

The wellbeing benefits of reading for children

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1. Foreword by BookTrust and Place2Be



Lizzie Catford
Director of Children's Books at BookTrust

"BookTrust research highlights a growing concern in primary schools - that as children progress across the primary phase, their enjoyment of reading decreases.¹ The implications of this go beyond reading enjoyment. Children are spending less time reading overall and crucially; in doing so, they are missing out on all the wider benefits that reading can offer. This includes benefits to children's wellbeing² - something that is more important than ever before.

To help combat these worrying trends, BookTrust has produced this guide, which includes both research evidence and actionable tips highlighting how reading enjoyment can improve children's wellbeing. We are also really excited to feature some suggestions from Place2Be, drawing on their invaluable experience providing mental health support in schools.

At BookTrust, our mission is to help children and families embed reading habits into their daily life, ensuring that children from all backgrounds experience the immediate and lifelong benefits of reading. All our work with schools shows us time and time again the vital role that teachers play in fostering this love of reading among children. We hope this guide can help you with ideas on how to address the decline in reading enjoyment and support your classes to feel happier and more confident through the joy of reading."



Dr Rebecca Kirkbride
Clinical Director at Place2Be

"NHS Digital's latest data shows currently one in five children have a probable mental health condition (around six children in each classroom)³ and that half of all mental health issues develop before the age of 14.⁴ To help address this crucial issue, Place2Be provides support in schools and expert training to improve children's mental health and wellbeing across the UK.

As part of this work, Place2Be is passionate about the value and significance of reading to help with mental health and wellbeing, and as a useful therapeutic tool. Books can be written in any language and provide a range of cultural perspectives making them accessible and inclusive for all backgrounds and developmental needs. Recently, a group of Place2Be practitioners got together and discussed how books enhance their practice and support children's wellbeing. You can find more details on this conversation later in the resource, but it was clear that books and stories provide a rich and valuable way of supporting children and young people's wellbeing, especially in the school setting where a natural emphasis is placed on the importance of literacy and reading.

We are delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to this important resource, drawing on our work with schools across the UK, and championing the value of reading for mental health and wellbeing in school."

2. The power of reading in supporting children's wellbeing

What difference does reading make to children's wellbeing?

We know that reading is often an activity where children can enjoy a quiet moment or to wind down from their day. Research studies, however, highlight much more powerful benefits that reading can have to support children's wellbeing, which we will explore in the next few pages.

The benefits are also long lasting: recent findings suggest that children who enjoy reading from a young age are more likely to experience better mental health in adolescence and improved overall wellbeing as they grow older.²

Children who are most engaged with reading are also **three times more likely to experience higher levels of mental wellbeing** than those who are least engaged.⁵

Throughout this section you can click on the 'CLIP' buttons to view insights from Professor Sarah McGeown, Director of the Literacy Lab at the University of Edinburgh.

 **CLIP 1**

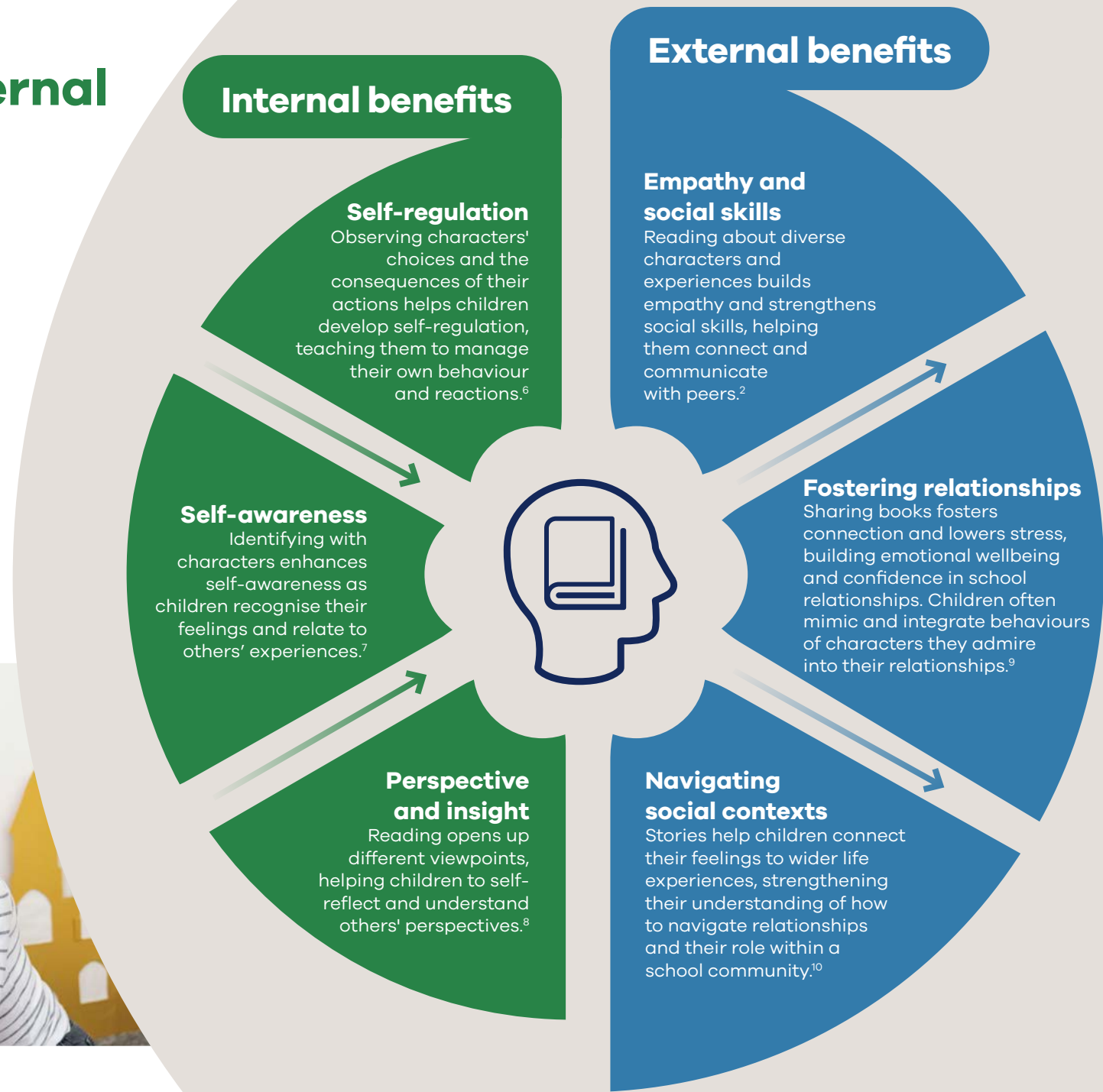
Wellbeing is a broad term that covers many aspects of life, from feeling good and building positive relationships to having a sense of purpose and opportunities for personal growth. For children, it's not just about being happy now or today, it lays the foundation for a fulfilling future.



3. Internal and external wellbeing benefits from reading

The wellbeing benefits of reading are multi-faceted, with benefits both within children themselves and their relationships with others (internal and external).

Just as wellbeing includes many different things, the benefits of reading for wellbeing are in turn varied.



4. The role of teachers and schools in supporting children's wellbeing through reading

Teachers play a key role in supporting wellbeing outcomes through building up children's reading enjoyment.¹¹

CLIP 2

Helping children pick out different books to read that they will like (scaffolding and supporting book choice) helps children explore diverse genres. This in turn creates different emotional experiences and wellbeing benefits for them, as illustrated in Table 1.

CLIP 3

Proactively providing opportunities in class for shared reading experiences builds collaboration, promotes communication, empathy, and a sense of belonging.¹¹

CLIP 4

Table 1: How different genres can support different wellbeing benefits

| Type of book | ...provides... | ...leading to... |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Comedy | laughter, enjoyment | calmness, relaxation, positive mood (happiness, joy) |
| Fantasy and adventure | escapism, creativity, imagination, excitement | emotional security, problem-solving, resilience, empathy, comfort |
| Real-life books | self-reflection, deeper understanding | personal growth, empathy, self-awareness, social development |
| Non-fiction | intellectual stimulation, exploration of interests | curiosity, self-exploration |

5. How reading can support therapeutic work – perspectives from Place2Be

As a leading children's mental health charity, Place2Be provides counselling and other mental health services in schools and community settings across the UK.

In this section you will find some of the ways we've seen books and stories play a positive role in supporting our therapeutic work in schools.

One of the most effective ways of helping children process trauma or work through difficulties in therapy is via creative methods including **play and metaphor**. These methods allow us to connect with a child in a way that feels safe and helps to build trust. They also enable safe exploration and expression of emotions by creating opportunities to reimage (form a new mental picture of) our own experiences, as well as taking on new perspectives and ways of understanding our world and who we are within it.

For example, through counselling sessions a child's experiences and feelings can be projected onto **toys, characters or symbolic objects**. These techniques are used to explore the child's inner world safely without re-traumatising in a way that remembering or being asked directly about painful experiences could. This means that **interacting with books and stories can be a wonderful means of doing therapeutic work with children and young people**, through using these concepts of play and metaphor.



At Place2Be our practitioners are passionate about integrating books throughout their practice and have developed a range of ways of doing this.

A great example of this is our Place2Be group work intervention '*Journey of Hope*' which has books and stories at its core. Every Journey of Hope session is based around a particular theme, for example sadness or fear. A set of carefully curated books are provided to all Journey of Hope facilitators before they begin the intervention. Each Journey of Hope session begins with the facilitator reading one of the selected books to the group to provide a shared experience as the foundation for the linked activities that follow.

Place2Be practitioners have also successfully integrated books into their 1:1 counselling sessions with children and young people. Books can be selected to work with specific issues or challenges a child might be experiencing, such as bereavement, anxiety, identity and sadness.

6. More ways books and stories can be used to support therapeutic work

When looking at most works of fiction, the basic structure involves the main character overcoming a challenge or danger in order to grow and become more resilient. This 'hero's journey' maps well onto the therapeutic journey where a child often comes with a problem to overcome or a difficult experience to process.

Practitioners can also use **books and stories as metaphors for the child's own life**, helping them explore their own emotions. Books can be selected to work with specific issues, but are also **versatile, and can represent a range of identities, cultures, family dynamics, and experiences**. An example of this is *I Lost Something Very Special* by Husna Rahman, which explores loss and bereavement in a developmentally sensitive way using characters from a South Asian background.

Stories encourage imagination, creativity, and help children explore our human need for acceptance and connection, especially in a school environment where books form part of the classroom furniture. They can be used for whole class activities to **support conversations around difficult subjects**, or **to help other children understand challenges their classmates might be facing**, helping them develop empathy and compassion for others. In the past, one of our Place2Be practitioners used the book *I Talk Like a River* by Jordan Scott and Sydney Smith, to successfully help a primary school class understand and develop empathy for a neurodivergent classmate.

It's also not just the content of books that support therapeutic work and improves children's wellbeing. Many children, especially those who are neurodivergent or who have additional needs, can experience the school environment as overwhelming. Being read to away from the class can provide a soothing experience for these children which can aid regulation of emotions. This knowledge of the calming power of reading can also be shared with parents, who are frequently looking for tools to help them support their children's wellbeing and enhance their own bond with their child.



7. Top tips for using books and stories to support wellbeing

At BookTrust, we asked a teacher to put together some top tips for using books and stories to support children's wellbeing. Here are four of their top tips:

1. Recommendations

Tailor your book recommendations to help individuals or groups who may be dealing with particular issues affecting their wellbeing.

Our [website](#) features carefully curated booklists on a variety of themes ranging from personal experiences such as becoming part of a [blended family](#) or struggling with [school transition](#); to more general themes including [books which help with conversations about race](#) or [picture books that encourage resilience](#).

Having the right books and resources at your fingertips can help educators maximise the wellbeing benefits of reading.

2. Self-regulation

Reading can help children regulate their emotions by modelling behaviours via characters, signposting regulatory strategies, and through the physiological benefits of reading itself.

Brilliant stories like [The Boy and the Octopus](#) demonstrate how art can improve wellbeing and help children communicate their emotions; whereas non-fiction texts like [How to Shine at Primary School](#) talk about emotional regulation in a more direct, practical way.

The physical act of reading is proven to reduce stress and improve wellbeing. Introducing quiet reading sessions at key times during the school day can help to reduce stress and enable pupils to engage.

3. Books as social stories

Books can provide a safe space for children to explore social situations and learn about boundaries.

Sharing well selected stories with a class or a particular group of children can help them to empathise with and understand others' perspectives in more meaningful ways than if they were simply told to do so by an adult. There are many excellent books which navigate the intricacies of [friendship](#), [bullying](#) and other aspects of school life for children in authentic and engaging ways.

Rather than sharing a presentation, try using a story or an extract of a book to introduce a relevant social theme in your next PSHE lesson.

4. Provide a nurturing reading environment

Shared reading experiences from an early age provide an emotional foundation that contributes to children's wellbeing.

Unfortunately, many children do not experience this kind of emotionally grounding reading at home. It is therefore vital that teachers provide plenty of opportunities for collaborative story sharing, role play and wider reading activities which focus on the joys of reading rather than always working towards specific academic goals.

These shared reading moments will not only ground children emotionally, but they will also help to foster a feeling of community between members of the class.

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For research, resources and more
please visit the BookTrust 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 more targeted support to children and families from low-income and vulnerable 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 robust evidence including research with parents, carers and practitioners. We understand and design for the very diverse structures, circumstances and preferences of families in the UK.

About Place2Be

Place2Be is the UK's leading provider of school-based children's mental health services, providing support in schools and expert training to improve the emotional wellbeing of children, young people, parents and teachers. We call this a 'whole school approach'. We provide mental health services to around 650 UK schools, supporting a school community of around 350,000 children and young people.

Our in-school counsellors help children and young people in the UK cope with some of the most challenging times in their lives. By helping them understand and accept themselves, they start to build self-awareness. This allows them to develop the skills and resilience they need to help them get the best out of their time in school and navigate their future lives successfully.



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