



Tips for working with teen readers facing challenges with reading level and engagement

1 Identify fellow staff members with whom you can collaborate. Clinicians, case workers, and teachers can provide helpful insight, suggestions, or tips for working with youth. Input from institutional staff is invaluable, especially if you are not a primary staff member at the facility.

2 Similar to any school or library environment, you will be working with teens performing at varying reading levels. Prior to meeting with program participants, try to assess your group of students, their reading levels, and educational needs. Work with a school counselor, reading specialist, or teacher to effectively design your program and activities accordingly.

3 Ask teens to participate in a dialogue-driven icebreaker to help them feel comfortable speaking in a group as well as thinking about the theme of the program. Suggestion: Ask youth to explore myths and preconceptions about mental health and suicide in teenagers, and to test their knowledge on the risk factors and warning signs.

4 Utilize audiobooks. You may see a spectrum of reading abilities and levels among your participants. In order for your program to feel inclusive and not exclusive, provide alternative forms of access to literature, if permissible. If you cannot circulate audiobooks on an individual basis, try to set aside time in the library for interested participants to listen to the book.

5 Reluctant teen readers may experience a lot of difficulty and frustrations trying to keep pace with the group, participate in discussion, and fully grasp the various thematic elements presented. This may lead to insecurities, self-doubt, acting out, or a refusal to participate. If alternative formats — audiobooks — are not a feasible option, devise individualized plans for participants that meets their goals. Get back to the basics with extra reading time, supplemental worksheets to guide comprehension, or suggest reading one chapter at a time.

6 Read-alouds: Reading aloud is a great technique to help struggling and reluctant readers sound out words and decode themes and overall content. By reading aloud together, the facilitator and fellow participants can help demonstrate fluent reading. Read sections together and discuss them. This also may help to revamp energy and

discussion threads and decrease anxiety among reluctant readers.

7 If you notice participants struggling to grasp a certain scene or plot point, ask teens to “act out” the respective text. I used the performance technique to help readers struggling with character dynamics within the Tennessee Williams’ play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Readers who previously felt compassion and sympathy toward protagonist Stanley Kowalski walked away from their performance with a drastically different perspective!

8 Journal your thoughts: Provide participants with a book journal that will be used throughout the program. A journal not only is an incentive but a safe space for teens to jot down their thoughts, emotions, and questions about the book. It also will help teens organize their thoughts, support comprehension, and allow for chapter reflections.

9 Interact with the text: Ask participants to write down their reactions and question in the margins of the text and share with fellow students. In these small groups, participants can work through questions together and share personal strategies they employed to unravel themes and complex narratives.

10 Artistic expressions: For some of us, verbally expressing our thoughts is difficult and thwarted by apprehension and self-doubt. Use art to supplement traditional discussion groups, allowing teens to express themselves individually and independently. Ask teens to select a character or scene that embodies the book and themes discussed in group. Ask teens to share their art and describe what it depicts and what it means to them.

11 Promote monthly observances to bring awareness about teen violence, bullying, and teen suicide. February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month; April 7-11 is Teen Violence Prevention Awareness Week; and, September is Suicide Awareness Month. Encourage teens to participate in healthy dialogue about these topics; ask them to design a display for the library or classroom promoting resources, materials, and help lines; or, schedule activities to promote youth activism, engage with teens, and promote awareness.



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12 Show the movie version of the book. After participants read the book, designate time for them to watch the movie version, if available. Ask them to journal or reflect on the movie. How was it different? Did it convey the same message and themes? What was more powerful or impactful to the participant — movie or book? Add snacks and make this a fun movie day that all can enjoy after working so hard.

13 Incentivize your program. Depending on institutional rules, incentivize your program through intrinsic motivation, where participants view reading as meaningful and rewarding. Provide teens with fun bookmarks at the beginning of the program; award certificates of completion at the end; give each participant their choice of a new, popular book; or, allow teens to work off library fines for each book or activity they complete as part of the program. Always check with staff and administration about your institution's rewards program and what is and is not allowed.

14 Take a break from the books. Book clubs don't have to be just book clubs. To curb lulls in participation and general interest, incorporate a variety of group work and activities to revive the group's energy. Break teens into small groups and have them create PSAs against bullying. Visit the Jed Foundation's Half of Us campaign with mtvU and view video stories from teens and high-profile artists creating awareness about mental health problems and the importance of getting help.

15 Hold a debate. Split participants into smaller groups and ask them to select a character from the book. Encourage students to prepare arguments that dissect a character's decisions while encouraging conversation among the rest of your group.

16 Have fun. Laugh a lot. And take a breather when needed. This program addresses some heavy content for teens and adults and may expose raw emotions that have been dormant. Be supportive. Listen. And finally, allow time to reflect on everything you have read and discussed.