from New York's Ithaca City School District Pre-K and Tompkins Community Action Head Start who received *The Bus for Us* as a gift, with funding made possible by Ithaca's Alternatives Federal Credit Union. The book has helped to build community, strengthen families, enhance school environments, and enrich children's pathways to reading in a wondrous way by sending the clear message that all children and their families belong.

Books that children can call their own ensure everyday access. Each time they open those books and soak in the story, it is with new meaning, new mastery, and new affection. Those books also can become a form of cultural capital—an investment in the idea that every child and family is a participant in community life, not just a spectator.

It is essential that we place as many books as possible into the hands, homes, and hearts of our children, and that we do all we can to support families in making the wonder of words and the joy of books part of everyday life. A future filled with hope and promise begins with books at home. Together we can make that vision a reality!

Make it count. Here's how to give books to children in ways that build bridges between families, schools, and communities:

- Gift books in as many ways as you can to create a culture of literacy. Give a book to new babies at birth as a gift from the community, and welcome children to school with a book. Give books at the holidays and on special occasions, and create events bringing everyone together to elevate and celebrate best-loved books.
- Choose a book of the highest quality—one that depicts children from all kinds of families and captures experiences that are meaningful. Make sure that children can see themselves in the book's illustrations.
- Personalize the book for each child with a name label and perhaps even a personal inscription such as, "I believe in you."
- Make sure the book is presented as a true gift from someone in the child's life.
- Build excitement and anticipation around book gifts and create traditions for your students and their families. Children will then associate other books with the same joy, wonder, and love.

Closing Thoughts

Book ownership influences children's reading identities and their feelings about reading. Children read more and express more enthusiasm for reading when they own books. How can we guarantee that every child in our communities owns at least a few books?