

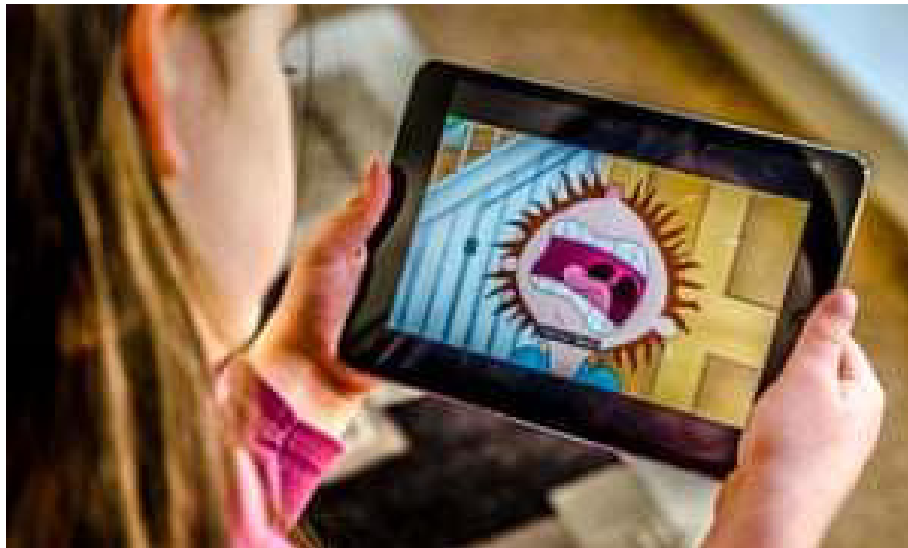
The Observer
Children's TV

Read my lips: how lockdown TV could boost children's literacy

Campaigners call on broadcasters and streamers to seize the moment to switch on subtitles for kids' programming

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Research shows that turning on TV subtitles boosts kids' reading ages, particularly among primary school children.

Photograph: Manj Virdee

An urgent call is to go out to children's television broadcasters this weekend, backed by major names in British entertainment, politics and technology. Writer and performer Stephen Fry, best-selling author Cressida Cowell and businesswoman [Martha Lane Fox](#) are joined by former children's television presenter Floella Benjamin as signatories to a letter, carried in today's *Observer*, that urges all leading streaming, network and terrestrial children's channels to make one simple change to boost literacy among the young: turn on the subtitles. ¹

If English-language subtitles were to be run along the bottom of the screen for all programming, they argue, reading levels across the country would automatically rise. Longstanding international academic research projects prove, they say, that spelling, grammar and vocabulary would all be enhanced, even if children watching TV are not aware they are learning.

The campaign aims to improve reading ability across the English-speaking world and has won backing from former President [Bill Clinton](#), who said: "Same-language subtitling doubles the number of functional readers among primary school children. It's a small thing that has a staggering impact on people's lives."

¹ Letter reproduced at the end.

The drive is being run by a campaign group called Tots, or Turn On The Subtitles, and launches this week. The open letter to broadcasters from the organisation, founded by old friends and entrepreneurs Henry Warren and Oli Barrett, draws attention to the benefits of featuring same-language subtitles as a default on programming aimed at children across the world - almost a billion of whom are now being educated inside their own homes.

The campaign is aimed at broadcasters and online platforms, and names Sky, Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube Kids, ITV and the BBC, many of whom have shown interest in the idea. Campaigners are pushing for this change to be made at a moment of maximum benefit.

“This needs to be done as a matter of urgency. This simple change will make the world of difference to millions of young people at this extremely challenging time,” reads the letter.

Warren, a businessman who has specialised in education technology, said he aims to raise awareness of the issue among parents as well as broadcasters. The plan is to start with video-on-demand content now, and then move on to converting all children’s programming.

“It starts helping as soon as a child can decode basic phonemes,” said Warren. “But the real benefit is when a child is a sufficiently competent reader that it is done subconsciously.” Parents would be able to turn off the subtitles if they wished, or change them to another language. And if broadcasters prove slow to respond to the renewed pressure, Warren hopes parents will hear the message.

“To be blunt, though, even the best awareness-raising often fails to reach the families that need it most.” It is an intervention, Warren adds, is not supposed to replace home reading, merely to supplement it.

Researchers using eye-tracking software have shown that children follow subtitles on screens. While many broadcasters have engaged with Tots in recent months, and most have few technical obstacles to surmount, final editorial approval for the plan has been difficult to get.

A Dutch study of eye-tracking during television viewing found in 1991 that the subtitles drew the eyes of viewers for a considerable time. A previous study also found that action-oriented cartoons, such as Popeye, did sometimes draw children’s eyes away from the text below, but not in more verbally dense shows, such as *The Garfield Show*. And two years ago, PlanetRead, a literacy charity based in Canada, America and India, carried out research in rural Rajasthan, India, which involved showing children animated stories. One group of struggling readers watched with subtitles and one without.

The overwhelming majority of children, 94 per cent, were found to have engaged with the subtitles, especially in the simpler shows when words appeared at a rate of around 81 a minute.

Letters: the unseen victims of coronavirus

Today, the vast majority of schools are closed and millions of children across the UK are being home-schooled for the first time. Across the planet, that number is approaching a billion. It is incumbent on all of us to do what we can to help them.

Extensive research from top academics in many countries has shown that simply turning on the subtitles for children's television improves literacy. Dramatically. In fact it may double their chance of becoming a proficient reader, in particular those children between the ages of six and 10.

As former ministers, secretaries of state, civil servants, charity CEOs, business leaders and academics, we all now call on Sky, Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube Kids, ITV, Channel 5 and the BBC to all turn on the subtitles, by default, for children's TV programmes. This needs to be done as a matter of urgency. This simple change will make the world of difference to millions of young people at this extremely challenging time. You can find out more at the website www.turnonthesubtitles.org.

Stephen Fry, Cressida Cowell, Baroness Floella Benjamin, Dr Ranj Singh, Zenna Hopson, Lord Storey, Lord Knight, Baroness Lane-Fox, Errol D'Souza, Prof Ralph Tabberer, Jonathan Douglas, Mike Dickson, Shuna Kennedy, Sir Michael Barber, Lord Foster, Prof Stephen Heppell, Dr Kate Cowan, Antonio Gould, Tom Hall, MT Rainey, Sir David Mellville, Benita Somerfield, Dr Brij Kothari, Jim Fruchterman, Robert Lynch, Deborah Nichols, Annika Small, Michael Acton Smith, Kate Robertson, Alok Singh, Sara Olsen, Scott Norton, Jonathan Seaton, David Angrave, Dame Julia Cleverdon, Baroness Helen Liddell, Oli Barrett, Henry Warren, Steve Haines, Brett Wigdortz, David Wood, Alex Smith, Paul Lindley, Bob Carolgees, Prof Alison Baverstock, Ravi Gurumurthy, Su-Mei Thompson