

Story Hunters

Pilot Evaluation Report 2016



Contents

Introduction	2
Summary Findings	3
Findings	4
Experiences of Story Hunters	4
Feedback on the resources	4
Use of the resources	5
Impact of Story Hunters	6
• Attitudes towards reading	6
• Confidence	8
• Reading activity at home	8
• Sustainability of impact	8
Programme delivery	8
• Logistics	8
• Parental involvement	8
• Delivery to children	9
• Selecting children to take part	9
• Maximising impact	9
Programme development	9
• Improvement of Story Hunters	9
• Roll-out to other year groups	9
Methodology	10
Research tools	10
Sample	10
Ethics	10
Recommendations	11

Introduction

Thanks to funding from Amazon, the Story Hunters pilot supported 322 children between January and June 2016.

Story Hunters is a new programme for Year 4 children, designed to support struggling or reluctant readers. Each child taking part receives a total of six packs (one each month for six months) containing carefully chosen books, activities and stationery. The packs are delivered to participating schools, where they are personalised and given to the children.

Story Hunters is based on the award-winning Letterbox Club model, which has been successful in supporting the educational outcomes of children in care. The pilot allowed us to evaluate whether a model using the same system of giving out regular book and activity packs could benefit other groups of children.

Story Hunters aims to encourage children to engage more with reading, as well as to write and draw more frequently. The resources aim to help children and families build their relationships by increasing the amount of time they spend together sharing the books and activities. It is intended that Story Hunters will increase children's confidence with reading and will lead to improved academic attainment in the long-term.

Story Hunters was piloted in 16 schools across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with 322 children. Those who took part were primarily children eligible for free school meals, as well as children who were struggling or reluctant readers.





Summary Findings

Much of the evidence collected in this pilot evaluation suggests that Story Hunters was very successful in meeting its stated aims. Children were excited about taking part and the excitement appears to have been sustained throughout the programme with many children talking about the books with teachers and friends, and bringing the resources into school to share. All teachers said that they would recommend Story Hunters to other schools.

The Story Hunters resources were widely praised in terms of their age-appropriateness, range and level. Different genres and the mix of easier and more challenging books were popular as they introduced children to different types of books, ensured accessibility, and promoted both shared and independent reading. The stationery and activities were also seen as important in giving children access to resources they might not have at home, encouraging writing, increasing the accessibility of the packs, and introducing children to different formats of reading and writing. The resources were used frequently and widely throughout and beyond the programme and were often showed to and shared with family and friends.

Whilst the surveys did not find a significant change in engagement with reading as a result

of the programme, the rest of the quantitative and qualitative evidence collected suggested many positive impacts of Story Hunters. These impacts were wide-ranging and corroborated across children, parents and teachers, often independently of each other.

The main impacts recorded were:

- Improved attitudes to reading;
- Improved engagement with reading and reading more frequently;
- Increased enjoyment of reading;
- Increased engagement/willingness to try different books or different types of books;
- Increased likelihood of independently choosing to read;
- Improved confidence and progress with reading;
- Increased engagement with reading activities at home and with family members;
- Increase in talking about books.

These impacts were particularly marked for reluctant readers, children who struggle with reading, and children in receipt of free school meals.

Findings

Experiences of Story Hunters

Children were overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic about their experiences of Story Hunters. They described being really excited to receive the parcels and opening them as soon as possible so that they could start using the contents. The children taking part in the focus groups had really enjoyed the programme and several mentioned that they felt really happy to have been chosen to take part. Parents and carers supported this in their responses.

Teachers also reported that children had been hugely enthusiastic and all said that children enjoyed taking part in Story Hunters. Teachers remarked on the sustained enjoyment of the programme, saying that children would often talk to them and their classmates about the books they had received, and bring in parts of the packs to show them. All teachers said that they would recommend the programme to other schools.



“

My daughter looks forward to getting her Story Hunters pack every month. Once she gets it in from school the first day she gets it she can't wait to get in and get reading and doing the projects in her pack.

”

Parent, Millennium Primary School

Feedback on the resources

Teachers were very positive about the Story Hunters resources in terms of their range, quality, age-appropriateness and level. They praised the variety of books in terms of level, with some more challenging books, which could either be read alone or with an adult, and some easier books which all children could access independently and share with their siblings or peers. Teachers also praised the variety of different genres included in the packs, which had introduced children to books that they might not have read before or might not have chosen for themselves.

“

The sheer excitement on their faces when I've handed them out, and then enjoyment, and whenever they see me round school they stop me to talk about it or say "when's the next one coming?"

”

Teacher, Gwenfro Community Primary School

The other items in the parcels (i.e. the stationery and activities) were also seen as important in giving children access to resources they might not have at home, encouraging writing, and increasing the accessibility of the packs. This also introduced children to different formats of reading and writing.

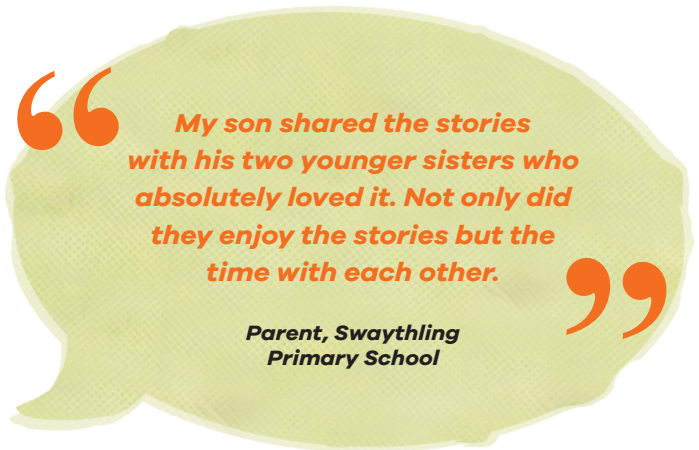
Children were also very positive about the Story Hunters resources, and gave a wide range of responses when asked which parts of the packs they liked best, with many saying that they liked everything.

Use of the resources

Data collected across surveys, interviews and focus groups with children, parents/carers and teachers all indicated that the Story Hunters resources were very widely used and continued to be used throughout and beyond the programme.

Almost all the children (98%) reported that they used the things they received in their Story Hunters parcels and the majority (82%) of these said that they used the things they received every day or almost every day. This was supported by parents/carers in their survey responses, and by children in their focus groups. Most children and parents also reported that children were still using their Story Hunters resources, with almost two thirds saying they were still using them a lot.

The majority of children shared and used their packs with others, most commonly their parents, siblings and friends, but also extended family members, such as grandparents and cousins. Children reported doing the activities with their families and friends, and reading with others (including being read to by their parents/carers or older family members, reading to younger family members, and reading together). This was supported by parents'/carers' responses to the survey, in which 93% reported that their child had used the resources with others at home.



Impact of Story Hunters

There was little evidence of any statistically significant differences between parents/carers and children's attitudes and engagement with reading before and after taking part in the programme. These results are very important and contradictory to other quantitative and qualitative data collected during the evaluation (summarised later in this section).

This suggests that further evaluation is needed in order to robustly assess the impact of the programme.

However, these initial results should be interpreted with caution as a number of issues could have affected the data collected. For example, there appears to be some ceiling

effects with both children and parents/carers reporting very positive initial attitudes and engagement with reading.

This could have implications for the targeting of the programme, in ensuring that the children taking part have potential to make improvements in terms of their engagement and attitudes towards reading. However, these ceiling effects could have been due to other reasons, such as:

- methodological issues (e.g. If children and/or parents and carers were made aware of Story Hunters at the same time as completing the pre-programme survey this may have affected the results);
- the survey tool used (for children, this was based on a validated measure but some changes were made, including only using questions relating to reading for pleasure, and altering the scale. For parents/carers, the measure was not validated.)

Despite this, data from post-programme surveys and interviews/focus groups with children, parents/carers and teachers suggests that there were many positive and important impacts of Story Hunters.

The main impacts are discussed below:

Attitudes towards reading

In case study interviews and in survey responses, teachers reported improvements in children's attitudes towards reading, particularly in their enthusiasm, enjoyment and engagement with reading.

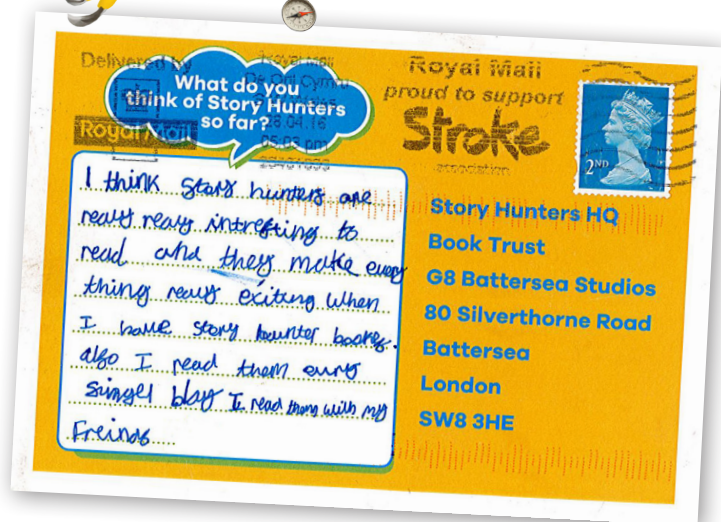
Teachers reported that children were now talking about books with teachers and with their friends, reading different types of books (e.g. reading different genres), reading more frequently (e.g. in their free time and in the playground) and reading together with their classmates. They also reported that because of Story Hunters children were now very engaged with reading, willing to try out new books, and choosing to read independently rather than being told to read.

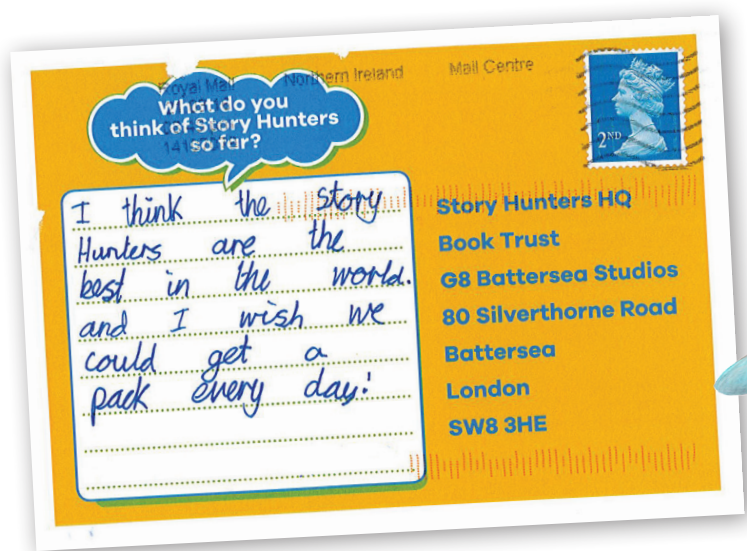
'The children involved were very positive about the programme. They brought the books from their packs into school and some were reading them in the playground at break and lunch. It definitely encouraged them to read more and developed a positive attitude around reading.'

Teacher, Downpatrick Primary School

“ You always have a different variety of things to use and I LOVED it! ”

Year 4 child, Swaythling Primary School





Parents and carers also reported differences in their child's reading behaviours and attitudes, in terms of their child becoming more interested and engaged in reading as a result of taking part in Story Hunters. Many parents and carers commented on how they thought Story Hunters was a really good way of encouraging children to read different kinds of books that they may not have considered before.

'It is a very good way of getting different books to children that they may enjoy, who otherwise would not realise that they liked.'

Parent, Millennium Primary School

'[She] is much more interested in books now and reads every day and finds it enjoyable, we talk much more about books as a household thanks to Story Hunters.'

Parent, St. James CEVA Primary School

Children also reported that Story Hunters had introduced them to books that are different to what they normally read and different to what

" I took the books over to my Nans... I didn't read them with her but I went to bed earlier. I went to bed at 7pm and stayed up till 9pm reading. That was the Horrid Henry book I started off with... I've nearly finished it. "

Year 4 pupil, Portmead Primary School

they would normally choose for themselves. Several children across the focus groups reported that before Story Hunters they rarely or never read due to a variety of reasons, and these children reported that their attitudes towards reading had changed as a result of taking part. Across different groups and schools, children said that the programme had made them more interested in reading, made them enjoy reading more, and made them want to read more.

'I wouldn't have bought some of these books, because they aren't my type. But when I read them there was something different and I enjoyed them.'

Year 4 pupil, Portmead Primary School

'I didn't used to read at all before, but now I love to read! Especially these books. Because they are really good.'

Year 4 boy, Francis Askew Primary School

" I think it fits really well... the different range of products you put in them [weren't] just books... but they had stationery, postcards, comics, and all different ways for them to read and write involved. I think it was lovely. "

Teacher, Dog Kennel Hill Primary School

Confidence

Teachers and parents/carers also reported positive impacts of Story Hunters on children's confidence. This seemed to be particularly the case for children who had previously been reluctant readers.

'Children who are doing Story Hunters are a lot more vocal and have a lot more ideas and are willing to share more than they were prior to this, so it does show that they've got that confidence in speaking about texts so that's good'

Teacher, Francis Askew Primary School

'This is a good programme for children to help improve their confidence in reading and see it is fun and not just a chore to learn in school.'

Parent, Appleton Academy

'I feel much more confident and much better at reading now'

Year 4 boy, Dog Kennel Hill Primary School

Reading activity at home:

Parents/carers reported that they had been reading more with their child and talking more together about reading and doing reading-related activities.

“ We read more now than ever and for the first time ever my son asked me for a book (The World's Worst Children) when we were shopping last week, he finished it in two days. ”

Parent, St. Patrick's Primary School



Sustainability of impact:

The teachers from the case study schools were positive about the impact of the programme being sustained once the programme was over. Teachers referenced the ownership of the books, children's improved attitudes towards reading more generally and their increased propensity to choose to read over other activities as evidence that the impact of the programme would be sustained. Children were also confident that they would keep reading after receiving Story Hunters.

Programme delivery

Logistics

Teachers at the case study schools universally reported that the programme ran very smoothly and was easy to deliver.

Parental involvement

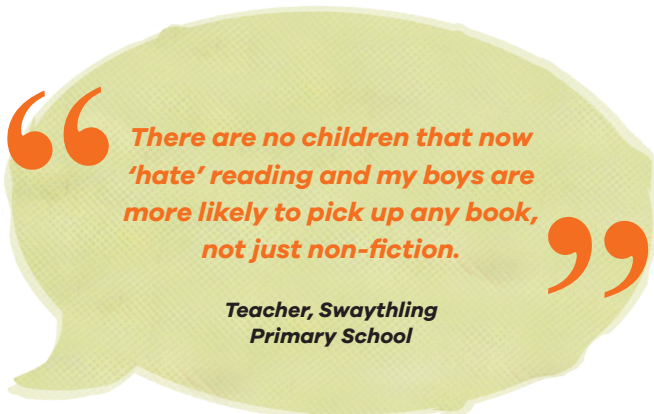
In general, there appears to have been limited communication between parents/carers and schools about the programme, although teachers from two of the focus group schools had spoken to parents/carers about the programme. Some teachers mentioned that parental engagement was a challenge at their school, and that they generally struggled to get parents/carers to come into the school.

Delivery to children

Most teachers reported that they delivered the Story Hunters parcels directly to the children (11 out of 13 survey respondents). Teachers tended to give children their parcels at the end of the school day to take home and open. Teachers spoke about building the excitement at their schools by telling the children when the parcels would be arriving in advance.

Selecting children to take part

A couple of schools mentioned that one of the reasons for children opening the parcels at home was to avoid having the packs out too much in the classroom with other children who were not taking part in the programme, who may feel left out. However, some schools had not experienced any issues with targeting. For example, one teacher said that students at their school were happy to share in others' successes and that children taking part were pleased to share their books with those not taking part.

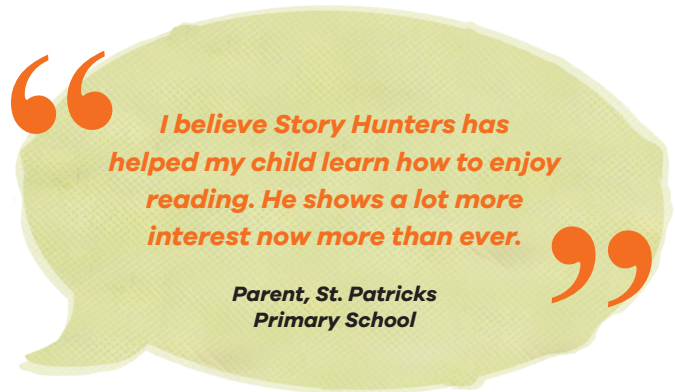


Maximising impact

Evidence from the case studies supports selecting reluctant readers or children who struggle with reading to take part in Story Hunters, as well as children in receipt of free school meals, as the programme appeared to have the biggest impact for these children.

‘Well I used to think that reading was really boring [but] when you started giving us our first Story Hunters pack there was a book in and I thought ‘Yeah, I’ll read it, why not?’ and then I thought it was gonna be really boring but then I started reading it more and then I started getting into the books and then I’m now really into reading.’

Year 4 girl, Swaythling Primary School



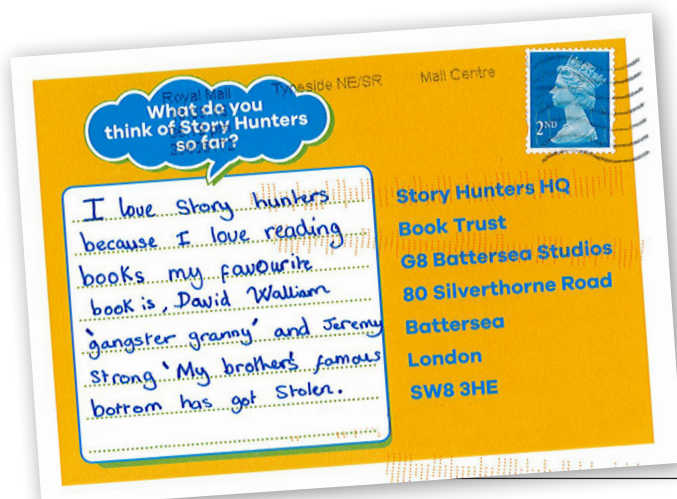
Programme development

Improvement of Story Hunters

Teachers and students made very minimal suggestions for improvement of Story Hunters, with suggestions including receiving more packs, more activities, stationery, and more different types of books.

Roll-out to other year groups

Teachers in the case study schools thought that all year groups would benefit from Story Hunters, and thought that Year 2 (which is being considered for the programme) would be a good year to have Story Hunters as it would encourage more independent reading, and because it is a SATs year.



Methodology



Research tools

• Surveys with children, parents/carers and teachers

Pre- and post-programme surveys were developed for children and parents/carers assess any differences before and after the programme. Some questions were repeated in the pre- and post-programme surveys to assess the impact of the programme.

These questions related to attitudes and behaviours around reading and were adapted from an existing validated measure.¹

The post-programme surveys contained additional questions focussing on the resources, perceptions of the impact of the programme, and their experiences of Story Hunters.

Teachers completed post-programme surveys to provide feedback on the programme and their perceptions of any impacts of Story Hunters.

• Post-programme case studies in seven schools (three in England and four in Wales)

Interview and focus group guides were developed and used in post-programme case studies in seven schools. The case studies used interviews with teachers, focus groups with children and focus groups with parents/carers to gain in-depth feedback about: programme experiences; resource use; and the impact and delivery of Story Hunters. The guides were flexible and informal to enable conversations to flow naturally, within a consistent structure that ensured all outcomes were covered. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and fully transcribed.

Data was also gathered through the following methods:

• Postcards

Stamped addressed postcards were included in every third parcel that children received. The postcards had a picture of the Story Hunters characters on the front and asked the question 'What do you think of Story Hunters so far?' on the reverse.

• Emailed questions

Teachers were emailed every two months with a couple of questions relating to the delivery,

impact and experience of Story Hunters. This complemented data received from the teachers in their post-programme surveys.

Sample

Surveys:

Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected from the surveys.

- 299 survey responses from children, a response rate of 95%.
- 74 survey responses from parents/carers, a response rate of 23%.
- 13 survey responses from teachers, a response rate of 81%.

Interview/focus group schedules:

Further qualitative data was collected via the following interviews and focus groups:

- Interviews with seven teachers in seven different schools
- 14 focus groups with approximately 107 students across seven schools
- One focus group with 3 parents at one school
- One interview with a parent at one school

Postcards:

A total of 35 postcards were returned from children.

Emailed questions:

We received email feedback from four teachers over the course of the programme.

Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all teachers, parents/carers and students taking part in the focus group/interview element of the research. We also took additional measures to ensure that children felt comfortable to participate in the research by including a fun warm-up activity. We encouraged honest responses by assuring children that we really wanted to hear any criticisms as well as positive feedback, and that they had an important role in helping to improve the programme.

¹ *The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*, McKenna, Michael C. & Kear, Dennis J. (1990, May). *Measuring attitude toward reading: A new tool for teachers. The Reading Teacher*, 43(9), 626-639.

Recommendations

- 1** It is recommended that the roll-out of Story Hunters as a traded programme continues. Much of the data collected in the pilot evaluation provides evidence that the programme is successful in meeting its aims. The format of the programme and resources provided were widely praised and were reported to result in numerous positive impacts.
- 2** Further analysis of the impact of the programme is needed. Development of research measures and methods to allow robust pre- and post-programme evaluation to assess the impact of the programme will be important to achieve this.
- 3** It would be useful to conduct further follow-up research with schools who took part in the pilot to assess whether the reported impacts of Story Hunters are sustained long-term.
- 4** As there was limited communication between parents/carers and schools about Story Hunters, the outcomes of parents/carers and children building relationships, and spending more time together sharing books and related activities may need to be investigated further. Resources or ideas to help schools to engage with parents and carers about Story Hunters may be beneficial for teachers to ensure the programme meets these aims and is successful for all children participating.
- 5** Case studies modelling best practice and giving schools ideas on how to deliver Story Hunters successfully could be beneficial. Specifically, these could help schools in funding Story Hunters, selecting students to take part in the programme, delivering the programme, engaging parents and carers, etc.
- 6** The development of the Story Hunters programme for other year groups should be considered further. Teachers were positive about the impact that Story Hunters could have for all age groups. They responded well to the suggestion of Year 2 as this is a SATs year and they felt that the programme would encourage and support independent reading for children of this age.
- 7** Small changes to the contents of the parcels should be considered based on suggestions from children, teachers and parents/carers, e.g. providing additional teacher resources, including different stationery items to avoid repetition, including trading cards of the Story Hunters characters, etc.

“ ...when you look at the end result and what the children have got out of it, I mean that just speaks volumes about its worth and how much of a success it is.

Teacher, Francis Askew, Primary School ”

To find out more about this report, please contact the author Catherine Harris at research@booktrust.org.uk

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