

# The role of multiple 'reading influencers' in supporting children's reading journeys

Findings from new BookTrust research with early years families from low-income backgrounds

## Introduction

Research shows that reading in the early years brings a wide range of immediate and lifelong benefits that can transform children's life chances. Sharing stories with babies and toddlers creates special moments of closeness, shared attention and enjoyment. In turn this supports bonding, positive attachment and wellbeing in families. Children who have regular exposure to books and stories experience important developmental benefits such as improved language skills, social-emotional growth, and enhanced creativity.

BookTrust's research shows that children are more likely to become independent readers when they experience reading with and are inspired by multiple people or 'reading influencers' from the earliest moments in childhood (see our [recent research](#)). These positive 'reading influencers' can include different family members, teachers, or other

trusted people in families' lives. At a time when the disadvantage gap is widening, it is essential that we support and encourage as many people as possible to read and share stories with young children so they can enjoy the life-transforming benefits of reading.

### About this briefing

This briefing summarises BookTrust's research on the crucial and influential role that multiple 'reading influencers' have in shaping a child's long-term reading habits. By sharing these findings, we seek to inspire and encourage our partners, practitioners and policy makers to support as many people as possible to get involved in children's reading journeys.

This is the second in a series of research briefings that BookTrust is publishing in 2023 on early childhood reading habits in families in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. You can read our first briefing here: [Reading in the Early Years](#).



of children aged 0-7 have **more than one individual** who regularly reads with them



of children aged 0-7 **do not experience regular reading with multiple people**



of mothers and 67% of fathers **engage in regular reading with their children** aged 0-7



of families, children aged 0-7 **experience regular reading with their grandparents**



of families, children aged 0-7 **experience regular reading with their siblings**. In 14% of families children aged 0-7 experience regular reading with their aunts/uncles



of children in school (aged 4-7) **experience regular reading with their teachers**

## Research methodology

Figures in this document draw on BookTrust's second Family Survey. This online survey 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 BookTrust's recent qualitative research with families and practitioners and our first Family Survey conducted in 2021.

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.

Many grandparents play an important role in their grandchildren's reading experiences. BookTrust's Family Survey 2021, which included 500 low-income grandparents, found that 91% of them gifted books to their grandchildren. Over half of grandparents (53%) gave books as part of everyday life (not just on special occasions such as birthdays) and 19% of grandparents borrowed books from libraries to share with their grandchildren.

## What does this research tell us?

Through this new research we have learnt that 69% of young children in England, Wales and Northern Ireland experience shared reading with multiple people in their lives. It reveals that a range of individuals act as positive 'reading influencers' for young children, supporting them on their reading journeys. However, it also makes clear that nearly a third of children do not have multiple 'reading influencers' in their lives.

Our research highlights the important role 'reading influencers' such as family members and caregivers play in helping children to develop a love of reading. Not only do they share books and stories, they influence children to enjoy reading by finding ways to make reading fun, discovering new books to explore together or modelling their own enjoyment of reading. Children aged 0-7's enjoyment of reading is influenced by mothers (77% of children), fathers (73%), siblings (63%), grandparents (61%), and aunts/uncles (39%). For 57% of children in school (aged 4-7), teachers are also among key 'reading influencers'.

Our research shows that some groups of potential 'reading influencers' face particular challenges in supporting young children on their reading journeys:

- 33% of fathers tell us they do not regularly read with their children (relative to 5% of mothers).
- Many fathers tell us that they want to support their children's reading journeys but lack confidence or knowledge to do so. 31% of fathers say they do not feel confident choosing books that their children would enjoy (relative to 17% of mothers).
- Some grandparents lack confidence in reading books with their grandchildren. Others face challenges due to geographic distance from their grandchildren.
- Many teachers have limited time to discover new books to inspire children in their schools.



“ The Bookstart Baby pack started us reading to him at a young age, and it encouraged one of his older siblings to read to him too!”

**Mother, BookTrust Family Survey, 2022**



We are working to address these needs and barriers as part of our **strategy** for every child to benefit from the transformative power of reading. We have a particular focus on supporting families with children aged 0-5 and the multiple ‘reading influencers’ in children’s lives to develop sustained shared reading behaviours:

- Bookstart, our early years programme for all families in England is designed to support easy, enjoyable and interactive shared reading experiences across families with diverse structures, circumstances and preferences. Bookstart resources have been developed with families and practitioners for use by different ‘reading influencers’ with different levels of skills and confidence in sharing stories with young children.
- BookTrust is currently running a series of innovative pilots with families with children in their early years and practitioners in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to increase early shared reading. The pilots have a particular focus on ensuring children and different ‘reading influencers’ experience the immediate benefits of shared reading moments including family bonding, wellbeing and making memories.
- We are developing new training and tools for early years practitioners to support their work with families.
- We are improving the quality and accessibility of our support for teachers. This includes our **Bookfinder** platform which helps teachers to easily discover high quality books for use in their schools.

“ Time is one of the biggest restrictors when it comes to reading. But I think bonding between you increases if you do. A couple of pages here and there makes all the difference.”

**Father, Bookstart Toddler and Pre-schooler programme, 2022/23**

“ I was very excited to receive the Bookstart Toddler pack and couldn’t wait to open it and see what was inside. My granddaughter was very excited with the moving pictures as I read the stories. Everything about this pack was very exciting for her.”

**Grandparent, Bookstart Toddler and Pre-schooler programme 2022/23**





With the widening attainment gap, the need to encourage families to read and share stories with children from the earliest possible moment has never been greater or more urgent.

We are proud of the difference our Bookstart and BookTrust Storytime programmes are making to families with children in their early years, in all communities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We have a particular focus on supporting children from lower-income households and from vulnerable family backgrounds. We are working with an extraordinary network of over 6,000 early years community partners to get these children and families reading together. However the scale of the challenge and the need are great. There is more to do to reach more families, providing the support needed to create and sustain those crucial early shared reading habits.

By drawing attention to the importance of multiple ‘reading influencers’ and their impact on children’s experiences and later life outcomes, we hope to increase the number and range of people sharing stories and books with young children”

**Ruthann Hughes, Director of Research and Impact, BookTrust**

## 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 families from low-income and vulnerable backgrounds because we know these children 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, grandparents, other caregivers and practitioners. We understand and design for the very diverse structures, circumstances and preferences of early years families in the UK.

Thanks to an extraordinary network of partners, including local authorities, early years settings, schools, libraries, and more across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, we are able to reach families where they are, in their local communities.



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