

Children's reading habits in the early years

Research with families from low-income backgrounds in the UK

Introduction

Research shows that reading in the early years brings profound and wide-ranging benefits to children that can have a lifelong positive impact. At a time when the disadvantage gap is growing, understanding the reading habits and behaviours of children from low-income families is essential for anyone who supports children in their early years and wishes to give them the best start in life.

About this briefing

This briefing provides an overview of BookTrust's research of children's early years reading habits across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. By sharing these findings, we hope to inspire our partners, wider practitioners and policy makers to support children and families to share books and stories together so every child grows up with the potential to be a lifelong reader.

This is the first in a series of research briefings that BookTrust will be publishing in 2023.

Daily shared reading peaks between two and four years of age then declines

% of children being read with daily



 **95%**

of parents and carers **see reading as important** for their child

 **77%**

of families start sharing books with their child **before their first birthday**

 **28%**

of parents and carers **don't find reading with their child easy**

 **21%**

of parents and carers **don't feel confident choosing books** that their child will enjoy

 **20%**

of parents and carers say they don't read with their child due to **a lack of time**

What does this research tell us?

Parents and carers see reading with their children as important and whilst the majority are sharing stories with their children in the first year of life, almost a quarter of families are not. Frequent shared reading reaches its peak when children are aged between two and four and then starts to drop significantly, continuing to decline throughout childhood. This means many children are missing out on regular shared reading opportunities and exposure to books and stories and, therefore, the chance to enjoy the profound and wide-ranging benefits that reading brings.

A lack of time due to the pressures of work or family life and a lack of confidence in choosing books their children will enjoy are among the main barriers that prevent families from reading together. Furthermore, over a quarter of parents and carers do not find it easy to read with their young children.

These are complex issues that require a behaviour change led approach to support families to read more with their children, and to continue shared reading throughout and beyond the early years. Making sharing stories with children easy and enjoyable for families is therefore key.

Research methodology

BookTrust conducted an online survey of 2,148 parents and carers of children aged 0–7 living in low-income households in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between April and June 2022. We use the term low-income families to indicate those living in relative poverty as defined by Department for Work and Pensions.

“ Amelia is becoming very interested in books now. We’re hoping that by reading books with her at six months old, it becomes the norm for her. It’s just really nice that you’re able to take five or ten minutes out just to have that time where you’re all sat together with books. The thing you can feel is that warmth from being together. It really helps me as a mum, and I hope it helps them as well.”

Liz, mum of three including baby Amelia from Shropshire



Why is reading important for children?

At a time when families are facing multiple and competing pressures on their time and finances, why is it so important to invest in supporting families to share books and stories?

Reading and sharing stories is proven to bring children profound and wide-ranging benefits that can affect their health, wellbeing, progress at school and their creativity. Shared reading brings immediate benefits to families too. It supports bonding between children and their parents, carers or other family members, boosts parental positivity and improves children's sleep.

Children's brains experience the most growth in their first five years. In these early years, stimulation from books, and using books, stories and rhymes as a focus for playing, talking, and singing enhances the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth and development of children that extends far beyond childhood.

We know that if children experience early shared reading they are more likely to continue to read as they grow up. Reading for pleasure in the early years has four times more powerful impact on a child's progress across the curriculum at age 16 than parental education or socioeconomic status.

Children from low-income backgrounds stand to benefit even more from the immediate and longer-term benefits of early shared reading. Evidence shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve highly at the end of primary school are twice as likely to have been read to at home in their early years, compared to their peers. In the long-term, reading has the potential to transform children's future life chances. A child growing up in poverty who is read to at age five has a significantly higher chance of economic success in their 30s than their peers who were not read to.

It is essential that children from low income and vulnerable family backgrounds do not miss out on the transformative benefits of early shared reading. That's why at BookTrust, we provide extra support to these families; ensuring our books, resources and support reach and engage children and families who need us the most.

[Read our research into the Benefits of Reading](#)

“ The growing disadvantage gap between children from low-income families and their more affluent peers starts in the early years and persists throughout childhood. As a matter of urgency, any discussion about supporting children in their early years needs to include measures that will motivate and encourage children and families to share stories together so they can experience both the immediate and longer-term benefits of reading. BookTrust is committed to supporting families with impactful and cost-effective interventions so they can enjoy shared reading experiences. Will you join us? ”

Diana Gerald, Chief Executive, BookTrust

About BookTrust

As the UK's largest children's reading charity, we want every child to read regularly and by choice. We reach millions of children and families every year, inspiring them with books and resources to get them started on their reading journey. We provide a wide range of carefully curated and designed books, resources and support to help families start sharing stories and to continue reading throughout childhood. We offer more targeted support to families from low-income and vulnerable backgrounds because we know these children stand to benefit the most from the benefits of reading.

Our support is based on robust evidence, designed to deliver reading behaviour change. It is developed in partnership with families and expert practitioners to create inspiring and enjoyable shared reading experiences for children and families.

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

Bookstart

In the last year alone, our Bookstart books and resources reached over 700,000 families with children in their early years in over 5,000 different community settings across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.



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