

At BookTrust we work with families, supporting them to start sharing stories and books together from the earliest possible age.

We get millions of children reading, especially those from low-income families or vulnerable backgrounds. Our carefully selected books and well-researched programmes are delivered by thousands of local partners, bringing the magic of reading to children in every community in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This interactive resource summarises the evidence on how reading benefits children. You can click through for headline findings or more detailed information.

The benefits of reading



Reading supports children to

Overcome
disadvantage



Develop better
mental wellbeing,
social skills and
strong relationships



Meet speech
and language
milestones and do
better at school



Develop
imagination,
empathy
and creativity



Reading supports children to

**Overcome
disadvantage**



They will experience better educational mobility and social mobility



Those growing up in poverty are less likely to remain in poverty as adults



Throughout school, they are more likely to overcome the barriers caused by disadvantage



Evidence from selected studies on this topic

Read More



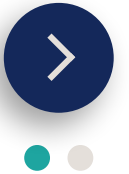
Reading supports children to overcome disadvantage

They will experience better educational mobility and social mobility

- Reading for pleasure has the power to help mitigate socioeconomic inequalities¹ such as low family income and educational background.

Those growing up in poverty are less likely to remain in poverty as adults

- A child growing up in poverty who is read to at age five has a significantly higher chance of economic success in their 30s than their peers who are not read to.²



Reference Material >

Reading supports children to overcome disadvantage

Throughout school, they are more likely to overcome the barriers caused by disadvantage

- Shared reading has a unique and transformative impact on school attainment.³ Shared reading at home exerts a stronger influence on children's academic performance than parents' supervision, control of homework or attendance of school activities.⁴
- Disadvantaged children who achieve highly at the end of primary school are twice as likely to have been read to at home in their early years, compared to their peers.⁵

A child who is an engaged reader provides themselves with self-generated learning opportunities equivalent to several years of education.⁶

The impact of reading for pleasure is four times more powerful on progress in vocabulary, mathematics, and spelling at age 16, than that of parental education or parental socioeconomic status.⁷

Disadvantaged children aged 11–14 who read in their own time and take part in enriching activities at home are more likely to achieve three or more A-levels, compared to those not engaged in these activities.⁸



Reference Material >



Reading supports children to

**Develop better
mental wellbeing,
social skills and
strong relationships**



They feel more secure and develop deep bonds with parents and carers



They have healthy routines and habits



They have better socio-emotional skills



They have better mental wellbeing and self esteem

**Evidence from selected
studies on this topic**

Read More



Reading supports children to develop better mental wellbeing, social skills and strong relationships

They feel more secure and develop deep bonds with parents/carers

- As a bonding activity, shared reading in their early years supports the development of a child's attachment (how safe, secure and trusting they feel around their parent or carer). Attachment is essential to a child's future happiness, social competence, and ability to form meaningful connections.⁹ The availability of their parent or carer¹⁰ during shared reading contributes to a child's sense of safety.¹¹
- Shared reading creates opportunities for joint attention and emotional closeness between a child and their parent or carer. Shared reading increases parental warmth and reduces parental stress¹², enabling them to provide the sensitive and nurturing interactions their children need to thrive.^{13,14}

- Children with secure attachments are more likely to show enthusiasm and attention during shared reading, which motivates their parent or carer to read with them more frequently and reinforces their opportunities to feel safe, secure and protected.¹⁵
- It is the emotional aspects of shared reading (e.g., cuddling, smiling, singing, and laughing) that boosts a child's brain activities needed to forge secure attachment, not the parent or carer's reading skill.¹⁶



Reference Material >

Reading supports children to develop better mental wellbeing, social skills and strong relationships

They have healthy routines and habits

- Shared reading plays a role in promoting a relaxing and reassuring bedtime routine. Language-based bedtime routines such as reading are associated with better parental emotional availability and parental attention.¹⁷ Routines can support a safe, stable and predictable environment that's needed to facilitate children's healthy development.¹⁸
- Reading for pleasure also supports routines later in life. Children aged 11–14 who read for pleasure are more likely to adopt healthy behaviours.¹⁹

They have better socio-emotional skills

- Children who read more perform better in tasks of attention and have lower levels of hyperactivity.²⁰

- Reading is associated with improved interpersonal and social skills, helping children form meaningful relationships.²¹

They have better mental wellbeing and self-esteem

- By providing escapism and relaxation, reading can act as a protective factor against the adversity some children face.²²
- Children who regularly read for pleasure have better self-esteem and emotional regulation, with lower levels of emotional and behavioural challenges such as anxiety and aggression than those who don't.²³
- Children who read have higher levels of mental wellbeing and happiness.²⁴



Reference Material >



Reading supports children to



They have better brain development, attention, and cognitive ability



They have better speech and language development and literacy skills



They have better school readiness and knowledge about the world



They make more progress across the curriculum

Meet speech and language milestones and do better at school



Evidence from selected studies on this topic

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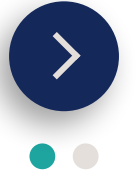
Reading supports children to meet speech and language milestones and do better at school

They have better brain development, attention, and cognitive ability

- Children's brains experience the most growth in their first 5 years, when their brains are most responsive to their environment.²⁵ Stimulation from reading books, playing, talking, and singing with a parent or carer serves an important neurological function, enhancing children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth.²⁶
- Shared reading among children from low-income backgrounds enhances healthy brain activation in language, attention, memory, self-control, and adjustment.²⁷
- Reading for pleasure has long-lasting positive benefits on brain development. Younger children who read more score better on cognitive tests.²⁸

They have better school readiness and knowledge about the world

- Children who start reading early and continue reading throughout childhood have greater general knowledge. Reading helps kickstart and sustain a child's ongoing learning journey.²⁹
- Reading enhances educational attainment. By feeding into cognitive skill development, forms of reasoning, complex concepts and imaginative richness, reading supports children to develop problem solving and intellectual capacities.³⁰



Reading supports children to meet speech and language milestones and do better at school

They have better speech and language development and literacy skills.

- Shared reading provides unparalleled opportunities for a child's verbal interactions with their parent or carer. Among the many key childhood activities such as playing with toys, arts and crafts or sharing mealtimes, shared reading has particular value in creating these opportunities.³¹
- Shared reading offers children exposure to rich and novel vocabulary in meaningful contexts.³²
- Shared reading facilitates children's word learning. Because the focus is entirely on the story, children do not have to extract new words from the stream of ongoing activities like they would in a free-play setting.³³
- There are several benefits of shared reading for a child's language and literacy outcomes in the early years, which support school readiness. These include vocabulary size, oral language skills, print awareness, word identification and comprehension skills.³⁴

- The impact of shared reading on literacy is unique. Among home learning activities such as parental help with reading and writing, playing music or learning the alphabet, only shared reading has a positive influence on literacy assessment at the end of Reception.³⁵
- The impact of shared reading on literacy is long lasting. Children who are read to frequently at age five are over half a school year ahead in reading performance at age 15, compared to those who are read to infrequently or not read to at all.³⁶

They make more progress across the curriculum

- Reading for pleasure unlocks academic success across the curriculum. A child who is read to at age 1–2 scores higher in reading, spelling, grammar, and numeracy skills at age 8–11.³⁷
- Reading for pleasure at the ages of 10 and 16 has a substantial effect on a child's cognitive scores in vocabulary, spelling, and mathematics at age 16.³⁸



Reference Material >



Reading supports children to



They have more empathy



They are more creative and imaginative



Evidence from selected studies on this topic

Read More 

Develop imagination, empathy and creativity



Reading supports children to develop imagination, empathy and creativity

They have more empathy

- Empathy refers to the ability to value, feel, understand and respect other people's experiences. Shared reading nurtures theory of mind abilities and empathic skills.³⁹
- Stories can offer children a realistic and authentic 'mirror' of their own lives and experiences and a 'window' to view the experiences of others.⁴⁰ When children are emotionally involved in a story, they feel connected to and see their lives as part of the wider human experience.⁴¹ This can be transformative when it comes to developing their empathy.⁴²
- Children who read books that offer opportunities to empathise with the characters have increased levels of empathy, especially towards stigmatised groups.⁴³

They are more creative and imaginative

- Engagement with stories nurtures the disposition and skillset that are fundamental to a child's creativity throughout childhood. Stories with imaginative and magical elements enable children's minds to transcend their immediate context, freeing them from a fixed way of thinking.⁴⁴
- By constantly formulating and reformulating their expectations of what might happen in a story, young readers practice mental flexibility, an openness to new situations and interpretations and problem-solving.⁴⁵
- A story can also prompt dramatisation, allowing children to use their imagination to visualise, verbalise or act it out.⁴⁶
- Children who are read to at age three make greater progress in creative development at the end of Reception than those who are not.⁴⁷



Notes and references

We've drawn on hundreds of peer-reviewed studies, a selection of which are included in the reference list. It's worth noting that the type of evidence underpinning each benefit may differ. In summary:

- The evidence that reading supports children to overcome disadvantage is mostly based on cross-sectional and longitudinal quantitative studies.
- The evidence that reading supports children to develop better mental wellbeing, social skills and secure relationships is based on a range of study types including systematic reviews, Randomised Control Trials (RCTs), qualitative and quantitative studies.

- The evidence that reading supports children to meet early development milestones in speech and language and do better at school is based on a range of study types including systematic reviews, RCTs, qualitative and quantitative studies.

- The evidence that reading supports children to develop imagination, empathy and creativity is mostly based on qualitative studies but also includes some longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies.

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At BookTrust our mission is to get every child reading regularly and by choice and we provide extra support to children most in need. If you would like to know more about our work and how we support children and families to develop their reading habits please get in touch.

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