



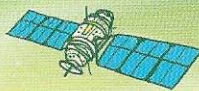
INTRODUCING LIBRARY  
**HACKS**

GRAPHIC NOVELS &  
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## Prime Time *for* Podcasts

It's a golden age for both  
listeners and creators



# Prime Time for Podcasts



It's a golden age for both listeners and creators

**By Linda Rodgers**

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HEN MARCIE ATKINS wants to immerse her students in a topic, she often offers podcasts among an array of learning materials that students can watch, listen to, and read. “It gives students an opportunity to learn information in other ways besides just reading,” says Atkins, a teacher librarian at Belvedere Elementary in Falls Church, VA. “As adults, we often get information through various media: reading, watching videos or TV, and listening to the radio or podcasts. I want students to experience that as well.”

She may be onto something. Kids who listen to podcasts are passionate about them. A survey by Kids Listen ([kidslisten.org](http://kidslisten.org)), a grassroots advocacy group for high-quality audio content for children, found that 80 percent of kids listened to their favorite podcasts more than once, and nearly three-quarters liked to discuss what they’d heard. In addition, 53 percent liked to listen along with others.

That exploding popularity explains why school and youth librarians are embracing podcasts—and helping kids and teens make their own. Podcasts, particularly ones that tell a story, engage young people in unique ways, says Jonathan Messinger, cochair of Kids Listen and creator of the sci-fi adventure podcast *The Alien Adventures of Finn Caspian* ([finncaspian.com](http://finncaspian.com)). “Having no screen or visual in front of them lets kids’ imagination take over and run the show, and the intimacy of listening—hearing the voice or voices of the show’s presenter—really makes them feel like they’re a part of what’s unfolding,” he says. “It’s immersive.”

Kidcasts, as these podcasts for younger audience have been dubbed ([ow.ly/hRmH30hGcfB](http://ow.ly/hRmH30hGcfB)), can play many roles in the library. They can inform young people on topics such as history and science, serve as a virtual book club, or entertain them with swashbuckling tales or real-life stories. Along the way, they sharpen listening skills and get kids excited about reading. “I’ve heard from dozens and dozens of listeners who have picked up the books we’ve mentioned on the show,” says Messinger.

What makes for an effective podcast for kids? “A good podcast regularly releases content in predictable intervals, so that listeners know when they can tune in,” says Anne Bensfield, children’s digital learning librarian at the Oak Park (IL) Public Library. “Each episode is not more than 20 to 30 minutes and includes some sort of variation in the sound—like switching off between voices or adding sounds or background music—that makes it an exciting experience.”

Another appealing factor for librarians: podcasts are free and easy to subscribe to, and download, via Apple’s podcast app or Stitcher Radio. If you want to discover ones already vetted by experts, Carissa Christner, youth services librarian at the Alicia Ashman Neighborhood Library in Madison, WI, recommends checking out the kids’ media blog “Zooglobber” ([zooglobber.com](http://zooglobber.com)).

com/podcasts-for-kids-list) and the *Kids Listen* app, which curates weekly episodes of different kidcasts. Christner uses these sources to make informal recommendations to her young patrons. Some librarians also include links to their favorite kidcasts on their library websites, while others, including Bensfield, print brochures with explanations and recommendations to give out at the circulation desk.

### Get kids listening (and creating)

Ready to tap into the podcast passion? Librarians and kidcast creators offer these tips to get young patrons listening—and creating podcasts themselves.

**Cue episodes before storytime.** If Bensfield wants to get kids ramped up before she reads a movement-based story, she plays a few songs from the music and storytelling podcast *Ear Snacks* ([earsnacks.org](http://earsnacks.org)). When little ones need to unwind, Bensfield suggests playing an episode of the fairy-tale songs and stories podcast *April Eight* ([aprileight.com](http://aprileight.com)), which she keeps cued up.

**Get together with podcast creators.** Jamie Winchell, teacher librarian at the Percy Julian Middle School in Oak Park, jumped at the chance to record an episode of *Book Club for Kids*, a book discussion podcast geared toward middle schoolers ([ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL BYERS](http://bookclub-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

# From Nonsense to Science: Top Podcasts

Recommendations from experts Anne Bensfield, Kitty Felde, Cassandra Hickman, Jonathan Messinger, and Pam Rogers

## For kids

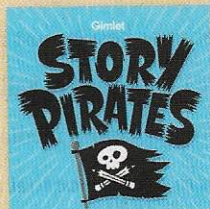
**Ear Snacks** (earsnacks.org) Science, art, and culture served up with catchy songs and kid participation. The award-winning children's musicians connect ordinary things with extraordinary ideas, says Bensfield. (Ages 2-5)

**Little Stories for Tiny People** (littlestoriesintypeople.com) Original tales featuring animal characters tackle topics from school to new siblings. Warm, funny, and pitch-perfect. (Ages 2-5)

**April Eight** (aprileight.com) Songs and fairy tales for kids of all ages that also feature family-friendly crafts and recipes. (Ages 3+)

**Circle Round** (ow.ly/iIsE30hHwCn) The stellar host curates global folktales in this podcast from NPR's Boston station. (Ages 3-10)

**Story Pirates** (podcast.storypirates.com) Actors perform kid-written sketches that are weird, funny, and amazing, says Messinger. (Ages 4-10)



**Buttons & Figs** (buttonsandfigs.com/Nonsense) Nonsense literature, from jokes to tongue twisters, helps kids make sense of the world around them and create nonsense of their own. (Ages 5-10)

**What If World** (whatifworldpodcast.com) The narrator spins comic tales out of kid questions, like "What if Santa were an elephant?" or "What if sharks had legs?" (Ages 5-10)

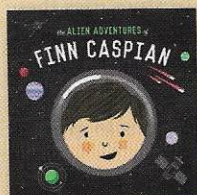
**Peace Out** (bedtime.fm/peaceout/s2e7) Perfect for getting kids to relax and breathe while sneaking in mindfulness lessons. A great way for kids to wind down. (Ages 5-12)

**Tumble** (sciencepodcastforkids.com) Crack science reporting and interviews with experts on new scientific discoveries, from biofuels to black holes. (Ages 6-12)

**Short and Curly** (ow.ly/My0930hHxIq) An Australian podcast examines serious ethical questions ("Would you donate your kidney to a stranger?") with plenty of time for students to interact and share views. (Ages 6-12)

**The Past and the Curious** (thepastandthecurious.com) History with a side of fun, this features stories about such figures as Nellie Bly and Henry "Box" Brown. (Ages 6+)

**The Unexplainable Disappearance of Mars Patel** (marspatel.com) Middle grade kids script and voice this mystery show in a high-quality cross between *The Goonies* and *Stranger Things*, says Bensfield. (Ages 8-12)



**The Alien Adventures of Finn Caspian** (finncaspian.com) Sci-fi adventures starring an eight-year-old on a space station who explores the galaxy with friends. (Ages 8-13)

**Brains On!** (brainson.org) Kids submit questions; scientists answer them. Music, wisecracks, and decoding a mystery sound every episode keep things lively. (Ages 9+)

**Book Club for Kids** (bookclubforkids.org) Middle schoolers discuss books and sometimes hear a celebrity read or answer questions. (Ages 10-14)

forkids.org), with her students. "I am always looking for unique opportunities for students to exert agency and express themselves in relation to literature," she says. Winchell gathered some interested students and gave them a choice of books (they picked *Orphan Island* by Laurel Snyder). Kitty Felde, the *Book Club for Kids* creator, stopped by the library to record the discussion for her series. Librarians can also invite podcasters to visit their libraries and talk with kids about what they do, the way they would an author or illustrator, as Christner is planning to do this summer.

## For teens

Teenagers often gravitate toward podcasts geared to adults. Here are some of those, plus appealing shows for youth.



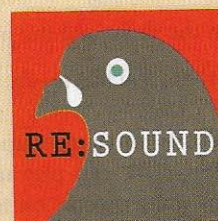
**99% Invisible** (99percentinvisible.org) How design impacts our lives, from sports bras to store logos.

**How Sound** (prx.org/series/32401-how-sound) A helpful podcast about making podcasts, says Hickman. Pros share tips on the ins and outs of storytelling, from recording techniques to editing a narrative.

**Mouthful** (mouthfulpodcastphilly.com) Young adults tackle complex topics, including eating disorders, stop-and-frisk, and gender identity in these dramatic monologues.

WNYC's **Radio Rookies** (wnyc.org/shows/rookies) Stories created by teens that may inspire listeners to make their own, says Hickman.

**Radiolab** (radiolab.org) Think a geeky *This American Life* with lots of sound effects as host Jad Abumrad explores scientific, musical, and other topics. Hip and approachable.



**Re:Sound** (owly/6jdg30hHBcf) Curated by the folks behind Chicago's Third Coast Audio Festival, this podcast has audio documentaries and features.

**Storycorps** (storycorps.org) The storytellers span all generations, allowing teen listeners to tune into other points of view, says Felde.

**Youth Radio** (youthradio.org) Journalistic stories produced by young people from the Bay Area for teens all across the country.

**Jump-start discussions.** "Jokes in the Library," an episode from *Buttons & Figs* (buttonsandfigs.com), a celebration of nonsense literature, gets kids at the Oak Park Library to start riffing knock-knock jokes on their own, says Bensfield, who also keeps several joke books on hand for checkout to make the connection between podcasts and reading. Librarians can play episodes from such science-based podcasts as *Brains On!* (brainson.org) before maker sessions, says Felde. Or they can use them the way Atkins does—as a new way to delve deeper into a topic. "For a fifth grade lesson on ocean animals, I used

the book *Giant Squid* by Candace Fleming and Eric Rohmann along with an interview with them on the kids' book podcast *All the Wonders* (allthewonders.com/podcasts) for my choice board," she explains.

**Host a podcast petting zoo.** In Oak Park, Bensfield set up 11 iPads, each downloaded with an episode from a different podcast and a sign describing the series next to it. Students could touch the screen to launch the episode and sample each one. "The volume was down pretty low so it didn't distract the other listeners in the room. Plus, it promoted group listening," says Bensfield. When students find a favorite, Bensfield suggests showing them (or their parents) how to subscribe. For those concerned with hygiene, she suggests swiping the tablet with a wipe to disinfect it.

**Connect with kid creators.** Your library or school may have all the resources you need to host an after-school workshop for budding podcast creators; it's just a matter of connecting with them. This past fall, the Canarsie branch of the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) in New York City offered

a six-week after-school workshop for teens, thanks to help from BKLYN Incubator (bklynlibrary.org/incubator), a think tank within the library that provides resources and support to innovative staff-generated programs.

Cassandra Hickman, children's librarian at the Canarsie branch, and her colleagues came up with the idea to create podcasts with teens and reached out to a local high school for participants. Based on her BPL colleagues' recommendations, she brought in a filmmaker, an audio creator, and a tech expert to teach the teens storytelling basics, editing, and mixing. The result: the teen-produced podcast *KNRC Youth Radio* (ow.ly/CMB330hHuEC).

"It was exciting to watch students come out of their shells," says Hickman, who is offering the after-school program again. "One teenager said that the workshops humanized the library for him; he now sees the library as not just a building, but a place where he knows people."

**Become a contributor.** Creating your own podcast is highly rewarding but time-consuming, says Felde—it takes six to 10 hours to edit a 20-minute episode of *Book Club for Kids*. If you can't spend the hours or aren't ready to, there are ways for students to participate in podcasts that are already out there, like *Button & Figs* and *But Why*, a Q&A podcast, says Felde. All you need is your phone to record your students—then upload the digital file to the producers. (Find more information on these podcasts' sites.)

## Become a podcaster

Pam Rogers, the creator of *Buttons & Figs* and a former children's librarian, has been producing the audio series for two years. Her

main piece of advice: honor your students' voices by creating a space where they can share their ideas and thoughts openly and honestly. After that:

**Tap into existing projects or school activities.** If your school has a book club, record a discussion, asking kids what they liked about the book and why they'd recommend it. Or let curious students pick a question and interview classmates about it. (Rogers suggests having them listen to *The Big Question* (stmarks.merton.sch.uk/News/Podcast), created by students in the United Kingdom, as an example.) If your students are discussing

a topic—say, the life cycle of butterflies—let them record information they've researched.

**Use the tech you have.** If your school has iPads, use *GarageBand* (already installed), which is simple to navigate and great for capturing and producing audio. Or install *Audacity* (audacityteam.org), a free tool, to create a digital audio workstation.

If you want to produce students' recordings—and then let other kids listen and respond—try *Soundtrap* (soundtrap.com/edu). It's free to try out, and special pricing is available for educators. Alternately, let kids record things on their parents'

phones (or their own) via Voice Memo or Voice Recorder, and then have them send or AirDrop the files for you to edit. Rogers recommends the online tool "How To Start a Podcast," (ow.ly/UzTg30hT9vW), a free PDF booklet available at Podcast Host (thepodcasthost.com), a site packed with podcasting tips and resources to guide you through the process.

**Don't stress the editing.** Rogers advises that if you're only planning to share podcasts with the class and their families, you don't have to get too fancy. "Everyone in your school community will love hearing the voices of those near and dear, whether you put in background music or not," she says.

**Do share.** Sound platforms like Soundcloud (soundcloud.com; free) or Libsyn (libsyn.com; requires a monthly fee) let your students be heard beyond the library's walls, says Rogers. You can also host the podcast on your school or library's website or blog. Rogers always gets permission before sharing student voices. Another strategy from her former library: create a blanket policy that anyone who participates in a program agrees to share their picture, voice, etc. Currently, Rogers notifies parents up front that their kids' contributions may be shared, and they can opt out. "When I do classroom recordings, I work through teachers and also use an opt-out statement," she adds.

**Focus on content, not audio quality.** "Capturing student ideas and thoughts matters most," says Rogers. "Keep it simple, pick one project to record, inspire students to reflect on an idea, select the best time and place to record, then share. Once you record your first project, you'll be inspired to record more."

Linda Rodgers covers health and education for a variety of magazines and websites.



Second graders recording a *Buttons & Figs* show at the Horace Mann Elementary School Library in Oak Park, IL.