

RAISING GENERATION E(MPATHY) READERS

Shannon Cullen, Publishing Director, Walker Books [adapted from the 2025
Raising Generation Empathy Conference]

As publishers, we spend our days thinking about what stories children see, whose voices they hear, and how we can get those stories into as many hands as possible. I'm particularly interested in the way books don't just teach children how to read, but how to understand themselves and other people, and build their empathy skills.

So how do we raise a generation of empathy-fuelled readers, and what role can publishers continue to play? We're living in a world that feels complex and divided. For children, that might be confusing and sometimes frightening.

So there's a moral and social imperative here: we need to equip young people with the emotional toolkit to navigate difference, disagreement and uncertainty. But also, to navigate friendships, participate in their community, be good listeners, critical thinkers, and find the unity in difference.

Empathy education has to be woven through the fabric of schools, homes and communities – in the stories we share, the conversations we have, the attitudes we model.

Books, in all their forms, are one of the most accessible, affordable, most powerful ways to do this. A story is a safe rehearsal space for complicated feelings and situations. Through a character's journey, children can practise saying, "*What might it feel like to be you?*"

When we say "literacy", we often picture a child with a printed book. But, as publishers know, literacy today is much broader.

Children are encountering stories as audiobooks, as comics, manga or graphic novels, as e-books, as podcasts and spoken word. This is exciting: it means stories are more accessible than ever, and we can meet children where they already are.

For me, literacy is the ability to make sense of stories – to follow, question and reflect on them – whatever format they appear in. If we widen our view like this, we open many more doors for empathy-building moments.

Empathy Lab's work shows that reading isn't just "nice"; it scientifically builds empathy. When children are deeply absorbed in a story, brain imaging suggests they're simulating the experiences of the characters.

Through that, they learn to:

- Understand different perspectives and experiences.
- Develop critical-thinking skills – why is a character acting this way?
- Recognize our shared humanity – that behind every headline is a person with fears, hopes and people they love.

At their best, books are a bridge: this is how I feel, and look – someone else has felt it too.

That's an extraordinary outcome from something as accessible and humble as time spent reading.

And yet, we know we have an empathy deficit – and we also have a literacy problem. Children's reading ability is declining, and they are reading less for enjoyment. Covid disrupted learning; screens compete for attention; families are under huge pressure.

You likely know about "word poverty": by age three, some children have heard millions fewer words than their peers. When time and energy are luxuries, it's conversations – the bedtime stories, the chats on the bus, the "tell me about your day" – that are the first to go. If we leave that unaddressed, we're baking inequality and disconnection into the next generation.

When children do read in their free time, the benefits are remarkable. As publishers you are well aware of the research from the National Literacy Trust, where young readers tell us they read for many reasons including relaxation, happiness and confidence.

Reading for pleasure isn't an optional extra after the "serious" learning. It is the serious learning. It boosts life chances and mental health and empathy.

A significant number of children identify that one of the things they gain from reading is understanding other people's views and cultures. And that is essential for empathy, as it provokes the thoughts: "That could be me" or "That's not me, but I care what happens to them."

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All of this is happening against a backdrop of polarised public debate. Children are growing up surrounded by inflammatory headlines, culture-war rhetoric and social-media outrage, plenty of which is being served directly to them, completely unfiltered and unregulated.

At the same time, access to books is under threat. We've seen book bans and challenges surge in the US under Donald Trump's presidency, particularly around stories that feature LGBTQIA+ characters and children of colour. That trend is starting to seep into the UK too. One of Walker's books, *The Hate U Give*, was recently removed from a school reading list in Weymouth after a parent complaint, and thankfully reinstated after a petition from other parents. And I know of other examples of silent censorship happening across our school and local libraries.

If we restrict the stories children can see, we restrict the people they're allowed to care about. For empathy, that is deadly.

So, from a publishing perspective, we're facing:

- Literacy levels under threat
- Reading for enjoyment falling sharply
- Screen time eroding attention spans
- Growing pressure around the "acceptability" of certain books
- And children navigating an increasingly fraught social and political landscape

But I don't want to stay in doom mode – because there are also huge opportunities, especially if we work together. This year, the government-backed National Year of Reading gives us a shared banner to rally under. It's a chance to align what's happening in classrooms and communities, so children get the same message everywhere: your stories matter, and other people's stories matter too. They're encouraging us to go all in, so let's go all in for empathy.

Every June we already have Empathy Day, within Empathy Lab's festival of reading and action. What if we truly treated that like World Book Day – a fixed point in the calendar when schools, libraries, publishers and retailers all lean in together? Empathy Lab is offering something very different and deeply relevant to our times and challenges, so supporting it to have its own moment will help it to grow.

This year our book-makers are going to be out and about across the country even more than usual. Author and illustrator events can turn empathy into something vivid: children meeting the minds behind the stories, asking questions, seeing that books are made by real people who listen and care. They are our best ambassadors. And we mustn't forget infrastructure. School libraries are crucial empathy hubs. Initiatives like Libraries for Primaries show how transformative it is when every school has a safe, well-stocked space for reading, as the current government has now pledged.

And I want to acknowledge the early work done by Penguin Random House Children's in leading Puffin World of Stories, which is the origin of Libraries for Primaries. It shows that publishers can have impact on the government, in the same way we might support the lobbying for empathy on the curriculum in all devolved nations, as it is in Wales.

So, how do we turn these opportunities into concrete action? Here are ten practical steps I believe we in publishing could commit to.

1. Perhaps the most obvious one, but keep publishing empathy-rich books – stories that centre feelings, relationships and diverse experiences.
2. Back Empathy Lab financially and for as far as you can project ahead, so they can scale their strategy in schools and communities with confidence.
3. Train authors and illustrators for empathy-focused events, so that school visits explicitly build these skills.
4. Make the June Empathy Festival a calendar moment like World Book Day – planned, resourced, and embedded in publishing timetables.
5. Bridge conversations between Empathy Lab and retailers, so bookshops highlight empathy-building titles from the collection.
6. Embed empathy and reading in company culture and Corporate Social Responsibility – from staff training to volunteering in local schools.
7. Support curriculum lobbying, so learning about, and building, empathy skills is recognized as core, not a "nice to have".

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8. Champion Libraries for Primaries, partnering with the NLT to refresh stock of empathy-led titles and train staff.
9. Use the National Year of Reading as the start of a long-term plan, not a one-off campaign, ensuring that the empathy gateway of a story can reach as many children as possible.
10. Use your networks all year round – newsletters, social media, professional events – to keep empathy reading on the agenda and share success stories.

None of these steps requires perfection or particularly large sums of money, even in a tight economic climate.

They just require consistent, collective effort.

Let's jump ahead to 2030 and imagine the impact if we do this together.

A child in 2030 walks into any school in the country and expects to see a library; expects to have regular time for reading for pleasure; expects to meet authors, to talk about feelings, to hear stories that sound like their own life and stories that are completely different.

Empathy isn't a bolt-on; it's a thread running through homes, schools and community work. And that child grows up having practised, again and again through stories, the habit of saying: "I wonder how it feels to be you."

That's the generation of empathy readers we can raise – if we choose to.

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