



# Age Guidance

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**Caroline Horn** explores the issues.

Book buyers will have started to notice something a little different when browsing the children's sections of their local bookshops. On the back covers of some of the books will be a small black and white image indicating the age of reader that book might suit. But is age ranging a good thing? **Caroline Horn** explores.

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By the autumn most new children's fiction titles will include a suggested age range. The new age range images will be printed as a small [image:Age Guidance.jpg:left]black and white image (either 5+, 7+, 9+, 11+ or 13+) alongside the bar code ? small enough for many people (and young readers) to miss unless they were looking for it.

The introduction of age ranging on children's books may be happening discreetly but behind it lies many years of heated debate within the publishing world. The argument for age ranging children's books has been based on the fact that, while products like children's toys and clothes are age ranged to help the consumer, books are not. That leaves many potential book buyers too bewildered to choose a book and as a result, book sales are being lost.

However, it is also hard to compare like with like, given the learned skills required by a child to read a book, argue many teachers, librarians and independent booksellers who have been largely opposed to any form of age guidance on children's books.

## In favour of age ranging

Until last year, most publishers would have agreed with the booksellers but recent research into consumers' attitudes to buying children's books has tipped the balance in favour of including age guidance on books.

Philippa Dickinson, managing director of Random House Children's Books, admits to having felt 'very sceptical' about the concept of printing age guidance on children's books, 'for all the reasons which have been chewed over in the 30 years I've been in this business and which will no doubt continue to be debated for some time', she says. What changed her mind were the results of the market research commissioned by the Children's Book Group (CBG) of the Publishers Association and the method of delivery which, she believes, 'genuinely offers useful and consistent guidance to consumers'.

It was a 2005 report by Book Marketing Ltd (BML), 'Expanding the Market', that suggested to children's publishers that, rather than re-debating the issue, proper research was needed into how adults felt about buying children's books.

BML's research showed that around one fifth of those questioned did not know what books to choose and that they found it easier to buy other kinds of presents. The report concluded, 'Several respondents were clearly worried about giving books that were too young or too old, though the former is seen as the greater sin.' A 'common suggestion' by

those questioned was to give more guidance on children's books as to the age at which the book was aimed.

Further research among booksellers, adult book buyers and children, commissioned by the CBG, confirmed that many adults would welcome age guidance on books, while children remained largely indifferent since they chose books by their cover design.

Some 86% of the adult consumers questioned, including parents, grandparents and other gift buyers, thought age ranging was a good idea, with just 8% opposed to it. Many parents feel they need more guidance said one mum, Tara Gifford. 'I like to share books with my children but I find that I often buy books that I enjoyed and they are totally age-inappropriate for my children. It's also a problem when you buy books as gifts.'

In CBG's research, a high proportion of gift buyers, 66%, was concerned about buying a book as a present that was unsuitable for the child's age and 39% would not buy books if they could not decide what age the book was for. Nearly half, 49%, felt they were more likely to buy books if they included 'suitability of content' guidance. Fiction was the hardest category to buy and the groups that found most difficulty in buying children's books were the light children's book buyers (buying one to five books a year), non-working adults and low socio-economic groups.

There is a strong commercial argument for including age guidance on books; the children's book market is simply not growing. Figures from BML's 'Books and the Consumer 2008' report indicated that the number of books sold in 2006 and 2007 (excluding Harry Potter) are virtually identical, at 78.7m and 77.7m, while the value of the books sold has declined from £382m to £367m over that period thanks to heavy discounting in the high street and online.

Publishers need to find new ways to sell children's books and the suggestion that more people might buy books as gifts if they include age guidance is a compelling one. Publishers also point to a moral argument in that lower socio-economic groups, who buy fewer books, are less likely to buy children's books because of the lack of age guidance and so are effectively excluded from bookshops and book buying.

### **The controversy continues**

However, the move towards age guidance remains controversial, particularly among two groups that were not consulted as part of the research - authors and illustrators themselves, and librarians.

Author Adèle Geras believes that age ranging will not help to encourage children to read more. Writing for trade magazine **Publishing News** she said, 'Parents will remain as woefully ignorant as they ever were about the content and worth of the book in front of them and children will be denied the pleasure of browsing for whatever they fancy.'

Author and illustrator David Melling agrees: 'I can see it may be a practical solution, from a consumer's point of view, but as an author/illustrator, I'd rather it didn't happen.'

'I'd like my books to appeal to as wide a range of children as possible and I can't help but feel that with an age range stamped on the cover, potential readers would be put off without even giving it a chance. And, for me, that is a bad thing.'

As a parent, he adds, 'I am amazed at how anxious some [parents] are, already, that their child is 'keeping up' with the rest of the class. Might the introduction of ages fuel a child and parents anxiety unnecessarily?'

Philip Pullman has led a movement by authors to distance themselves from any age guidance included on books. Their website, [www.notoagebanding.org](http://www.notoagebanding.org) [3], describes the proposal as 'ill-conceived, damaging to the interests of young readers, and highly unlikely, despite the claims made by those publishers promoting the scheme, to make the slightest difference to sales.' Hundreds of authors and illustrators, teachers and librarians have given their support.

Those opposed to age guidance argue that children's books are already shelved by age range in bookshops and that guidance is provided in libraries according to a child's reading ability (early readers, confident readers etc). 'Librarians look at a range of factors, which would include interest level and reading ability,' says Sharon Kirkpatrick, chair of

ASCEL (Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians). 'Age ranging could potentially limit parents from looking at a selection of books and choosing only from the stock category that they feel their child belongs to, whereas in libraries the mantra is 'the right book, for the right child at the right time'.

It is the joy of browsing books and spontaneously finding the right book - whether or not it fits a child's age range - that age guidance on covers will destroy, says librarian Jake Hope. 'What develops readers is passion - the passion of those we encounter who recommend books, the passion inherent in the writing that resonates most with us and the passionate interest roused by the ideas and imaginative inner-worlds of the stories that sweep us away...' Age-ranging, he argues, is 'a formula' that puts individual tastes as secondary to 'arbitrary assumptions based solely around age'. In so doing, it reduces access to books and so excludes readers rather than encouraging open access to books.

One of the most pressing arguments against age ranging is that of confidence among the readers themselves, says Tricia Adams, chair of the Youth Libraries Group. 'Booksellers may be in favour of age guidance but they see families that have a history of buying books while at the School Library Service we see everyone, including children whose families are not from that culture. If a child sees that the age guidance on the back of a book is for a four year old, and they are ten, what hope do you give them?'

It is an issue that concerns many teachers, too. Jo Klaces, a teacher at Queensbridge School in Birmingham, agrees that parents would find age guidance useful but adds, 'If you are giving less able readers books which indicate - clearly and explicitly - that they are written for a younger audience, it is not good for what is usually fairly fragile self esteem. I do think that parents and teachers might like it, it's an apparently helpful short-cut, but I worry that it might limit what children get offered to read and how sad to potentially cut out browsing for books - that most pleasurable of activities.'

Although the form of age guidance is deliberately discreet, Lynette Voisey, a trainee teacher, believes that children will still spot it. 'Children will quite quickly see and understand the age range mark and if I was choosing a book for a Year 5 child who was just beginning chapter books, I think they would be upset if they saw a 7+ age range on a book and they were nine or ten years old. I suppose that is the rationale behind colour-coded reading schemes.'

That said, Lynne Harris, a teacher at Kingstone School in Barnsley, believes that there are benefits in age guidance, including the issue of age appropriateness. 'Sometimes things can crop up that maybe you don't want a 10-year-old to read; regardless of their reading age.'

Including age guidance on book covers marks a huge shift in how books are marketed and bought and many argue that the argument in its favour is not made. Different conclusions could also be drawn by revisiting the research itself. Even without age guidance, 86% of those questioned said that they felt that buying a book was a great present for a child and 81% found pleasure in buying books for children. Just one third of those questioned said that they found buying books for children a 'bewildering experience'.

Time will tell if including age guidance on books will encourage adults and young people to buy more books, but what might be harder to evaluate is whether young people themselves read more as a result. Many people believe it could in fact have the opposite effect.

**Caroline Horn** compiles children's book news for the **Bookseller**.

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