

Family reading habits and the impact of Bookstart

Executive Summary of Findings

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Executive summary

The following executive summary synthesises the findings from two separate reports on family reading habits and the role of the Bookstart programme. The first; the findings from a nationwide survey of parents and carers on Bookstart and family reading habits, and the second; a desk-based literature review and findings from follow up qualitative research into motivations and barriers to reading with young children, and the role of the Bookstart programme. The work was commissioned by Booktrust and undertaken between Nov 2013 and Feb 2014.

The study revealed considerable engagement with books in the home:

- For 93% of survey respondents, shared reading with their 0-5 year old was the most popular way to enjoy time with their child. The study showed many and varied parental motivations to read with their 0-5s.

However the study also identified practical and knowledge-based barriers to shared reading, or to reading more frequently with a child:

- These barriers undermine parental propensity to read with young babies and the extent to which books are used throughout the day, in or out of the home.

The Role of Bookstart

Overarching benefits of Bookstart Baby and Bookstart Treasure

1. Receipt of a Bookstart pack sends a timely message to parents about reading

Research amongst pack recipients demonstrated the value of placing books into parents' hands and the influence of accompanying messages:

- 45% of all pack recipients surveyed agree or strongly agree that they have spent quality time with their child as a result of their Bookstart pack
- 32% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they know more about how to read with their child since receiving their pack.

"It's a brilliant idea just because...you're just not sure whether you should be reading and whether it's appropriate. It kick starts it."

(Mother of 9 month old)

The packs can prompt greater engagement with a parent's local library on behalf of their child. 21% of Bookstart pack recipients joined the library for themselves or their child for the first time since receiving their pack, however 55% were already members.

2. *Bookstart materials support greater confidence and knowledge about reading*

Bookstart supports a positive parental view of shared reading together with their child. 84% of pack recipients view reading as a good way of spending time together with their child, compared to 58% of non pack recipients. 82% of respondents found the guidance in the Bookstart Baby parent booklet useful, whilst 90% of respondents found the guidance in the Bookstart Treasure parent booklet useful.

Socio-demographic status does not appear to have a significant impact on propensity to *access* Bookstart books. However parents with under 5s in socio-economic group DE report greatest *benefits* from the Bookstart Baby and Treasure:

- 38% of DE parents report that they know more about how to read with their child since receiving the Bookstart pack, compared to 27% of AB parents
- 32% of DE parents felt the pack improved their confidence about reading with their child, compared to 22% of AB parents
- 73% of DE parents feel the pack has improved communication with their early years setting compared to 52% of AB parents.

The reach and impact of Bookstart Baby

Bookstart Baby reaches 95% of parents with a child between 6 and 12 months:

- It is familiar to and warmly spoken of amongst recipient parents
- 87% of survey respondents stating that their Bookstart Baby books were of a high quality, whilst 76% agree or strongly agree that the accompanying resources were of a high quality
- 81% of respondents state that they look at their Bookstart Baby books 'sometimes' or 'often'.

Receipt of a Bookstart Baby pack provokes an emotional response in first time mothers, who are more inclined to read literature given to them:

- Respondents recall the positive feeling of receiving a gift for their child and (for some) the clear message the bag sends out
- Those already reading appreciated the chance to extend their book collection
- However only 52% of Bookstart Baby recipients surveyed agree or strongly agree that the person that gave them their pack explained it effectively.

"It was really good with Indra as we didn't have books at home at the time."

(Mother of 13 month old)

Parents receiving the bag for a second or subsequent child also appreciate the contents (which vary between bags), with many identifying the valuable role that new baby books can play in a house full of toddler toys:

- However these parents place a slightly lower value on their second pack than on their first pack: their reading habits with their new baby may be influenced heavily by older siblings, existing patterns of behaviour and the prior presence of books in the house

On being prompted, some focus group respondents were able to reflect on the differing vocabulary and voice patterns employed when reading a book versus talking to a child:

- This echoes Senechal's observations of the four characteristics of shared reading, including use of more complex language and the undivided attention of the parent to reinforce new vocabulary and concepts (Senechal, 2012)
- There was some interest in the potential for books to introduce children to the concepts of new social situations and settings (e.g. an imminent sibling or house-move) however little unprompted awareness amongst focus group respondents of the emotional *resilience* engendered in children read to on a regular basis as detailed in Desforges & Abouchar study, 2003.

The reach and impact of Bookstart Treasure

Bookstart Treasure fails to have quite the same *emotional* impact on parents:

- Distribution directly to the child reinforces his / her ownership of the pack
- Parents are likely to be less avid consumers of parenting advice by this stage
- There are likely to be more books in a child's home by this point

However the pack is hugely welcomed with 95% of parents stating that the books were of a high quality and 85% stating that the accompanying resources were of a high quality.

"It was a new book, I just wanted to read it, someone had given it to him."

(Mother of 3 year old)

Parents of three year olds are becoming more engaged in their child's attainment:

- The pack could do more to help parents understand how they can dovetail with nursery activities and to understand the value of their ongoing role
- Improved sign-posting of age relevant books and reading strategies might support parents with resistant readers or restricted reading repertoire
- Bookstart Treasure reminds many parents of their local library but more could be done to help convert this awareness into action, e.g. a competition that incentivises library visits or book borrowing. Previous evaluation of Bookstart in Sheffield demonstrated the potential value of such incentives influencing the behaviour of many library members that borrow infrequently or not at all (Hines & Brooks, 2005).

Parental motivations

Many varied factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic, influence parents to read with their child, often reflecting their personal relationships with books.

1. Books support closeness

- Enjoyment of shared reading is the greatest motivator for parents; 86% surveyed indicated that it is a 'good way to spend time' with their child, and a greater motivator than the perceived role of books at bedtime (62%) or the potential for books to support their child's attainment (63%)
- A previous Bookstart study demonstrated the sensory and emotional benefits gained from shared reading, and promoted the *experience* of book sharing rather than focusing on specific skill attainment it supports (Pahl, 2010)
- Qualitative discussion provides further insight into parental enjoyment, with respondents revealing that their child's positive reaction to books gives them significant pleasure and motivates them further.

2. Books have qualities that are distinct from other entertainment

- Books are perceived by parents to be accessible, visually stimulating and tactile, bringing different learning and emotional benefits to other forms of visual entertainment such as television or interactive devices
- Books are perceived to widen children's worlds and to expand their imagination and vocabulary in a way not achieved via other forms of entertainment
- Parents do not spontaneously reflect on the unique properties of books but when prompted consider their impact to be largely due to the demands books place on the child to 'fill in the gaps' between words and pictures as well as the motivation generated by parent-child closeness.

3. Children are an uncritical and responsive audience

- Every book supports a multitude of potential delivery styles; parents from all backgrounds and with varied literacy skills reported enjoyment of and confidence in reading aloud to their children regardless of their level of literacy
- Many focus group respondents acknowledged the pleasure they gain from their child's uncritical reaction and the motivation their child's response evokes
- The above findings echo the recommendations in 'Desirable Literacies', which argues in favour of family-centric literacy practices, empowering families to develop their own approaches to reading at home (Taylor, 1999)
- As a child becomes more responsive to shared reading and begins to participate, his interactions too, become an emotional driver for parents. Over 80% of survey respondents with children over the age of two read because their child

‘asks me to’. This positive impact of ‘serve and return’¹ interaction was also noted by the National Scientific Council (NSC, 2007).

4. *Parents seek to replicate their own childhood enjoyment of stories*

- Though only 65% of parents surveyed stated that they read to share a love of books, focus groups revealed a strong desire amongst the majority of parents to inspire a love of books in their children, just as they themselves had been inspired. This was particularly apparent amongst parents with children over the age of two.
- Many parents, even those that do not read as adults, seek to ignite in their child the attachment to books they themselves had had as children. There is a sense that childhood represents a unique opportunity to ‘lose yourself in a book’ with that possibility for complete immersion dissipating during puberty
- Fuelling their child’s imagination and interest in the other worlds conveyed by books is perceived to be a gift about which parents are quite sentimental.

5. *Books play multiple roles, supporting both play and relaxation*

- The vast majority of parents surveyed and interviewed share books with their child at least ‘once a week’ or more often
- Parents choose to read at convenient times of the day rather than assigning reading to a regular slot. This is often bedtime for older children that are at nursery all day and with better stamina in the evenings. Bedtime reading is often viewed as a ‘punctuation mark’ at the end of a child’s busy day
- Those parents for whom shared reading is not just at their child’s bedtime appear to reinforce the relevance of stories and books to their child’s play. A minority keeps books amongst their child’s toys, helping the child to self-select books and read. These parents reported their children simulating reading to toys, role-playing characters and bringing books to be read during the daytime.

6. *Books support learning and attainment*

- Many parents, particularly those with lower education levels and / or that read less as adults, appear to place considerable emphasis on reading for attainment
- Egmont’s survey of over 1,000 parents with children over two indicated high levels of interest in the value of reading to support attainment (‘64% read for language development’). Mirroring this, 63% of Booktrust respondents indicate that they read to their child to improve their child’s reading skills. It is notable though that 86% of Booktrust recipients view reading as a good way to spend

¹ The National Scientific Council explores the ‘serve and return’ interaction between parents and their children in its paper on the developing child. It explains how children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions and gestures, which adults replicate and return (NSC, 2007).

time together, revealing its emotional significance to parents of pre-school children

- The perceived value of shared reading with young babies is to attach words to objects and to support the child's emotional development. Amongst toddlers, reading is perceived to increase vocabulary but also to lay the foundations for future learning, exposing the child to concepts outside his / her sphere and more complex scenarios. For this age-group books are viewed as a 'portal' to learning.

7. Parents' own education attainment

- Previous research has noted links between a parent's educational attainment and his / her propensity (motivation) to read with his / her child (Reading is Fundamental, 2008)
- However Booktrust's study observed different connections between a parent's education and his or her reading behaviours:
 - o Those with higher levels of education attainment placed high importance on inspiring imagination but sometimes lacked insight into the value of simple picture books and the importance of age-relevant books
 - o In turn those with lower levels of education attainment sometimes place emphasis on the importance of reading in order to do well at school.

Parental barriers

Barriers to reading are largely practical, though poor awareness of the value of reading from a young age influences parental propensity to read with their babies. 53% of parents feel that they could read more frequently with their child; education around how reading might be fitted into their routine could be beneficial.

1. Books require extra effort

- Books and shared drawing activities are relatively demanding activities, requiring parents to sit with the child and focus on a task. For this reason they usually play a limited role in a parent's entertainment repertoire, often rejected in favour of less physical and time consuming activities.

2. Lack of parental time

- 24% of parents surveyed feel they do not have time to read more with their child, with household, children and work commitments all taking precedence
- 15% of parents note that the demands of work inhibit the extent to which they read with their child whilst 19% cite the demands of other children as a barrier

3. *Lack of parental energy*

- Parents' 'lack of energy' was often mentioned in the focus groups, specifically by mothers. The dedicated focus, energy and time required to sit with a child and read a book appear to be significant inhibitors

4. *Children's interest in other forms of entertainment*

- 10% of respondents claimed that their child's preference for other forms of entertainment impacts the frequency with which they read with their child
- Focus group discussions revealed a poor awareness amongst many parents around age-relevant texts, particularly amongst 3-5 year olds, with parents selecting text-heavy titles or demanding that their child sits still for too long
- Desk research implies that in some cohorts of young people use of technology limits access to books and affects how parents read with their child (Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer 2009). Indeed, focus group activity in this study revealed how technology has undermined parents' use of books outside of the home (using a phone and tablet instead to occupy a child). However survey data implies that in general physical books are preferred to digital entertainment in the majority of respondent households with 0-5 year olds.

5. *Poor awareness of the value of reading from a young age*

- Lack of access to books was never cited as a barrier to shared reading within the focus groups though the presence of age relevant books is critical
- Receipt of a book clearly tailored to the abilities of their young child can prompt a parent unaware of the value of reading to read for the first time and can support a positive reading experience for both parties
- One study observed how a baby's age is a significant predictor of reading activity, with the likelihood of a parent reading with their child increasing with each monthly increase in age (Van Zanten, Coates, Hervas-Malo & McGrath, 2012)
- Some respondents referred to their Bookstart Baby bag as having given them the 'green light' to start reading with their child, demonstrating the value of placing baby books into parents' hands and of accompanying messages
- This echoes previous DCSF research revealing how parental motivation to support their child is positively impacted when they believe that such involvement is a key element of being a responsible parent (DCSF 2007).

6. *Perception that it is the partner's role to read with the child*

- 13% of survey respondents believe that their partner prefers to read with their child, with the majority of these being fathers
- Engaging disengaged fathers is recognized in a number of studies as having considerable potential to support family literacy, in particular the performance of boys (Mullan, 2010). Gadsden argues for tailored initiatives to target fathers and

sustain their interest in reading with their children (Gadsden, 2012). However a Booktrust study paints a more heartening picture, revealing the positive impact of Bookstart Treasure on fathers' propensity to read with their children.

Bookstart recommendations

The defined ages of Bookstart Baby and Treasure reflect two periods of transition for young children and their parents. By placing age-relevant books into the hands of young people and their carers, Bookstart successfully reminds families of their child's capabilities and his / her likely appetite for books. Following are a number of recommendations to improve the already considerable impact of the packs:

Key messages and call to action

- The bags send out inclusive, positive messages about shared reading, though could highlight more overtly the tangible benefits of reading and give parents an easy target to achieve (e.g. one short book a day)
- Explain the selection process for books included in each bag. Picture books are not always valued by parents with less understanding of their role and benefits
- Consider practical incentives and mechanics that encourage parents to change their reading behaviour. A 2011 report noted considerable disparity between what parents know they should do and what they actually achieve
- Consider parental education around reading strategies that address the following:
 - o Misconceptions of shared reading as a time consuming task
 - o Responding with age-relevant books to a child's increased capabilities
 - o Engaging resistant or disinterested toddlers in shared reading
 - o The role of shared reading in a multi-sibling family
 - o Widening the role of books in the home, presenting more opportunities for shared reading
 - o Parental understanding of their role as their child's first teacher' and the developmental benefits of shared reading.

More might be done to consolidate and communicate key messages at distribution:

- Greater visibility and anticipation of distribution
- Greater consistency of messaging around distribution
- Promote the value of shared reading on books inserted into the bags
- Consider opportunities for practitioners to model shared reading.