

Reading Together: a call for investment in early years reading

We are calling on the Government to commit to a long-term national investment in books and reading for the under-sevens. We are writing as current and former Children's Laureates from the last 25 years, and as BookTrust, the UK's largest children's reading charity.

The cost-of-living crisis is tipping more families into poverty. In this context, it is vital to recognise that children who read regularly are more likely to overcome disadvantage. Alarming statistics, however, reveal how little family reading is actually happening. According to a BookTrust survey, although 95% of parents with children under seven know that reading is important, only 42% of children of that age have a bedtime story. Further, only half of children aged one to two from low-income families are read to daily. It can come as little surprise that the number of children starting school needing speech and language support has risen by a fifth since 2017.

Reading with children may sound like something which is nice to have in life, rather than something which is essential, but nothing could be further from the truth. There is overwhelming evidence that children who are read to do better across a wide range of outcomes. Children from low-income families who do well across the curriculum at the end of primary school are twice as likely to have been read to early on. Reading to young children builds bonds and creates family rituals. It helps relationships form and supports the development of the brain and language skills from as early as two weeks of age.

Given the wide-ranging benefits which flow from being read to from a young age and how long those effects last, it is not right that children from poorer backgrounds are deprived of a life that is rich in reading. Families need access to books and activities which inspire an interest in reading, but this is only part of the story: they need support from everyone who works with young children, from midwives and health visitors to librarians, family support workers and early years teachers, to turn their understanding that reading with children matters into making time for reading rituals which are a regular part of family life. This is especially true for those who did not have books as a large part of their own childhoods or those who are not regular readers themselves.

This is why we are asking for the Government to commit to a long-term national investment in books and reading for the under-sevens to support every low-income family in becoming a family which reads together.

Reading together brings joy to children and families and lays down the best foundations for life. It enriches lives and helps children become the best version of themselves they can be.

Extending the benefits of reading to every family, no matter what their circumstances, no matter what their challenges, is simply the right thing for any government to do.

Yours faithfully,

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