

How reading evolves in the early years: longitudinal insights from families

Introduction

The earliest years of a child's life are some of the most critical in shaping their future. The experiences during this period of rapid change have lasting effects. In fact, research shows that 90% of a child's brain growth happens before the age of 5¹. There is strong evidence that early exposure to books and stories brings about lifelong benefits. Learn more about the [benefits of reading](#).

At a time when the gaps in outcomes are growing between children growing up in families with low incomes and their more affluent peers, reading is a way to make an immediate and a long-term positive difference. But many families face barriers that make regular reading challenging. Find out more in our other [early years research briefings](#).

At BookTrust, our mission is to support children and families – especially those with low incomes and those in foster care, kinship care and adoption – to make reading an enjoyable part of daily life. We collaborate with thousands of early years professionals across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to reach millions of children during their formative years.

“ You’ve helped play a big part in my son’s life, because if I didn’t show him them [Bookstart] books, if I didn’t read them books to him, if I didn’t show him the black and white book, he wouldn’t have had that experience from such a young age and to be where he is now.”

Parent, England

About this briefing

This briefing provides an in-depth understanding of the role of reading in the early years through the voices of families on low-incomes. It explores how reading habits evolve, intersecting with broader developmental and family dynamics. It also examines families’ experiences of support for reading at different stages.

Our findings underscore the importance of supporting families, especially those who stand to benefit the most, throughout this period of rapid change. At BookTrust, our Early Years programmes reflect an understanding that a child’s engagement with books and stories evolves as they grow. We provide carefully curated and age-appropriate books and resources, which meet their changing needs.



Research methodology

BookTrust conducted a qualitative longitudinal study with 22 families from low-income households² across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These families were selected from our Bookstart Toddler and Pre-school survey respondents. We spoke with families twice over a six-month period – March 2024 and November 2024 – through one to two hour online interviews.³

Our longitudinal approach gave us a deeper understanding of families' experiences, routines, and challenges. Rather than capturing a single moment, this method provided valuable insights into how reading habits, support needs, and parental concerns evolve over time.

Our researchers engaged with families from diverse locations, backgrounds and circumstances, to provide a rich picture of how reading fits into everyday life. The research design was informed by [previous learning](#) from our national and programme-level surveys, qualitative research, and our [Theory of Change](#). We explored what supports reading within family life through a strengths-based lens. This was iterative as we built our understanding with families over the two fieldwork phases.

What does the research tell us?

The journey of reading and sharing stories across the early years

This research provides an in-depth understanding of how reading behaviours and attitudes evolve as children grow. We found that while reading plays multiple, overlapping roles at each stage of early childhood – roles such as bonding, learning and play – different aspects of reading take on greater significance at different developmental stages. Based on the families we spoke with, the visual below shows the most prominent way reading features in the lives of children as they grow.

While these themes represent observed trends, every child develops differently and every family's circumstances and contexts are unique, meaning not all reading journeys will look the same and families' needs will differ.

Each section of this briefing explores a different stage, outlining what we heard from families about their context, reading and sharing stories and experiences of reading support. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

We would like to thank all the families who gave their time for this research.

The evolution of reading across the early years



Ages 0–1: In the first year of life, books and shared reading promote bonding and sensory discovery



Family context: Parents and carers navigate new routines, focusing on meeting their child's immediate needs. As they get to know their baby, they explore ways to bond and engage. Babies begin to experience the world around them through sensory play and stimulation, with their need for engagement increasing as their vision and mobility develop.

Reading and sharing stories at this stage: Shared reading helps parents and carers bond with their child through physical closeness and interactive, playful engagement. Books serve as sensory objects – offering textures, sounds, and visuals – that help stimulate cognitive development. Parents and carers are motivated by their baby's reactions, such as babbling or engaging during tummy time.

Family experiences of reading support: Parents and carers begin sharing stories and books at different times. One important factor is knowledge of the benefits of early reading. Greater awareness of these benefits may come from information provided, for example during health visitor appointments. Parents' and carers' own experiences of reading, along with peer influences, can also play a role – either reinforcing reading as a norm in family life or discouraging it as something 'not for them'. At this stage there is also reluctance to invest in baby books due to their perceived short-term use or limited access to books.

Qasim is four months old and lives with his mum, dad and five-year-old sister in North West England. His mum began sharing books with him when he was around four weeks old, making it part of his daily routine – especially at bedtime. She includes sensory engagement into story time, something she started earlier with him than with his sister. His sister enjoys turning the pages for him, and their mum values the bonding experience that reading brings for all of them.

Bookstart Baby is BookTrust's universal programme for 0–1-year-olds, delivered through health professionals, libraries, and other early years professionals. It provides a free book, information leaflet and finger puppet to over 90% of newborns in England and Wales, ensuring families have access to books from birth and encouraging them to start reading with their children as early as possible.



Ages 1–2: As babies grow into toddlers, books become a tool for exploration and play



Family context: As toddlers grow, their curiosity and ability to touch, grab, and explore different objects increases. Distinct preferences and interests start to emerge. Parents and carers perceive children to have a greater need for stimulation. To meet this need, parents and carers seek activities beyond the home, such as visiting children's centres, libraries, playgroups, Family Hubs or outdoor spaces. Some children also start attending childcare settings like nurseries. At this stage, parents and carers become more aware of their children's speech and language development, often measuring progress by the number of words they know.

Reading and sharing stories at this stage:

Books transition from being primarily a medium for bonding to also being a source of exploration and play. Perceived short attention spans can make shared reading challenging, but books with appealing, interactive features like textures and flaps help sustain engagement. As children take a more active role in choosing what they play with they may develop preferences towards certain books or topics. With increasing focus on speech and language development, parents and carers who have concerns about speech delays may place greater emphasis on books and shared reading.

Family experiences of reading support:

As reading enters a new phase, parents and carers need fresh ways to engage their child in reading and sharing stories. Support in finding suitable books, such as durable options that withstand heavy handling or interactive books that maintain attention, is highly valued. Families also seek a wider range of books to match their child's evolving interests. For some, especially those who feel less confident reading with their child, tips around interactive shared reading or modelling different ways to enjoy reading together can be helpful.

Lily is almost two years old and lives with her mum and two siblings in South East England. Bedtime stories are a cherished family ritual, offering a chance to relax and escape into "story world", especially during stressful periods. During the week, Lily attends a playgroup at the local Family Hub, visits her grandmother, and has playdates. She can sometimes throw books on the floor if she loses interest in them. Lately, she has developed a keen interest in animals, and *Maggie the Monkey* is her current favourite book.

BookTrust Storytime is a library-based programme for under-5s, developed in collaboration with local authorities, libraries, and families. It introduces families to library spaces and encourages them to return, by providing a fun, easy way for them to share and enjoy stories together.

Bookstart Toddler is BookTrust's programme for 1–2-year-olds, providing age-appropriate resources that encourage playful, interactive reading. The programme includes two books with engaging features, activity ideas, and props for games based on book themes. These resources support parents and carers as they navigate this period when children require more varied and stimulating experiences.

Ages 2–4: As children mature, reading becomes a richer, more interactive experience



Family context: Families may transition to different hours of childcare, often bringing new routines into their daily lives. There are varied approaches to screentime in routines, but a general approach is to limit it. By the time children reach three or four years old, parents and carers begin thinking about getting ready for school.

Reading and sharing stories at this stage:

Books evolve from being primarily objects of bonding and play into offering rich, immersive experiences, as families increasingly connect stories to the world around them and their imagination. Growing independence and creativity are reflected in children's preferences for humour, narrative-driven stories, and imaginative play – often involving parents and carers.

Reading can be a source of pride, and in turn, motivation for parents and carers, especially when they see signs of progress, such as children memorising parts of a book as if they are 'reading' it themselves.

Competing priorities, such as nursery and a child's evolving interests, pose challenges to maintaining reading time. Non-physical books and alternative storytelling mediums – such as TV, tablets, or audio players – also increasingly compete for attention. Parents and carers often position reading as a healthier and more engaging alternative to passive screen use.

Some parents and carers incorporate learning elements, such as colours, shapes, and numbers, into shared reading, especially as they begin thinking about school transition. Others see this as a time to cherish – an opportunity for bonding and connection through story time, especially in bedtime routines, before busy school life begins.

Family experiences of reading support:

As parents and carers begin thinking about school, some start seeking support and advice on reading or considering where to find reliable information. Parents and carers are generally more open to external reading support, such as guidance from nursery staff and other trusted professionals – especially if their child has additional support needs.

Aoife is three years old and lives in Northern Ireland with her mum, dad and five-year-old sister. She recently started full-time nursery, while her sister began school. The family has a well-established reading routine, choosing a book each evening to read together in their "cosy nook." This space is a source of comfort for Aoife and her sister, where they enjoy flipping through pages and retelling stories from memory. Aoife will start primary school next year, and her mum is pleased that she is already showing an interest in reading and learning.

Bookstart Early Years is BookTrust's programme for 2–3-year-olds in Wales, delivered in partnership with health visitors. Funded by Welsh Government, it provides bilingual Bookstart Early Years packs to encourage early shared reading habits and engagement with stories.

Bookstart Pre-schooler is BookTrust's programme for 3–4-year-olds and a continuation from Bookstart Toddler. The programme provides two age-relevant books and activities that help bring stories to life. It supports early learning by encouraging children to interact with stories in new ways, sparking their imaginations and helping them connect books to both their own experiences and the wider world.

Ages 4–7: Reading evolves with the transition to school, which brings more structured routines and a new ‘juggle’ with independent reading



Family context: The transition to school is a key milestone at this stage. For most families, this shift brings more structured routines and dynamics. Key challenges include social adjustments, such as making friends, and separation anxiety – both for the child and the parent or carer. As children settle into the early years of school, parents and carers navigate attainment-focused expectations, often worrying about their child falling behind.

Reading and sharing stories at this stage:

As children transition to school, reading becomes more structured, with greater emphasis on phonics, independent reading, and academic skills. Parents and carers may struggle to balance school-assigned books – focused on learning to read – with shared reading for enjoyment, especially when children come home tired.

This can result in less shared reading for enjoyment, as school books and reading skills take priority. However, some parents and carers view reading for relaxation after a long school day as equally or even more important.

Family experiences of reading support:

At this stage, the primary source of reading support comes from school. This support typically includes take-home reading materials, phonics kits, and digital resources, alongside encouragement towards shared reading at home. This has a strong focus on developing independent reading skills, particularly through phonics. Some children may receive additional support if they have specific learning needs.

Stella is five and lives in London with her mum and older siblings, aged 11, 13, and 14. Since starting reception, the transition to school has been a significant adjustment. Her mum has found the teachers to be supportive in helping Stella settle into school and in navigating her possible autism. Stella is learning phonics at school and brings home a new reading book every week, which she reads with her mum most nights. Recently, she has shown more interest in storybooks.

Pori Drwy Stori is a Welsh programme for nursery and reception-age children (ages 3 and 5), funded by Welsh Government. It aims to inspire a love of books, stories and rhymes while supporting children’s development in speaking, listening and numeracy. Through engaging resources, the programme helps families support children’s learning and confidence during transition to school.

The BookTrust website provides a range of reading support for school-aged children, including the annual Great Books Guide, book recommendations, tools to encourage home and school engagement, and resources to help with reading aloud. These resources complement school learning while encouraging parents and carers to continue fostering reading for pleasure.

BookTrust support for families across the early years

While we've not captured every family's experience, this research has highlighted how reading and sharing books and stories evolve at each stage of the early years, shaped by a variety of factors. Supporting families as they navigate this journey requires engagement at different points across these early years, tailored to their specific needs at the time.

Our Bookstart programmes focus on the early years as we know how important it is to start reading and sharing stories early. Thanks to an extraordinary network of partners including local authorities, early years settings, schools, libraries and more across England, Wales and Northern Ireland we're able to reach families where they are, in their local communities. Our programmes span different stages to meet needs at these specific moments. Find out more about our programmes [on our website](#).

About BookTrust

As the UK's largest children's reading charity, we want every child to read regularly and by choice. We reach millions of children and families every year, inspiring them with books and resources to get them started on their reading journey. We provide a wide range of carefully curated and designed books, resources and support to help families start sharing stories and to continue reading throughout childhood. We offer focused support to children and families with low incomes and vulnerable family backgrounds because we know they stand to benefit the most from the benefits of reading.

Our support, designed to deliver reading behaviour change, is based on evidence including research with parents, carers and practitioners.



Contact us

queries@booktrust.org.uk

booktrust.org.uk

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BookTrust Early Years programmes



Endnotes

- 1 Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood (n.d.) *Early childhood and the developing brain*. Available at: <https://centreforearlychildhood.org/news-insights/case-studies/early-childhood-and-the-developing-brain/>
- 2 The term family from low-income households indicates those living in relative poverty as defined by Department for Work and Pensions
- 3 NB: One family dropped out for the second stage of the research