

Finding the Right Fit: A Beginner's Guide to Book Levelling

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Do you find yourself struggling to choose the right books for your child? Are you curious about book levelling and how to make informed choices for children of different age bands? Book levelling is the process by which a book is judged for its reading demands on the child and then labelled for the age when children can typically respond best to those demands. Read through this article to see and understand the book levelling process. I describe steps to book levelling, from identifying the age for which the book content is appropriate to recognising what is suitable in the text, illustrations and layout designs. We will delve into how the book levelling tool can aid parents, teachers, and educators in making decisions. Let's start the journey toward unlocking imagination and learning for young minds! But first a little about the tool we will use.

The TalkTogether Book Levelling Tool

TalkTogether is a collaborative initiative between the Department of Education at the University of Oxford (UK), University of Philippines and the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Schools at The Promise Foundation (India). The primary objective of the UKRI-GCRF funded TalkTogether project is to enhance spoken language skills in young children aged 3 to 10. Following a review of existing tools for levelling children's books, we identified a few significant gaps. First, there was a lack of emphasis on books for the early childhood years. We also needed a standardized method to evaluate books from various publishers. Recognizing both as important, we were motivated to create [a simple tool](#). We tested our tool with close to 1000 books in India's northern and southern languages, in Filipino in the Philippines and Khmer in Cambodia. The books included children's picture books, story collections, folktales, chapter books, non-fiction materials, learners' materials like reading cards, and school textbooks. In addition to this, when we aimed to level translated books, we found that the level of the original book could be different from the translated version because of the language chosen by the translator. The original works would use a certain level of language, while the translated versions would be levelled for a different age band. Our aim was to ensure that our tool encompassed criteria we thought were essential for accurately assessing such hidden variations.

Our book levelling tool holds particular significance in schools where book levelling practices are not yet widespread, particularly for teachers and librarians who want to get a better understanding of a diverse and dynamic children's book industry.

Book levelling is the process of evaluating a book for its reading demands on children and assigning it a label associated to the age group most suited to meet these demands. Read through this article to see the book levelling process.

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Being Aspirational about Books

In the TalkTogether Book Levelling Tool, books are categorized into three levels, Level 1 to 3, corresponding to books for children aged 3-to-5 years, 6-to-8 years, and 9-to-10 years, respectively. A book is considered appropriate as a Level 1 book if it *can be read aloud* to a typically developing three-to-five-year-old child. For a book to be tagged to level 2 and 3, the book, even if a little challenging, must be *independently read* by a typically developing 6-to-8 and 9-to-10-year-old child.

The primary guideline for book levelling is that the rating should be ‘aspirational’ and consider ‘the best-case scenario’ of a well-resourced environment with plenty of books to read, and an adult available to support the child.

However, for children with limited exposure to books or with below-average reading skills due to lack of practice, achieving an independent level of skill may be challenging. Despite the potential discrepancies between our aspirations and the child’s reality, an aspirational rating serves well as a target for teachers and curriculum developers to guide and enhance children’s reading development. Making use of an aspirational rating also ensures that children are exposed to diverse texts, this is opposite to when teachers limit reading material to books only at the child’s current level.

The primary guideline for book levelling is that the rating should be ‘aspirational’ and consider ‘the best-case scenario’ of a well-resourced environment with plenty of books to read, and an adult available to support the child.

With these considerations in mind, let's explore how to utilize our tool.

How to Use the Tool

The tool evaluates four key aspects of each book: content, organization of ideas, language use, and illustrations/design. Below I explain each criterion with examples of books we levelled, explaining our reasoning for a book level.

Criteria 1: Content Assessment. Children’s literature serves as a reflection of identities, aspirations, and thoughts. Literature is also a gateway for children to explore the world of emotions, traditions, and other experiences. Stories prompt children to engage with characters, providing insights into how they navigate similar challenges in their own lives. Careful thought is needed to decide if a theme is child-friendly and culturally relevant. Ideally, themes should resonate with children's lived experiences or have enough background to open up newer worlds. It also is important to decide how to deal with books that promote or appear to condone wilful inequality, discrimination, and violence.

In our review of over a thousand storybooks, popular themes for children aged 3-to-5 included animals, body parts, marketplaces, nature, seasons, occupations, friendship, leadership, responsibility and sharing. However, there are other engaging themes that resonate with all 3-to-5-year-olds, wherever they live, and whatever their life circumstances. My favourite is the theme of toothache! “[The Very Wiggly Tooth](#)” captures the almost universal children’s theme of Bunu’s wait for the tooth to fall out! “The story of [The Royal Toothache](#)” is

another wonderful example of the author delving into this toothy problem. In summary, the books with themes that are more concretely visible and used more commonly in everyday lives can be recommended for a 3-to-5-year-old.

For children aged 6-to-8, themes mostly revolved around lifestyles and habits of humans, birds and animals, culture and tradition, journey experiences, faith, gratitude, honesty, facing challenges and overcoming fear. An extension of our favourite stories: "[The Hare and the Tortoise \(Again!\)](#)", and "[Sniffles, the Crocodile and Punch, the Butterfly](#)" showcase beautiful relationships built on friendship. Such stories are mostly developed from originals like Aesop's fables and the Panchatantra and Jataka tales. They capture how trust, teamwork and cleverness could take us a long way in achieving our goals. These ideas are in step with the cognitive development of the 6-to-8-year-old.

On the other hand, we found books for children aged 9-to-10 often related to historical events, science-based topics, and abstract ideas of identity, justice, self-discovery, hospitality, compassion, loyalty and sacrifice. There are intriguing selections for this age band. "[Panipuri Inside a Spaceship](#)" provides insight into the life of astronauts in space. Another book, "[The Cat in the Ghat](#)" is inspired by real-life adventures. The storyline follows a wildlife photographer's quest to find a wild cat, encountering various creatures along the way. The sequence in the story is more complex—there are more characters, more conversation, and more in-depth descriptions including giving the species names of animals met along the way. The content is in stark contrast to the story "[The Very Wiggly Tooth](#)" for 3- to 5-year-olds where a smaller number of characters are met, and the conversations are kept to a line each.

Levels of Three Example Books based on Content Assessment

 <p style="background-color: red; color: white; padding: 2px;">ENGLISH - LEVEL 2</p> <p>The Very Wiggly Tooth Reshma Thapa Gurung Canato Jimo</p> <p style="color: red; font-size: small;">✓ VERIFIED</p>	 <p style="background-color: red; color: white; padding: 2px;">ENGLISH - LEVEL 2</p> <p>Sniffles, the Crocodile and Punch, the Butterfly Herminder Ohri Herminder Ohri</p> <p style="color: red; font-size: small;">✓ VERIFIED</p>	 <p style="background-color: green; color: white; padding: 2px;">ENGLISH - LEVEL 3</p> <p>Panipuri inside a Spaceship Vidya Pradhan Arpita Bhattacharjee</p> <p style="color: red; font-size: small;">✓ VERIFIED</p>
<p>Level 1: Theme of toothache for a 3-to-5-year-old</p>	<p>Level 2: Theme of friendship and teamwork for a 6-to-8-year-old</p>	<p>Level 3: Theme of life in space for a 9-to-10-year-old</p>

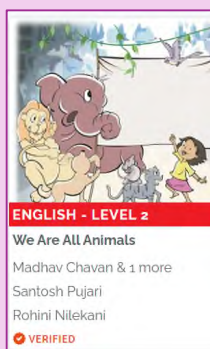
Criteria 2: Organization of Ideas. This aspect of book levelling focuses on coherence and clarity, irrespective of narrative style. A good read for the child is when ideas are logically connected and presented smoothly. Important aspects to consider are the number of idea units in the story and if the story has abstract concepts, then how well is this introduced.

Idea units are the different concepts or information bits in the text. For example, in the sentence "when he sat under the tree thinking what to do next, he saw a squirrel" we can see two ideas (underlined here to quickly spot). Idea units can range from simple ideas to ideas

underpinning complex actions or events. They help understand the overall meaning of the story. Assessing idea units is vital for gauging how easy a book is to read and understand. Turning to concepts in stories, examples of increasingly abstract concepts are death and reincarnation and, depending on how they are introduced, could be recommended for 9-to-10-year-olds. These contrast with concrete concepts that are visible such as size (big and small, tall and short) that could be recommended for the 3-to-5-year-olds. Some abstract concepts can be made visible with pictures such as the concept of sharing, emotions like surprise and fear, and the sense of a family. When abstract concepts are supported by pictures, they help comprehension and thus, provide a reason to recommend an otherwise abstract book to a lower age band. As you read along, you will see that I discuss the pictures in books, the global book design and page layouts, and their importance in book levelling.

We can expect complexity and abstractness of ideas to increase with the age band a book is written for. In [“We are all Animals”](#) a little girl relates her body parts to that of animals to understand how similar we are to animals. The ideas are organised in a list-like manner and visualised with pictures and is appropriate for 3-to-5-year-olds. For the 6-to-8 age band, [“Papa’s Moustaches”](#) has a different level of idea organisation. The theme of moustaches is concrete, and children can usually relate to this easily. Although this book has a greater number of ideas presented within the main topic, such as the girl’s fascination with her father’s moustache, his routines for its maintenance and how there is a difference in the facial features of boys and girls, these idea units join up in a smooth manner. Adding each new idea does not affect the flow of the story. A step up in idea complexity is seen in a book for 9-to-10-year-olds titled [“Rhino Charge”](#). The story introduces a shy and withdrawn character, his struggles with fellow mates in the jungle, and his determination to overcome his fears and shyness. As a first step he decides to learn his name and to confidently introduce himself to everyone. These are subtle ideas. However, the flow of the story, including when there are transitions, is smooth. Each layer of information is connected and even when there are gaps, it is still possible to make the connections. This type of organisation of ideas in a book is appropriate for 9-to-10-year-olds.

Levels of Three Example Books based on Organization of Ideas



Level 1: One simple idea of comparisons of body parts of human with animals. Appropriate for a 3-to-5-year-old.



Level 2: Three different ideas but all under the one theme of a 'moustache'. Appropriate for a 6-to-8-year-old.



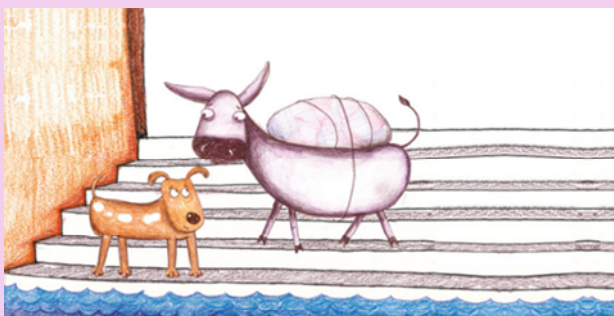
Level 3: Multiple ideas with more complex connections between ideas. Appropriate for a 9-to-10-year-old.

Criteria 3: Language Use. We also consider vocabulary, sentence structure, and use of figurative language. Vocabulary is an expanding treasure house of words. It is therefore excellent to have some challenge in the book without new words becoming overly complex. Sentence length and complexity also vary with age, with younger children benefiting from simplicity. Having said that, it is also possible to add longer sentences and complex constructions and still keep the book accessible for younger listeners and readers through well supported illustrations, and explanatory texts. “[Bheema, the Sleepyhead](#)”, a book we rated for the 3-to-5-year age band stands out in this regard. The book has language that is somewhat above the expected capabilities of the 3- to 5-year-old. The number of sentences is between 3 to 10 on each page. In addition, sentences are slightly lengthier. But simple words used in daily life make it a book that can be read aloud and be self-understandable. Although a bit dense with text, this book can be recommended for a 3-to-5-year-old as a challenging story to listen to.

Examples of books that challenge the 6-to-8-year-old child’s exposure to language are “[The Doll that Bommakka Made](#)” and “[Kato Clever and the Big Trouble](#)”. Both books have long sentences and difficult words such as “‘We will surely die’ they said and wept...’ Here the word *wept* may be a rare word for some children, but it’s meaning may be guessed from previous sentences and especially the dialog “We will surely die”, where the characters are worried about a threat to their lives. Thus, when complex words are supported with other simple words of action, the book can be levelled for younger children.

“Medicine from the Courtyard is Good Medicine” is laid out with longer sentences, using later learnt vocabulary such as *sigh*, *by good fortune*, *abruptly*. Likewise, in “[Nasira Begum and the Landlord](#)” we see use of complex words such as *conviction* and *intolerable*. We rated these as Level 3 books appropriate for the 9-to-10-year-old as a result of complex word use and higher level of grammar usage in these books.

Levels of Two Example Books based on ‘Language Use’ criteria



Coming back from the river in the evening, Bheema met Moti, the dog. “I can never get up in the morning on time. Will you wake me up?” Bheema asked Moti. “Yes, I will,” said Moti and the next morning he barked and barked but did Bheema wake up? No Sir!

Level 1: Use of simple words and short but meaningful sentences are used alongside text-supporting illustrations. Appropriate for a 3-to-5-year-old.

The caterpillars said, “Let us look for leaves.” The butterflies said, “We want flowers.” The mice wanted holes. The moles wanted to dig their own holes. The squirrels, birds, insects wanted trees, bushes and grass.

All the animals wanted the soft earth, not cement or concrete. “Where will we find all this?” they cried. “We will surely die,” they said and wept.



Level 2: Longer sentences and richer vocabulary are used with context information helping to understand their meaning. Appropriate for a 6-to-8-year old.

Criteria 4: Illustrations and Design. Images can captivate children, draw attention to the text, motivate reading, and potentially stimulate imagination and ideas about character’s emotions, thoughts, and what prompts behaviours. However, the impact of illustrations and design can vary depending on how they are presented. This criterion thus examines layout, text-supportive illustrations, font selection, and text amount.

For the youngest children, simple and light background colours without distracting textures or overlapping illustrations, legible font that is simple and not stylized, and large text size seem to work best. Illustrations should enhance understanding and engagement, prioritizing clarity over decorative elements.

For 3-to-5-year-olds, “[Too Big! Too Small!](#)” is a book in which the concepts of big and small are well illustrated and are supportive of the narrative for each situation. The font size (approximately 14 point) is comfortable and legible for children to read. By legible I mean a Sans Serif font which means that it does not have extra lines or strokes that decorate the font. Turning to illustrations, appealing pictures occupy the space on each page, with one short and simple sentence per page.

In contrast, we rated “[Everything Looks New!](#)” as appropriate for the 6-to-8-year-old. Not all sentences per page have supporting images, but the situation described by every set of sentences is illustrated. Additionally, font size is slightly smaller (lesser than 14 point).

And lastly, for the 9-to10-year-old, “[The Maldhok in the Desert](#)” with around 16 pages, and close to a hundred sentences, seems more like a novella: a narrative prose fiction whose length is shorter than most novels, but longer than most short stories. The illustrations are not text supportive. A lot is left to the imagination, and this is good! The font size is small (slightly bigger than newspaper size print).

In summary, the lesser the amount of text on each page, the clearer the background, the greater the number of illustrations and colours, the bigger the size of the text, the younger the age band for which the book can be recommended.

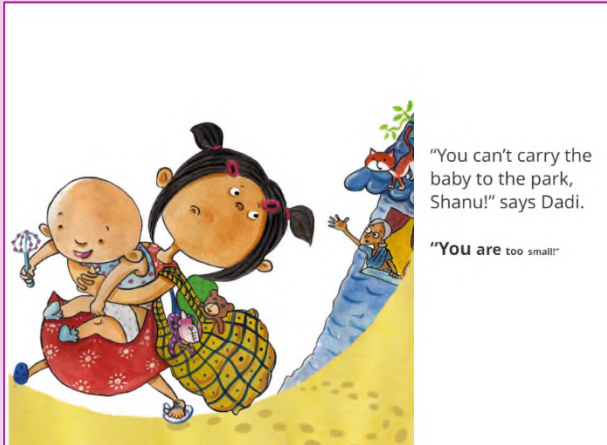
When can a book be recommended to a younger child?

Content and their organisation: When books have themes that are more concretely visible and used more commonly in everyday lives.

Organisation of ideas and their illustration: When abstract concepts are supported by pictures, they help comprehension and thus, provide a reason to recommend an otherwise abstract book to a lower age band.

Organisation of ideas, language use, and their illustration: Books with longer sentences and complex constructions can still be accessible for younger listeners and readers when there are well supported illustrations, and each layer is well connected.

Levels of Three Example Books based on Illustrations and Design



Level 1: Illustrations support each sentence, background is kept simple and the text is legible. A comfortable layout design. Appropriate for a 3-to-5-year-old.

Level 2: Illustrations reflect ideas covered in a set of sentences. A comfortable layout design. Hence a recommendation for a 6-to-8-year-old.



The garden is full of flowers.
I like the yellow roses the best and Grandpa likes the white jasmine.
There is a carpet of leaves under some trees.



The haunting notes of the shepherd's reed flute die down. In the haze of dusk, the sheep bump against each other, bleating all the way home.

On one side of the flock, a unique shepherd is at work; with ostrich-like legs, he bends over to peck, nudge and guide, leaving three-toed footprints on the desert sand.

Gagan is a Great Indian Bustard – a maldhok – picked up as an orphaned chick and trained by a young boy to herd his sheep.

Gagan's master Chaitan tucks his *narh* away and swings his stick onto his shoulders to rest his tired arms. His giant red *shafu* offers little protection from the relentless Rajasthan sun.

Chaitan's weary foot, in a battered curly-tip shoe, is scorched by the hot sands. The other is an artificial Jaipur limb.

* Narh - Flute made from desert grass
* Shafu - Turban worn by Rajasthan men

Level 3: A book with very few images to support text as in the picture. Smaller font size. Appropriate for a 9-to-10-year-old under this criterion.

Bringing it all Together to Decide Book Level. After rating a book on each of the four criteria described above, it is time to assign an overall rating to each book.

When we worked on book levelling, many books had consistent ratings across all four criteria and a book level could be quickly assigned. But books can also show variations. Take, for instance, the storybook [“The Jungle School”](#). Its content and organization of ideas, depicting an imaginative forest scenario where animals wonder about their teacher seemed easily appropriate for 3-to-5-year-olds. The narrative also flowed coherently, showing clarity in presentation. However, language use was rated for a higher age group, for 6-to-8-year-olds, because although the book's language comprised short sentences. We saw words like ‘slithered’ and ‘concluded’ that might challenge comprehension for children under 6.



Tota, the parrot flew ahead.
Zhoola, the monkey jumped from tree to tree.
Poorakha, the python slithered fast.

“Here!” shouted Tota. “Can you read?”
“It is upside down, I think,” said Zhoola hanging by the branch.

Poorakha concluded, “Hisssss. No one can read.”

Illustrations and design were also rated for the 6-to-8 age band because the text was somewhat dense, with pages containing 5 to 16 sentences and in small font sizes. However, the layout and presentation of text on a plain background was completely fine. In summary, while the content and organization of ideas were suitable for younger children, the language complexity and layout features suggested a better fit for the 6-to 8-year-old.

Over time, working through hundreds of books, we began to use some easy-to-apply rules. First, if language complexity was high, then level the book to a higher age band. Second, if books fall on the borderline between two levels, place them in the lower age band when the content, organization of ideas and language use is not very demanding, and illustrations support the text well. With these rules, we found more agreement across raters in our teams.

Children’s Books, Book Levelling and You

The book levelling tool serves as a valuable resource for teachers, librarians and early childhood educators. Librarians can curate levelled reading libraries, and teachers in diverse classrooms can provide tailored books to meet individual learning needs. Parents who wish to engage more analytically with children’s books can also use the tool. Overall, the tool aids in assessing children's reading progress and planning their ongoing literary, literacy and language development.

In conclusion, the book levelling tool empowers users to make informed decisions when selecting children's books. By using a set of four comprehensive criteria, parents, teachers, and educators can ensure that books are not only age-appropriate but also engaging and enriching for young readers and story listeners. Let us together embark on a journey to ignite children’s imagination and cultivate curiosity in the next generation of readers.

What better gift for a child than to help unlock with them the magic of reading!

Appendix:

The TalkTogether Book Levelling Tool is open access and can be found [here](#).

Bibliography:

Name of the book	Author	Illustrator
The Very Wiggly Tooth	Reshma Thapa Gurung	Canato Jimo
The Royal Toothache	Sanjiv Jaiswal 'Sanjay'	Ajith Narayan
The Hare and the Tortoise (Again!)	Venkataramana Gowda	Padmanabh
Sniffles, the crocodile and Punch, the butterfly	Written by Herminder Ohari, translated by Divaspathi Hegde	Herminder Ohari
Panipuri Inside a Spaceship	Written by Vidhya Pradhan, translated by Tanuja A Jakkannanavar	Arpitha Bhattacharya
The Cat in the Ghat	Ambika Rao	Ruchi Shah
We are all Animals	Madhav Chavan, Meera Tendulkar	Santosh Pujari
Papa's Moustaches	Madhuri Purandare	Madhuri Purandare
Rhino Charge	Vijayalakshmi Nagaraj	Sanjay Sarkar
Bheema, the Sleepyhead	Kiran Kasturia	Swetha Mohapatra
The Doll that Bommakka Made	Praba Ram, Sheela Preuitt	Debasmita Dasgupta
Kato Clever and the Big Trouble	Herminder Ohari	Herminder Ohari
Medicine from the Courtyard is Good Medicine	Sumathi Prabhakar	Arka Prabha Roy Chowdary
Nasira Begum and the Landlord	Githa Hariharan	Taposhi Ghoshal
Too Big! Too Small!	Lavanya Karthik	Lavanya Karthik
Everything Looks New!	Mala Kumar, Manisha Chaudhary	Priya Kurian
The Maldhok in the Desert	Jeyanti Manokaran	Jeyanti Manokaran
The Jungle School	Madhav Chavan, Meera Tendulkar	Kethan Ravuth