

Reading in the Early Years: Why starting shared reading early matters and the role of Bookstart Baby

Research with families from low-income backgrounds in the UK

Introduction

Our new analysis indicates that families who start sharing books and stories together early are more likely to develop a long-lasting shared reading habit. It also shows the important role Bookstart Baby, BookTrust's offer for every child aged 0-12 months in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, has in helping families to start their reading journeys early.

Wider research shows that getting families reading together from the earliest moments brings unique immediate and long-term benefits. Early shared reading supports bonding between children and their parents, stimulates brain development and improves wellbeing in families. It helps children to reach early speech, communication, language and other development goals.
Read more about the benefits of reading.

Research methodology

Figures in this document draw on our new analysis of BookTrust's Family Survey data. This online study of 2,148 parents and carers of children aged 0-7 living in low-income households in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was conducted between April and June 2022. This briefing also includes insights from our mixed methods evaluation of Bookstart Baby 2021-2023 of over 500 parents and carers of children aged 0-1 across the three nations and the wider academic research literature.

To note: we use the term 'low-income families' to indicate those living in relative poverty as defined by the Department for Work and Pensions.

About this briefing

Our analysis highlights the positive impact that early shared reading has on building long-term reading habits in families. It reinforces the need to support families to share books and stories together from the earliest moments in childhood.

Other new research briefings from our Early Childhood Reading Habits series can be read here: **Reading in the Early Years**, **The role of multiple 'reading influencers' in supporting children's reading journeys**, and **Supporting generational cycles of readers**.



What does this research tell us?

Importance of starting shared reading early for longer-term reading habits and children's development.

We know that shared reading reaches its peak when children are between two and four years old, but the frequency of children being read to daily after the age of four drastically reduces and continues to decline throughout childhood (see **Reading in the Early Years**).

Our new analysis shows that the earlier families start sharing books and stories together, the more likely it is that children will continue being read to daily beyond the age of four. 66% of children who had their first reading experience in the first year were still being read to daily at age 5-7, compared with 49% of those who were first read to at 12 months or older. Starting shared reading earlier increases the likelihood that children will continue to experience regular shared reading opportunities throughout childhood and the chance to enjoy the profound and wide-ranging benefits of reading.



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Starting shared reading in the first year is not only important for longer-term reading habits but also crucial for children's development. A wide body of evidence shows that a child's brain doubles in size in the first year of life.¹ This development is heavily influenced by the quality of the bond between children and their parents and carers, which can have long-term effects on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development.²

Shared reading in the first year boosts parental warmth and positivity, enabling parents and carers to provide their children with the nurturing care needed to build positive attachments.³

Research shows that shared reading improves 0-12 month old children's speech, communication and language skills.⁴

Impacts of Bookstart Baby and delivery practitioners on getting families to start shared reading early.

Bookstart Baby has supported families with newborn babies for over 25 years. We work with an extensive network of early years professionals to bring playful, interactive books and activities to newborn babies, sparking early reading moments in families. Every year, health visitors, libraries, registrars, and many other early years professionals give out more than half a million Bookstart Baby packs, reaching 90% of all newborn babies in England and Wales.

Our findings demonstrate that there is a positive association between families receiving Bookstart Baby and whether they start sharing books and stories in the first year.

Bookstart Baby provides families with valuable access to books from the earliest moments, boosts parental confidence, and positively affects reading behaviours.

“ I wouldn't have started reading with my older children until they were about two years old. The Bookstart Baby pack did make me think maybe I'm leaving it a bit late. And I did try it earlier when my daughter was three months old, and it did work, because now at two, she absolutely loves her books and is speaking so well. ”

Parent, South East England



77% of parents and carers who received their Bookstart Baby packs when their children were 0-12 months old started reading together in the first year.



86% of parents and carers responding to our Bookstart Baby evaluation survey say the books included in the pack were among the first they owned for their child.



72% of parents and carers say Bookstart Baby made them feel more confident about reading with their children.



68% of parents and carers say it prompted them to read and share stories more with their children.





Our findings show that the interactions families have with early years professionals positively impact reading in families. When health visitors and other early years professionals encourage parents and carers to share stories and show them how to do it, they become more motivated and more confident.

Over a quarter (28%) of parents and carers tell us they don't find reading with their children easy. However, the majority of parents and carers who were given tips and advice by early years practitioners on using Bookstart Baby report the programme's positive impact on their confidence and how much they read with their children.

- 80% say the pack made them feel more confident about reading and sharing stories with their children.
- 76% say the pack prompted them to read and share stories more with their children.

“ I found the practitioner really helped me because she delivers everything bilingually and she's very good at being inclusive and bringing everybody in. Using that baby sort of language helped me feel more confident to join in. She was also doing actions, so it helps me copy those actions when I read with my grandchildren.”
Grandparent, Central Wales

How BookTrust is supporting families to start shared reading early



Visual 1. BookTrust's Early Years portfolio

Bookstart Baby is a core element of BookTrust's new and evolving Early Years portfolio. Following extensive research of what works to get families reading together with families of diverse structures and circumstances, we have developed and extended our offer for children aged 0–6 (see Visual 1).

We work to ensure that every child gets the best start on their reading journey. We provide families based in Wales books and activities in both English and Welsh. We provide Bookstart Additional Needs packs for children aged 0–2 and 3–5 who are deaf, blind or partially sighted, and with conditions affecting their fine motor skills. We also offer Dual Language books and guidance to families who have English as an additional language. In 2022/23, 98% of local authorities in England used our additional needs books and resources and we provided dual language books in over 30 different languages.

“The resources are very colourful and interactive, just what staff and parents need to support and encourage reading, they provide an active tool for parents to bond with their child from an early age. All children love to listen to stories even small babies. The resources help support the learning journey encouraging children to ask questions about the world around them.”

Bookstart Coordinator, North East England

About BookTrust

As the UK's largest children's reading charity, we want to support all families to establish and maintain a reading habit from the earliest moments. We provide a wide range of carefully curated and designed books, activities and support to help families get started and continue on their reading journeys throughout childhood. Thanks to an extraordinary network of partners, we are able to reach families where they are, in their local communities.

During 2022/23 we made excellent progress in supporting families in the early years on their reading journeys, with a particular focus on low-income families, whom we know stand to benefit the most from the benefits of reading. Read more about BookTrust impact in our most recent **impact report**.



“Some parents might not think about reading. Or they think their baby's too little and can't read or talk yet so there's no point reading yet. The Bookstart books and the pack give them the information they need and a good starting point that cements the fact that it is never too early to start reading. Some families get the encouragement they need to say “why not start reading together now?””
Bookstart Coordinator, East Midlands England



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