

# **Reading with children – Findings from a nationwide survey on the reading frequency of Mums and Dads**

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August 2014

## Introduction

Booktrust is an independent reading charity which delivers both universal and targeted bookgifting programmes to children and their parents<sup>1</sup> at key stages in their development. Through these programmes, Booktrust encourages parents to share stories, books and rhymes with their children at the youngest possible age, and aims to help families adopt reading habits that will last throughout their child's lifetime.

Through our flagship universal programme Bookstart, every baby and pre-school age child receives free book packs, guidance and support via health visitors, library services and early years settings. Booktime is a similar programme that goes out to all reception aged children through their school, and Bookbuzz for children in the first year of secondary school, which can be purchased by schools.

With our programmes and our other work, Booktrust focuses on encouraging parents to read frequently, raising awareness of the benefits of reading every day and of reading for pleasure.

There is a large body of research which indicates a strong positive relationship between the frequency of book sharing and children's language and literacy development, attainment at school, and well-being. For example, evidence shows that reading 3-5 days per week has the same effect on a child's reading skills at age 4-5 as being six months older. Reading 6-7 days per week has the same effect as being almost 12 months older (Kalb et al, 2012). Further evidence also indicates that children of all backgrounds who were read to regularly by their parents at age 5 performed better in maths, vocabulary and spelling at age 16 than those who were not read to (Sullivan and Brown, 2013).

Although there are strong links between reading frequency and future academic attainment, evidence suggests that reading for pleasure appears to be more significant for reading attainment than reading to improve reading skills and achieve results (Schiefele and Schaffner, 2012). The importance of reading for pleasure is recognised by the OECD which found it to be a predictor of future economic success (Kirsch et al, 2002).

This brief report presents the key findings from a survey on reading with children, with a particular interest in the ages of children who are targeted by Booktrust's programmes; Bookstart, Booktime and Bookbuzz.

Booktrust commissioned Ipsos MORI to ask parents 'How often, if at all, do you read with your child?'<sup>2</sup> on their face-to-face omnibus surveys in February 2014. The question replicates the question on reading frequency asked in the Millennium Cohort Study<sup>3</sup>. The survey question was answered by 2415 parents – 1519 mums and 896 dads with children aged from 0-11 years old. The survey ran over 6 consecutive weeks from 7 February to 20 March 2014.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'parents' is used throughout this report to refer to parents, carers and legal guardians

<sup>2</sup> The term 'reading with' is used throughout the report to refer to shared reading between parent and child

<sup>3</sup> The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is a large scale longitudinal study that follows the lives of around 19,000 babies, born in the UK between 1 September 2000 and 11 January 2002

<sup>4</sup> The parent was asked to focus on one child (in the case of multi child households) and to answer for the child whose birthday was closest to the date when they completed the survey. This was to ensure a random spread of ages.

## Key findings

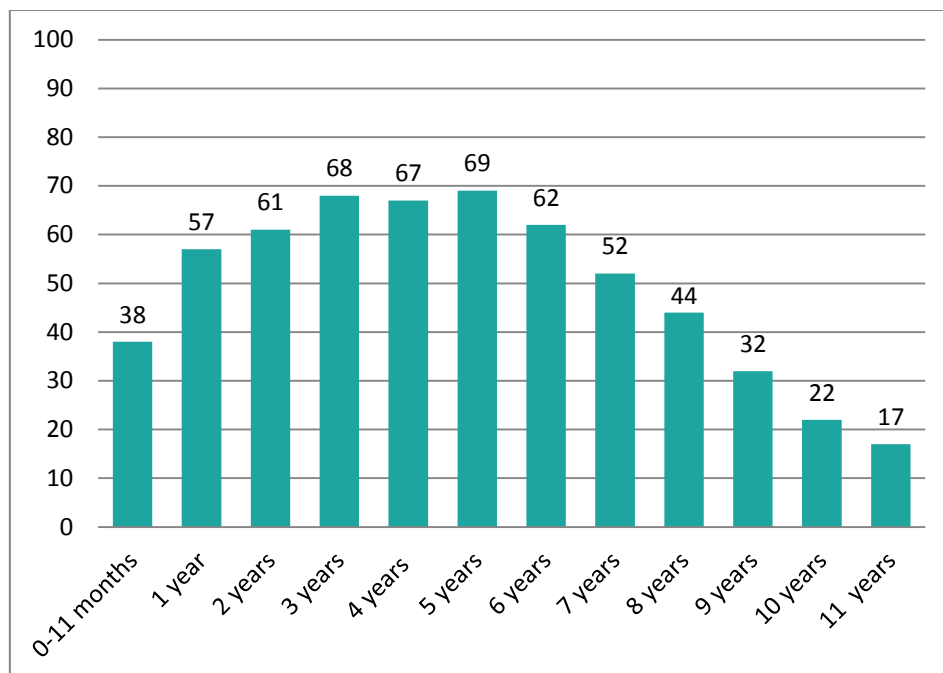
This report explores the frequency that parents read with their children, focusing particularly on the percentage of parents that read with their children on a daily basis. The analysis investigates how the frequency of parents reading with their children changes as children grow older, and compares the reading behaviours of mums and dads.

The key findings are as follows:

- The proportion of parents reading with their child every day peaks when the child is aged 5; 69% of parents read with their 5 year old daily
- Mums (55%) are significantly more likely to read with their children daily than dads (42%), and mums read daily more than dads with all ages of children
- Significant minorities of parents never read with their 0-11 month old baby: 45% of dads never read with their child at this age, and 32% of mums.

## Reading every day peaks at age 5

Fig. 1  
Percentage of  
parents who read  
daily with their  
child at ages 0 -11  
years



Source: Ipsos MORI. Base: Parents of children aged 0-11 years (n=2415)

The results show that 38% of parents of 0-11 month olds read with their child every day, whilst 68% of parents of 3 year olds, and 69% of parents with 5 year olds read with them every day. The sharpest increase in the proportion of parents reading to their child on a daily basis happens between parents with 0-11 month olds (38%) and parents with 1 year olds (57%). The likelihood of reading every day begins to gradually decrease after age 5, as the child grows older – with only 17% of parents reading with their 11 year old.

The peak at age 5 coincides with the start of Key Stage 1<sup>5</sup> at school where children are taught to read via formal reading systems. It is likely that parental behaviour is in part guided by school expectations at this time. What we do not know is whether parents are reading with their 5 year olds for pleasure, or if they are reading books sent home from school focused on acquiring reading skills. It would be interesting to investigate in more depth the type of reading that is going on at this stage, including the balance between the parent reading to their child, and the child reading to the parent.

Separate research by Egmont shows that once children can read fairly competently, parents often take a step back from their child's reading, which tends to coincide with Key Stage 2<sup>6</sup> at school. This is even more likely to happen with parents who tend to regard reading as a skill to be learnt for academic attainment, rather than as a source of entertainment and enjoyment, as they feel that their job is done once their child has learnt the mechanics of reading (Egmont, 2013).

Therefore, age 7 is a pivotal point; although this data doesn't indicate whether the child continues to read every day independently of their parents, research suggests that without continued parental

<sup>5</sup> Key Stage 1 is taught between ages 5-7

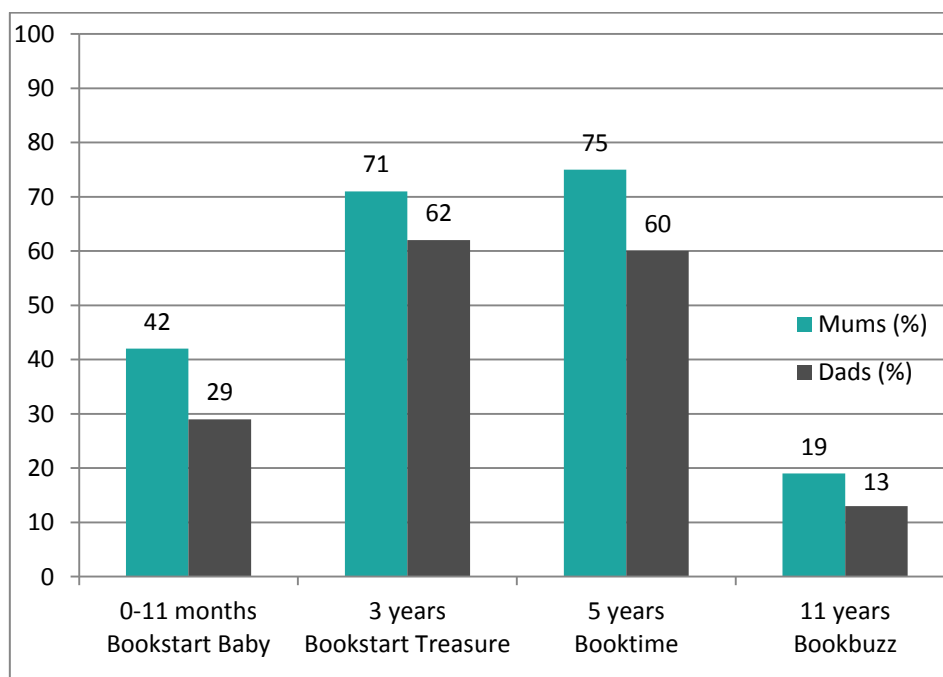
<sup>6</sup> Key Stage 2 is taught between ages 7 – 11

involvement and direction children may not choose to read beyond what is required of them at school (Egmont, 2013).

Programmes need to focus on encouraging sustained parental support around reading at this age, with particular emphasis on encouraging ‘the will’ to read (motivation), as opposed to just ‘the skill’ (ability to read). At Booktrust, we encourage adults (both parents and teachers) to recognise their role in providing motivation for children to read for pleasure by opening up dialogues and discussion around books, and helping with book selection. The role that parents can play continues to be important as children get older, and is highlighted in a recent review of literature on motivating 11-13 year olds to read (Clague and Levy, 2013).

### Reading every day: Mums read with their children more than dads

Fig. 2  
Percentage of mums and dads who read daily with their child at the key ages for Bookstart, Booktime and Bookbuzz

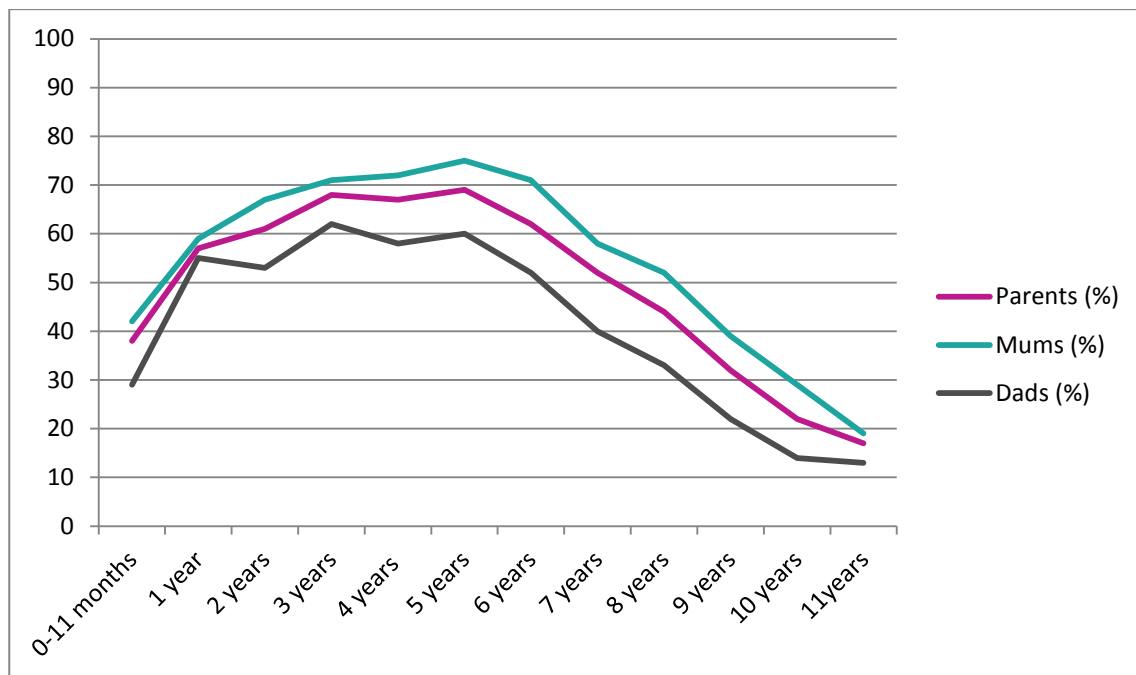


Source: Ipsos MORI. Base: Parents of children aged 0-11 years (n=2415)

- 42% of mums compared with 29% of dads read with their 0-11 month old every day. This means that at this age almost 50% more mums than dads read with their children on a daily basis
- 71% of mums compared with 62% of dads read with their 3 year old every day
- 75% of mums compared with 60% of dads read with their 5 year olds every day. This means that at this age 25% more mums than dads read with their children on a daily basis
- 19% of mums compared with 13% of dads read with their 11 year olds every day.

### Reading every day: Mums read more than dads with all ages of children

Fig 3. Percentage of parents, mums and dads who read daily with their child at ages 0 – 11



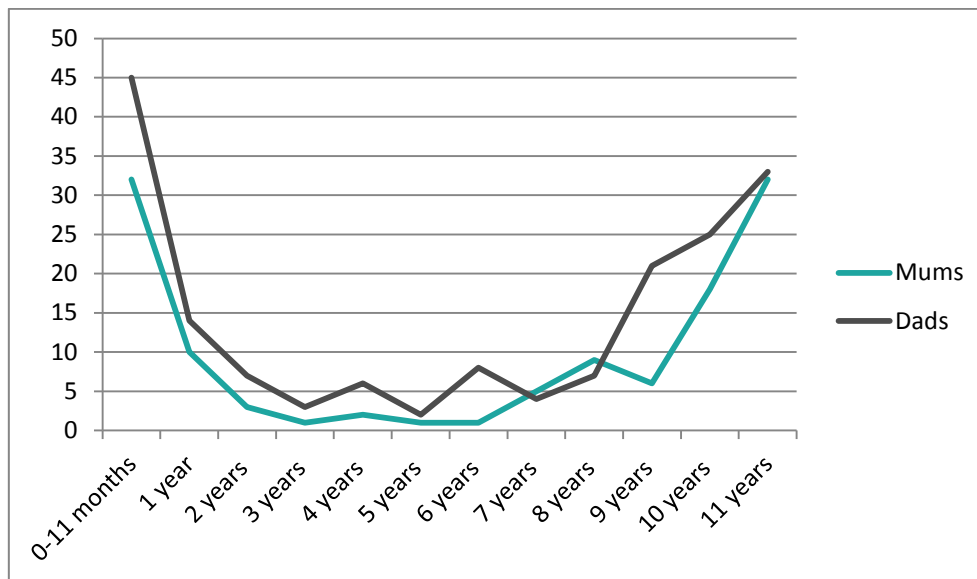
Source: Ipsos MORI. Base: Parents of children aged 0-11 years (n=2415)

Mums are more likely to read with their child than dads across all ages of child, and this follows the same pattern as parents as a whole; the proportion of mums and dads reading with their child increases up until the age of 5, with the sharpest increase between ages 0-11 months and 1, then decreases after the age of 5. The reading frequency gap between mums and dads is lowest at age 1, and highest between ages 6-8.

Recommendations from the latest Bookstart evaluation suggest exploring opportunities to directly engage fathers and encourage both parents to recognise the importance of dad’s role in reading with their children. This could be achieved through tailored initiatives and more overt messaging which directly target dads with a call to action (Venn, 2014). Booktrust will also be building on our successful Get Dads Reading campaign to unite parents around a common goal of increasing the frequency that they read with their children.

### Dads are more likely to never read with their child, but percentages are low for parents overall

Fig. 5  
Percentage of mums and dads who never read with their child at ages 0-11



Source: Ipsos MORI. Base: Parents of children aged 0-11 years (n=2415)

Dads are more likely to never read with their child, with 45% never reading with their children aged 0-11 months compared to 32% of mums. However, this falls sharply to 10% when the child is one and then continues to stay low in the early years, with the gap between mums and dads closing.

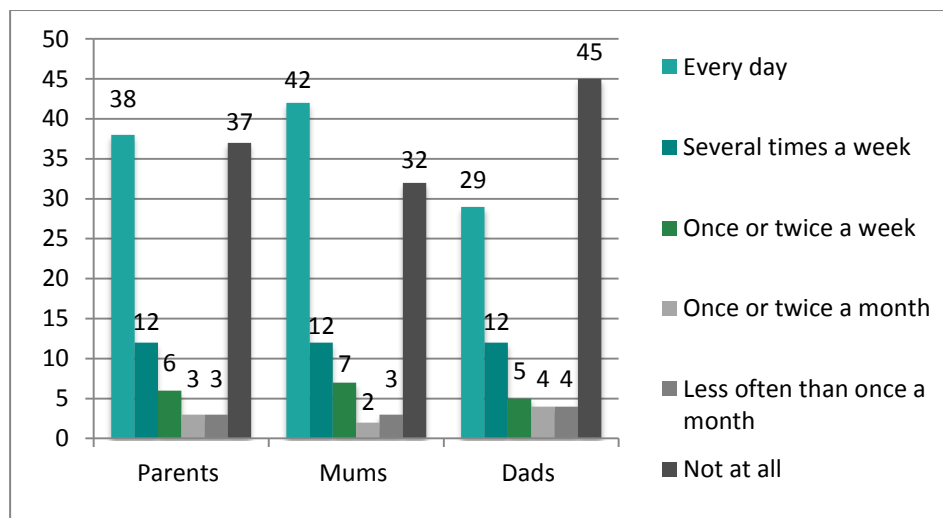
The percentages of parents overall who never read with their child are very low, particularly between ages 1-7, and even more so in the age groups in which Bookstart treasure (aged 3) and Booktime (aged 5) are given out, potentially suggesting the positive impact of these packs:

- 2% of parents with Bookstart treasure age children never read with them
- 1% of parents with Booktime aged children never read with them

The small percentage of families who never read with their children will require intensive support to gain the confidence and knowledge to begin a reading routine.

## Significant minorities of parents with 0-11 month olds never read with their child

Fig. 6  
Percentage of parents, mums and dads who read with their 0-11 month old by reading frequency



Source: Ipsos MORI. Base: Parents of children aged 0-11 years (n=2415)

Only 38% of parents are reading with their babies (aged 0 – 11 months) every day, whereas 37% of parents of babies never read with them at all. It is likely that knowledge gaps around the benefits of reading with young babies act as significant barriers to establishing reading routines at this early stage. This 0-11 month age group in particular is an area where Booktrust will be continuing to focus on improvements in reading frequency.

The most recent Bookstart evaluation found that uncertainty about the relevance of reading at such a young age could hold many parents back, but that receiving the Bookstart pack gives parents the green light that it is appropriate and beneficial;

'[Bookstart is] a brilliant idea ...you're just not sure whether you should be reading and whether it's appropriate. [Bookstart] kick starts it.' (Mother of 9 month old quoted in Venn, 2014).

This indicates the influence that programmes like Bookstart can have on parental behaviour. Booktrust is always looking at ways to get messages about the importance of reading out to families at earlier stages, with two initiatives specifically focused on this:

1. A new targeted programme for expectant mothers called Bookstart Bump aims to address knowledge gaps through messaging which highlights the potential of early reading, highlighting the fact that reading with babies can promote early bonding, assist in establishing routines and help parents make the most of the time their baby is awake and responsive. The programme is being piloted from January 2015
2. As part of the Bookstart programme, many families also receive a high contrast black and white booklet for their new-born baby. The booklet '*Bookstart Baby's first shapes*' is designed specifically for new-borns. The bold shapes and images help babies' eyes to focus, and the shared nature of the booklet enhances early attachment and bonding, and encourages families to think about reading ahead of receiving their Bookstart pack



## Conclusion

This report presents a positive picture of parent and child reading frequency, particularly in light of the changes over time, and underlines the good work that Booktrust is doing to encourage positive reading behaviours with families. However, there is still more work to be done – particularly with the parents of children age 6 and over, with dads, and with the parents of young babies.

The research has found that:

- The number of parents reading with their child every day peaks when the child is aged 5; 69% of parents read with their child daily at age 5. This coincides with Key Stage 1 when children are taught to read via formal reading systems. It is likely that parental behaviour is guided by school expectations at this time
- Reading frequency begins to decrease at age 6-7, and into Key Stage 2. This is a transitional phase for children and there is a need to re-focus parents with regards to encouraging reading for pleasure at this pivotal point
- At all ages of child, mums are more likely to read with their child daily than dads. There needs to be a focus on ways to direct more messaging specifically to dads and encourage both parents to recognise the role that dads can play
- Significant minorities of parents never read with their 0-11 month old baby: 45% of dads never read with their child at this age, and 32% of mums. This highlights the importance of Booktrust's work around raising awareness of the benefits of reading; including reading's potential for supporting bonding and attachment, helping establish routines and capitalising on the time new babies are awake and responsive.

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## Appendix

On behalf of Booktrust, Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative quota sample of 2,415 parents aged 15 years and over who were the parents of children aged 0 – 11 years. Interviews took place across Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales). Interviews were carried out across 6 Omnibus waves as follows:Fieldwork

7<sup>th</sup> February – 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014 (n=385 parents or guardians interviewed)  
14<sup>th</sup> February – 20<sup>th</sup> February 2014 (n= 425 parents or guardians interviewed)  
21<sup>st</sup> February – 27<sup>th</sup> February 2014 (n=421 parents or guardians interviewed)  
28<sup>th</sup> February – 6<sup>th</sup> March 2014 (n=404 parents or guardians interviewed)  
7<sup>th</sup> March – 13<sup>th</sup> March 2014 (n=391 parents or guardians interviewed)  
14<sup>th</sup> March – 20<sup>th</sup> March 2014(n=389 parents or guardians interviewed)

Survey data were weighted to the known population proportions of this audience