



SHADE TREE  
NATURE SCHOOL

# Character-Building Reading List



A guide to finding age-appropriate literature  
with wholesome themes

*By Ellie Probert*

## Includes...

- Family read-alouds
- Recommendations for every age
- Reading lists
- Guide to previewing content
- Discussion Guide: The Inevitable Conversation About Content



**Disclaimer:**

**These are recommendations only.**

**The themes and content in the books recommended should always be previewed by a parent first to make sure they fit with the themes, developmental levels, and goals of your family. Not all books may align with your values, ideals, or beliefs.**

**See Chapter 10 on finding wholesome content for your kids.**

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# Introduction: Why “Character Building?”

When I was asked to come up with a book list, I was kind of taken aback. Sure, I can- but can't you just go to the library and pick something up off the shelf? I grew up going to the small-town library every week. But that was a long time ago. Unfortunately, it's not that simple anymore.

I don't think anyone has to really say that media really isn't what it used to be. Gone are the slow days of the Ingalls family and Andy Griffith. Yet many families yearn for the slower pace and the morals of yesterday. Anytime I walk into a library now, even in small-town America, I'm inundated by books that are filled with ideology that doesn't align with Christian values. Books with overarching moral values and character building are gone, and they've been replaced by books with themes of gore, sex, violence, darkness, witchcraft and rebellion. At alarming rates- and in books that are marketed towards babies, toddlers, and young children.

If you're here, that means you're concerned too. And you may be asking what *can* your children read? Is anything left?

**YES!**

But it's going to take some digging and time on your part as the guardian of your home to preview the content your kids consume.

My encouragement to you is that **this will be worth it.**

In this e-book, you'll find reading lists of some of my all-time favorite books for all ages, some recommendations for parents, and tips and tricks to make finding content a little easier. You'll also find a discussion guide for older kids when you're faced with the inevitable questions that come when you tell them that they can't or shouldn't read/watch something. I hope that this guide helps you on your quest for wholesome content!

***“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” -Philippians 4:8***

# 1. Chapter Book Read-Alouds For the Whole Family

- **The “Little House” Series**

By Laura Ingalls Wilder | All Ages | Suitable for independent readers ages 8+

Starting off strong, the Little House series has been a staple in many homes for the past century. Spanning the generations of a young family braving the frontier and the challenges they face along the way, this series is a celebrated classic for its heartfelt lessons, engaging characters, and balance between struggle and triumph.

- **Anne of Green Gables**

By Lucy Maud Montgomery | All Ages | Suitable for independent readers ages 10+

The “Anne” Series is well loved by all for its charm and whimsy. Anne is adopted by brother and sister duo, Matthew and Marilla. She learns lessons about forgiveness, friendship, and truth as she grows up on beautiful Prince Edward Island.

- **Because of Winn-Dixie**

By Kate DiCamillo | All Ages | Suitable for independent readers ages 8+

This refreshing story of a stray dog and his girl has been a family favorite because of the movie adaptation. But have you read the book? This book enchants through its theme of friendship and how the quite literal “underdogs” find their place in the world.

- **Stuart Little**

By EB White | All Ages | Suitable for independent readers ages 7+

A childhood favorite about a mouse as a member of a human family. This tale follows Stuart on his adventures through New York City and his close encounters.

## • **Tyler, Wilkin, and Skee**

By Robert Burch | All Ages | Suitable for independent readers ages 8+

A summer of play, fun, and work for 3 brothers raised in the country. A humorous tale reminiscent of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. This book is a favorite among rough-and-tumble boys who just want to have fun.

## • **The Borrowers**

By Mary Norton | All Ages | Suitable for independent readers ages 8+

This *small* family lives in the homes of regular sized people without them knowing and makes their living by “borrowing.” This is an enchanting read but would be advised that parents discuss with their children about the concept of stealing vs. borrowing.

## • **The Waltons**

By Carl Henry Rathgen | All Ages | Suitable for independent readers ages 9+

This series follows a large family and their challenges and triumphs through the depression. A captivating series that shows joy through hardship. A must-read to teach about perseverance and joy through suffering.

## • **Caddie Woodlawn**

By Carol Ryrie Brink | All Ages | Suitable for independent readers ages 8+

This tomgirl on the frontier is a force to be reckoned with. Raised in Wisconsin in the 1860s, Caddie runs with her 6 brothers unlike other girls of her time. A story that has some themes of war, death, and survival that is offset by the humor and mischief of the Woodlawn family.

## • **The Mouse and the Motorcycle**

By Beverly Cleary | All Ages | Suitable for independent readers ages 7+

Ralph S. Mouse lives in a motel with his family. When a young boy and his family check in, the mouse are disappointed. Instead of left behind crumbs, the young boy brings a mouse sized motorcycle.

## 2. Chapter Book Read-Alouds For the Family with Older Children

- **A Day No Pigs Would Die**

By Robert Newton Peck | Ages 10+ | Suitable for independent readers ages 12+

This book has important themes of responsibility, ownership, and self-control. A coming-of-age classic about a boy raised on a farm in Vermont and the challenges of life and death on the farm. Parental discretion would be advised, but a very moving story.

- **Bridge to Terabithia**

By Katherine Paterson | Ages 10+ | Suitable for independent readers ages 12+

This family favorite deals with some difficult themes and spans a wide spectrum of emotions. We recommend reading this book as a family, as it deals with the issues of sports, school, peers, death, guilt, friendship, and family. A must-read with parental support, guidance, and discussion.

- **The Hobbit**

By JRR Tolkien | Ages 10+ | Suitable for independent readers ages 13+

A classic about perseverance and the dangers of greed and manipulation. This one should be read by parents first, but makes for an excellent and engaging read-aloud for parents who enjoy bringing the characters to life.

- **Redwall**

By Brian Jacques | Ages 8+ | Suitable for independent readers ages 10+

This series follows the tales of woodland animals who live in an old abbey. An allegory form, similar to The Hobbit, shows the battle between good and evil as the animals ward off evil led by their warriors, primarily mice.

### 3. Independent Reads for Children learning to read

- **Frog and Toad are Friends**

By Arnold Lobel | Beginning Readers

A beautiful and slow-paced series about friendship and kindness.

- **The Cat in the Hat**

By Dr. Seuss | Beginning Readers

A rollicking classic with rhyming schemes and sight-words to challenge and motivate new readers.

- **Little Bear**

By Else Holmelund Minarik | Beginning Readers

A beautifully written book that is very developmentally appropriate for new readers.

- **If You Give a Mouse a Cookie**

By Laura Numeroff, Felicia Bond | Beginning Readers

A humorous tale that keeps children on their toes.

- **The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything**

By Linda Williams | Beginning Readers

A tale of a little old lady who is approached by empty articles of clothing on her way home and finds a solution.

- **Madeline**

By Ludwig Bemelmans | Beginning Readers

This charming series is perfect for readers who have mastered sight words and are working on rhyme schemes. The meter of these delightful books challenges young readers while keeping it light and fun with humorous rhymes.



## 4. *Independent Reads for children comfortable with reading alone*

- **The Boxcar Children**

By Gertrude Chandler Warner | Middle Readers

A classic series about 4 children who make their home in a boxcar. The series tracks their adventures as they solve mysteries and make friends.

- **A Lion to Guard Us**

By Clyde Robert Bulla | Middle Readers

A historical fiction about the founding fathers of Jamestown colony and their families. This book has some themes of death, abandonment, and poverty. Parental discussion and guidance suggested based around these themes.

- **My Father's Dragon**

By Ruth S. Gannett | Middle Readers

A charming fantasy series that has been a family favorite for more than half a century. A great transition series for children who are moving away from picture books into chapter books.

- **The Sugar Creek Gang**

By Paul Hutchens | Middle Readers

A series written about a slower time with strong Christian themes. The books were written based on the life of the author and his 6 brothers. Follow along as they solve mysteries and have adventures.

- **The Wind in the Willows**

By Kenneth Grahame | Middle Readers

A tale of adventure and experiences that ultimately shows the joy of home. Frog, Rat, Mole, and Badger take us through the English countryside on their many expeditions, but each longs to return to their home. A true children's classic for ages 8-11.

- **Pippi Longstocking**

By Astrid Lindgren | Middle Readers

A delightful tale of a young girl living in the middle of town with remarkable strengths and talents that have a flair for the ridiculous.

## 5. Independent Reads for advanced readers (12-15)

- **The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle**

By Avi | Middle Readers

A seafaring tale of 13 year old Charlotte crossing the ocean to join her family in Providence, Rhode Island. The trip starts out on the wrong foot and spirals her into the adventure of a lifetime. This book has some themes of loyalty and mutiny. Parental guidance suggested.

- **The Diary of Anne Frank**

By Anne Frank | Middle Readers

The story of the Frank family told through true accounts in Anne's diary during their time in hiding during the Nazi invasion of Amsterdam. A look into the what life was like for a 13 year old during a tragic war. Parental guidance suggested due to the heaviness of the topics.

- **A Wrinkle in Time**

By Madeleine L'Engle | Middle Readers

A classic sci-fi novel about friendship and courage. This has been a household staple for many years. Many parents have said that this book marks a turning point in their children's lives as they learn how to navigate the realization that they are part of something bigger than just themselves. A novel about a young girl finding her lost father with the help of her brother and friend.

- **The Wingfeather Saga**

By Stephanie Morgan | Middle Readers

A favorite of kids for its fantastic creatures and characters. Some parental guidance suggested for themes of darkness, but ultimately a book about the battle between good and evil.

## 6. Independent Reads for teens (16+)

- **The Chronicles of Narnia**

By C.S. Lewis | Advanced Readers and Teens

An allegorical series that tracks four young children and their adventures in Narnia. We recommend C.S. Lewis with a grain of salt, as there are some themes and mythology that may not be suitable for all family structures, but this has been a favorite for the past century for its whimsy and tales of courage, loyalty, and underlying tones of the gospel message.

- **The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas**

By John Boyne | Advanced Readers and Teens

This holocaust story has been retold through film, and the book is just as touching and emotional as its movie rendition. This tells the story of a 9 year old boy living inside a prison camp during WWII, and his friend that comes to visit him.

- **The Book Thief**

By Matt Berman | Advanced Readers and Teens

This book has been a favorite for many teens- a story about a book-loving girl during the Nazi rule in Germany. Another powerful portrayal of life during WWII for children and teenagers. This book has a few mature concepts such as life and death during a gruesome war. A few adult concepts, including coming of age and romance.

## 7. Boy Favorites

- **The Dangerous Book for Boys**

By Conn Iggulden | How-To and Informational Books

- **Hatchet**

By Gary Paulson | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **The Hardy Boys**

By Grosset and Dunlap | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Tyler, Wilkin, and Skee**

By Robert Burch | Early to Middle Readers

- **The Adventures of Tom Sawyer**

By Mark Twain | Middle Readers

- **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**

By Mark Twain | Middle Readers

- **The American Boy's Handybook**

How-To and Informational Books

- **The Last Mission**

By Harry Mizel | Advanced Readers and Teens

- **The First Edition of the Boy Scout's Handbook**

How-To and Informational Books

- **The Red Badge of Courage**

By Stephen Crane | Advanced Reader and Teens

- **Treasure Island**

By Robert Lois Stevenson | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Kidnapped**

By Robert Lois Stevenson | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **The Call of the Wild**

By Jack London | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **A Day No Pigs would Die**

By Robert Newton Peck | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Calvin and Hobbes**

By Bill Watterson | Comic Books

- **The Adventures of Tin Tin**

By Georges Remi | Comic Books

- **Where the Red Fern Grows**

By Wilson Rawls | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Hornblower**

By C. S. Forester | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Little Britches**

By Ralph Moody | Early to Middle Readers

- **My Side of the Mountain**

By Jean Craighead George | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **The Story of King Arthur and His Knights**

By Howard Pyle | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **The Art of Manliness**

By Brett and Kate McKay | How-to and Instructional Books

- **The Brotherband Chronicles**

By John Flanagan | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Ranger's Apprentice**

By John Flanagan | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Stone Fox**

By John Gardiner | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **"I Survived" Series**

By Lauren Tarshish | Middle Readers

- **Encyclopedia Brown**

By Donald J. Sobol | Early to Middle Readers

- **Johnny Tremain**

By Esther Forbes | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **The Tale of Desperaux**

By Kate DiCamillo | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **The Giver**

By Lois Lowry | Advanced Readers

- **Ask an Adventurer**

By Alastair Humphreys | How-To and Instructional Books

## 8. Girl Favorites

- **Little Women**

By Louisa May Alcott | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Little Men**

By Louisa May Alcott | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Good Wives**

By Louisa May Alcott | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Jo's Boys**

By Louisa May Alcott | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Ramona**

By Beverly Cleary | Early to Middle Readers

- **Nancy Drew**

By Carolyn Keene | Early to Middle Readers

- **Elsie Dinsmore**

By Martha Finley | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Amelia Bedelia**

By Peggy Parish | Early Readers

- **Little House Series**

By Laura Ingalls Wilder | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Anne of Green Gables Series**

By L. M. Montgomery | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Fancy Nancy**

By Jane O'Connor | Early Readers

- **Dear America Series**

Early to Middle Readers

- **Misty of Chincoteague**

By Marguerite Henry | Middle Readers

- **King of the Wind**

By Marguerite Henry | Middle Readers

- **Born to Trot**

By Marguerite Henry | Middle Readers

- **The American Girl Series**

Early to Middle Readers

- **The Bobbesy Twins**

By Laura Lee Hope | Early to Middle Readers

- **Charlotte's Web**

By E. B. White | Early to Middle Readers

- **The Mysterious Benedict Society**

By Trenton Lee Stewart | Middle Readers

- **The "Mandie" Series**

By Lois Gladys Lepperd | Middle Readers

- **Christy**

By Catheryn Marshall | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Five Little Peppers and How They Grew**

By Margaret Sidney | Early to Middle Readers

- **Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman**

By Teresa Warfield | Middle to Advanced Readers

- **Pippi Longstocking**

By Astrid Lindgren | Middle Readers

- **Madeline**

By Ludwig Bemelmans | Early to Middle Readers

- **The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle**

By Avi | Middle Readers

- **The Diary of Anne Frank**

By Anne Frank | Middle Readers

- **Caddie Woodlawn**

By Carol Ryrie Brink | Middle Readers

- **Ask an Adventurer**

By Alastair Humphreys | How-To and Instructional Books

## 9. For Parents

Some of our favorite recommendations for raising kids in an ever changing world.

- **Mama Bear Apologetics**

By Hillary Morgan Ferrer

- **Mama Bear Apologetics Guide to Sexuality**

By Hillary Morgan Ferrer

- **The Hands-On Ranch Book**

By Mary Hefferman

- **The Opt-Out Family**

By Erin Loechner

- **The Hidden Half of Nature: The Microbial Roots of Life and Health**

By David R. Montgomery

- **How to Talk so Kids Will Listen**

By Adele Faber

- **The Fight to Flourish: Engaging in the Struggle to Cultivate the Life You Were Born to Live**

By Jenny Lusko

- **Find the Work You're Wired to Do**

By Ken Coleman

- **Raising Emotionally Strong Boys: Tools Your Son Can Build On for Life**

By David Thomas

- **Raising Men, Not Boys: Shepherding Your Sons to be Men of God**

By Mike Fabarez

- **Until the Streetlights Come On**

By Ginny Yurich



# 10. Finding Content for Your Family

Let's face it. Media and content aren't what they used to be. Not only are themes getting darker, but the lines between good and evil are becoming increasingly blurred. Mature content is being introduced earlier and earlier, and even things like attitude, sassiness, cussing, and inappropriate behavior is becoming normalized. Let's get back to some basics on finding good books for your kids- because I PROMISE you they still exist. Here's 4 steps to making sure the content you're bringing into your home is safe.

## 1. Start with Classics

Whether you're reading aloud as a family or your kids are reading independently, classic literature is a super great place to start because the values of yesterday were simply different than they are today.

## 2. Stop reading if it doesn't engage you in the first couple of pages

Austin Kleon recommends in his book *Steal Like an Artist* that you stop reading more books so that you can **read more books!** If it doesn't pull you in immediately, that's okay. Put it down and come back to it. I love anthologies of literature because it gives you a taste of a story without the full investment. Read more about anthologies in step 3.

## 3. Find abridged versions or anthologies

There are some books that are just too mature for some ages. I love abridged versions of books, especially some of the ones listed below! They're also great for struggling readers because they're much easier to read than classic literature (some even have pictures!). This is a great way to start your child off on the right foot for appreciating literature later on.

I also love anthologies, which are collections of literature, poetry, and stories. This way you can have a small taste of a story before you invest in the full read.

Some of my favorites are:

- The Great Illustrated Classics
- McGuffey's Eclectic Reader
- Anthology of Children's Literature (Norton or Riverside are my favorites!)
- The Illustrated Treasury of Children's Literature
- Easy Classics
- The Children's Own Readers- Pennell and Cusack (out of print)
- All children's collections by William J. Bennett

## 4. Take advantage of other people's reviews

This is the BEST piece of advice I have for all media intake in the home. But where do you start? Well, here are some of my favorite websites for previewing content without having to read/watch the whole thing.

- **Plugged In by Focus on the Family**

[www.pluggedin.com](http://www.pluggedin.com)

I love that this is free and easy to use! Focus on the Family is a good resource for family content all around. My husband and I grew up with Adventures in Odyssey audio adventures and loved them.

- **Common Sense Media**

[www.common sense media.org](http://www.common sense media.org)

This one does have a membership, but for educators it is free. If you have an umbrella school, put in the name of it when you sign up and you can get a free membership as a parent/educator. I also love their newsletters and recommendation lists.

- **Parent Previews**

[www.parentpreviews.com](http://www.parentpreviews.com)

This one is just for movies. It's a bit outdated, but a worthy mention for thorough previews that give a letter grade based on kid-friendly content.

- **Kids in Mind**

[www.kids-in-mind.com](http://www.kids-in-mind.com)

Another one just for movies. Very similar to Common Sense Media, it rates on an easy to read bar and good explanations on why movies are rated the way they are.

- **VidAngel**

A streaming service that is compatible with other platforms to "bleep" or cut out scenes, cuss words, or content that you're not okay with.

- **CovenantEyes**

A VPN that tracks suspicious activity on all your devices. Concerning screenshots are sent to the administrator on the account, and fishy pages are blocked from viewing.

*The bottom line is that you are the one who knows what is best for your family. I hope these recommendations have helped and that you're feeling refreshed and equipped as you find content for your kiddos!*

# 11. The Inevitable Discussion

## “But Mom/Dad- it’s just a book! I know it’s not real!”

So you’ve got a tween/teenager, and they want some freedom regarding their content choices.

There’s going to be some conversations that come up as they spread their wings and fly. I’m not here to tell you when that’s going to be. I’m also not going to tell you what to do, and I’m also not telling you to never let them read things with mature themes. They’re your kids and you know them better than anyone.

To be completely upfront, I don’t have teens of my own; but I have been a mentor to a LOT of teens. The reason I’m including this discussion guide is because my heart broke for the parents when their children came to me with hard questions that they were too scared to ask their mom or dad.

Those conversations always ended with edification that their parents love them, want what’s best for them, want to trust them, and that hard conversations are part of growing up and being an adult.

I want my kids to trust me with hard stuff- and I want the same for you.

I’m a huge advocate for asking questions without judgement. For building Godly character early. For open discussion between parents and teens.

I can tell you coming from a very conservative Christian background that the **less children know, the more they find out from the wrong sources**. When the time is right, kids benefit from education from a safe source. When kids understand something, they’re less likely to experiment. Let’s set our kids up for success through open communication and education in a safe, informative, and logic-based way.

*I highly recommend the “Mama Bear’s Guide to Apologetics” and “Mama Bear’s Guide to Sexuality” for more resources on discussing hard topics with your kids.*

## The Questions:

### For yourself and your spouse:

- Why is this book/movie/show concerning us?
- Do we have all the information about it?
- Are we confident that we've educated our child well on these topics?
- Does my child understand God's view on these themes and the place they have in a Godly lifestyle (sex, violence, war, witchcraft, inappropriate behavior, disrespect, rebellion, etc.)?
- Does my child understand the world's view on these themes and the place they have in our culture?
- Can we trust our child to understand morality and consume this content **without** being consumed by it?
- How will we feel if our child reads/watches this?
- Are we going to draw a hard line and say "no," or are we going to give them some freedom in this area?

### For your kids:

- Do you know what this book/movie/show is about?
- Where did you hear about it?
- Why would you like to read it?
- Are you aware of anything in this book/movie/show that might not align with our family values or your personal values?
- Can we look at the online reviews together?
- If you read/watch/listen to this, would you be comfortable talking about the content with us?
- Do you have any concerns about this book/movie/show?
- If we say "no," do you understand why?

[illegible]