



The Playaway: A Tool to Help Make Reading Fun

By Sue Fellerer

Brandon School is a small pre-K through 8th grade school serving approximately 327 students. As you can imagine, Brandon School does not have the funding that a lot of larger school districts have. When the special needs teacher approached me a few years ago about high-interest, low-level books and asked for ideas to help her students read more, we came up with the idea of incorporating recorded books into the library. Research is available on the benefits of using recorded books as an educational tool, which helped in the quest to secure funding.

made for more recorded books. I kept looking for more funding opportunities, applying for the Walmart grant a second time and receiving \$500 to support the recorded books program.

NEW TECHNOLOGY TO THE RESCUE

About the same time a new item came on the market called the Playaway (www.playaway.com). One concern about recorded books was the outdated technology—almost half of the collection was audiocassettes. The recorded book market was booming, more and more titles were

to-shelve package. Middle school students were targeted first. All it took was “booktalking” the Playaway to a few students and within a few weeks, other students were asking about them. But the program wasn’t as popular as I thought it would be. Then I promoted the Playaway to the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students, and I realized I had found my target audience. The students loved them! They could check out a more challenging book, and actually make it through to the end. They didn’t have to worry about a player being available or be limited to what they had access to at home. Students would come in for book checkout and actually ask for a “POD.”

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Brandon School does not meet the requirements of a “needy” school based upon the number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, as required by many grants. Two grant opportunities, one offered through the local newspaper targeting reading programs, and the second offered through Walmart’s literacy grant, did work. Brandon School applied for both grants and received the grant offered through our local newspaper for \$1,500. The program was up and running!

At first the focus was on books related directly to the Language Arts curriculum but it quickly expanded into books popular with middle school students, so that the special needs students could be up-to-date with current literacy trends. The following year, I restructured the library budget to build the recorded book collection. The recorded books were circulating, the students were excited about the program, and requests were being

becoming available, and the focus shifted to buying more compact discs, but there was still a road block. Many students had no way to listen to recorded books because they didn’t have an audiocassette or compact disc player. The library’s portable players were almost always checked out and were easily damaged. The Playaway could be the answer to these problems.

The Playaway is a self-contained unit similar to an iPod, but material cannot be deleted, copied, or added. About the size of a deck of cards, the Playaway holds up to 80 hours of play time. The self-contained part was the determining factor, and I decided to jump in and purchase as many titles as possible for upper elementary and middle school. When the Playaway first arrived, I was skeptical. How could I get students to use these? The packaging was great; everything students needed to listen to the book came in a ready-

The Playaway is not usually checked out to students younger than 3rd grade. In rare circumstances, a Playaway has been checked out to 2nd grade students, but the controls to use the Playaway are difficult for younger students to manipulate. I have focused on books of interest to 3rd-8th grade students and do not offer many Playaway titles for younger students.

FROM THE MEDIA CENTER INTO THE CLASSROOM

Teachers use recorded books in their classrooms to support their curriculum and to offer reading strategies to their students. When the book is particularly long, a recorded book is great. The teacher and students can listen to the book together with students following along with a classroom set, but the teacher is free to move about the room and assist students as needed. At first, Playaways were not used in the classroom as they were seen as tools for individual students. Since purchasing portable speakers, Playaways are used in the classroom as often as other recorded books.

As with all recorded books, students have to check out the print book with the recorded book, and the Playaway is no exception. Hopefully, students are following along whenever possible in the print book to help develop fluency and vocabulary skills. Although Brandon School Library has

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no security system, Playaway cases are put on the shelf right next to the print book. Even the extra batteries and the ear buds are left with the player, and the entire case is put on the shelf for check out. The library offers extra ear buds to replace those that get worn out and the ear buds in circulation get cleaned when they come back. Playaway does sell security devices to lock the cases to prevent theft. The Playaway also comes with a standard one-year warranty. The Playaway seems to be holding up better than audiocassettes and compact discs.

Brandon School’s recorded books program started out with only two books. It has now grown to over 500 recorded books, including 100 Playaways. Although the recorded books program was initially developed to help students with learning disabilities, it has developed into something bigger. Struggling students, who do not qualify for special services, check out recorded books. Advanced readers, who are often intimidated by the length of more challenging books, check out recorded books. Students who are traveling on vacation or to sporting events check out recorded books and listen to them in the car or on the bus. Sometimes entire families listen to the recorded book while they are traveling. The Playaway offers an alternative in that a separate player is not needed. The Playaway becomes even more accessible with a cassette adaptor, FM transmitter, or portable speakers (although at Brandon School the speakers are only checked out to the classroom teachers). 🌈

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