

Reading in Foster Families

Summary Report



National Children's
Bureau





Foreword

Every year, BookTrust reaches 2.5 million families across the country with books, resources and support, to inspire a love of reading. We believe that every child has the right to experience the joy of reading. Research shows that children who enjoy reading have better reading outcomes. Reading also helps to develop imagination, creativity, empathy and wellbeing. However, we also know that not all children experience the benefits that a reading habit brings.

We already support thousands of children in care across the UK through our programmes, but we know there is more we can do. Foster carers are important role models for the children in their care and we know that reading together is a wonderful way to build relationships and ignite imagination, as well as improving vocabulary. We hope that this research will enable us, and others who work with foster families, to better support carers and their children to experience the joy of reading and its associated benefits.

Diana Gerald

Chief Executive, BookTrust

Summary

This report summarises the results of a UK-wide survey with almost 600 foster carers and interviews with a small number of foster carers and children. The purpose of the research was to find out more about carers' reading habits and attitudes, how they engage with reading with their children (particularly reading for pleasure), any barriers they face and any support that they need.



The findings highlight that:

- Foster carers generally have positive views on reading and read frequently, both alone and with their child. Children also reported generally positive views about reading
- Foster carers recognise the benefits and importance of reading with their child
- Foster carers' educational attainment is linked to their reading habits and confidence
- Foster carers are important reading role models for children
- Placement stability is related to children's reading abilities (as reported by carers)
- There are several barriers to shared reading in foster families
- Some carers receive support to help their children with reading from a variety of sources
- Carers would benefit from further support to help their child with reading.

These findings will help BookTrust, and other organisations who work with foster families, to develop support for carers, to help them with reading with the children in their care. The findings also contribute to the wider knowledge base in this area.

To access the full report, please [click here](#) or visit www.booktrust.org.uk

Background

Much research has been published on the poorer educational attainment of children who are looked-after compared with children who are not in care. Many interventions for children in care focus on narrowing the attainment gap between them and their peers. However, there has been little research into foster carers' own reading habits and attitudes, and reading engagement between carers and children, particularly related to reading for pleasure.



Considering this, BookTrust commissioned the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to undertake a research project to:

- Improve understanding of how carers can be better supported to engage with reading with their children
- Inform development of our programmes.

This research aimed to find out more about:

- Carers' own engagement with reading
- How carers currently engage with their child around reading
- Any challenges carers face with supporting their child with reading
- Any support carers currently receive to help their child with reading
- Any support that BookTrust could develop to help carers with reading with their child

This research aimed to inform the development of support for foster carers¹ to help them with reading with the children in their care.

¹BookTrust will consider how any future support developed can support carers with children in a range of placements, including kinship care placements, which made up 5% of the sample.

Methods

The project consisted of:

- A literature review
- A UK-wide online survey with foster carers and foster children
- Follow-up interviews with foster carers and foster children.

The literature review was used to inform the development of the surveys and interviews. It summarised the existing evidence on: the educational outcomes for children who are looked-after and the factors affecting these; the benefits of reading for children in foster care; and methods for increasing reading amongst children in care. It also outlined reading interventions currently available for children in foster care and the success of these.

The survey was developed and distributed to foster families through a range of organisations including: local authorities; membership organisations (e.g. Local Government Agencies); and charities and agencies (both UK-wide and country-specific), such as the Fostering Network and Barnardo's. The survey was also promoted through NCB newsletters, bulletins and social media. Foster carers were asked to provide contact details at the end of the survey if they were interested in taking part in

a follow-up interview and then selected based on their survey responses.

There were 598 responses to the foster carers' survey and 35 responses to the foster children's survey². 18 families were recruited for interviews through the surveys – in 13 of the families, the foster carer and child(ren) were both interviewed, while in five families only the foster carer was interviewed.

Whilst the survey distribution method ensured that a wide range and large number of foster carers could take part, it is unlikely that the sample is representative of the population of foster carers nationally due to the self-selecting nature of survey and interview research. It is likely that those choosing to take part in the research were carers and children who were more engaged, confident or interested in reading. This should be kept in mind when reviewing the findings summarised in the next section. Challenges and barriers faced by families who have lower levels of engagement and confidence with reading are likely to be higher in the general foster carer population than those reported here. This is due to this sample bias. This is also true for their support needs. This is important to consider when using this research to inform the development of support for foster carers.

²The primary focus of the survey element of the research was to obtain the views of foster carers and the dissemination strategy focused on this aspect, hence the low number of responses to the foster children's survey.

Key findings from the literature review

The literature review highlighted the following key points:

- Fostering is the most common type of care received by children who are looked-after in the UK, with 75 – 86% of looked-after children in such placements (The Fostering Network, 2015).
- Children in care generally achieve lower educational outcomes than children who are not in care (Sebba et al., 2015). Research suggests a number of reasons for this, including placement instability (Maxwell et al., 2006; Allen and Vacca, 2010) and a lack of clarity around the role of foster carers in supporting children's learning (Maddern, 2010). However, foster care has been found to have benefits over other types of care in terms of improving children's attitudes towards reading and reading abilities (Hedin et al., 2011; Roy and Rutter, 2006).





- Studies show links between early reading and later academic attainment and behaviour issues (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Pears et al., 2011), which are important considerations given the greater number of looked-after children who have social, emotional and behavioural needs (Bywater et al., 2010; Sebba et al., 2015). Reading for pleasure and a rich home literacy environment help to address these educational and behavioural issues, and can be beneficial to relationships between foster carers and their children (Clark and Rumbold, 2006; Wilkins and Terlitsky, 2016).
- Previous evaluations and/or systematic reviews have pointed to the promising nature of reading interventions, such as Paired Reading, the Letterbox Club, Reading Rich and Wriggle and Roar, for improving the reading abilities and engagement with reading of children in care, as well as improving foster carers' confidence and skills in supporting their child (Forsman and Vinnerljung, 2012; Liabo et al., 2012).
- Important supportive factors for increasing reading for pleasure for children who are looked-after include placement stability and foster carers' involvement in supporting and encouraging children (Greig et al., 2006; Seden, 2009). Developing children's interest in reading through selecting appropriate books, engaging in literacy activities, reading aloud or identifying with characters is vital if they are to read for pleasure (Miller, 2012).

Key findings from surveys and interviews

The key findings from the surveys and interviews with foster carers and children are summarised below:

Foster carers generally have positive views on reading and read frequently, both alone and with their child. Children also reported generally positive views about reading.

- Most carers responding to the survey reported that they enjoyed reading.
- In interviews, carers said that reading gave them an opportunity to escape, use their imagination and relax.
- Children gave similar feedback, reporting that reading made them feel happy and increased their knowledge and understanding.
- Carers also reported that they read frequently, with almost half reading websites and blogs at least once a day. Over a third read fiction books at least once a day.
- Over half of carers reported that when they were children, they read by themselves very often.
- Just over half of carers reported reading with their child at least once a day, with fiction and non-fiction being the most popular genres.
- Carers reported reading less frequently with older children than younger children.

90% of foster carers who read with their child reported that it had made a positive difference to the relationship between them and their child.





Foster carers recognise the benefits and importance of reading with their child.

- Around three quarters of carers strongly agreed that reading helped to widen a child's vocabulary, fed imagination, helped with school work and built communication skills.
- In interviews, foster carers reported that reading was often prioritised over other activities, at least at certain times during the day. For example, some carers described a routine, particularly with younger children, where computers and televisions were turned off at a set time each night and books were chosen to be shared together.
- 90% of foster carers who read with their child, reported that it had made a positive difference to the relationship between them and their child. The more frequently carers read with their child, the more likely they were to report that reading had made a positive difference to their relationship.
- In interviews, foster carers reported that reading had given their child increased confidence and self-esteem. Spending quality time sharing a book was believed to be one of the best ways to connect with their child. Reading was viewed as an opportunity for children to hear about and understand issues in their own lives in an enjoyable and non-threatening way. It also opened conversations, allowing carers to tackle issues in ways that children would understand and gave carers insight into children's feelings without having to ask them direct questions.
- The quotes on the following page illustrate carers' perceptions of the importance of shared reading for foster children in terms of bonding, strengthening relationships, and increasing the child's self-esteem and sense of security.

“...it signified the end of the day and did not matter if there was upset or behaviour issues... we could still do it... and it was nice to do that at the end of the day to show that we still cared about them, no matter what had happened that day.” - **Foster carer**



“...to build a relationship, to build trust, to show them that people do want to spent time with them...and to build their self-worth I guess, that you know, people do want to help them and be interested in what they want to be interested in.” - **Foster carer**

“I sometimes wonder whether they’ve clung to that [reading] as a way of praise through everything that went on.”

Foster carers’ educational attainment is linked to their reading habits and confidence.

- How often carers read when they were a child (both with an adult and alone) was related to their educational attainment. Carers who had read less frequently with an adult when they were aged 10 and under had lower levels of educational attainment. Carers who read more often by themselves when they were aged between 11 and 16 were more likely to achieve higher educational attainment.
- Most carers were generally confident about reading silently (86%). However, carers were less confident about reading to someone else (60%) and discussing books and stories with others (55%). Again, this was linked to educational attainment with carers with higher educational attainment feeling more confident about reading aloud and discussing books than carers with lower educational attainment.

Placement stability is related to children’s reading abilities (as reported by carers).³

- 40% of children were reported by foster carers to have a below average reading level.
- However, carers were more likely to say their child was average or above average in their reading level if they had been in foster care for longer.
- Carers were also more likely to report that children had an average or above average reading level if they had been living with their current foster carer for longer.
- Children who had been in their placement longer read more frequently with their carer.

³ Children’s reading levels were not measured independently. Carers were asked to rate children’s reading level as either ‘above average’, ‘average’, or ‘below average’ for their age based on their experiences and any information they had from the child’s school.



Foster carers are important reading role models for children.

- The survey results showed that the more time foster carers spent reading fiction and magazines themselves, the more time they spent reading with their children.
- The more time foster carers spent reading certain materials, the more time their child spent reading the same materials. This included magazines, newspapers, websites and blogs, comics, audio books, fiction books and non-fiction books.
- The more carers agreed with the benefits of reading for children (e.g. widening children's vocabulary, feeding imagination, helping with school work, building communication skills), the more frequently they read with their child.
- On the other hand, foster carers with lower levels of reading enjoyment were more likely to report that their child was not interested in books.
- In interviews, many foster children said their views of reading had changed since being in their current placement. They generally attributed this to their foster carer making reading fun and enjoyable.
- In interviews, carers also acknowledged that they were aware of the importance of being a good role model by reading in front of their foster children.



“Being a good role model in reading is one of the best things you can actually do.”



There are several barriers to shared reading in foster families.

Through the survey, carers reported the following as the main barriers to reading with their child:

- My children struggle to concentrate when reading (56%)
- My children find reading difficult (35%)
- Finding books my children will enjoy is difficult (29%)

- My children don't enjoy reading (29%)

In follow-up interviews, some carers also highlighted that they faced challenges in finding high-interest low-ability books, i.e. books that were suitable for children with below average reading levels that included age-appropriate content matching the child's interest level. Carers also referenced a lack of appropriate books about foster care for children to read.

Some carers receive support to help their children with reading from a variety of sources.

- Just under half of foster carers had received support to help their child with reading.
- Of those who had received support, two thirds had received this from their foster child's school, and half had received it from the local authority.
- Support was mainly focused on

providing better access to books (56%), information about reading (34%), advice (34%) and tutoring for children (31%).

- Support for foster families from family and friends was reported to be the most useful, with 88% finding this useful.
- Of more formal types of support, library support was reported to be the most useful (87%), followed by school support (84%) and local authority support (82%).



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Carers would benefit from further support to help their child with reading.

Carers reported several areas of support that they felt would be useful. The most common themes from the survey and interviews were as follows:

- **Improved access to books.** Carers reported that improved access to libraries would be beneficial. They also reiterated the need for more high-interest low-ability books. Foster carers also reported the importance of children having their own books to keep. This was of particular importance for carers offering emergency or respite placements who may not be able to offer a wide range of books to suit different children's needs.
- **Advice.** In general, carers reported that advice on suitable books would be beneficial. Some carers lacked confidence and understanding of their child's reading level, which made it difficult to select appropriate books and reading materials. Some carers reported that they needed advice on supporting children

with additional needs or reluctant readers, especially older children.

- **Additional support from schools.** Carers felt that they would benefit from additional support and advice from schools on how to support their child with reading. Carers reported that a united approach between the carer and the school would be beneficial, allowing sharing of concerns and approaches, and encouraging adaptability of support to suit the needs of the individual child.
- **Extra reading support for the child.** Carers discussed the need for children to receive additional support with reading. It was suggested that this could involve one-to-one tutoring in school, extra help from library staff and fun, interactive support to engage reluctant readers.

Foster carers reported the importance of children having their own books to keep.

Conclusions

This research has highlighted carers' perceptions of the benefits of shared reading, including:

- Strengthening the relationship between them and their child
- Connecting with their child
- Helping them to talk about issues with their child
- Improving children's vocabulary and communication skills
- Increasing children's self-esteem and sense of security.

Carers' knowledge and recognition of these benefits and their confidence and ability to support their child with reading is therefore crucial. Providing support and guidance for carers who have lower levels of confidence with reading, less positive attitudes towards reading, or difficulties with supporting their child's reading is particularly important.

Linked to this is the importance of foster carers as role models to their children. For example, the survey results showed that the more time carers spend reading themselves, the more time they spend reading with their child.

On the other hand, carers who enjoy reading less were more likely to say that their child was not interested in books. This highlights the importance of foster carers' own attitudes and behaviours around reading for pleasure in influencing their children's attitudes and behaviours around reading. Therefore, support for carers to help them to become reading role models for their children could be beneficial. Again, this could be especially important for carers with lower confidence or knowledge around reading.

Placement stability has been identified as an important factor in the wider literature in supporting reading for pleasure and better educational outcomes. This research supports this, as children who had been placed with their foster carer for longer were reported to have higher reading levels. Children who had been in their current placement longer also read more frequently with their carer.

Whilst placement instability poses a wider challenge and is affected by many factors, these results could indicate where support for reading

...providing support and guidance for carers who have lower levels of confidence with reading, more negative attitudes towards reading, or difficulties with supporting their child's reading is particularly important.

for pleasure may have the greatest impact and could help to guide the development and targeting of this support. Families with less stable placements may benefit more from additional support related to reading with their child.

The barriers to reading with their children that carers reported, provide evidence about areas where they may benefit from additional support.

Difficulty in accessing suitable and enjoyable books was a common barrier. Specifically, carers reported a lack of high-interest low ability books. This is a wider issue, but probably affects children in care more as they are more likely to have reading levels below average for their age than children who are not in care (Sebba et al., 2015).

Carers also reported a lack of books about foster care, and books which may help children to understand or relate to issues in their own lives. Given that shared reading was reported to facilitate conversations between carers and children and allow for discussion and understanding of issues affecting children, this is an important finding which warrants further consideration. Carers also reported that they would benefit from more advice around understanding their children's reading



levels to help them to select appropriate books, as well as advice on supporting concentration and learning and helping children to enjoy reading.

Some carers also felt that they would benefit from advice on supporting children with additional needs or with engaging reluctant readers, who tended to be older children. Working with libraries, schools and local authorities to deliver this support may be most

beneficial, as carers reported that the support they currently received from these sources was most useful.

Whilst school support was reported to be very useful, a few carers mentioned that they had faced some challenges in terms of the suitability of books sent home and reading interventions that children took part in. These carers would welcome a more collaborative approach, in which they are more involved and able to contribute to their child's development. This finding may represent issues identified in the wider literature review on the lack of clarity around the role of the foster carer in supporting learning. It should be noted that these issues were reported by a small minority of respondents in this research, but it remains an important area to consider in terms of supporting both foster families and the practitioners who work with them.

Recommendations



1. BookTrust should consider providing support for foster carers who have lower levels of confidence, less positive attitudes towards reading, or struggle to support their children with reading. Support for these foster carers is likely to have the greatest impact on increasing engagement with reading and supporting reading for pleasure.
2. Targeted support may also be useful for foster carers who look after children in shorter or less stable placements, to help them to start reading with their child and establish a reading routine. Further research into the differences in shared reading in different types of placements would be beneficial to inform the targeting of support.
3. Support should aim to:
 - Increase foster carers' knowledge of how to access books
 - Increase carers' knowledge about the benefits and importance of shared reading and reading for pleasure
 - Increase carers' confidence in reading with their child
 - Increase foster carers' knowledge of how to choose suitable books for their child
 - Increase carers' knowledge and skills in supporting their child's reading
 - Enable carers to seek help for any literacy needs they may have.

4. Further research should be undertaken with practitioners (e.g. schools, libraries, local authorities) in order to develop support that is flexible (to fit in with support already available), meets the needs of families, and is useful and feasible for practitioners.
5. BookTrust should give foster families better access to books through:
 - Continuing to give children books to keep as part of their programmes
 - Continuing to create and promote bespoke booklists related to specific areas of need identified by the research, e.g. high-interest low ability books for older children; books about foster care; books dealing with difficult topics and issues to help children understand situations and feelings they may be coping with; books for children of different ages; and books for reluctant readers
 - Signposting to local support, such as libraries and other services.
6. BookTrust should consider providing additional guidance and support for foster carers as part of their existing programmes and support for children who are looked-after.
7. BookTrust should consider working with local authorities and libraries to deliver presentations or workshops at events for foster carers, or provide guidance materials to be delivered as part of programmes or training. These practitioners will be valuable in identifying families who need the most support, and possibly in delivering the support to foster carers directly.



8. BookTrust should continue to work with publishers to identify and highlight subjects and formats of books and reading materials that are not widely available (e.g. high-interest low-ability books and suitable books about foster care) and seek to encourage further publishing in these areas.
9. BookTrust should work with schools to help develop their support for foster carers, particularly related to supporting children's reading and accessing suitable books. This support should help schools to work closely and collaboratively with foster carers in a flexible way to meet the needs of the individual child.

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About BookTrust

BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity. Each year we reach 2.5 million children across the UK with books, resources and support to help develop a love of reading, because we know that reading can transform lives.

BookTrust currently supports children who are looked-after with reading through the Letterbox Club, for children aged 3-13, which provides personalised parcels containing carefully selected books, maths games and stationery. Children receive one parcel a month for six months. In 2016, 11,146 children took part in the Letterbox Club across the UK.

For more information visit booktrust.org.uk

About the National Children's Bureau

The National Children's Bureau is a leading children's charity working to build a better childhood for every child. We champion children's right to be safe, secure and supported, by using evidence and our expert knowledge to influence government policy. We help practitioners to do the best job possible, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people. For more information visit ncb.org.uk





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