

# Parental reading motivations and the impact of Bookstart

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Parts Two and Three: a literature review and qualitative research project

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# Background

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Booktrust commissioned Free Thought Research in November 2013 to undertake research amongst parents and carers across England with children under the age of five in order to establish the impact of its Bookstart bags on shared reading behaviours and the role of books in the home.

The research ran from November 2013 to March 2014 and comprised three strands:

1. Nationwide survey targeting parents with children of all ages under five
2. Literature review collating UK and international research into parental motivations for reading with their children
3. Focus groups with parents of differently aged children under five

## **Part One: National survey of parents and carers**

A nationally representative Bookstart branded survey was conducted in November and December 2013 amongst over 1,200 recipients of Bookstart Baby and Bookstart Treasure packs. Further shorter survey responses were also received from parents not in receipt of the pack or that did not recall receipt.

Multiple recruitment channels ensured representation of traditionally 'hard to reach' audiences whilst both opt-in and more proactive recruitment ensured representation of parents with lower engagement with Booktrust or reading generally.

## **Part Two: Literature review**

A comprehensive review of previous research amongst parents of children under five exploring literacy behaviours at home and motivations for reading was conducted.

UK publishers and international book-gifting organisations were invited to contribute documents to be considered for the review, in addition to desk based research sourcing much of the content.

## **Part Three: Depth discussions with parents and carers**

Eight focus groups targeting parents of children aged 3-6 months, 6-12 months, 12-24 months and 36-48 months respectively were then held nationwide. Two-hour discussions conducted permitted exploration of motivations for reading, the role of books in the home and the impact of Bookstart Baby and Bookstart Treasure.

Groups were recruited from amongst local parent networks, permitting some socio-economic targeting, representation of fathers and inclusion of both working and non-working mothers.

This report details qualitative findings arising from Parts Two and Three of this research. A separate report details findings from Part One. A separate Executive Summary summarising findings from all pieces of activity has also been produced.

## Part One: Literature Review

### Reading With Children – Parental Motivations & Barriers

#### Introduction

‘The embeddedness of literacy in everyday life (Nutbrown, 1997) is an important basis for the confidence which underpins later academic success’ (Hall, 2001).

Why do parents choose to read aloud with their baby, toddler and pre-school child? What prevents them from reading with their children at later ages? This literature review attempts to summarise the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations and barriers that influence the extent to which a parent reads with his or her child.

Hoover-Dempsey et al (2005) devised a model of parental involvement that sought to identify why parents become involved in children’s education. In summary, they identified that parents are motivated (1) by their sense of achievement in helping their child to progress, (2) by their sense of involvement in the school’s objectives for their child and (3) by the knowledge and skills that they perceive they can contribute. However in practice the extent to which parents are motivated to support their child is also influenced by further socio-economic and practical factors. This literature review seeks to identify these factors and their perceived influence.

#### Context

Parents are encouraged by nursery and pre-school practitioners to read with their pre-school child in order to develop their language skills, emergent literacy skills and cognitive abilities.

However the reasons for reading with their much younger children i.e. with babies and toddlers are made less clear to parents. Though the social and emotional value of reading with these young children is indicated by research, as is the positive impact on their early language skills and association with books, it appears that parents themselves are less aware of the influence that they can exert at this age.

Halfon (2002) writes that the ‘point’ of reading is less well communicated to parents, despite its value being well documented. He also notes that parents are given little information about what they might read with their young child, and how often they should read to their child.

This literature review summarizes the findings of previous research into parental motivations for reading with their young children and the barriers that inhibit this.

## Parental motivations for reading with children

The wealth of literature on this subject reveals both conscious and subconscious motivations that prompt parents to read with their children. The following list does not rank these motivations, and in fact an understanding of the hierarchy of motivation appears to be lacking in the research reviewed. However it spans both the internal and external factors that give rise to parents choosing to read with their child e.g.

- For pleasure
- Sensory comfort
- Shared time
- 'Serve and return' interaction
- Perceived benefits to the child
- Parents' own enjoyment of reading
- The appeal of technology
- To meet school expectations
- Increased awareness of the value of reading

## For pleasure

For many parents, reading with their younger child aged 0-5 is a pleasurable experience for both parties. It offers together time and complete focus on the task in hand. Senechal (2012) notes that during shared reading, parent and child can enjoy the language and content of stories as well as the accompanying illustrations, with additional benefits that may not have been intended.

In contrast to parents' functional attitude to their child's reading skills, school-age children appear to be motivated by the *pleasure* they derive from reading. When asked why their children read, 43% of parents in the Egmont study reflected that it was for pleasure (Egmont 2013).

## Sensory comfort

An ethnographic study of 8 families that had received Bookstart in 2010 revealed the range of experiences that books provide to an engaged family including 'singing, laughing, cuddling, story-telling, drawing as well as quiet concentration.' A key recommendation of the report was to promote book sharing as an experience rather than focusing solely on skill development.

'The range of experiences coming from the books, including drawing, storytelling, singing, cuddling and the wide affordances of the books in providing sensory and emotional comfort as well as a way of being, and a shift in the habitus of the homes, indicates that these objects, that is, 'books' with words and pictures, are worth investing in' (Kate Pahl, 2010).

### Shared time

An evaluation of Bookstart Baby in Tyneside revealed the important role that reading with their child plays in many parent-child relationships, promoting bonding and shared time. This in turn was perceived by respondents to support their baby's development. '[Sharing books]... was seen to be an important part of family life. Parents felt shared reading was part of a calming routine, allowed them to spend quality time with their child and promotes their child's attainment' (Hall, 2011).

Library staff interviewed for an evaluation of Bookstart conducted in 2003 noted 'benefits in terms of social interactions and learning opportunities for both parents and children' (Moore & Wade, 2003) within the context of their book sharing events.

The SROI Analysis of Booktrust conducted by Just Economics in 2010 identified four key outcomes from the scheme, of which two are associated with the value of shared time:

- 'An increase in the amount of quality time children and their parents spend together'
- 'The calming effect of reading time on children'

Within the context of the report these two outcomes are presented as having significant impact on the future wellbeing and attainment of young people, but they also present real value too to parents, who in turn are positively motivated to continue to read with their children.

### 'Serve and return' interaction

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. 'Sensitive and responsive parent-child relationships are associated with stronger cognitive skills in young children....which illustrate the connection between social / emotional development and intellectual growth' (NSC, 2007).

In this sense, children themselves provide motivation and opportunity for their parents to engage. As parents improve the quality of their interactions, so does the quality of the child's, rewarding the parent for his / her input.

### Perceived benefits to the child

Egmont's study of over 1,000 UK parents invited respondents to prioritise the three most important benefits of reading to children aged 2+ from a list of ten benefits. From a list provided to parents the top three benefits identified were:

1. Language development (64%)
2. Improving imagination (51%)
3. Giving them a head-start at school (37%)

It is revealing that these three exclude any social or emotional benefits. Egmont reports '...only 11% cited their social development, 10% their child's emotional development and just 8% thought increasing their self-esteem was one of the most important benefits of reading' (Egmont 2013).

Senechal identified four characteristics of shared reading that also foster learning in young people. These occur indirectly and often unintentionally as a result of a pleasurable activity, rather than by design.

1. Use of more complex language in many books than that typically used in conversation with the child (Hayes & Ahrens 1988)
2. More complex use of language by the mother than other mother-child conversations (Crain-Thoreson, Dhalin & Powell 2001)
3. Undivided attention of the adult to introduce and reinforce new knowledge
4. Repeated exposure to new knowledge and reinforcement of new vocabulary where books are repeatedly read.

Bookstart Wales cited the extensive social and emotional benefits of parental involvement in their children's literacy practices in its 2012 report 'including more resilience to stress, greater life satisfaction, greater self-direction and self-control, greater social adjustment, greater mental health, more supportive relationships, greater social competence, more positive peer relations, more tolerance, more successful marriages and less delinquent behaviours' (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

Even when aware of the value of reading with their child, some parents appear to need additional impetus to act. A survey of Canada's Early Childhood Literacy Programmes revealed considerable disparity between what parents there know, and what they do (Balla-Boudreau & O'Reilly, 2011). When implemented, early literacy strategies appear to support parents' ability to translate existing knowledge into action.

In O'Hare & Connolly's (2010) trial evaluation of Bookstart+ '48% of respondents claimed that although they were aware of the benefits of reading, receiving the pack led to them reading more frequently with their children.' O'Hare & Connolly's recommendations include placing greater emphasis on encouraging parents to read with their children alongside the distribution of packs.

Taking this further, the Canadian 2011 review of its Early Childhood Literacy Programmes identified the incremental value of developing connections between communities and libraries, reaching minority populations and hard to reach communities.

### Parents' own enjoyment of reading

'Children who know adults who read for pleasure take it for granted that reading is a valuable and worthwhile activity' (Czikszenmihalyi, 1991).

Though not a direct predictor of propensity to read with their child, a parent's own attitude to reading has been demonstrated through a number of studies to have an impact on his / her child's subsequent motivation to read. By sharing (directly or indirectly) their own pleasure in reading, parents foster an environment that views reading as a positive activity. 'The gift of reading can best be given by another reader who models what it is like to get pleasure from reading' (Sheldrick-Ross, McKechnie & Rothbauer, 2005).

Baker & Scher's 2002 research highlighted the value of looking beyond quantitative indicators of home literacy experiences. It argues that looking at the behaviours and impact of those parents who believe that reading is pleasurable and whose children have adopted their attitude, through either their words or the nature of the experiences they have provided, enables a deeper understanding of motivations to read and how they are developed.

A later study noted again that 'parents who believe that reading is a source of entertainment have children with more positive views about reading than do parents who emphasise the skills aspect of reading development' (Baker, Scher & Mackler, 2010).

### The appeal of technology

Though 'screentime' is posited in most literature as having a negative influence on children's reading frequency and on the extent to which parents read with their child, a small number of studies revealed that technology can be a motivating tool.

A Mumsnet survey conducted in October 2013 revealed more than one in ten of their respondents (self-selecting 'mumsnetters') use an iPad or Kindle to read from at bedtime, citing interactivity as their main appeal.

An opposing view is found in other literature. Lopez argues that though highly appealing to young people, electronic books can detract from the reading experience and can undermine early literacy skills. She cites a US study that explored parents' use of language when reading conventional and electronic books with their three year old child. When using an electronic book 41% of the parents' language concerned the child's manipulation of the book, whilst when reading a traditional book 92% of their speech related to the story itself (Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer 2009).

However Green & Beavis (2013) propose focusing on the question of literacy education in a digital age. They acknowledge the likely 'lag' between parents / schools and young people, who are (or will become) digital natives. They advocate exploring how literacy can best be supported in this digital age and helping parents



to explore the 'opportunities inherent in the many and varied forms of literacies including such practices as instant messaging, blogging, website maintenance, creating and sharing photos, shopping online, digital storytelling etc.'

Mackey & Shane (2013) also argue the need to expand our thinking of early literacy beyond babies and their board books. They identify the impact of the rate of change in domestic technologies on young children and advocate parents harnessing these opportunities to support their children's literacy. 'At an extremely young age, they learn the appeal of a complex rather than a singular text.'

### **To meet school expectations**

'Parents view themselves as responsible for supporting a love of reading, with schools responsible (in their eyes) for teaching the mechanics of learning to read' (Kids Connections, 2012). However in practice, engaged parents would like the skills to complement school delivery and to support their child.

The Department for Education 'Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement' reviewed studies of various parental interventions. It concludes that parental engagement with children's learning is 'effectively supported when parents receive clear, specific and targeted information from schools' (DfE, 2011).

However, by perceiving reading as a purely functional skill, some parents appear to absolve themselves of responsibility once their child has learnt to read. 'Because reading is largely seen as learning a skill, when children can read well enough independently, parents feel they can 'legitimately' forget about it – obviously an appealing thought when free time is so tight. The busier the family, the more likely it is that reading is viewed as a skill to be learnt' (Egmont 2013).

### **Improved awareness of the value of reading**

A DCSF study revealed that 'parents are more likely to be involved in their children's education when they believe that such involvement is a key part of what it means to be a responsible parent' (2007).

Low awareness of the value of reading with their children has an impact on parental behaviour. It limits the extent to which they might read aloud to their child and reduces their propensity to expose their child to a variety of books. However the inverse appears to be the case: the incremental benefit of value awareness on reading frequency is long-term.

One sample of 1,100 very low-income mothers participating in the U.S. parenting-skills scheme 'Early Head Start' sought to explore the impact of improved awareness of the value of shared reading on reading frequency. The results were revealing. Not only did early intervention influence parents' initial propensity to read and their reading frequency, but children's reactions over time then provided further motivation for their carers (Raikes & Luza 2006).

Research carried out by the S. Tyrol Bookstart initiative revealed how communicating the value of shared reading to parents of newborns and toddlers can positively impact behaviour. 63% of the sample (1,100 families) indicated that 'Bookstart had made parents aware that literacy begins after birth' whilst 43% 'have realised how important it is to talk to the child, read aloud, look at books and now do it more often.' The Bookstart project had positively influenced the behaviour of 43% of parents who on receipt of the pack had either begun to read with their child or now read more frequently (LeseForum, 2007).

Directly combatting this low level of awareness and understanding, the ORIM framework designed by researchers at Sheffield University seeks to give parents the knowledge and tools to take an active part in developing their child's literacy. The ORIM framework helps parents to provide four support pillars for their children: opportunities, recognition, interaction and modeled behaviour.

### **Barriers to reading**

Whilst the following section covers a wide range of barriers that limit the extent to which parents read with their children, some only become relevant as the child grows older. The child's increasing independence, widening social participation and personal inclination towards books all influence reading frequency, as does the adult's own perception of his / her changing role.

A parent may be less conscious of the barriers that limit the extent to which he / she reads than of the motivating factors that support reading behaviours:

- Parental literacy levels and confidence
- Lack of knowledge and tools
- Speaking English as an additional language
- Cultural beliefs
- Disengaged fathers
- The impact of routine
- Parental academic attainment
- Age of parent
- Perception of attainment as a reason for reading, not enjoyment

### **Parental literacy levels and confidence**

The impact of book sharing on literacy development is well documented, with Sonnenshein & Munsterman (2002) claiming that it is the 'dialogue and adult-child interaction that occurs around the book that is as important as the actual reading of the text. This dialogue typically focuses on story events, predictions about what is going to occur and how issues in the book relate to aspects of everyday activities.'

However this form of interaction with a child around a book does not come easily to all parents. Parents that lack strategies for reading even simple texts with their pre-

school child are deterred from doing so and lack the confidence to manage their child's natural interjections or to talk broadly about the story.

There is evidence for the value of targeted intervention work with less confident parents, helping them to develop an armoury of skills including use of picture books, asking their child to predict what is going to happen next and discussing images on the page. The Handbook of Early Literacy Research (Toomey, 1994) articulates that 'parents who have received training and are confident can help improve poor readers' interest in and enthusiasm for reading and their reading competence.'

Whilst many young people, including some confident readers, exhibit a reluctance to read aloud in the classroom (Kids Connections, 2012) there is a lack of research around the impact of low literacy confidence on a parent's inclination to employ questioning techniques when reading with their child. It is possible that there is a relationship.

The DfE acknowledges the particular challenges faced by parents presenting numerous barriers to engagement including language (EAL families), low levels of numeracy and literacy and a lack of confidence in supporting children's learning or engaging with a school (DfE, 2011). Indeed, the National Literacy Trust highlights that 'some parents are at risk of 'exclusion' from interventions because of their own reading difficulties or because of different language and cultural backgrounds' (Close, 2001).

There is an apparent lack of available data regarding the percentage of pre-school children whose parents have low literacy levels. However illiteracy across the UK is recorded within the DBIS Skills for Life study, noting that in 2011 15% of the 16-65 year old population recorded literacy levels of Entry Level 3 or below (where Entry Level 3 is equivalent to the national school curriculum standard for 9-10 year olds). Unfortunately this data is not further segmented by age except for the 16-18 year age bracket, and there is no significant difference between these two groups.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011 quantitative study 'Skills for Life' noted the impact of parent literacy on a child's prospective attainment.

'...not having parents who stayed on in education was associated with 'weak' literacy and 'weak' numeracy. When examining the data in detail, respondents with at least one parent who stayed on in education beyond the age of 16 were more likely to be classified at Level 1 or above in literacy than respondents whose parents did not remain in education beyond that age (90 per cent versus 84 per cent)' (DBIS, 2011).

Similarly in its 2009 report, NRDC noted '64% of parents reported that since taking a family literacy course they had become more involved in their child's pre-school or school.'

The National Literacy Trust's review of research into parental involvement and literacy achievement also highlights the need to manage any interventions

sensitively, avoiding ‘the dangers of counter-productive pressure.’ The report summarises the need for the ‘inclusion and self-empowerment’ of parents and carers, where professional intervention cannot be perceived to be a negative intrusion on family life (Close, 2001).

Specifically this relates to the need for parental approaches and involvement to be carefully and sensitively initiated, with regard for the exigencies of family life, the realities of poverty and low income levels and the differing abilities of parents to become involved. They should be parent-led and should evolve together with the child.

Furthermore, in *Desirable Literacies*, Carol Taylor argues in favour of family-centric literacy practice, beginning from the premise that there are many approaches to literacy and that the literacy that goes on in homes need not necessarily reflect what happens in schools (Taylor, 1999). She purports that prescriptive, one-size fits all approaches undermine families and don’t sufficiently empower parents.

Note that whilst numerous texts cite the value of parental intervention and support, there is a lack of longitudinal data exploring its long-term value.

### **Lack of knowledge and tools**

There appears to be a lack of know-how amongst parents with children of all ages in terms of the strategies they might employ to support their child’s early literacy skills. Even amongst those that are aware of the indirect benefits of reading with their child, there is a lack of knowledge about how to maximise this interaction. The NLT’s Reading for Pleasure research overview (Clark & Rumbold, 2006) calls for ‘some information for parents to help translate knowledge into actual behaviour.’

### **With pre-school children**

A 2005 study of Bookstart recipients and non-recipients identified the impact of discussion as a routine element of a parent-child book sharing routine. The highest performing children in the cohort studied, all came from families where this was commonplace (Collins, Svensson & Mahony 2005). However quality discussion does not appear to be commonplace, even in engaged families.

### **With early readers**

OUP’s Reading for Pleasure study (of parents with children aged 5+) identified contradiction between parents’ stated beliefs and their actions. On reflection, many engaged parents exhibit a high degree of sentiment about reading and express a desire for their child to develop a love of books. However, they appear to lack the knowledge and tools to support this.

Many (engaged) ‘parents place considerable emphasis on the social and emotional benefits of reading, including awareness of the wider world, exposure to complex emotional situations, increased vocabulary, the ability to focus, opportunities to

escape from reality and to further a passion in a subject area' (Kids Connections, 2012).

However the most popular strategies employed by parents of older children appear limited to providing reading material and 'opportunities for children to read independently at bedtime', neither of which fully achieve the above ambitions.

Parents are unlikely to talk to their child about the stories he / she is reading. There is little awareness amongst most parents that an important aspect of progression in reading is comprehension. 'Parents lack the tools to proactively and sensitively support their children but would welcome them' (Kids Connections 2012).

### EAL families

Some parents appear to need more support than others in understanding the value of reading on their children's literacy development and attainment.

It appears that some families that speak a language other than English at home may be less influenced by family education initiatives and interventions.

Bookstart's report 'Planting a Seed for Life' (Collins, Svensson & Mahony, 2005) noted that 'the value of reading (including in their mother tongue) was rarely understood by parents who spoke EAL, despite the translation of Bookstart.' Though the author observed some notable behaviours and attitudes amongst the sample studied, these do not in themselves explicitly address why the value of reading might not always be understood and further research into perceptions of reading amongst EAL families is warranted.

Barriers observed for this group within Collins' study reflect some of those observed more generally e.g. confidence, lack of strategies and techniques, and poor literacy:

- Lack of confidence translating books from their mother tongue into English and vice versa
- Uncertainty around how to support a child's early reading attempts due to personal lack of confidence
- The parent's own early literacy experiences being quite different to the culture of books observed in the UK, impacting on confidence

One group of studies (Chall & Snow 1982, Heath 1983) examines literacy practices across a wide range of demographics, observing that those children whose family literacy practices best resemble those implemented in the education setting perform best.

However research often fails to address the high levels of parental support and creation of a learning environment present in so many EAL families. The Institute of Education conducted a review of research into EAL teaching and observed the need for cultural sensitivity and awareness, and taking care to ensure parental

understanding of teaching practice in order to maximise their potential value (Andrews, 2010).

The DfE's 'Review of Best Practice In Parental Engagement' acknowledges that language can be a barrier to engagement in initiatives both in and out of school which needs to be proactively managed (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011). In turn, the NLT stresses the value of recognizing parents' linguistic backgrounds and the need for a tailored approach that helps engage distinct audiences.

### **Cultural beliefs**

Romany Gypsy and Traveller communities hold beliefs that can make these parents resistant to education, community or informal literacy programmes. They place less value on formal education than the settled population; anticipating discrimination in the labour market they value forms of self-employment more highly than formal education and employment. Education presents the opportunity to learn to read and write but is associated with inevitable 'cultural pollution,' and the weakening of identity and values (Bowers, 2005).

### **Disengaged dads**

Much of the literature highlights the greater involvement that mothers have in reading with their child than that of fathers. This is often a product of the balance of caring or the conflicting demands of the working day and a young child's routine.

Indeed, in OUP's Reading for Pleasure study (Kids Connections, 2012), some parents of younger children highlighted the desire to counteract this, with the 'bedtime story' as a regular ritual for the father, and viewed as a pleasurable and bonding activity compensating for absence during the day. Some of the parents involved in this study also reflected on the proactive role that the father takes in the household in reading longer, chapter books with their older children. This is viewed as an extension of the bedtime story ritual (Kids Connections, 2012).

NLT's 2012 study 'The Importance of Family Support for Young People's Reading' seeks to quantify the extent to which dads are reading with their children. Their findings are not positive. They identify that 'one in three fathers gives no reading encouragement to their children at all' and that 'one third of dads are never seen with a book, newspaper or magazine.' A survey of 21,000 young people aged 8 to 16 involved in this study revealed that only 25% of young people say that their father encourages them to read a lot (a decrease from 29% in 2005). This is in contrast to 34% of mothers encouraging their children to read 'a lot.'

Furthermore, 34% of fathers never encourage their children to read, compared to 17% of mothers.

However Booktrust's evaluation of the Bookstart Treasure programme in 2013 presents a more heartening picture, with potential evidence that programmes like Bookstart can encourage fathers to read more often with their children. It concludes

that 'an increase in the frequency of fathers reading with their 3-4 year old child was found to be more likely' amongst families that received the Treasure pack (Sheffield Hallam, 2013).

Gadsden (2012) gives considerable attention to the role (or lack) that fathers have in their children's emerging literacy, in her report 'Father Involvement and Family Literacy' (Handbook of Family Literacy). She argues for the need for alternative ways to engage fathers and to sustain their engagement, including embedding literacy within dedicated programmes targeting fathers directly, and which are tailored to their specific needs and expectations.

Mullan's time-diary analysis of families' reading habits in New South Wales (Western Australia) suggested that whilst seeing their mothers read is associated with an increased incidence of girls reading, seeing their fathers reading has a similar effect on boys (Mullan 2010).

More research could perhaps be conducted to explore the role of dads in the development of emerging readers and any unique attributes that fathers present. In particular, it could be useful to explore the changing role of dads at home as children grow older and interact more with both parents.

### **The impact of routine**

Many parents' good intentions are undermined by existing habits and lifestyle commitments. OUP (Kids Connections, 2012) noted that even amongst parents where there is commitment to reading with their older child, this is sometimes missed due to other household commitments or the demands of a younger sibling. Reading behaviours appear to become most securely established when they are a formal part of the parent's day (e.g. bedtime routine). For this reason it can be difficult to change parents' existing routines and actions.

A small-scale evaluation of the Sheffield Bookstart project noted that although as a result of the programme '20% of children who met the target criteria were registered with the library service, more than half had used the service only marginally and very few had used it substantially' (Hines & Brooks, 2005). There was a sense that entrenched behaviours and routine are hard to alter.

### **Parental academic attainment**

There is some evidence that a parent's academic attainment is a predictor of the extent to which he / she reads with their child. An observational cohort study of mothers of newborn babies in Canada revealed that regardless of exposure to the Read to Me! literacy programme, parents who finished post secondary education compared to those with high school or lower education were more likely to read with their babies (Zanten, Coates, Herves-Malo & McGrath, 2011).

The Reading is Fundamental report 'Raising Readers' reinforces this point. 'The single most significant predictor of children's literacy is their mother's literacy level.

The more education a mother has, the more likely she is to read to her child' (RIF,2008).

### **Age of parent**

The age of parent too, appears to be a significant predictor as well in reading and talking activities, with younger parents more likely to read or talk to their babies than older parents (Zanten, Coates, Herves-Malo & McGrath, 2011).

The reasons for this were not explored in this study and more research is recommended.

Random House's segmentation of the children's book reading market identified the notable impact of age on how comfortable a parent is with reading with their child age 2+. Whilst 83% of 24-34 year old parents were in high agreement with the statement 'I feel comfortable reading with / to my child', only 66% of parents aged 45-54 years were in high agreement with this statement. (Note that the audience comprised motivated readers).

When asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement 'I could do with reading to my children in a more engaging way e.g. using funny voices, making sounds etc', younger parents (all engaged readers) demonstrated higher expectation and desire to improve, with 44% of those aged 17-24 in high agreement and only 16% of those aged 45-54 years. This could be interpreted either as younger parents having lower confidence levels or as older parents being more 'set in their ways' and less inclined to seek out new techniques.

### **Perception of reading for attainment, not purely for enjoyment**

Egmont's 2013 'Reading Street' study revealed that for many parents reading with their child is simply associated with academic attainment: a necessary parental role but not one that they equate with enjoyment.

'Children's time is filled with activity driven by the priority to keep up academically, to keep up with homework and to keep up with peers in every way. Life is packed out. In this context, parents are equating reading first and foremost with learning, with 49% of parents thinking children's reading is essential for doing well in education' (Egmont, 2013).

The same study revealed that only 7% of parents see reading with children as fun for adults and only 5% see it as the highlight of their day. The self-inflicted pressures of family life and the demands of many schools' approach to measuring and testing reading appear to have turned reading into work, not fun, for parents and children.

Many studies voice desire for recognition that parental involvement in their children's reading habits should not desist as they start formal education.



## Barriers to reading more frequently

### Impact of the working day

Parents' working routines have a direct impact on the extent to which they read with their child.

A 2010 study of family reading activities (The Fatherhood Institute & ICM Research) reveals that mothers are more likely than fathers to read with their baby, but that this 'becomes non significant when working hours are taken into account.' For the same reason (more opportunities and more time) those who are not in employment are more likely to share books with their baby than those who are in employment.

Household income does not appear to be a significant factor in terms of the reading behaviours exhibited i.e. frequency, patterns and nature of shared reading practice.

### Age of child

In one study age of baby appears to be a significant factor for reading, talking and watching TV activities, with these activities increasing as the baby becomes older.

A study of participants in the Read to Me! programme in Nova Scotia observed the incidence of reading with their child between the ages of 4 months and 2 years, compared to a control group that had not participated in the programme.

The Read to Me! programme observed a significantly higher propensity to read with their child and a lower propensity to watch TV after participating in the programme. However it also observed that the age of baby was a significant factor, with the incidence of reading, talking and watching TV activities increasing as the child increased in age.

'Age of the baby was a significant predictor in all of the activities, showing that for each monthly increase in the age of the baby, the likelihood of parents engaging in each activity increased by roughly 8-40% ( $p < 0.001$ ) after adjustment (Van Zanten, Coates, Hervas-Malo & McGrath, 2012).

Interestingly, age of child has a changeable impact on parental propensity to read. Parents read less often when their baby is apparently too 'young'. They increase reading frequency as the child becomes better able to interact, continuing to the period when he has learned to read. After this they then generally read less often with their child once again.

### Impact of younger siblings

There is little discussion amongst the literature reviewed of the impact of siblings on the extent to which parents read with their individual children. However where it is explored the presence of siblings appears to undermine the extent to which a parent reads for pleasure with their child. Reading becomes more functional, limited to

necessary support for school, and attention at bedtime is diverted to younger children.

Interviews with parents conducted as part of OUP's Reading for Pleasure study revealed that the presence of younger siblings and the demands of bedtime routine both conspire to result in older children having to read independently, and at an earlier age, than either party would like (Kids Connections, 2012).

A study of the Read to Me! programme in Nova Scotia identified the number of siblings in the home as an important likely variable influencing the mother's engagement in literacy activities, recommending that this should be explored further.

### **Reluctant readers (children)**

None of the studies reviewed directly explore the impact of reluctant readers on their parents' motivation to read with them for pleasure.

Whilst some studies acknowledge the difficulties that parents face in limiting other forms of entertainment (TV and the internet, for example), others (including the National Literacy Trust's Reading for Pleasure Research Overview) have sought to identify strategies employed by schools in tackling specific cohorts of reluctant readers (e.g. boys). But none reviewed appear to explore if and how parents' efforts to read with their child are undermined by the child's reluctance. This could be an interesting area to explore further.

### **Limited free time & multiple distractions**

Both adults and children report that they would like more time to read together (or to read alone, in the case of older children) (OUP, 2012).

Parents' limited free time impacts on their priorities and choices and is cited by parents in many studies as an overarching reason for their failure to read more with their child. In the context of child-oriented external factors (homework, after-school clubs) and adult-oriented external factors (work or other commitments), many parents feel unable to carve out time to read for pleasure with their child.

Alongside this, parents are increasingly permissive, 47% citing guilt at the lack of time spent with their children, 44% believing it's harder to say no when their children's friends do what they want and 41% identifying that it's simply less stressful to avoid confrontation (Egmont, 2013).

'Raising Readers' (Reading is Fundamental, 2008) reports that American 'children of all ages watch as much TV in one day as they read for fun in an entire week. Overall, children under age 13 spend 90 minutes a day in front of the TV – one quarter of their free time.'

Where screen time might previously have been reading time, young people are increasingly accessing digital entertainment, and from a very young age.

Scholastic's Kids & Family Reading Report identified that 33% of parents think their children spend too much time playing video games or visiting social network sites. 49% of those parents interviewed feel that their children do not spend enough time reading books for fun.

The report does not explore how receptive parents are to guidance on tackling young people's inclination towards screen-based entertainment. However there are some references within the report to parents that hope to take advantage of e-readers, and to capitalize on their children's interest in screens in this way. It notes that 72% of its respondent parents are at least somewhat interested in having their child read e-books.

Scholastic's report revealed that for those children aged 6-17 there may be merit in schools setting reading expectations that can then be supported within the home environment. 'Building reading into kids' schedules and regularly bringing additional books into the home for children positively impacts kids' reading frequency' (Scholastic, 2012).

OUP's Reading for Pleasure report reached the same conclusion, acknowledging that even amongst children that would like more time to read 'it is unlikely that [they] will carve out this time for themselves within their free time: screens and outdoor activity exert more influence than books in their current format.'

## **Other influential factors**

### **Parents as role models**

The presence of reading material in the home has been found to exert a positive influence on children's propensity to read for pleasure. This includes both children's and adult's titles, which together create a 'reading culture' in the home.

Scholastic's 'Kids & Family Reading Report' found that 'having reading role-model parents or a large book collection at home has a greater impact on kids' reading frequency than does household income' (Scholastic, 2012).

A time-diary analysis of reading carried out in NSW households (Western Australia) revealed a strong association between parents' and young people's reading concentrated in households where parents are observed to read for more than 30 minutes per day (Mullan, 2010).

However the extent to which keen adult readers successfully role model to their children should perhaps not be overstated. As part of its 2012 Reading for Pleasure research OUP invited engaged, literate parents to reflect on the extent to which they model reading to their young children. The extent and nature of reading was impacted by time of day and day of week, with many children's exposure being

limited to parents' functional reading needs or media. Many respondents amongst those interviewed read for personal pleasure but do so in the evenings, when their children are less likely to observe them (Kids Connections, 2012).

Furthermore, the incidence of reading on an electronic device (phone, tablet or other device) is increasing amongst parents, with some adults that participated in the OUP Reading for Pleasure research aware that these undermine a child's ability to identify what was being read and be engaged in this, e.g. a newspaper, novel or even work-based text. For some parents this was a source of regret, with their children keen to access any screen-based content but not able to differentiate between (for example) media, a novel or other title (Kids Connections, 2012).

### **Incidence of books in the home**

Baumann & Duffy (1997) highlighted the value of a 'print-rich environment, where [children] are read to and given opportunities to read, where they see their caregivers read, have opportunities to engage in pretend play, are encouraged to interact with environmental print and visit the public library' in helping children to become readers.

Kraschen (2004) echoes this sentiment but goes on to argue the necessary presence of comfort and quiet in order for access to books to translate into reading opportunities. OUP's Reading for Pleasure study (Kids Connections, 2012) reinforces this, with young people and parents both reporting increased propensity for 'older (literate) children to read at bedtime, when free of other distractions including other entertainment, commitments and the presence of siblings.'

Access to books gives children of all ages the power to choose what they want to read which in turn makes reading more fun. The presence of books in the home (whether sourced through the library or elsewhere) empowers young people and makes them more likely to finish titles they select: the Scholastic 'Kids & Family Reading Report' found that 'nine out of ten kids are more likely to finish a book they choose themselves' (Scholastic, 2012).

Booktrust research exploring the value of Bookstart Baby in Birmingham revealed the impact of bringing books into the home together with additional educational material. There was a significant increase (at the 0.01% level) in library membership amongst those reached. 'Bookstart is more than a one-off stimulus. It has the potential to generate a continuing positive effect' (Wade & Moore, 1993).

Booktrust research exploring the value of Bookstart Baby in Birmingham revealed the particular value of bringing books into the homes of those 'who lacked the opportunity to visit the library or the money to buy books' (Wade & Moore, 1993).

However subsequent Bookstart research conducted in 2005 identified that some parents with lower levels of literacy (and confidence in this) required additional

support to exploit the presence of books in the home or to adopt the philosophy of reading regularly with their child (Collins, Svensson & Mahony, 2005).

Kate Pahl's ethnographic study of book sharing in the home (2010) revealed that ownership of Bookstart books is highly valued by some parents, who feel less concerned about damaging the books than those borrowed from the library. In turn this renders them more confident in letting their younger children hold, read and play with them.

### Presence of books as a motivator for parents

There is evidence to suggest that one short-term motivator for parents is simply the presence of books in the home. A study of Bookstart Baby parent recipients revealed the causal impact of the books in the home setting. 'While most [parents and carers] were aware of the value of reading books to babies before receiving the pack...significant numbers felt that Bookstart had converted awareness and good intentions into action and good practice' (University of Surrey, 2001).

Bookstart's National Impact Evaluation (Hines & Brooks, 2009) drew similar conclusions, identifying that amongst less active reading families that participated in the study and who had relatively few books in the home, 'Bookstart seems to have reminded them of its importance and provided them with the resources to act on this knowledge.'

## Conclusion

**Numerous studies have explored motivations to reading with children using a variety of methodology. However none of these show which motivational factors play the biggest part in influencing behaviour or, in turn, have the greatest impact on outcomes.**

### Parents are motivated by perceived benefits to the child at each age and stage

Hoover, Dempsey et al (2005) identified the positive impact of communicating the valuable role parents can play and a subsequent DCSF study (2007) which observed that parents are most likely to be involved with their child's development when they understand the tangible benefits of their input as well as the emotional impact.

### Personal enjoyment is also a key motivator

Parental motivations for shared reading are subjective and often environmental. Sheldrick-Ross, McKechnie & Rothbauer (2005) observed the 'serve and return' nature of shared reading practice whilst Baker, Scher & Mackler, (2010) also

observed that parents with positive views about reading have a positive impact on their children's attitudes.

The demands of everyday life can present real barriers to shared reading. The extent of a parent's personal enjoyment help to overcome these.

### **Parents as first teachers**

Reading is reciprocal; parents' motivation to read is often augmented by their children's interest and enthusiasm, with the implication that they have helped to achieve this. The positive impact of early education around the value of shared reading in low-income households in the US was demonstrated by Raikes & Luza (2006), with participating parents experiencing the 'serve and return' interactions noted elsewhere.

Green and Beavis (2007) argue that parents should explore the potential for digital technologies to support literacy in the home. Though digital usage is limited when reading with children aged 0-5, it is argued that parents need to be equipped in order to use these tools effectively.

### **Knowledge gaps are common to many homes**

The review noted a number of knowledge gaps amongst parents, specifically the role that EAL parents play in supporting their children's early literacy, the impact of older siblings on a younger child's early reading experiences, the impact of reluctant readers on parental interest and parental perception and use of picture books.

### **Consider dedicated initiatives for disengaged audiences**

The impact of disengaged fathers (NLT 2012) and parents with low levels of literacy (DBIS 2011) on their children's engagement with books and reading were both explored. Previous research suggests that these audiences would be responsive to dedicated initiatives, however it is worth noting that this Booktrust research observed parents with low literacy responding well to their children's uncritical reaction to stories and shared reading. In *Desirable Literacies* Carol Taylor (1999) observes that any interventions should empower parents. More research might be warranted into this area.

# Part Two: Qualitative Research into Parental Motivations and Barriers to Reading with Their 0-5s

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## Methodology

Eight focus groups were conducted over a three-week period: 10th – 28th February 2014. Recruitment was via a network of mothers nationwide who in turn recruited from their own wider network. These mothers all have at least one school age and one younger child, widening their reach.

All but one of the groups were held in the evenings in a domestic setting, permitting attendance by both working and non-working parents. The eighth group was conducted in a children's centre in a deprived ward in West London permitting mothers of 3-6 month old babies to attend that might otherwise not have been able to.

Each group comprised six to eight parents, including a minimum of two fathers. Additional recruitment criteria included:

- Mixture of first-time parents and parents with more than one child
- Working and non-working mothers
- Variety of demographic and educational backgrounds represented
- Strong English speakers though EAL families represented
- All parents literate but need not personally read for pleasure
- Minimise friendship sets within the group

Furthermore parents in each group all had a child that fell into a specific age category. Two groups were conducted for each age-bracket represented:

- 3-6 months
- 6-12 months
- 12-24 months
- 36-48 months

In this way both Bookstart Baby and Bookstart Treasure packs were represented. Samples of each were taken to each session to support recall / demonstrate contents to any parents unfamiliar with the bags. Parents were invited to complete a reading diary in the week prior to attending their group, reviewing how, when and where their child accessed books, with whom and which titles.

The discussion guide is included within the appendix to this report.

## Qualitative Findings

### Part One: The role of books

#### 1. The reading environment

##### 1.1. Limited parental modeling

Parents interviewed in this study demonstrated a range of interests in reading for their own pleasure, though a majority read infrequently or not at all and only a small number on a regular basis.

Some of the parental reading patterns observed were consistent with those observed within the literature review, e.g. higher academic achievement supporting greater propensity to read for pleasure and females being more inclined to read for pleasure as adults. However it was also the case that within every socio-economic group represented both infrequent and frequent readers were seen; background or gender are by no means the only influences on adult reading patterns.

All respondents had young babies or pre-school children. Reading books for personal adult pleasure appears to diminish drastically after the onset of parenthood; rather than remaining one of a number of entertainment options it appears to become a choice only in the absence of a more passive option. When looking for relaxation parents seek less demanding forms of entertainment (facebook, phone, online newspaper or television), citing low energy levels, poor attention span and the need for immediate gratification as key reasons.

'The iPhone is by my bed. Just a smartphone, as books are just bulky to move around. I reckon my phone has stopped me reading as much, it's always there.'  
(Mother of 4 year old)

Previously keen readers expressed regret over their current limited repertoire, with many citing the low number of books read in the past twelve months and the missed opportunities to read on holiday. However none planned to change their behaviour and many saw it as an inevitable aspect of parenthood.

Those that read less frequently prior to having children had been less impacted by their arrival; for them, reading had always been something incidental rather than a regular activity and was not missed.



Media consumption remains relatively popular amongst those that previously consumed the news on a regular basis, particularly those titles accessible online. However even avid news consumers reflected on the limited opportunity to read more than one article at a time and the snatched nature of this when around children.

Where parents do consume media online, these 'snatched' moments are often in front of their children, in direct contrast with how they read books. Some parents spontaneously reflected on the likely interest in technology this engenders amongst their children as opposed to the content material being read. However the lack of exposure their children have to their parents reading either conventional newspapers or books was not raised, even on being prompted.

Amongst parents interviewed there was consistency when discussing their children's reactions to seeing them focus on reading material, whether on a tablet, phone, a magazine or a book. There was reference to their children coming to point at pictures in magazines and trying to turn the pages. Similarly of other children attempting to take a tablet or phone from their parent and play with it. It was not clear whether children were seeking to interact with the item in front of their parent or simply to gain their parent's attention.

These findings echo those of the Literature Review, with parents in the OUP study (2012) regretting the inability of their children to differentiate between screen-based content, whether a novel, news or email.

Two parents interviewed noted that they had never read to or shared a book with their child. Their reasons for not doing so differed:

- One parent with a four month old reads frequently for her own pleasure but is cynical about the value of early literacy efforts. This was her third child and she had previously been conscientious about reading with her older two children.
- The second parent has one child, aged 12-months. She herself has very low literacy levels and no reading material in the home but places emphasis on talking and singing. The child accesses books in her childcare setting and occasionally handles them as part of her play at home. However she never looks inside or shares them with her parent.

'I've always shown her pictures in my phone, we live so far from family. Videos of myself, lots of sharing with family, who she belongs to and so on.'  
(Mother of 12 month old)

## 1.2. Books in the home

All of the parents interviewed acknowledged the presence of at least some adult books in the common areas of their homes. However children's books are often

stored in their bedrooms rather than the common areas, with some parents of younger children additionally placing books out of reach.

'There's not really any books available to them, they're up on a shelf. It's to settle them down, they can't roll around, they need to be calm.'

(Mother of 3.5 year old)

The number of families restricting books to the bedroom environment was notable in light of Baumann & Duffy's report in 1997, in which they highlighted the value of a 'print rich environment.' Scholastic's 'Kids & Family Reading Report' highlighted the empowering nature of books around the home and children's greater propensity to complete a book they have selected themselves.

Approximately one third of parents interviewed store their children's books with their toys; doing so appears to be a strong indicator of the parent's perception of the positive role of books throughout the day, i.e. not just associated with early literacy or bedtime routine. Small numbers of parents spoke of 'boxes of books' in the kitchen or other play areas in the home. These children (of all ages above 9 months) appeared most likely to look at books independently as part of their play and / or to select books for their parent to share with them.

'We've got a big box of books, there's one that has a button that she loves to press. My oldest one brings his books home and reads with her and shows her. He makes rhymes up with her name.'

(Mother of a 4 month old)

Parents with more than one child reflected on the different environment into which their second or third children arrived. Not only are these young babies more likely to be exposed to books being read to and by their older siblings, there are simply more books in the home. Whilst first-born children are born into an environment often free of any children's books, a younger sibling may have access to a wide range of (broadly) age relevant titles.

### 1.3. Perceived value of reading

Despite some personal apathy towards reading for personal pleasure or a sense that decreased reading was an inevitable outcome of having young children all adults expressed nostalgia and sentiment around their childhood reading experiences.

Whether recalling being read to as a younger child or the enjoyment of complete immersion in a book as an older child, all respondents voiced warmth towards their old selves as 'readers.' Sentiment was largely connected to recalled titles and the enjoyment of being read to but most of all to the memory of complete immersion in the worlds inside a book, something felt lacking as an adult.

Some respondents that read less frequently as adults reflected on the cause and timing of this demise. Greater independence and widening interests as teenagers

were perceived to be the most common cause of this. However increasing demands of school and the changing role of books (i.e. for academic purposes and from pleasurable to functional use) had also negatively influenced how books were perceived by some young adults.

## 2. Attitudes towards shared time with a child

### 2.1. The demands of quality time

All parents interviewed expressed enjoyment spending time with and around their children. Both those surveyed and interviewed within this study were able to identify multiple instances of shared quality time. Parents spoke readily of those activities that they love to share with their child and those that they would like to do more of, whether restricted by the child's age, family routine, presence of siblings or other factors. In families with more than one child parents were readily able to identify preferred ways of spending time with each sibling, with these often being deliberate attempts to interact one on one.

However the extent of a parent's engagement with their child at any one time can also be strongly influenced by various factors. When asked, parents with children of all ages distinguish 'occupying their child' from spending 'quality time' with their child, and can readily cite instances of both within their repertoire. Other priorities, distractions and the child and parent's respective interest levels all have a bearing on their actions at any one time.

Those activities that require a parent's focused attention and physical presence, such as sharing books and drawing together, demand the greatest engagement from parents, and feature regularly amongst those that parents would like to do more frequently. Reading, sharing books and concentrated play such as drawing or building blocks all require the parent to sit down with the child and to devote their attention. In short, they require 'conscious' parenting and are considered as examples of 'quality time.'

'I think my son really is entertained by the books. He enjoys them but I've found that you have to read them five times over and when you're trying to do something serious you say 'not now'.'

(Mother of 3.5 year old)

These activities are also considered reciprocal in their nature by parents: they are most rewarding when they elicit a reaction from the child or better still, when the child initiates an aspect of play.

'He really likes balls so we have a tub with his toys. He goes over and gets something and rolls the ball to you. He crawls and he's got a walker. I do initiate a lot of it. I make it exciting for him. He investigates things very differently. He wants new

things all the time to investigate. He loves putting things inside things and putting the lid on.'

(Mother of 11 month old)

In contrast, singing can be done on the move around the house, clapping games can be played while changing a baby and a child can be sat in front of a television or tablet with minimal additional engagement. Parents satisfy themselves that their child is being stimulated and enjoying a variety of activities without always having to be fully immersed in the process. In turn little response is required from the participating child. Parents are largely comfortable with a degree of reliance on these forms of entertainment though some voice a sense of deficit in their 'active' parenting.

## 2.2. The impact of age and family make-up

The nature of time spent together unsurprisingly alters according to a child's age and his / her place in the family e.g.

- A child's cognitive and physical abilities limit the extent of its interaction during the first six months, demanding significant parental input into playtime. Discussion with parents implied that such 'active play' can be less rewarding for parents and hence less motivating
- Second or third children generally experience less one on one time with their parents as babies than their older siblings may have done, however are likely to benefit by multiple family interactions and immersive play.

Amongst all those interviewed age of child and place in the family appear to have the greatest influence on parents' motivation to read with their children. Both are expanded upon in the 'motivations' and 'barriers' sections below.

## 2.3. Evolving parental roles

From birth, mothers are most commonly the primary carers, spending the greatest numbers of hours with their children each day. Those respondents that had returned to work still assume greatest responsibility for the child's routine and social interactions.

The primary carer appears to enjoy the broadest range of shared experiences with their child, each activity having a clear role. Mothers of young children spoke of the need for a range of activities to 'break up the day', to 'combat their (adult) boredom', to entertain the child and to keep the child distracted. An armoury of options is drawn upon, with many having clear roles including to distract, to burn up energy, to calm down, to play and learn and to pass the time. For some parents of young children the day is clearly divided, with a child's routine dictating opportunities to leave the house, meet friends or to interact one on one. The needs

of older children often transcend those of young babies, whose shared time with the parent may be dominated by the school run or by homework.

Fathers' choice of activities with their young children is therefore strongly influenced by the time(s) of day they are at home. Very often it is at bedtime, with the focus being on practical bedtime and calming activities. Many fathers spoke of their involvement in bedtime stories, though others acknowledged that their presence can be disruptive, as their personal inclination is for more energetic play. The majority of fathers interviewed spoke of a desire to spend more time outside with their children; they enjoy the intimacy of bedtime routine but seize opportunities to visit playgrounds and parks at weekends. For many, encouraging and promoting active play was viewed as an important aspect of fatherhood.

As the child grows, parent responsibility for creating and shaping entertainment lessens. The primary carer no longer has to manage the child to such an extent, whilst working parents can anticipate greater stamina at the end of the day. Children can occupy themselves for longer in each activity; they become more self-sufficient and also more inclined to decide for themselves how they want to play. The impact of the above was evident in conversation with both mothers and fathers of 3-4 year olds. Not only were their children able to engage with them for longer periods of time, and to interact more, there were opportunities for both creative / active play and relaxation towards the end of the day.

However, many parents also reported the impact of their (older) children's restlessness and poor concentration on shared time together. Children with limited exposure to books at a younger age or whose parents lack the skills to engage them appear particularly resistant to quieter forms of entertainment. None of the research examined within the Literature Review explicitly explored the impact of early exposure to books on a child's ability to concentrate and engage; however the concept of 'serve and return' interaction acknowledges how babies' responsiveness grows in accordance with sensitive and responsive parent-child relationships.

#### 2.4. Nostalgia

Some urban parents lamented the freedom they enjoyed as a child, and placed importance on space for their own children.

A minority of respondents regretted new technologies and the impact this has on imaginative play.

However of all the shared activities spoken of by respondents, sharing books with their child was, for some, uniquely prompted by nostalgia - a desire to recreate aspects of their own childhood. This was most commonly seen amongst parents with children aged 3+, where stories become more complex and engaging.

Most commonly expressed by adults that have been keen readers as adults, respondents spontaneously and warmly referenced the escapism and imagination arising from books as 'skills' they wanted to give to their child. They derived personal enjoyment from shared time in this way, as well as a sense that they were gifting to their children.

'Things go into their mind in a different way than when you play.'

(Mother of 5 month old discussing the unique opportunities that books present her to introduce concepts and 'the world' to her young child)

## 2.5. Differing parental priorities

Many factors influence the diverse interactions parents have with their young children. As well as the need to entertain, distract or calm a child, parents are motivated by their personal interests and priorities.

As well as nostalgia, a number of other attitudes were observed that influenced how a parent chose to engage in active play:

### *Preference for play-style*

Their personal interest in imaginative play, role-play, physical play or other activity type heavily influences the extent to which a parent will engage in these activities. Parents spoke of deliberately avoiding certain forms of play as being too dull, repetitive or unsuited to their interests. Equally some respondents report great enjoyment from initiating craft / messy play, whilst others place value on ordered construction or role-play. Only a small minority of parents fully take their child's lead in play and even so it appears likely that the child is responding to perceived adult enjoyment.

'You've got three or four hours where some days I just read to him as it's something I enjoy doing and it's something to do. Its better than role play!'

(Mother of 15 month old discussing how she spends free time with her child, allowing him to play independently and then using books as the primary means of interacting)

Whilst parents' interest in reading with their child varies as much as for the above activities it is notable that its perceived value to their children largely surmounts this, even amongst those parents for whom it is a chore. Regardless of their personal interest in reading, the majority of parents spoken to share books with their child to some degree.

In turn, the responses of their children also motivate a reluctant parent. It is noticeable that shared reading with very young babies and with resistant older pre-school children is less successful where a parent is less motivated to read or is less confident, due to the child's lack of interaction or disinterest. Messaging around

reading 'little and often' and knowing when to stop reading to a child may be useful for many parents unsure of what constitutes 'good' reading behaviour.

'I felt quite confident. When you are alone with your baby you feel okay. But when they lose their concentration and get bored it stops you wanting to read.'

(Mother of 13 month old)

#### *Emphasis on community*

For many primary carers, opportunities in their wider community have at some point influenced how and where they spend their time. This is particularly true of first-time parents and of parents with babies aged 6 months to one year. Most mothers involved in this study had accessed at least one community resource (library, drop-in, weigh clinic or equivalent) with their first child, the first visit usually with their child aged between three and twelve months. No one setting appears dominant; choice is influenced by appeal, age relevance and the extent to which activity suits the child's routine. The likelihood of a parent attending a setting does not appear to be dictated by location, though mothers in urban settings reported greater choice as well as greater ease of access.

Parents with more than one child declared time restraints and household chores as barriers to participation in community initiatives with their youngest children. However decreased need for support, network and entertainment also appears influential. Second children are born into a ready-made parenting network; their mothers often feel more confident, have less reliance on external ideas and resources and are less 'eager and worried generally, about the business of getting it right' (Parent of 14 month and 3 year old).

### **3. Motivations for reading with a child**

'To begin with it's about vocab then it's about imagination. I'm a really terrible, slow reader. If you can read really well then it's all about power.'

(Mother of 2-year old explaining why reading is a skill for life, helping young people to access knowledge, contribute to discussion and open up new worlds.)

Parental motivations for sharing a book with their child can be implicit, explicit and sometimes both. They can be influenced by a perceived goal or by perceived value of the process of reading together.

'I do read to him. We've got one baby book that someone bought. He loves that, I pick out the images and he follows but I'd like to do more of that. Often if I'm reading a book I read it in a baby voice and he doesn't understand but he loves that. I do a lot of singing and action songs and move his hands.'

(Mother of 4 month old)

Parents were invited to spontaneously reflect on what motivated them to read with their child. Patterns common to certain ages and stages of childhood emerged, though parenting background and external influences also have some weight.

Some parents regard books as presenting a number of different benefits to the child; these parents were most likely to access books more frequently with their children.

Other parents placed a narrower emphasis on the role of books day to day, with reading more likely to happen at a specific time or in a specific place (e.g. bedtime or reading nursery books on arrival at home). These adults were more likely to read less themselves, tended to place less emphasis on innate enjoyment of reading and more emphasis on its long-term value to the child.

However regardless of personal appetite for reading or the extent to which they access books with their children, on reflection most parents were able to identify some of the many motivations listed below. Some that had previously read infrequently with their child acknowledged greater interest in the implicit value of reading after these discussions.

As already detailed, age of child and presence of siblings were seen to have the greatest overall influence on parents' reading habits. The impact appears to be greatest on under-ones with older siblings; they do not benefit by as much one to one parental interaction as their older sibling might have had, however they are more likely to be surrounded by story-telling and books from a younger age.

Motivations are intrinsic and extrinsic, emotional and practical. Parents appear to be influenced by multiple motivations at any one time, often meeting both their child's practical and emotional needs at the same time.

Within the Literature Review, OUP's study of parental motivations around reading for pleasure observed the value of routine, the absence of younger siblings (in bed) and the arrival back from work of a co-parent in supporting a regular bedtime reading routine. However conversations with parents in this study observed that bedtime rituals were found to be less influential in promoting a regular reading habit than had been anticipated.

Furthermore, parents displayed a number of intrinsic motivations for sharing books with their child. Personal enjoyment of reading aloud (also singing songs and nursery rhymes) influenced many whilst the sense of themselves as their child's first teacher imbues others with a sense of responsibility.



## 4. Emotional drivers

### 4.1 Inspire the imagination

The opportunity to feed their children's imagination is a primary emotional driver for many parents with children aged nine months plus. Discussion reveals how much parents enjoy their children recalling favourite titles and adopting and role-playing fictional worlds. Parents place real value on this immersion; it is perceived to be a valuable aspect of childhood with young people able to direct and shape outcomes and to support their growing maturity.

The word 'inspire' is used frequently, in a way that it isn't about television or other forms of entertainment. There is a sense that parents hope that this inspiration will instill an emotional involvement in books and all that they can bring. Through this attachment they hope that their children will remain immersed in books, echoing their own nostalgic memories of childhood.

'The more I think about it, I don't want to make it a chore, I want to help them pick up classic books, get lost in the imagination. I try and choose books I might have enjoyed, ones with loads of pictures they don't currently access.'

(Father of 3.5 year old)

The vocabulary adopted by parents implies awareness that reading requires some tenacity at first. Seeking to 'inspire' their children to develop a love of books is one way in which parents can overtly support early literacy skills.

Parents did not spontaneously discuss the merit of books (text and illustration) versus equivalent television programmes. However some alluded to the 'glazed' look adopted by their children in front of the television. It appears likely that the desired engagement in books helps to ensure that children are more actively engaged and likely to derive more pleasure from them.

### 4.2 Together time

Parents with children of all ages agreed that sharing books offers opportunities for intimacy and closeness. It is not always a conscious driver; some parents have more practical motivations for reading but relate how their child always sits in their lap or very close to them for a story.

It is the undivided attention from their parents / for their child which appears to be most compelling to both parties. For some parents this manifests as a book and 'cuddle time', whilst for others it is an opportunity to read a book with different voices and accents.

However there was not a sense from parents that shared reading represents greater opportunities for closeness than some other activities. One father spoken to enjoys watching films with his children; they sit close to him and engage with him regarding the action on screen. He feels that after a day at work he doesn't have the requisite

energy to engage his children properly in a book or for very long, and that the quality of the experience will be negatively impacted as a result.

'We do a lot of 'on the sofa, watching dvds.' We do some reading; we do it every night. I'd like to do more drawing, more activities, I don't do it as I'm always tired and it's a lot easier than coming up with activities.'

(Father of 3.5 year old)

One mother of three recalled how her husband and children derive great satisfaction from the drawing activities he does with them most evenings. This has become a family ritual with the youngest on his knee and one either side. Other parents spoke of similar scenarios involving rhyming games and dancing; what these activities share is intimacy born of focused attention and relatively static play.

Some parents with children aged 18 months+ expressed frustration at their child's inability and reluctance to sit still for a book. They regretted the loss of quiet time with their child and their child's inability to concentrate born out of their child's increasing independence, however there was no sense that they felt a lack of closeness as a result.

Some parents with more than one child deliberately seek to read stories to each one separately. For them there is value in offering undivided attention to, and being actively engaged with each child.

'When my daughter was about a month old she slept through the sound of her older siblings playing. She heard them when I was pregnant so she definitely took in their voices. Now I read directly to her so she knows it's her-time.'

(Mother of 6 month old)

One mother of three was satisfied that her youngest aged four months did not have stories read to him directly, even though her first born had done at that age when (she reflected), she had had more time. For her there was little point in spending this time since on a practical level she knew he would learn to read 'at some point.' However on reflection she identified that this child had minimal undivided attention from her, and decided to rectify this by reading to him during the day.

### **4.3 Bedtime routine**

There was some inconsistency amongst parents with regards to the importance of books at bedtime and less importance was placed than anticipated on the ability of books to calm and wind down at this time of day. The personality of the child and the demands of the household appear to exert considerable influence in this regard.

Parents of the youngest children were least likely to read a book at bedtime; though some did choose to do so, it was to support closeness rather than introduce a routine at this age. Older children attending nursery were more likely to have a

story read aloud, though the number of parents opting for alternative means to mark the end of the day were noticeable.

Certainly books are perceived to have relevance at this time of day; parents are keen for their children to settle and they can dictate the tone and pace of any story read out loud.

‘We do three books every night, and I do three nights a week. It’s definitely part of our bedtime routine; during the daytime he’s running around and we no longer have books at mealtimes.’

(Father of 4 year old boy)

Many parents interviewed have tried or continue to try to read to their children at bedtime; whilst they recognise that their children will affect an interest in books to delay lights-out, reading becomes an integral part of their routine.

‘For me it’s definitely part of the bedtime routine, they really enjoy us reading to them. It settles them down: they can’t roll around and they need to be calm.’

(Parent of 3 year old girl)

However if (for example) a child is reluctant to sit with a book, demands the same book many times over or tears the pages, the parent is more likely to adopt a different approach to bedtime. From poor knowledge of age relevant books, to unrealistic expectations of their children, these parents demonstrate few strategies and limited confidence with which to combat resistance.

One mother deliberately reorders the events of bedtime to ensure she can read to her otherwise distracted children at the end of the day:

‘I’d like to do more relaxed reading time. The majority of the time I read is before bathtime or during bathtime when I’ve got their full attention. They both love it, they both interact. He’ll read from the pictures.’

(Mother of two boys age 1 and 3 years)

Some parents opt for other options to mark the end of the day including interactive stories online, playing on an iPad or equivalent or listening to a story-tape. These parents use these devices to create the ‘punctuation mark’ at the end of the day, are satisfied that digital storytelling performs an equivalent role to books and did not reflect on any specific or unique merits of books to calm their child.

#### 4.4 Nostalgia

Nostalgia is another subconscious driver for many parents. It extends to recollection of specific titles and of the feeling of being read to as a child.

Though not likely to ever be a primary motivator for reading aloud, parents reminisced about the enjoyment of having already read a personal childhood favourite to their own child or spoke of their anticipation at doing so.

Enjoyment at sharing books with their child is heightened for some by the recognition that their children's lives will be dominated by technology. Though not fearful of this advance, nostalgic sentiment is underpinned by parental desire to give their children some insight into their own childhood experiences. There was a sense that their children may not read many physical books as adults.

However one negative aspect of this nostalgic motivation for reading was also apparent. Few of the parents interviewed had proactively sought advice over age relevant titles; though they may have received suitable books from friends some were still keen to read the titles from their own childhood, often at too young an age. Many reported disinterest amongst their children but lack of insight into the reasons for this. These parents appear motivated by personal enjoyment as much (if not more than) by the benefit to their children.

#### 4.5 Rewarding interaction

Of all drivers, parental interaction with their child is most clearly affected by their child's age. Parents become increasingly motivated to read as their child becomes more able to respond and participate and their parental role becomes more evident.

'Often he'll get a book and bring it over to me. He'll go over and get another one. It's always 'Each Peach Pear Plum'... he'll sit by himself afterwards and he's babbling and he's pointing. He's trying to say... He usually sits on me. I let him turn the page – once I've finished reading the first part of the text I'll do that (with my finger) and he'll turn the page. I let him direct it.'

(Mother of 11 month old)

Parents of 3-6 month old babies that chose to read with their child spoke in some cases of feeling a little foolish at first. Concerned that their child didn't understand the words they were uncertain whether reading was appropriate. However reading was also felt by many of these parents to be a productive way of passing the time and to present a more structured and enjoyable way of interacting than merely holding up a toy that the child can't hold.

'You're going to pick up a book rather than a stuffed animal. It's something to do. I'm not going to hold the toy as it's not going to do anything for her, as nothing happens. Whereas when I hold a book she can look and engage.'

(Mother of 5 month old reflecting on the role of picture books when interacting with her young child)

Parents of very young babies note closely how their child responds when they read to them, revealing the role that books can play in early bonding. One baby looks solely at the mother while she is reading; she doesn't turn towards the book at all but simply listens to the parent's voice. Another mother enjoyed recalling when her baby's eyes tracked the page for the first time. A number of mothers spoke of their belief in the black and white visuals designed for young babies, whilst other mothers recalled how difficult these were to use with a child that interacts very little, preferring to use bright pictures and stories to create a dynamic reading experience.

'One thing I do like are the big bright pictures. It's for them and I see how she reacts differently to when I am just talking.'

(Mother of 7 month old)

Those parents that do not read with their very young babies (approximately 25% of each group representing parents with children under 12 months) felt able to justify this by claiming not to see the value in it (though interestingly two of these parents had read to their first child at the same age). These parents prefer the reaction they see in their child to touch, song and movement and do not see the 'point' of books. They perceive books to have greater relevance when their child can reach out, move his / her head and engage with simple real-life pictures.

Parents demonstrate increased enjoyment of reading with their child according to their child's increased ability to interact. Parents of 6 month+ babies are motivated by their child's enjoyment of tactile, textured books, and speak of the child's pleasure in taking part in the story. Books with a game to play, for example find the mouse in the 'That's not my...' series, give the child a clear role and help retain their attention. Stories with repetition and a climax echo (in the words of one parent) the 'swooping, playful games we play with babies, in which they relish the anticipation of being tickled' (Mother of 6 month old).

'It's much more rewarding now that the stories are more interesting and my daughter can get involved. Julia Donaldson – she's doing it at nursery so she really loves it. She likes family pictures: 'this is Daddy' etc. Resembles her family.' (Father of 3.5 year old)

However some parents of children aged 6-18 months also appear at a loss for which books to read at this stage. Books given by friends or acquired from other sources (e.g. Bookstart) are often seized on in the absence of other age relevant titles in the home. This is particularly true of first-time parents and does not appear to be influenced by their own enthusiasm for reading. The lack of awareness of picture books (without text), of their value and how to employ them was of particular note amongst this audience.

Parents with children aged 6 months+ were often quick to report the correlation between the effort they put into reading a story, and the response from their child. Funny voices, silly faces and accents all engage their children, with some parents

reflecting on their partner's skills in this regard and their own limitations. However children are non-judging and extremely tolerant; one mother acknowledged her 'appalling accents and reluctance to speak in silly voices' and yet how her child will still ask her to read the same book again and again. Children appear to be able to engage with the storyteller and the content, regardless of the quality of the telling.

'His concentration goes after a while but if I go 'wow' and make funny hand movements he's back onto it again.'

(Mother of 5 month old)

The only exception to their children's 'tolerance' is when parents seek to shorten story-time, for whatever reason. Skipping pages, rushing text or omitting sentences was common to all groups and is universally met with disapproval from children.

In the same vein, children do not appear to differentiate between the reading confidence / abilities of their parents. Five of the respondents spoken to in this study spoke of their partner's poor reading skills and low confidence. In every instance the partner has made efforts to read to his / her children with an entirely positive reception. In these instances the positive responses of their children have given these parents the confidence and inclination to continue.

#### 4.5 Giving their child a sense of ownership

Never spontaneously raised by parents but implicit in conversation is the enjoyment of the relationship their children have with familiar books and stories. Parents recall their children having personal favourites, wanting to hear the same book repeatedly or even in some instances, taking a book to bed with them.

This enjoyment of familiar titles was brought to life by the reading diaries completed by parents participating in the qualitative groups, with many reading the same title(s) on consecutive days to their children.

Interestingly though, only a third of parents with children over 12 months initiated shared reading. It would appear that children have fixed notions of what they would like read to them but often need an adult to initiate reading in the first instance.

Children enjoy selecting their own titles, they love to participate in story-telling (whether completing rhyme or answering questions at the end) and they re-enact stories as part of role-play. Parents enjoy reflecting on their children's relationship with books; though there is tongue in cheek frustration with repeated telling of the same story they appreciate the sense of ownership displayed by the child. This was apparent both in conversation and in respondents' reading diaries, which reflected individual children's passions for books about 'pirates', 'Disney' or other topics. Though parents don't take the credit for their child's delight it appears to fulfill their desire to inspire their imagination.

One EAL parent noted her regret on her first child's first day at nursery, observing how unable he was to engage in any of the rhymes and how little exposure he had had to the books displayed around the room. Though she was not concerned about his likely attainment she sensed the enjoyment other children gained from their familiarity. Though she perceived her English to be too poor to personally remedy this for her younger children this mother subsequently delighted in her older child being able to fill this gap on her behalf.

From the child's perspective, a sense of ownership is possibly cultivated by simple enjoyment of characters or pictures, the pleasure of familiarity with a text or a combination of all of these. Many parents recall their children aged 18 months+ sitting alone with their favourite book, pretending to read and mimicking the sounds they've heard read to them, implying a desire for maturity or role-playing adult behaviour.

## **5. Intrinsic emotional drivers**

### **5.1 Personal enjoyment**

A small number of parents spontaneously voice personal pleasure in reading aloud as a motivator for them doing so with their children from a young age. For some, reading aloud is preferable to singing or other activities, whilst for some having a text to read feels more meaningful than talking to a largely unresponsive baby. Two thirds of the parents that completed a reading diary indicated personal enjoyment as one of their reasons for reading with their child.

When questioned, only a small minority of parents recalled any feelings of embarrassment or uncertainty when reading for the first time. If alone with their child parents generally feel uninhibited, and notice the difference if having to read to their baby with another adult present. Mothers and fathers both spoke of the fun they had had reading aloud in silly voices, and spoke with knowledge and confidence of the books they enjoyed reading aloud as well as the ones they don't.

At the other end of the spectrum are a very small number of parents for whom reading aloud is personally and innately relaxing. One mother reads her adult fiction texts to her young baby, gaining pleasure from the process.

## **6. Practical drivers**

### **6.1 Develop new vocabulary**

A majority of respondents with children over the age of 6 months perceive shared reading to support the acquisition of new vocabulary. Books recorded in parents' reading diaries clearly demonstrated this, with a high percentage of books for babies being word and picture books as opposed to 'story books.'

Parents view vocabulary support via books manifesting in a number of ways:

- Helping young children to learn the words for everyday items
- Introducing older children to unusual words that do not occur in daily life or conversation
- Exposing children to rhyme and to expressive words in context ('Bang!')

'We read lots of books, they're not story books, they're all about vocabulary, a whole book about tractors!'

(Mother of 10 month old)

Books are perceived by some parents to offer unique value in this regard. These parents are most often keen readers themselves (or at least most likely to place a high value on shared reading). They see merit in the repetitious nature of books, in the accompanying pictures and opportunities they present for discussion and in the nature of their children's engagement as opposed to other forms of entertainment. Repeated re-reading of the same books was also highlighted by the diary entries of many participating parents, with some books read every day over a three or four day period.

Though not reflecting on the value of books in such detail, it appears likely that books are perceived by the majority of parents to present unique language-learning opportunities. Acquisition of vocabulary was a primary reading driver for many respondents, who in turn did not say the same of watching television, singing or other activities.

One mother recalled having been given a leaflet by her Health Visitor about the importance of talking to her child from birth. This prompted discussion in one group about how and why parents talk to their children and the different role of books within this. Everyday speech is perceived to support bonding and to help introduce the child to sentence intonation. Books play a distinct role in helping young babies attach words to images and in widening the older child's world.

'They don't tell you that reading books is different to talking. Wherever I'm going round the house I'm constantly talking to him.'

(Mother of 5 month old)

## 6.2 Speech and language development

On reflection some parents were able to identify the value of shared reading on a child's speech and language development. Initial responses from parents tended to be limited to opportunities for their child to listen to voice, new words and intonation. Only a small number of parents considered the opportunity shared reading gives their children to echo sounds, repeat words and rhymes and to practice re-telling.

There was little awareness generally of the potential of picture books to empower children to develop their own narratives or to expand their vocabulary on each read.



This was regardless of socio-economic group, personal propensity to read books or belief in the value of reading aloud.

From conversation it was also apparent that many parents lack experience or willingness to explore beyond the text on the page or to talk with their child about what they see in the picture. Inclination to simply 'read the text' was most noticeable amongst the most educated parents, who appear to place value on sophisticated rhyming texts and amongst time-poor parents who place emphasis on simply finishing the stories. Parents that voiced a desire to 'fuel their child's imagination' sometimes also failed to capitalize on the opportunity to talk around the picture and to let their children engage with a potential sub-text. It would be interesting to explore this further.

### 6.3 Bedtime routine

Stories at bedtime gain greatest traction amongst parents with children aged three years and over. To this point there are considerable variations between families (though stories at bedtime generally gain in popularity with each developmental milestone).

Parents with children aged 3-6 months recognise that routine is primarily for their benefit. Sleep patterns are of primary importance and much of the day is structured around this. Some parents with young babies choose to read a story at bedtime but an equal number do not, preferring (if they read at all) to do it at other, less focused points in the day. Bath-time and bottle carry greater weight at this time of day and can be time consuming. Those babies with older siblings may or may not participate in stories read to the wider family; parents acknowledge that their second or third child might access story-time at a younger age as a result of this, but it is by default rather than design. Equally some parents with more than one child choose to put the youngest to bed in order to focus on the older child.

'It's hard when they're so small. The older siblings are close in age so can do things together, run a bath, read stories with them.'

(Mother of 7 month old)

Parents of children aged 6-18 months place increasing emphasis on stories at bedtime. Their toddlers are increasingly active; books send out a strong signal to the child that it is time to calm down and may take place after bath-time. Those parents not reading to their children at this age will often select a substitute, though these offer quite different experiences to the child e.g. television or story tape.

Parents with older toddlers and children at nursery school without the prior benefit of a bedtime story routine appear to find it hard to initiate one at this age. This emphasises the value of using reading with a child to establish a bedtime routine from as early an age as possible.

Parents voiced a lack of confidence and strategies to persuade their child to sit still for more than a few minutes and the inclination to follow through. With a peaceful bedtime being most parents' primary objective, there is little desire to challenge their children at this time of day. Blame is attributed to their child's growing independence and energy levels, with many parents pointing out the differences between two children in the family in order to justify this point.

#### 6.4 Academic attainment

Academic attainment (in one form or another) is a primary driver for the majority of parents. It has particular weight with parents with low reading frequency and / or with lower levels of personal academic achievement.

'For me I think happiness comes from them being successful. You do think if they're not going to be smart they won't be happy. To me the appeal is more academic.'  
(Father, 2 year old)

Parents that gain higher levels of education demonstrate implicit confidence that their children will achieve at school and place greater emphasis on inspiring "a love of books for its own sake," whereas other parents make a strong link between literacy, confidence and a desire to learn. These parents (with lower academic attainment) also want to inspire their children's imagination but are more likely to voice academic attainment as their primary driver.

This last point echoes the findings of Egmont's 'Reading Street' research in 2013 which noted for many parents reading is attributed to academic attainment rather than enjoyment.

The above findings were noteworthy in the context of some of the findings in the Literature Review, with previous research identifying links between a parent's academic attainment and their child's literacy levels. Though the impact of parents' academic attainment was not being directly explored in this study, greater motivation to read (and lesser complacency regarding outcomes) was generally voiced by parents with lower academic attainment. However it also appeared that books can play a less central role in these households, often confined to bed or bathtime.

Amongst parents of all backgrounds the manner in which books are perceived to support academic attainment is expressed in different ways:

- Making links between the written words and the notion of discovery
- Repeated exposure to words to support early literacy
- Giving their child a 'love of learning'
- Child equating books with knowledge
- Child viewing books as a portal to knowledge
- Strong literacy skills enable children to access learning in the classroom
- Love of books = learning for life.

The parents involved in this research demonstrated no concern about the nature of the books read at home, specific ages and stages or demonstration of early literacy skills. There was no mention of the innate value of story-telling or of exposure to narrative. Books per se, represent value.

The implied value of reading alters with the age of the child:

- Parents of young babies see only the immediate value to their child, helping them to make connections between word and image as well as hear their voice
- Parents of toddlers place emphasis on inspiring a 'love of books' and exposing their child to unfamiliar vocabulary. Some spoke of a recognition in their toddler that the black text on the page contained the words spoken by the parent
- Parents of children aged 3+ identify a range of perceived benefits including inspiring a love of books, widening vocabulary, understanding the text (Usborne books ask questions at the end of many of their titles) and understanding more complex situations

Parents with very young babies were least likely to see relevance in Booktrust's claim that reading supports academic achievement. Those that share books with their babies are able to see the immediate value of what they are doing but attach no particular long-term significance. Those that are not reading to their young baby see no detriment to their child's long-term potential.

### 6.5 Sense of belonging

When prompted, some parents of older toddlers and pre-schoolers recognise the role played by books in helping their children to explore real-world situations and emotional scenarios. This most commonly manifests in books purchased by the parent to support times of transition e.g. potty training, the birth of a sibling, the first day of nursery school. However two parents interviewed had also used books to help address emotions, in this instance fear of the dentist and tantrums.

Presenting their children with the opportunity to explore real-life situations through books is perceived helpful by those parents that have used this route. The use of a story to recount a situation brings an often abstract notion to life for an inexperienced child, and the listener can choose the extent to which he / she wants to participate.

In equipping their children with real-life skills and foresight parents feel they are supporting their child through periods of change. Books are used to help empower the child and support a sense of security.

Parents that have not used books in this way (a majority of parents) demonstrated interest in doing so. However parents did not seem to feel that not having done this before was a missed opportunity, and they did not spontaneously reflect on relevant circumstances in their own family lives for which such books could be useful.

To a lesser extent, EAL parents also acknowledged the value of books in reinforcing their mother tongue with their children in an EAL setting. This is not seen as a problem with young children whose exposure is largely confined to the family. However parents that were able to do so saw merit in reading native language texts to their pre-schoolers complementing the English texts received in a nursery setting. EAL parents appreciate the dual language books sent home by some nurseries and reflected on the ease of use of early baby books, which can be 'translated' into any language.

### 6.6. Rewarding interaction

Parents seek out multiple forms of entertainment throughout the day in order to amuse, distract, cajole and console their young children. On a simple level, books play a part in this.

For many parents books play a varied role in this caring repertoire; they are used to break up the day, to offer quiet time and intimacy to a tired or unhappy child, to bribe a young child to eat or to distract a baby reluctant to be changed. Parents displayed considerable knowledge of the functions of different book formats; one parent voiced approval of the mini box-sets which through their design distract her young son for long periods of time, whilst another parent keeps a favourite board book under the highchair to reward each mouthful.

However it was noticeable that only one parent interviewed takes books out of the home for the purpose of entertainment on the move, with phones presenting a ready and apparently effective substitute in most cases. Some parents appear to have downloaded simple apps (games rather than stories) for use on their phone, though many let their child simply play with the device. Either way they demand little input from the parent and present a useful 'babysitting' tool.

Parental techniques appear to have been acquired by trial and error; there appear to be few sources of advice highlighting the potential roles that a book can play throughout the day, and parents that do not share books with their children in this way were interested in finding out more.

By equipping their child with increased vocabulary and improved language skills and by exposing them to new 'worlds' or real-life scenarios, some parents feel that they are helping to develop their child's communication skills and emotional maturity.

*'It's one on one, you're having a conversation. The more ideas about the world, the more you are helping them to decide what they like.'*

(Mother of 3 year old)

For the same reasons a small number of parents saw merit in sharing pictures of faces displaying various emotions to their very young baby. In doing so, these parents all feel that they are giving their child practical tools for life.

‘Some of the books I’ve got are about feelings - with faces on them and that sort of stuff. Obviously he understands because your voice changes, he just gets it.’  
(Mother of 13 month old)

‘They’re in our arms, feeling safe and secure. They hear the intonation of speech, the pauses and the sentences rather than us just babbling at them. It’s calming for them and you can see the expression on their faces.’  
(Mother of 5 month old)

It is worth noting that regardless of their inclination towards reading at bedtime or during the day, almost every parent that completed a reading diary indicated multiple reasons for doing so. Most commonly selected from amongst the reasons to choose from was that reading ‘is an enjoyable way to spend time together.’

## 7. External influences

### 7.1 The library

Perceptions of libraries vary, but for many parents of young children their role is restricted to simply lending books. Parents with pre-school children of all ages fail to explore or take note of additional resources (e.g. Rhymetime) offered by their library, which is generally viewed as having a functional role. Only a very small number of parents reported having attended a singing session at their local library whilst only one mother uses her library as a social alternative to the park on a wet day, arranging to meet friends there.

The practical reasons for lack of engagement with library events vary regionally and according to the age of the child:

- Reports of inaccessible, dirty or unwelcoming settings
- Lack of promotion around events on offer
- Events oversubscribed
- Events at the wrong time of day for baby’s routine
- Events for young babies only.

‘For me it’s a bit of an inconvenience. When I’ve been at work I just want to get home.’  
(Mother of 9 month old)

However barriers to library usage are also emotional and subjective:

- ‘Not for me’: reported by an affluent mother
- ‘Not for me’: reported by an educated mother in a mixed community
- Uncertainty about child’s behaviour in a library setting
- Perceived lack of welcome offered to parents of young babies or toddlers

A small number of parents borrowed books from the library for their child. This appears to commence from age 12 months, even amongst those parents that

attended the library with their young baby. A number of reasons for the low borrowing rate (amongst all respondents) were cited:

Amongst library users:

- Baby books too heavy to carry
- Perceived effort in returning them
- Concern over damaging them
- (Erroneous) perceived cost of joining the library

Amongst non-library users:

- Low awareness of baby books available
- Perception that baby books would be dirty
- Ability to purchase books cheaply elsewhere (pound shops and supermarket)
- Desire to own books
- Preference for bookshops (perceived to be inclusive, an aesthetic experience)
- Relationship with a bookshop (e.g. due to children's stories being read)
- Perception of a cost attached to joining the library.

*'It's not that valuable. The board books are too heavy to carry back and I'd be worried to get them covered in food.'*

(Mother of 11 month old)

## **7.2 Parent sites and emails**

In most of the groups conducted at least one mother voiced a strong relationship with parenting websites and emails. This often prompted agreement from two or three other mothers regarding their value, particularly during the months immediately following a child's birth.

Of particular use in these emails are the 'ages and stages' notes. Sent weekly or monthly, emails from the Parenting Network, Emma's Diary, Bounty and Baby Centre help mothers to track their child's progress and to anticipate the next step.

None of the parents interviewed could recall information about shared reading within these emails, however all agreed that it would be welcome. For first-time parents in particular, age and stage relevant information shared in an accessible format is viewed most helpful.

## **7.3 Social networks**

There was no evidence amongst respondents that parent networks or social settings influenced a parent's propensity to read with his / her child. Conducted mainly in a domestic setting, parents have few opportunities to see their peers reading with their child. And whilst some parents might voice to others that they have read to their baby, this appears to be offered as an amusing insight into their respective experiences at home with a young child, rather than to share parenting tips or seek approval.

Parents with children at school reflected on how this changes once their child reaches the reception year. For the first time parents exchange experiences and strategies and benchmark their child's achievements against others.' However this insight / experience does not affect these parents' propensity to discuss reading with a younger child amongst their peers.

#### 7.4 Bookstart

Responses to Bookstart and its role in motivating parents to read are explored more fully later in this document. However it is relevant to consider its role within the context of other external influences.

Unaware of the issuing client, parents in three of eight focus groups spontaneously referenced Bookstart when asked to reflect on external influences around reading. In each instance a mother remembered 'a bag, with books in' and at least two other mothers built on this, clarifying how and when received and what it looked like.

The bag designs appear to exert the strongest influence on recall; often parents (including fathers) unable to remember being given free books will be prompted by discussion around a 'tote, red or purple bag.'

In all but one instance the books were recalled to have been shared by recipients with their children, in a couple of cases being the first books read together. Fathers unable to recall the exact contents assumed that the books would have been incorporated into their child's collection.

'The first book I read was the one with the black and white faces. It was given to me, he was 6 months old, you know how you really try with your first born?'

(Mother of 3 year old)

Bookstart Baby derives the warmest response from parents. Its distribution is attributed to a precious time with a young baby and often to a key milestone e.g. first year check up. First-time-parents in particular expressed delight over its receipt.

'I think most children are exposed to books, whether at nursery or a drop in. But Bookstart is all about owning books, about your child actually getting their hands on them.'

(Mother of 2.5 year old)

'If you start reading at home... if they start to get engaged because they've got their own books... you're giving them a foundation.'

(Mother of 5 month old)

Parents are responsive to Bookstart Treasure but it appears to have less emotional impact and to present a lower perceived value. This may be due to their child already receiving and accessing books through other settings, the child-oriented

nature of distribution or the greater parenting confidence felt by a mother of an older child.

Their respective impact on shared reading varies according to the recipient's interests, personal circumstances and family dynamic. Family income is not an indicator of attitude towards the bags, however the following audiences are those for whom they appear to have had greatest resonance:

Parents keen to share books with their child:

- These parents appreciate the receipt of additional titles. In many instances (even in affluent settings) those issued by Bookstart are amongst the first 'baby friendly' titles received. Many parents recall the reaction of their child and particular affinity with one of the books.

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

(Mother of 3 year old)

Parents unsure what / when to read:

- Bookstart presented many parents with an indication that 'now was the right time to start reading.' Health Visitor messaging appears to miss opportunities to discuss the value of reading, so receipt of age relevant titles in the pack sends out a message to all parents to 'have a go.'

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

(Mother of 13 month old)

Though parents with more than one child often have many books in the house, receipt of their second Bookstart bag was for some a timely reminder of their youngest child's capabilities. In some instances it prompted the parent to begin to dedicate at least some time to shared reading with their baby.

The above points echo Van Zanten, Coates, Hervas-Malo & McGrath's 2012 report which identified many parents' reluctance to read when their babies were too 'young.'

They also reinforce findings in an earlier Booktrust report (University of Surrey, 2001) which identified the causal impact of books in the home setting, converting 'good intentions into practice.'

First-time parents:

- Mothers with children under 12 months appear more receptive to external messaging from parenting 'authorities' than they are with subsequent children. These parents do not always seek out information but when it is presented in an accessible format will engage and sometimes act on it
- Some first-time mothers likened receipt of the Bookstart bag to receipt of the Bounty pack; they were grateful for the free resources and read everything



inside. Its universal distribution reinforces perceptions of the bag as a parent 'must have'

- Though distribution of Bookstart via Health Visitors and libraries is received positively, more could be done to increase its impact. Lack of pre-promotion or certainty about local distribution channels fails to capitalize on potential parental anticipation, which would in turn reinforce perceptions of the bag and the importance of the contents
- Furthermore weak Health Visitor messaging and inconsistency of additional items inserted (e.g. weaning cup) may undermine the purpose of the bag; perhaps the contents could revert to being more single-mindedly focused on books.

### Other messaging

Unprompted, parents also recalled other early influences on their parenting style, in particular shared reading with their child:

- Health Visitor and hospital messaging at birth
- Older family relatives
- Seeking information on raising an EAL child.

## 8. Barriers to shared reading

Barriers to reading voiced by parents tended to concern practical 'justifications,' such as lack of time, lack of energy, the presence of siblings or other priorities.

Parents with more than one child additionally justified lack of parental shared reading by noting the implicit benefits for their pre-schooler of exposure to older children's story-time and having stories read to them directly by older siblings. These parents also tended to express increased cynicism in the value of reading with young babies, having '[seen for ourselves, the ages when it is really important](#)' (Mother of a 3 year old). They appear to have developed their own 'truths' around child development which might be challenged by effective messaging to second-time parents.

A study of the Read to Me! programme in Nova Scotia has previously identified the incidence and number of siblings in the home as an important variable influencing parental reading behaviours, recommending that this is explored further.

Parents appeared unwilling to acknowledge other, personal barriers to reading with their child, such as personal interest or ability.

When prompted, parents did agree that their mood has an impact on the extent of their likely reading with a child. If tired or distracted, parents will curtail shared reading, skipping pages or ensuring selection of shorter books.

### 8.1 Lack of time

Most commonly cited by parents with two or more children, lack of time encompasses a multitude of scenarios, from household priorities, managing the needs of other siblings, juggling work and home and a busy social parent network. It is most likely to be cited by mothers and can apply to all times of day, whether working or not.

In contrast fathers tended to cite 'tiredness' rather than 'lack of time' as a reason for not reading with their children after work.

Parents with one child were less able to cite lack of time as a reason for not reading together. They acknowledged this, but also stressed their steep learning curve and how busy their days are.

### 8.2 Lack of skills / technique to tackle disinterest

Not cited by parents of young babies, but prevalent in families with active toddlers and pre-schoolers, is an apparent lack of ability to engage children with poor concentration or experience of book handling. These children were typically unused to having stories read at a specific time of day and / or had not been previously expected to sit down while stories were being read to them.

'... he wasn't listening and he was squirming, and he'd turn back a page which used to really annoy me.'

(Father of 20 month old)

Many parents expressed frustration at their child's reaction to books, which may manifest as erratic focus, inability to sit and engage with the page or 'careless' behaviour with books.. These parents lack the skills or strategy to tackle such behaviour. They appear not to reflect deeply on its probable cause or to seek strategies to address it. They attribute this disinterest to the 'age of the child' and are unwilling to impose their will.

'I'd like to do more reading. As soon as we've opened the book after two minutes he's away. We go to the library but he doesn't sit down. At night he will concentrate on one book only. But the little one, he does.'

(Mother of 38 month old)

### 8.3 Lack of awareness around the benefits of reading

Lack of awareness or understanding of the benefits of shared reading appears to be a barrier for parents that read very little with their children. Parents that read on a regular or semi-regular basis with their children have at least some awareness of some of the benefits to their children, even if informed subjectively.

When asked about their reading habits with their children, very low frequency readers will shrug in response; to them it is not a conscious decision to not read with their child but instead the product of other apparent priorities and low personal

interest in books. This is despite many of these same parents expressing a high level of desire for their own children to enjoy books. There does not appear to be any understanding of the role they can play in helping to achieve this goal and no desire to explore relevant strategies.

On discussion of the merits of shared reading from a young age, these same parents often voice the immediate intention of beginning to read or of reading more. This is unprompted and is testament to the impact of peer discussion. These parents were most commonly motivated by discussion around the language-led and emotional developmental aspects of shared reading with some expressing a sense of guilt that they'd previously read so little.

Regardless of their background or personal affinity with books, many parents interviewed with very young babies chose not to share books with their child. For some the role of reading is redundant at this age, with children as yet unable to grasp the notion of books and with limited ability to interact.

#### 8.4 Lack of confidence

None of the parents spoken to acknowledged a lack of confidence when reading to their children, at whichever age they chose to begin. Children are a very non-judgmental audience; parents with poor literacy skills feel unthreatened and even encouraged by the reception they receive.

However a small number of parents voiced emotions and experiences that may have impacted on their confidence levels:

- Two mothers that indicated very low reading frequency with their children (in one case not reading at all) were both unable to explain why they didn't read, simply saying that they 'don't like it.' One of these mothers recalled having to read out loud at school and its impact on her confidence
- One EAL mother (Arabic spoken at home) spoke of her relief with the birth of her third child that her by-then school age children would be able to read confidently to the new baby. Though she had endeavoured to read to her first two young children she felt ill-equipped to do so, sensing that 'modern family life in England is very different' to her own childhood.

'My daughter reads to her and she makes the animal sounds. She has got a better technique than me. We learn in our country in a different way. This country is more about funny sounds and voices. Maybe in 2014 it's different there too. I read picture books, English books, Moroccan books...'

(Mother of 6 month old)

- Another EAL mother (Greek spoken at home) noted that she would welcome the opportunity for her child to learn English from native English speakers on starting

nursery, but in the meantime was satisfied reading and singing to her child in her native language

- Across the eight groups four mothers cited husbands with poor literacy skills. These fathers had addressed their lack of skills differently. Though all had each been initially reticent reading in front of other family adults all had read with their children. Two fathers read the text thoroughly, albeit slowly, while one father ad-libbed and enjoyed creating fictional stories around the picture. One mother reflected on her husband's attempts to read and his frequent use of substituted words. Whilst their children responded very positively towards this she felt that at any moment they might begin to criticize him for his lack of rhyming words or the correct text
- One father cited his own experience as a child of two profoundly deaf parents. Having not had many stories read to him as a child he found himself less confident reading rhyme and 'nonsensical' words out loud. This did not impact his confidence in reading to his own children however, since his children appeared oblivious to his difficulties.

The above findings echo those by Collins, Svenson & Mahony (2005), which noted how parents that speak another language than English at home employ strategies that address their low(er) levels of English literacy whilst also supporting bilingual development. This includes greater reliance on the education system, greater involvement of siblings and inclination towards reading and singing in their native tongue.

Of the four EAL parents involved in this study, all appeared to place considerable value on literacy skills in their children, even if lacking the tools or confidence to directly impact this themselves. This was in contrast to some of the findings by Collins, Svenson & Mahony.

### **8.5 Apathy is not a significant issue**

Parents interviewed all demonstrated an interest in their children's best interests. Those that did not read at all (or very little) with their children were quick to share how they do support and spend time together. One mother placed emphasis on singing and dancing with her 12-month old, whilst another saw value in her three year old son's exposure to read-along books on his tablet.

Apathy towards reading, if any was observed, was evident amongst a small number of parents with three children. Third time round they saw less value in shared reading and relied to a greater extent on older siblings to fill this gap. As some of these parents see it, this is an occupational hazard of 'being a third child.' Many of these parents were ambitious for their children and were regular readers themselves, however had decided that their youngest would acquire these skills regardless of their input.

The attitudes of this group contrasted with research findings reviewed in Part One of this research. Kids Connections' 2012 report for OUP observed that the necessary requirements of homework diminished the extent to which parents read for pleasure with their school-age children, whilst still adhering to story-time with their younger siblings. However a lack of research around the impact of multiple children on individual parent-child reading was also noted.

### **8.6 Lack of understanding of the value of reading in supporting early literacy**

Every parent interviewed demonstrated commitment to parenting and their own perspectives on their role. Whilst nurturing and helping their child to master life skills are the most visible aspects of their role day to day, parents also recognise their importance in helping their children to achieve long-term. Building confidence, developing social skills and feelings of security were the most commonly alluded to aspects of their role in this regard.

The majority of parents recognise that there is some value in reading with their toddler or pre-school child, regardless of their frequency of doing so. Many parents perceive that giving their child a love of books will support long-term academic attainment though their approaches and commitment to this vary hugely.

However, despite making this link between a love of books and academic attainment none of the respondents recognized the role they played in fostering early literacy skills. Some assumed that their child made links between what was being read and the type on the page, but none had explored this further.

Books with patterned words on the page and differently sized fonts (Charlie and Lola was cited) offer potential links between text and the spoken word; this was mentioned but not developed by parents. One parent spoke of her child's Leapfrog pad, which traces the text as it reads the story, however she too, failed to explain what value she places on this.

Parents appear largely comfortable with their self-appointed role which is to introduce their children to books in a nurturing context, without any formal learning or attainment led objectives. This lack of interest in specific attainment levels is a motivator rather than a barrier since it allows parents to develop their own approaches and for those with only limited opportunities to read with their child, to still be sure of its relevance. However parents could benefit by a better understanding of the 'levelling' of books, of age relevant books and of the different techniques they might employ with differently aged children, in order to best support them.

### **8.7 Lack of knowledge of suitable books**

Lack of understanding of age relevant books impedes many parents' enjoyment of shared reading. Equally, however, a number of parents are resistant to age-relevant baby books, feel confused about how to 'read' them and are largely bored by them. Dialogic tips to support accessibility would be helpful to many parents.

The greatest knowledge gap appears to sit with parents of 0-6 month olds, many of whom demonstrate a lack of confidence in what they should be reading, or the merit of reading at all. Note that parents did not voice a lack of confidence in how to read with their young baby once they had read together.

'Story books' are read to many young babies, but their lack of response can be a deterrent to parents, with some mothers reporting uncertainty over their appropriateness. Books with black and white images or block colour images may be more relevant to babies at this age, but many parents appear at a loss as to how to handle these. Advice around what to expect from a baby or how to engage with a young child would be well received by parents of 0-6 month olds.

'I wondered if it's appropriate to read to babies – is this something they enjoy doing? Or would they enjoy singing and dancing and moving more? I had that impression that they were too young for books. That's probably why I haven't got many books for him. I think, 'Is it right?' He can't understand words. He likes looking at pictures but what's the difference between looking at pictures under his mobile and looking at a book?'

(Mother of 5 month old)

A number of parents of toddlers (age 18 months to 2 years) also express dissatisfaction at their child's response to the books shared. In some instances these books had been selected for their illustrative appeal (e.g. Beatrix Potter) or for nostalgic reasons (e.g. The Velveteen Bunny), with little regard for age relevance or contemporary appeal. These parents were keen to fulfill a sentimental vision of shared reading with their child but failed to explore their child's interests or contemporary book lists. A number of working parents with little opportunity to access community resources or child-oriented events were included in this group, as were a number of parents from academic backgrounds.

A final group of parents needing advice on age-relevant books emerged. These are parents who read infrequently or not at all to their young baby, and fail to understand their advancing child's ability to engage in new book formats. Though they are aware of their child's developmental milestones many fail to recognise that his / her new ability to point, touch and lift flaps will translate into a more engaging reading experience. Many parents, including those that read relatively often with their young children, voiced interest in advice around when to move from (for example) textural books to board books, or from board books to paper books.

## Part Two: Bookstart

### 1. Awareness and reach

Awareness of Bookstart was high among respondent parents. Amongst parents with children over 12 months spontaneous or prompted awareness was universal, though a small number had not received one or other of the packs relevant to their children.

Roughly a third of respondents with children under 12 months had not heard of Bookstart, all being first-time mums.

Having older children contributes to a parent's understanding of Bookstart, how it is distributed in their area and awareness they might expect to receive one for their next child. However there was not a sense that these parents anticipated the pack or that they placed any greater emphasis on receiving the pack than their peers; the time that elapses between each child, lack of message reinforcement and lack of anticipation are probably major causes of this.

Recall of the bag was unprompted amongst at least two respondents in three of the groups. Their references to 'a bag with books,' 'a tote bag with bears on it,' 'the purple PACT folder given out at the 12-month check-up' or their child's 'red ruck-sack' usually prompted others in the group to recall receipt of their own bag.

Discussion of the pack usually elicited affectionate responses from parents, particularly of the Bookstart Baby bag. The bag itself generated the most unprompted attention, both in its older canvas tote format and its newer version, though sight of example books often prompted parents to select a favourite title and become nostalgic about its importance to their child.

Those parents with older children that recall receipt of the tote bag recall its usability and aesthetic appeal to parents due to its 'long strap,' fabric and branding. In contrast the newer style plays different roles due to its familiarity to 'school' book bags, its robustness and its wallet design. This bag is used as a swim bag by some parents but more commonly to store books and colouring equipment for days out. It appears that many parents (or children) continue to use this bag to house their child's Bookstart books, long after receipt.

Parents that had not received a pack at the requisite time but had been aware of its existence expressed frustration. Five parents had not received one or both of the packs to which they were entitled.

Parents previously unaware of the pack and with a child over the age of 12 months expressed disappointment. One mother noted the value that it represented. Three mothers noted that their 12-month check-ups were overdue and anticipated receipt of the pack at these.

It is worth noting that no first-time mother was aware of Bookstart Baby prior to it being distributed. Parents were similarly unfamiliar with Bookstart Treasure prior to its receipt, though some had seen the bags in use at their child's nursery.

### **Distribution channels**

Distribution of bags varies between regions and within a local area, in some places being given out through multiple channels. A negative impact of the local variations in distribution and in limited signposting is that some parents do not receive a pack. In contrast two of our respondent parents each received two packs.



## 2. Bookstart Baby

### 2.1 The library

Library distribution appears to undermine universal reach. Library usage is self-selecting and often limited to those parents that are engaged with community baby events (e.g. rhyme time) or that use the library for an older child. Whilst the context feels entirely appropriate to the bag and surrounding messaging, staff members do not always fully explain its rationale and the opportunity presented by the contents. Some parents reported an (erroneous) perception amongst library staff that anyone who enters the library to ask for a bag is already engaged with books and the Bookstart concept, and therefore without need of further help or advice.

Local signposting to library distribution channels, distribution 'weeks' and / or controlled distribution via a child's library card record might address some of these issues.

### 2.2 12-month check-up

The majority of Bookstart Baby bags appear to be given out at the 12 month check-up, which presents a useful opportunity for staff to simultaneously discuss next developmental milestones and how the parent can support their child.

An effective aspect of distribution in some areas appears to be a dedicated Bookstart form housed inside the child's Health Record (red book), which is stamped in some areas on distribution. This manner of distribution has a positive impact amongst mothers, raising the perceived value of the contents and making the role of the bag more official.

*'I remember they stamped my daughter's red book when they handed out the bag to keep a record of us getting it.'*

(Mother of 18 month old)

However simultaneous messaging can undermine this positive first impression. The majority of parents that received a bag via their Health Visitor recall little about the moment of distribution. In no instance were the bag contents shared with recipients, other than to point out items such as a weaning cup or a toothbrush that had been added in by the health visitor. Adding these unrelated items to the pack is against Booktrust best practice, and is discouraged because it dilutes the Bookstart messaging. No modeling took place and very limited discussion was had around existing reading behaviours.

Some health visitors point out the parent booklet but none discuss it further with the recipient. Health Visitors do not generally appear to be using the opportunity to raise awareness of baby Rhymetime or story-time sessions or equivalent local resources.

Parental perceptions of the reasons for this inadequate messaging appear to be three-fold:

- Lack of health visitor time
- Desire to not undermine the mother's parenting skills
- Perception that a mother with older children knows this already.

Many parents reported that they would be (or that they would have been) interested in being offered the opportunity to participate in a Health Visitor workshop to explore age relevant books and to witness modeling of different techniques. Health Visitors were perceived to play a useful and supportive role in introducing parents to various aspects of parenting. There was no interest in a workshop that required parents to practice and refine their technique in front of other parents: this was felt to be intimidating and forced.

It is worth noting that many parents reported confusion around the long-term plans for Bookstart Treasure and whether funding will continue. This appears partly pre-empted by Health Visitor information imparted at the 12-month check up. Such messaging undermines perceptions of the brand (i.e. its universal importance if funding is to cease) and impact on receipt.

### 2.3 Other Health Visitor contexts

A minority of parents reported receipt of the bag via their GP or at a differently timed health visitor scheduled check-up. One (low literacy) mother had received her bag when her child was two months old with no corresponding messaging whilst another (low literacy) mother of five had received her bag at her GPs along with a humorous instruction to 'put it with the other four bags'.

These are examples of poor practice within what is generally a robust distribution network. However given the difficulty of controlling messaging at point of distribution it may be worthwhile considering additional sign-posting on the outside of the bag or a data-capture vehicle within the bag to support subsequent communication.

## 3. Bookstart Treasure

### 3.1 Nursery schools

The majority of respondents (and all of those outside London) received their Bookstart Treasure bag via their child's nursery school. Distribution is at the end of the day and each respondent's child emerges from school with their bag.

The impact of this distribution is two-fold:

- Giving the book directly to the child is empowering and motivating. All parents reported the sense of importance receipt of the bag gave their child, particularly those with an older sibling and an equivalent 'school-bag.' In all instances the

child initiated opening the bag and reviewing the contents, with the mother sometimes demanding that the child waits until they reach home. In a number of instances the child had pulled out the contents of the book and then abandoned them after a few minutes, without the parent having shared the contents with him / her

- However distribution in-school to very young children and a lack of halo messaging to parents does undermine parents' understanding of the role of the bag and its message to them. There is less onus on the parent to discover the contents of the bag or to take action since it is apparently not addressed to them. Distribution via Book Week is evident in some contexts, appearing to explain the purpose of the bag more effectively than at other times, particularly where the bag is distributed in the absence of direct messaging to parents.

### **3.2 Children's drop-in playgroups**

London respondents recalled distribution of Bookstart Treasure via community 'drop-ins' (offering informal playgroup facilities). This channel is self-selecting: parents may visit erratically or on a regular basis and each drop-in's geographical reach is often quite small.

However a positive aspect of their involvement in distribution is their placing in deprived communities and the strength of the role that they play for many families.

Distribution via these settings appears to demand greater parental involvement than was reported in nursery school settings. In both cases Bookstart Bags were distributed directly to parents at the end of the session. In one instance parents were required to sign for their bag. In the other instance distribution was pre-promoted with bags being given out at the Christmas party.

It would be useful to explore further the perceived value of the bags amongst staff in each of the distribution channels employed. Respondents implied that for some Health Visitors distribution offered little added value to the professional's interaction with each parent. Libraries too, appear to fail to capitalize on the opportunity to engage parents in their community. In contrast, nursery schools and the drop-ins identified in discussion did appear to exploit the point of distribution to better effect, engaging the child and / or the mother.

Though a 12-month old child will not understand receipt of its Bookstart bag perhaps more can be done to leverage this moment and to contextualise its role.

### **3.3 Reaching working parents**

Working parents that do not attend playgroups or that do not pick up their child from nursery school often fail to realize the significance of their Bookstart bag. One mother recognized the Bookstart Baby bag on seeing it within the focus group but

had never questioned its origins in her home. Her assumption in hindsight was that her nanny must have been given the bag.

Engaging parents third-hand is a particular issue that not only concerns working mothers but fathers too. None of the fathers involved in focus groups could explain the origins of their child's Bookstart bags. Though they had seen the bags in the home none had seen the parent leaflet inside. This echoes the findings in Gadsden's report (2012) which highlighted the need to identify ways of engaging fathers directly in their children's literacy and embedding literacy in programmes tailored to their role(s) and involvement.

The Literature Review also identified the potential to explore more fully the unique attributes that fathers present, their self-perceived role and how this can be leveraged.

Pre-promotion, a call to action to parents on the outside of the bag or re-formatting of the parent leaflet may increase Bookstart's ability to engage with those parents not present at point of distribution (including fathers) and to explain the bag's presence in the home.

## Impact

Discussion with parents explored the immediate impact of the Bookstart bags (first impressions, first actions, perceived value and engagement) as well as their longer-term impact on behaviour and attitudes.

*'It's a brilliant idea just because of what I was saying earlier. You're just not sure whether you should be reading and whether it's appropriate. It kick starts it.'*  
(Mother of 9 month old)

### 1. Immediate impact

#### 1.1 Bookstart Baby

First-time recipients of the Bookstart Baby bag were not aware of the scheme's existence prior to distribution. Immediate response on receipt was appreciation of 'something for nothing' and pleasure at receiving a gift for their child. Limited integral accompanying messaging did little to emphasise the relevance of the pack to their child's current developmental level or to explain how their child might react. Simultaneous distribution of a weaning cup or equivalent milestone-related resource was quickly mentioned by many respondents.

*'I remember when Florence got them... they were some of her favourite books. We got them when she was really young and we didn't know what we should be doing.'*

There was one with lots of facial expressions - that was really valuable. I don't remember the second bag as well as the first.'

(Father of 4 year old)

All pack recipients looked at the contents of the pack on receipt, usually in the home setting. A majority shared one or more of the books immediately with their child. With no immediate call to action on the outside of the pack or on the books themselves some parents appear to have done little with the contents; books were assimilated into their child's toys or existing books but the pack did not achieve any behavioural change.

The parent booklet provides options and recommendations but does not set out parenting expectations. This is deliberate but apparently fails to engage some parents.

'It's not that important to me. I read the booklet but it didn't really have any value to me or her. I just remember the purple bag.'

(Mother of 20 month old)

Some parents criticized the lack of apparent connection between the different items in the pack:

- Integrating the advice in the parent booklet with the books themselves may be more effective in engaging parents via active learning
- A call to parents inviting them to benchmark their existing reading habits might have given parents a greater sense of responsibility on receipt and prompted parents to trial new behaviour.

There was also some criticism of the perceived quality of books amongst parents that place value on traditional texts or classic illustrations. These parents saw little aesthetic value in the chosen illustrations and text and were unsure how enjoyable they would find these titles to read aloud. These parents were typically more affluent and better educated, though it is worth noting that many parents from similar backgrounds did not hold these opinions:

An explanation of the merits of each of the books might help address some of the preconceived notions about 'good children's literature.' This should be prominent e.g. attached to the outside of each title inserted.

Suggestions as to how to use each of the books in the pack might support parents without the skills and / or interest to fully engage their child.

A report for Booktrust by Collins, Svensson & Mahony (2005) identified the positive impact of discussion as a routine element of a parent-child book sharing routine. The Literature Review questions whether research might explore this further, identifying the impact of parental literacy or parental literacy confidence on the techniques they employ when reading with their child e.g. the use of questioning techniques. The above findings suggest that this research might also include

exploration of attitudes towards what constitutes 'good' books for children, and what influences these attitudes.

The parent booklet accompanying the Bookstart Baby bag was reviewed by almost all respondents though often not until later on in the day or in the week, and often separately from the books themselves. Parents reported initial interest in the booklet, motivated by its design, layout and format.

"I would be totally put off by lists, I like little snippets like this. Especially as the booklet is quite big, you can whizz through this.... It's difficult to know what's good to do at home.'

(Mother of 11 month old)

The parent booklet is not generally kept as a reference tool but more commonly read and disposed of. Parents were not able to recall any aspect of the text that had particular resonance or that specifically altered behaviour.

The child-friendly design of the parent booklet makes it popular with some young toddlers. One parent recalled it becoming her child's favourite book whilst another recalls her daughter inviting the father to read it to her. Parents agreed that children liked hearing how children like their parents to play with them. Most parents also found the style accessible and appealing, though it carried less weight for one mother with low literacy levels.

'It feels like a story book for children, it feels a bit young for me. It doesn't feel important enough. I've never seen anything like this before. I'm not used to it.'

(Mother of 13 month old)

Parents receiving the pack for the second or third time were better placed to immediately understand the age relevance of the books. In many cases age relevant titles for their older children had been disposed of and these titles were a welcome re-addition to the family bookshelves. They also served to act as a reminder to these parents of the value that their 12-month old would derive from shared reading.

'You know exactly what stage you're at with the Bookstart bag. It's like giving you other ideas of entertaining your baby.'

(Mother of 6 month old)

## 1.2 Bookstart Treasure

The manner of distribution of Bookstart Treasure creates a buzz around the pack amongst both parents and children. Respondents reported the excitement of their children on leaving nursery school and their desire to immediately look inside the bag.

However this distribution appears to often be without much prior promotion; certainly many respondent parents were unaware of the initiative prior to the bag

being brought home. This does not undermine the impact of the bag's contents but possibly undermines the message being conveyed.

Parents reported encouraging their children to wait until reaching home before opening the bag, and their children's enthusiasm to do so as soon as possible. Children were motivated by the bag itself, as well as the contents, and many families reported the child insisting that the bag should stay in one piece for as long as possible. Parents reported a high level of child 'ownership' of the bag and its contents, a sense of importance this imbues in the child and greater attachment to the books themselves.

Parents recalled their children being generally very keen to share the books in the bag, which was usually reciprocated. However without reciprocation the child's enthusiasm appears to wane slightly; a minority of parents without the time to share the contents with their child reported subsequent ambivalence in their child.

The parent booklet was also received positively by this audience, though there was less evidence of it being read to the same extent as the Bookstart Baby booklet. Greater text density, greater parental confidence and the likelihood that their children are already reading books at nursery appear to be the primary causes of this.

## 2. Long-term impact

### 2.1 Bookstart Baby

Some parents recall their child's Bookstart Baby books being amongst the first books in the home, and their receipt sending a clear message that now was a good time to start reading. These parents were encouraged by the positive messages in the pack and their children's reactions to the books. All of these parents have continued to share books with their children to varying degrees.

*'It's having the books there that makes you read them.'*  
(Mother of 14 month old)

A minority of parents already reading on a regular basis recall the parent booklet encouraging them to consider a wider range of titles and to broaden the role of books in the home (e.g. not just at bedtime). These parents found the parent booklet reassuring and motivating.

A minority of parents who read infrequently with their children failed to respond to the pack beyond an initial review of the books and the parent leaflet. The books were retained but didn't impact on shared reading, either due to demands of older siblings or parental reluctance. It is this audience for whom a more didactic approach might be helpful within the pack (i.e. setting out expectations), though without being alienating.

'I think my wife took more interest... You see it and then interest fizzles out... you get it and then you move on to new books.'  
(Father of 2 year old)

## 2.2 Bookstart Treasure

It proved more difficult to establish the long-term impact of Bookstart Treasure on parents and children. By the age of three many children are engaging with peers; whether attending a nursery school part-time or a playgroup this is likely to offer them access to books and story-telling experiences. They may be bringing home books each week and may make associations between television and books.

Parents were asked to reflect on how sustained their child's interest was in the books and bag. In response some parents identified a favourite book from those received, one that for them evokes a particular stage in their child's development. Parents felt nostalgic for these books and warmly towards Bookstart. The bag also remained visible in many homes for quite a while; a small number of respondents reflected on how their child had always chosen to carry books in it.

More might be done to elicit tangible behavioural change amongst parents via Bookstart Treasure. The lack of a concrete call to action minimises expectations of parents. Those parents struggling to engage active pre-schoolers did not show evidence of employing fresh reading strategies, though on inspection they were warm towards the messages within the 'Share the Fun' booklet.

None of the attending parents had joined the library as a result of Bookstart Treasure, though all were aware of their local library and some were already members. One respondent suggested that his child would have been receptive to a library reading challenge or colouring competition to drive library attendance.

## Interest in Bookstart aims

Respondents were presented with Bookstart's aims: the literacy goals that it hopes to support through its various initiatives. They were invited to identify any aims that surprised them in being attached to early reading, with particular reference to the Bookstart Baby or Treasure packs.

The following aims derived the greatest interest and surprise from parents:

1. Highlights the importance of the home learning environment  
Many parents picked up on this aim, expressing interest in themselves as the child's first teacher and being impressed by the status this gave them. On reflection all recognized the role they played in teaching their child life skills but discussion of this



statement also helped many to identify the early language skills, book handling skills and knowledge about the world they had supported in their child.

'It's the different vocabulary. The words you use every day are banal, reading builds a broader vocabulary. Learning doesn't have to be structured, they are learning every day by virtue of you playing with them, listening to them.'

(Mother of 6 month old)

'Now that Ryan is able to read all of these big words I feel like I've put in all of that input.'

(Mother of 4 year old talking about 6 year old child)

2. Aids socio-emotional development, good mental health and wellbeing  
Parents in every group identified this aim as of interest, though also questioned its meaning. There was uncertainty in how reading could support good mental health; parents primarily chose to interpret this as 'knowledge about the world' though on reflection others perceived it to imply security and confidence that arises through shared reading and one-to-one nurturing.

3. Supports a child's development of confidence and self esteem  
Many parents were intrigued by this statement. They could understand that access to books and shared reading might promote a child's confidence, but could not initially identify a link with 'self-esteem.' On discussion, some agreed that a child's self-esteem might be supported by exposure to certain titles (e.g. those that help address transition or that support an understanding of heritage and community), by greater personal confidence (which is enhanced by parental attention and shared time) and by a greater sense of ownership (achieved through familiarity with titles and stories).

'They're really into Disney pictures and I try to show them more books with black people in. They don't seem that interested but I think that's really important to look at books of who you are.'

(Father of 4 year old)

Of the three aims commonly selected, viewing themselves as their child's first teacher was most easily understood and compelling to parents. For many parents this was a surprising notion, though one that made complete sense. Many parents had failed to interpret their parenting day to day as 'early teaching' and to be told they were doing so boosted their self-esteem.

An understanding of parents' potential to support their child's mental health and self-esteem was also of real interest, though less easily understood and not perceived to be relevant to children under 12 months. Each group interpreted differently how reading might boost a child's mental health and self-esteem, whether via security, bonding and personal identify (younger children), learning about the world (toddlers) or developing skills to tackle change (pre-schoolers). There was also a sense amongst a minority of respondents that children's familiarity

with favourite titles and characters and their ability to join in aloud with texts would boost self-esteem.

Respondents were quick to counsel caution over whether these aims should be promoted to parents. Whilst they understood that it was helpful for parents to receive tangible evidence of the value of reading they were concerned not to “burden” mothers further, to avoid feelings of guilt or worse; apathy in parents who have never read and therefore feel it is too late.

*‘I was working a lot, didn’t have much time, he never seemed to enjoy it. I think I was trying to read at the wrong time so I think knowing this might have made me feel worse. I’m only reading now because the books are there and I’ve got time.’*  
Mother of 13 month old, second child)

## Recommendations

Parents were invited at the end of each group to make recommendations for improving the impact and / or usability of the Bookstart bags. Discussion of book selections was not included within these debates.

### Pre-promotion

Any device that supports an understanding of when parents can expect to receive their Bookstart Baby and Bookstart Treasure packs will augment their perceived worth to parents. Expectation will promote the bags from having ‘freebie’ to ‘must have’ status. Those parents whose children’s Health Records were stamped on receipt of Bookstart Baby showed greatest regard for the official status of the initiative: perhaps this could be implemented universally.

Perhaps Bookstart Treasure could be pre-promoted in the Bookstart Baby bag, at the three year vaccinations and / or via the distributing partners. Distribution in the context of Book Week or at other key dates to a whole year group is motivating; although it means that some children are younger than others on receipt it does again, make distribution more official. Distribution as a ‘gift’ from the child’s nursery on his / her third birthday would be an interesting alternative.

Parents were keen to explore opportunities to interact with Booktrust online. Though budgetary restrictions are fully appreciated it may be worth reiterating these here, since each of them present opportunities for local, timely information regarding distribution:

- Tie-ups with monthly email bulletins regarding a child’s development (these can start from birth)
- Tie-ups with local and national online forums e.g. NetMums
- QR codes on parent booklets to support download of further online material from Booktrust

- Prize draw to join or visit the library which in turn subscribes the respondent to a dedicated Booktrust / local library email newsletter
- 'Reward chart' for parents helping them to chart their behaviour online, track their child's interest in books and pre-empt receipt of the next bag.

'Could they have it as an app? Unless you're a fast reader you're never going to finish the booklet? It's all there, in the palm of your hand...'

(Mother of 9 month old)

### Delivery partners

One strength of Bookstart lies in its distribution partnerships with local agencies and the success that these varied partners present in achieving wide reach in each region. Parents' recollections of receipt of their pack are largely positive; certainly the choice of distributing agents is perceived to be relevant and credible, though issues with the way the packs were gifted were also highlighted.

If it is possible to exert any further influence over distribution, Bookstart might consider exploring improved messaging, local pre-promotion and local cross-selling to other literacy initiatives:

- Messaging: Consistency in communicating the aims and intentions of Bookstart, consistency in the questioning of parents at point of distribution and invitation to trial shared reading and consistency in sharing the contents of the pack
- Local pre-promotion: Using templated materials or other, to raise awareness of the Bookstart packs prior to distribution including on scheduling the 12-month check-up
- Cross-selling: Exploring opportunities for Bookstart partners to promote details of the local library service and additional community initiatives
- Format: Attaching informal 'instructions for use' to the outside of each book will both emphasise the parent's role in shared reading and explain to unconvinced parents the value of the text selected.

Some parents criticised the lack of sign-posting on the outside of the bag to the parent literature within. Instructions to parents (or to discrete audiences, e.g. fathers) might stress the potential call to action inside the bag.

Many parents acknowledge that their previous personal reading habit has been usurped by use of their phone or tablet at bedtime. There was interest in both an online equivalent of the parent booklet (which is currently available on the Bookstart website) and an app that motivated and inspired behaviour.

Improve the retention and long-term impact of the messages within the parent booklet by exploring alternative formats such as postcards, magnets, diary formats, bath-book, or mini-posters.

## Conclusion

**Qualitative study revealed considerable commitment and motivation amongst mothers and fathers from all socio-economic backgrounds to engage their children in books and reading from an early age.**

**However reading strategies vary widely and can often be poorly informed, as well as inconsistently applied. Parental perceptions of the part they play in their child's early literacy development are subjective and parents often under-value this role.**

**Universal book-gifting schemes such as Bookstart play an important role in communicating key messages to parents early in their child's development and placing age-relevant books into households. An even stronger call to action and improved messaging around distribution might support more effective reading practices, helping parents to understand the importance of their role.**

### Parents make links between a child's age and the corresponding role of books

'We've got a big box of books, there's one that has a button that she loves to press. My oldest one brings his books home and reads with her and shows her. He makes rhymes up with her name.'

(Mother of 4 month old)

- Motivations vary between households though patterns emerged that suggest age of child has greatest influence
- For many parents reading with their baby is a pleasurable activity that supports an emotional connection and an introduction to vocabulary, whilst reading to a toddler helps to develop their awareness of the world and extend language beyond mother-child 'babble' and everyday conversation
- As their children grow older, shared reading reinforces the previous closeness but is also often driven by the child's desire to make independent book selections, interact and hear the same story repeatedly
- Many identified that barriers to reading with babies and young children are also age-related. Lack of reciprocity or interaction and uncertainty about its relevance can inhibit a parent's propensity to read with their young baby, whilst many parents of toddlers appear to lack the techniques or strategies to address short-term concentration spans and evolving interests. Whilst a parent's enjoyment strongly influences his / her propensity to read with their child, whatever its age, this enjoyment can be significantly undermined by a willful toddler and a parent without the skills or knowledge to engage
- The findings of the literature review back up the above. Parents' perceptions of the value of reading alter as children grow up, from having an emphasis on the

nurturing benefits and development of recognition and fine motor skills for their babies to supporting the attainment and concentration skills of their older child

- Whilst their children are younger, parents are likely to be heavily influenced by environmental influences (routine, opportunity, presence of books)
- In contrast, as their children reach school age socio-cultural influences become more dominant. School reading requirements, young people's burgeoning independence and increasing numbers of parents returning to work all place pressure on the extent to which parents spend time reading with their children.

### **Busy families are resourceful in finding times to share books**

'The majority of the time I read is before bedtime or during bedtime when I've got their full attention. They both love it, they both interact. He'll read from the pictures.'

(Mother of two boys age 1 and 3)

- Every parent involved in the study revealed elements of routine in the time they spend with their child. This may be influenced by other siblings, their own work and commitments, opportunities available to them within their community or the child's own interests and needs
- Books and shared reading are generally used at quieter times of the day, either to distract and calm a child or when the parent has fewer distractions and more time. Parents spoke of reading in bed in the morning, at mealtimes (younger children only) and books at bath-time
- There was an apparent lack of books used outside the home to distract and entertain when out and about. One mother who was committed to reading at home with her child reported being influenced by her own nanny on finding a book in her child's changing bag. More could be done to influence and educate parents in this regard
- Furthermore bedtime by no means presents a default opportunity for shared parent-child reading. Focus groups conducted in this study revealed quite a number of families without a bedtime story routine, for whom books are shared at other times in the day. These families employ other strategies to mark bedtime (story-tapes, television), with some having tried without success to introduce books and others selecting less time-consuming or effortful entertainment.

### **Academic attainment influences parents' motivations, but not propensity to read**

'For me I think happiness comes from them being successful. You do think if they're not going to be smart they won't be happy. For me the appeal is more academic.'

(Father of a 2 year old)

- Research identified in the Literature Review revealed links between a parent's academic attainment, engagement in their child's literacy and direct links with their child's own attainment (Reading is Fundamental, 2008). Parents with higher levels of education attainment were observed to be more engaged in their child's literacy practices. In turn, their children were observed to perform better.
- However the qualitative interviews conducted in this study observed slightly different patterns. Motivation to read with or to support their child's literacy was observed amongst most respondents, with propensity to read not apparently influenced by education level. Instead an individual's academic attainment appears to influence his / her attitude and approach to shared reading:
  - Parents with lower academic attainment place greater emphasis on early reading and access to books as a gateway to future academic success than parents with higher academic attainment, who perceive books as a means of fostering the imagination and part of the essence of childhood
  - However parents with lower levels of academic attainment also appear less likely to place books at the heart of their children's environments. Perceptions of books and the importance of early literacy does not appear to always translate into effective reading strategies
  - Likewise many parents with higher academic attainment failed to seek out effective strategies for supporting their children's interest in books. Interest in sharing nostalgic texts, not necessarily age-appropriate, was common amongst these parents, as was a lack of skill in addressing toddler resistance.

### Give parents strategies and tools to tackle knowledge gaps and cultural barriers

'I felt quite confident. When you are alone with your baby you feel okay. But when they lose their concentration and get bored of it it stops you wanting to read.'

(Mother of 13 month old)

- The literature review revealed motivating factors and barriers that influence parents' propensity to share books with their children that are both socio-cultural and environmental
- Many socio-cultural influences, such as increased prevalence of digital entertainment and increased parental time poverty, are common to many families within the UK, with parents of older children in particular apparently lacking strategies to address these issues (Green and Beavis, 2013)
- This finding was borne out in the focus groups though to a lesser extent amongst parents of toddlers and younger babies, where the child has less ability to dictate

entertainment choice. However the use of phones and tablets as an ad-hoc entertainment vehicle for parents when out of the home was noticeable and common to all socio-economic groups

- Environmental influences can be both universal (access to library facilities, available pre-school centres) or discrete (peer influence, presence of books in the home). Focus groups identified few external community influences on parents that exert influence around reading and books. Apathy towards local libraries was noted amongst all audiences and in particular a sense that that they were less relevant to parents with young babies and toddlers.

### Parents are interested in the idea of themselves as their child's first teacher

'Things go into their mind in a different way than when you play'.

(Mother of 5 month old)

- Parents' own experiences of childhood influence their interest in sharing books with their young children, linking to perceptions of value and outcome or to nostalgic beliefs.
- Addressing perceptions of value and helping parents to understand the role they can play in their children's development has been shown to have a positive impact on their propensity to share books with their child (Hoover, Dempsey et al, 2005).
- Exploration of Bookstart's aim to support every parent as their 'child's first teacher' revealed particular interest in this concept, with many parents undervaluing the role they play. Similarly parents were notably interested in the potential for books to support their children's mental health and well-being, and were keen to find out more about this.

### Second (and subsequent) children may see fewer age-relevant books

'It's hard when they're so small. The older siblings are close in age so can do things together, run a bath, read stories with them.'

(Mother of 7 month old)

- The literature review confirmed that children in larger families are more likely to be exposed to books at a younger age (with older siblings having to read books for school) (Read to Me!, Nova Scotia 2013). However, there was no evidence arising in this study that parents exposed through their child's school or nursery setting to the benefits of books were necessarily motivated to introduce them at a younger age for their subsequent children.
- Furthermore parents acknowledged that it can be difficult to carve out time for one to one reading with their youngest children. Despite benefiting from the



presence of older siblings and joining in with them at bedtime, household pressures may result in fewer opportunities for these younger children to hear age-relevant stories.

### Explore opportunities to directly engage fathers

‘We do a lot of ‘on the sofa, watching DVDs’. We do some reading, we do it every night. I’d like to do more drawing, more activities. I don’t do it as I’m always tired and it’s a lot easier than coming up with activities.’

(Father of 3.5 year old)

- The Literature Review (Mullan, 2010) and the qualitative research both demonstrated the positive role that fathers can play in sharing books with their children.
- Fathers interviewed demonstrated a range of approaches to shared reading, from the use of silly voices and entertaining, to being the dedicated reader of ‘chapter books’ at bedtime. Many were articulate in expressing a desire for recreating the ‘world of the imagination’ which they had inhabited as a child. A small number of mothers reported their husbands being slow readers but still being happy to read to their (uncritical) audience. Where a father is not the primary carer this one-on-one time is of real value to both the parent and child.
- However men also demonstrated a tendency to perceive themselves as better at physical play, with their role being to take children outside or to play physical games. Disengaged from reading with their children they fail to model enjoyment of reading to young toddlers or to provide support and encouragement to emerging readers. The Literature Review also revealed that men could be of particular influence on their sons’ attitudes towards reading.
- Gadsden (2012) argues for alternative ways to engage fathers and to sustain their engagement, including embedding literacy within dedicated programmes targeting fathers directly, tailored to their specific needs and expectations. With evidence from previous research suggesting that fathers whose child had received Bookstart Treasure are more inclined to read with him / her, perhaps the Bookstart packs are an ideal mechanic for a potential call to action.

### Booktrust can play an important role for potentially disengaged audiences

‘It’s one on one; you’re having a conversation. The more ideas about the world the more you are helping them to decide what they like.’

(Mother of 3 year old)

- Initiatives that seek to communicate to parents the value of reading with their children do effect change. The literature review demonstrated that book-gifting programmes and tailored interventions do appear to provide low frequency or

non-reading parents with the tools, confidence and physical books to overcome these hurdles. Focus group activity underpinned this, with many parents placing considerable value on the receipt of their Bookstart bag, viewing Bookstart Baby as a 'rite of passage' which attached considerable weight to their role as a parent.

- More research is needed to explore the specific requirements of EAL parents whose childhood literacy experiences may diverge from that practiced in the UK, giving them less personal knowledge to draw on. Focus group discussions in this study revealed the pragmatism adopted by many EAL parents, drawing on community support and welcoming the input of older children. However these EAL parents would also benefit by tailored advice, support and guidance in order to help them leverage their own education experiences in an EAL context.
- Equally, more research may help to better understand the cultural differences of certain UK communities (such as the Traveller community) and help organisations and agencies to better tailor their messaging and initiatives.
- All parents involved in discussion that had received a Bookstart Baby or Bookstart Treasure pack were able to recall the nature of its use on receipt, the subsequent role of the books in the home and the impact of the supporting literature.
- In general, Bookstart bags are highly regarded, with the quality of the books and the bags themselves perceived to be relevant and of high quality. However, more might be done to emphasise the relevance and role of picture books (books without any text), to provide parents with clearer expectations around reading with their child and / or a call to action. Dialogic tips for each book might support better links between the parent booklet and the titles within the bag, whilst improved messaging on distribution could emphasise the importance of the parent's role.

# Appendix

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