

NEWS

Children are losing love of books, so put down your phone and read by example

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Parents should put down their phones and pick up a book to tackle a big fall in children's reading rates, the education secretary has said as she launches a national campaign.

The National Year of Reading will be announced today by the National Literacy Trust (NLT) and the Department for Education (DfE) and will bring together schools, libraries, charities and businesses to kickstart "a reading revolution".

Starting in January, its aim will be to increase reading particularly among children under five, teenage boys and also parents, who will be encouraged to act as role models by reading more often for pleasure.

Only a third of children aged eight to 18 now read in their free time, according to the NLT, as books struggle to compete with smartphones and streaming. The collapse in reading is particularly stark among boys, halving in a decade to 26 per cent.

A decline in parents' reading is partly to blame. Children are 40 per cent more likely to enjoy reading if their parents or carers do, research by the Book Trust shows.

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, said: "We're launching a National Year of Reading to make sure that more of our children have a love of reading. We know that the numbers are going in the wrong direction, that too many children aren't reading for pleasure and they don't find reading a joy and

we've got to turn that around.

"It sets children up to succeed at school and write throughout life, but it also opens up so many opportunities and experiences. And I do feel that also as parents, perhaps we should lead by example and put down our phones and read a bit more ourselves."

Research by the Reading Agency shows that only half of adults aged 16 and over read regularly for pleasure, including books, magazines, blogs, graphic novels and listening to audiobooks. Pupils read, on average, 21 books a year – and the typical UK adult reads only three, YouGov has found.

Jonathan Douglas, chief executive of the NLT, said: "Parents continue to be the most important role models

for children and young people. We know parents and carers want to give their children the best start in life but if you don't understand the value of reading for pleasure, or you're not confident in your own reading and literacy skills, then you will struggle to support your child's early literacy development."

The campaign will include partnerships with the Premier League and celebrity influencers to promote reading among teenagers. Big employers in retail, media and technology, will help by encouraging customers and employees to read more to their children and themselves. School-based and community events will also be held.

The campaign, which will be particularly focused at

ANDRE CAMARA FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Government data shows that children with a stronger grasp of reading can go on to earn higher wages

people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, also aims to recruit tens of thousands of volunteer reading mentors for adults and children. Data released by the DfE tomorrow will show that children who have a stronger grasp of reading than their peers by the end of primary school can earn up to 14 per cent more over their lifetime.

As part of the National Year of Reading, the NLT will undertake an in-depth census of the nation's reading habits and try to better understand why we are reading less and how people can be encouraged to reach for a book again. The campaign is backed by the Queen's Reading Room, a charity and online book club launched by Camilla, as well as the Book

Trust, the Reading Agency and World Book Day.

Twenty publishers, including HarperCollins, Penguin Random House and Macmillan Publishers International, will provide funding for the campaign through the Publishers Association, alongside Arts Council England, the Booksellers Association and the Julia Rausing Trust. Businesses such as the Very Group and KPMG are also involved and will promote reading to their customers and staff.

Baroness Rebuck, non-executive chair of Penguin Random House UK and the founder of World Book Day, has been described as a "godmother" of the campaign, playing an instrumental role in bringing it together.

She said: "It is not just sitting down with a physical book, as fantastic as that is. It could be reading more on your phone, or listening to an audiobook whenever you have some downtime instead of scrolling.

"Reading fires your imagination, it improves wellbeing, it opens up opportunities and it's probably the single biggest factor in terms of increasing a young person's chances of a successful, fulfilled life and academic success."

Before the official launch next year, the NLT will distribute more than 72,000 new books to children in areas with the highest rates of child poverty. A website will be published tomorrow for people to find out how they can get involved in the National Year of Reading.