

Trends, drivers and inequalities in UK childhood reading

BookTrust's National Family Survey

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Contents

Executive summary	3
Section 1: Introduction	6
About this research	7
Section 2: Reading habits, enjoyment and trends	8
Shared reading habits	8
Children’s enjoyment	9
Parents’ enjoyment and motivation	10
Interpreting these findings	11
Section 3: Inequalities in early reading	12
Section 4: Conditions that shape early reading habits	14
Time, capacity and routine stability	14
Socially embedded reading networks	17
Access to and ownership of books	18
Family reading cultures and norms	19
Knowledge and perceived effort	20
Interpreting these findings	21
Section 5: What this means for effective solutions	22
Creating more equitable foundations for family reading	24
Strengthening the infrastructure that supports these foundations	25
Section 6: Concluding reflections	26
Methodology notes	27
References	28

Executive summary

Section 1: Introduction

Reading and sharing stories with children brings wide-ranging benefits that can have a lifelong positive impact. It helps children meet early developmental milestones and do better at school. It develops children's empathy and creativity. It supports bonding, connection and wellbeing, helping children find belonging. It helps overcome inequalities before they deepen.

For families with young children, reading has never been more important, more valued or more at risk. Family life is undeniably complex and this context is shaping reading habits in the early years. Changing societal dynamics and rapid technological change place a range of pressures on families with young children. These pressures are not spread equally, and neither are opportunities for shared reading. As a result, inequalities in children's experiences begin from their earliest moments. Early shared reading habits, like other aspects of the home learning environment, vary across families. Small but repeated variations in everyday routines and interactions build up over time, gradually shaping children's developmental trajectories in lasting ways.

About this research

This report draws on a wide range of evidence to interpret significant findings from three national surveys of parents and carers with young children. The core dataset is a representative quota sample of 3,508 parents and carers of children aged 0–8 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, surveyed online between 16 October and 5 November 2025. Trend reporting draws on two earlier surveys in 2021 and 2022 which used comparable methods.

¹ In our survey, 'reading' is defined in age-appropriate ways that reflect how young children typically engage with books, including reading, sharing, looking at or playing with books.

Section 2: Reading enjoyment, habits and trends

Our research shows that reading¹ is highly valued, emotionally rewarding and widely practised among families with children aged 0–8. Young children's enjoyment of reading has increased. Yet despite this broad engagement, daily shared reading has fallen markedly and frequent shared reading (four days a week or more) has also declined in recent years. It appears that although motivation remains high, maintaining a reading habit has become harder over time.



of parents and carers report high levels of enjoyment from reading with their child.



of children are reported to like or love reading – **rising from 65% in 2021.**



of children are read with daily – **falling from 60% in 2021.**



of children are read with frequently (four days a week or more) – **falling from 80% in 2021.**

Section 3: Inequalities in early reading

Our findings suggest reading habits vary across groups in ways that reflect broader inequalities in time, routine stability, resources and caregiving support. These conditions shape not only families' opportunity to read together, but also how easy and sustainable shared reading feels in everyday life. The greatest inequalities appear where multiple pressures cluster together. These pressures are more likely to affect some groups than others, including families on low incomes.

Analysis of responses from parents and carers of children aged 0–8 suggests that bedtime reading follows a clear income gradient. 50% of children in the lowest income households read or are read to as part of their bedtime routine, compared with 56% in low-income households and 69% in non-low-income households. This interpretation is reinforced by a clear association between bedtime routine stability and daily shared reading. Among families who follow a bedtime routine about half the time or more, 52% report that their child is read with daily by an adult, compared with 31% of those who rarely follow a routine or have none.

Section 4: Conditions that shape early reading habits

Families want their children to spend more time reading, but many feel they require help to make this happen.



of parents and carers want their children to spend more time with books and stories.



of parents and carers report at least one challenge to sharing books with their child.



of parents and carers would like to receive more information and support to help their child spend more time with books and stories.

Barriers lie in the everyday conditions that shape families' capability and opportunity to read together. Alongside families' own motivations, these conditions either build resilience or undermine reading habits in the early years. These elements are closely interrelated: capability and opportunity shape how motivating shared reading feels in everyday life. We identify the following factors as important:

Capability – reading cultures, parental knowledge and confidence, and perceptions of effort.

Opportunity – time, capacity, routine stability, supportive networks and access to books.

Motivation – enjoyment, emotional reward, self-efficacy and experiencing the benefits.

Section 5: Effective solutions

Our findings indicate early reading habits are eroding not because families have stopped valuing reading, but because the effort required to sustain it increases under pressure. This makes it more important than ever to strengthen the foundations that support families to read together.

Establishing shared reading in the first year of life may help protect longer-term reading habits. 58% of children who were read with in their first year are read with daily, compared with 31% of those who started later.

Increasing equity in book access through strong public library systems with properly resourced outreach; access in early years settings, family hubs, schools and community groups; and importantly, in the home, is central to building supportive reading foundations for all children.

Providing support is especially important when supportive conditions are fragile. Families benefit from reassurance, practical guidance and modelling, to make shared reading feel simpler and less demanding.

Strengthening social and professional reinforcement around reading and ensuring that families facing the greatest structural pressures receive proportionately greater support is essential. Reading support should be integrated across the services around families, including health visiting, early years settings, libraries, schools, community organisations, family hubs, early help and children's social care services, to ensure consistent and joined-up provision and reinforcement.

Evidence clearly demonstrates the impact of embedding reading support into the networks around families with young children. For over 30 years Bookstart has been providing this foundational infrastructure across England, Wales and Northern Ireland – in partnership with almost 5,700 early years education settings, around two-thirds of health visitors, over 2,500 libraries, more than 1,000 multi-agency family-support organisations (including over 300 family hubs), and over 170 charities and community groups. Across the 0–5 age range, Bookstart Baby, Toddler, Pre-schooler and Storytime

provide families with high-quality books, practical information and engaging activities, alongside resources and guidance that help professionals to deliver effective reading behaviour-change support. Reaching 90% of families with new babies and 33% of 1–4-year-olds in families on low incomes, these programmes support families at key moments, helping to establish and reinforce the conditions that protect shared reading.

Section 6: Concluding reflections

At a time of rising economic pressures, many families are experiencing increased strain, making the conditions in which young children are growing and developing more challenging. As a result, inequalities in children's early outcomes continue to grow. Early shared reading, with its proven developmental benefits, is a powerful way to reduce these inequalities. But complex pressures on family life, combined with unequal access to time, resources and supportive environments, appear to be making reading harder. Parents and carers find it rewarding and they tell us their children enjoy it. The appetite is there – what is missing are the right conditions. System change is needed to reverse the decline and ensure inequalities in early reading habits are reduced. Tackling these inequalities will require greater and sustained cross-sector investment in early reading, supported by partnerships that recognise its role in children's life chances.



Section 1: Introduction

Sharing books and stories with children from birth can be life changing. It supports cognitive development, bonding and attachment, emotional wellbeing, creativity, school readiness and attainment. It helps overcome inequalities before they deepen (BookTrust, 2025d). For children in foster care, kinship care or adoption, shared reading creates moments of connection, helping children find belonging, particularly following disruption or loss (BookTrust, 2025e).

Our mission at BookTrust, the UK's largest children's reading charity, is to create a world where reading is part of the everyday life of all children and families, especially those from low-income or vulnerable family backgrounds. We have been championing the power of reading for over a century, playing a leading role in shaping a national reading culture. Since Bookstart was launched over 30 years ago, we have grown to provide the national infrastructure to support reading in children's early years.

Through our programmes, we work with over 34,000 delivery partners, operating in every local area in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each year we reach more than 1.4 million children and families, including 90% of families with new babies and 33% of 1–4-year-olds in families on low incomes. Our extensive place-based partnership networks keep us closely connected to professionals and families, so our work evolves in line with their needs.

These networks, alongside our research, tell us this work has never been more needed. Shared reading has never been more important, or more at risk. Families enjoy reading together but are doing it less

and less. It appears reading is becoming increasingly challenging to fit into everyday life. Family life today is undeniably complex. Competing demands, changing family and societal dynamics, and rapid technological change create an increasingly pressurised environment for parents and carers with young children. This is the context that is shaping reading habits in the early years.

Crucially, these conditions are not evenly distributed. Pressures on time, routines, material resources and social support vary across families, and so do the opportunities to establish and sustain shared reading. As a result, inequalities in children's experiences begin from their earliest moments.



of parents and carers of children aged 0–8 do not report a strong sense of having a support network (for example, family, friends or wider community) to help them in this role.

This rises to **49%** among those on the lowest incomes and 45% among those on low incomes, compared with 39% among those on non-low-incomes.²

² In our survey, household income refers to the total annual income before tax from all sources and all household members, as reported by the respondent. Income is grouped by household composition, with low income defined as £28,000 or below for single-adult households and £42,000 or below for households with two or more adults. Lowest income (≤£17,000) is an additional analytic category defined for this study. Thresholds are informed by Households Below Average Income (HBAI) statistics.

While our society can celebrate increasing diversity, with a rich and expanding range of stories to be told, we are also navigating a landscape where cultural experiences are becoming more complex and varied. In this context, it can be harder to sustain the moments of connection that help people feel part of a shared culture. Reading and sharing stories offers a powerful way to build these connections, one that is intrinsically tied to the richness, creativity and joy of childhood. The flourishing landscape of children's books provides a way to foster common ground within families and throughout society. By bringing people together around stories, shared reading helps nurture a sense of belonging in an increasingly complex cultural world.

Our National Family Survey shows what gets families reading, what holds them back and how this is changing over time. The findings are clear: tackling early inequalities will require greater and sustained cross-sector investment in early reading, supported by partnerships that recognise its role in children's development and life chances.

About this research

BookTrust's third National Family Survey was conducted online between 16 October and 5 November 2025 with a representative quota sample of 3,508 parents and carers of children aged 0–8 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Trend reporting draws on two earlier online surveys using comparable methods: a 2021 survey of 3,932 parents and carers of children aged 0–8 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, conducted between February and March 2021, and a 2022 survey of 2,148 parents and carers of children aged 0–7 in low-income households in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, conducted between April and June 2022.

Trend comparisons are presented only when measures are sufficiently consistent. They should be interpreted as indicative of changes in reported reading routines and experiences rather than precise behavioural counts.

Full methodology, glossary, subgroup base sizes and limitations are provided in the [appendices](#).

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i In our survey, 'reading' is defined in age-appropriate ways that reflect how young children typically engage with books:

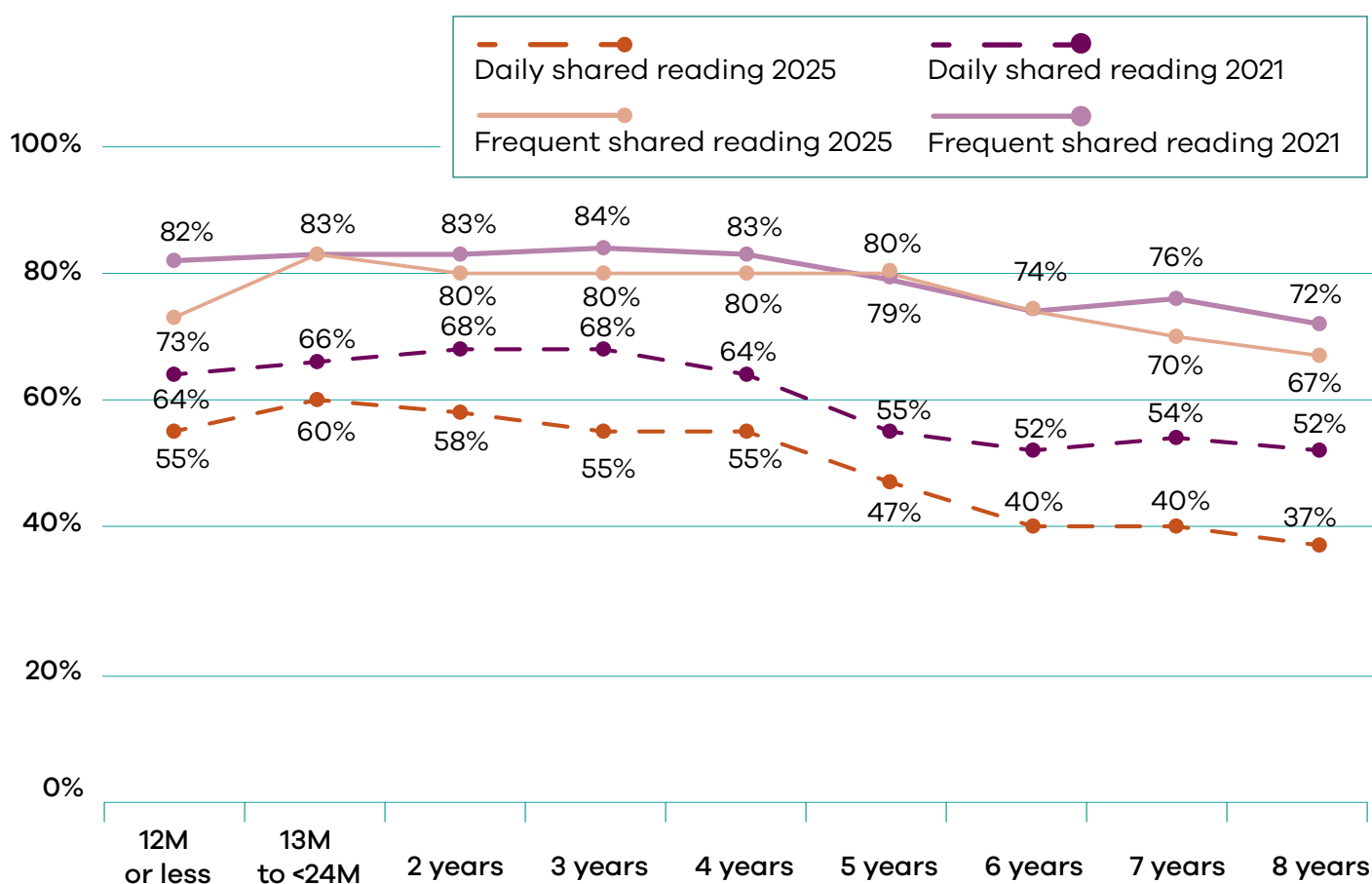
- ★ **Ages 0–2:** sharing, looking at or playing with books (including story books)
- ★ **Ages 3–5:** sharing, looking at or reading books
- ★ **Ages 6–8:** reading or sharing books

Section 2: Reading habits, enjoyment and trends

Shared reading habits

Our findings show that shared reading typically begins in children’s first year. 54% of children are first read with before 6 months, 67% by 12 months and 87% by age two.³ But habitual shared reading appears to be in decline, to a point where daily shared reading may no longer be the majority experience for young children. Among children aged 0–8 who have ever been read to or shared books or stories with an adult, 75% are read with frequently (four or more days a week), but only 49% are read with daily.^{4,5}

Figure 1: Percentage of families who report daily and frequent shared reading in 2021 and 2025



Base: All respondents with children aged 0–8 who have ever been read to or shared a book/story with an adult (2021 n=3,617; 2025 n=3,478).

Between our 2021 and 2025 surveys, daily shared reading among families with children aged 0–8 fell dramatically, from 60% in 2021 to 49% in 2025. Frequent shared reading (four or more days a week) among families with children aged 0–8 also fell, but less sharply, from 80% in 2021 to 75% in 2025. Our figures suggest this decline occurred across all age groups but was smallest in infancy and largest among children aged 6–8.

³ Throughout this report, references to proportions of children are based on parent/carer reports about a specific child they were asked to focus on in the survey.

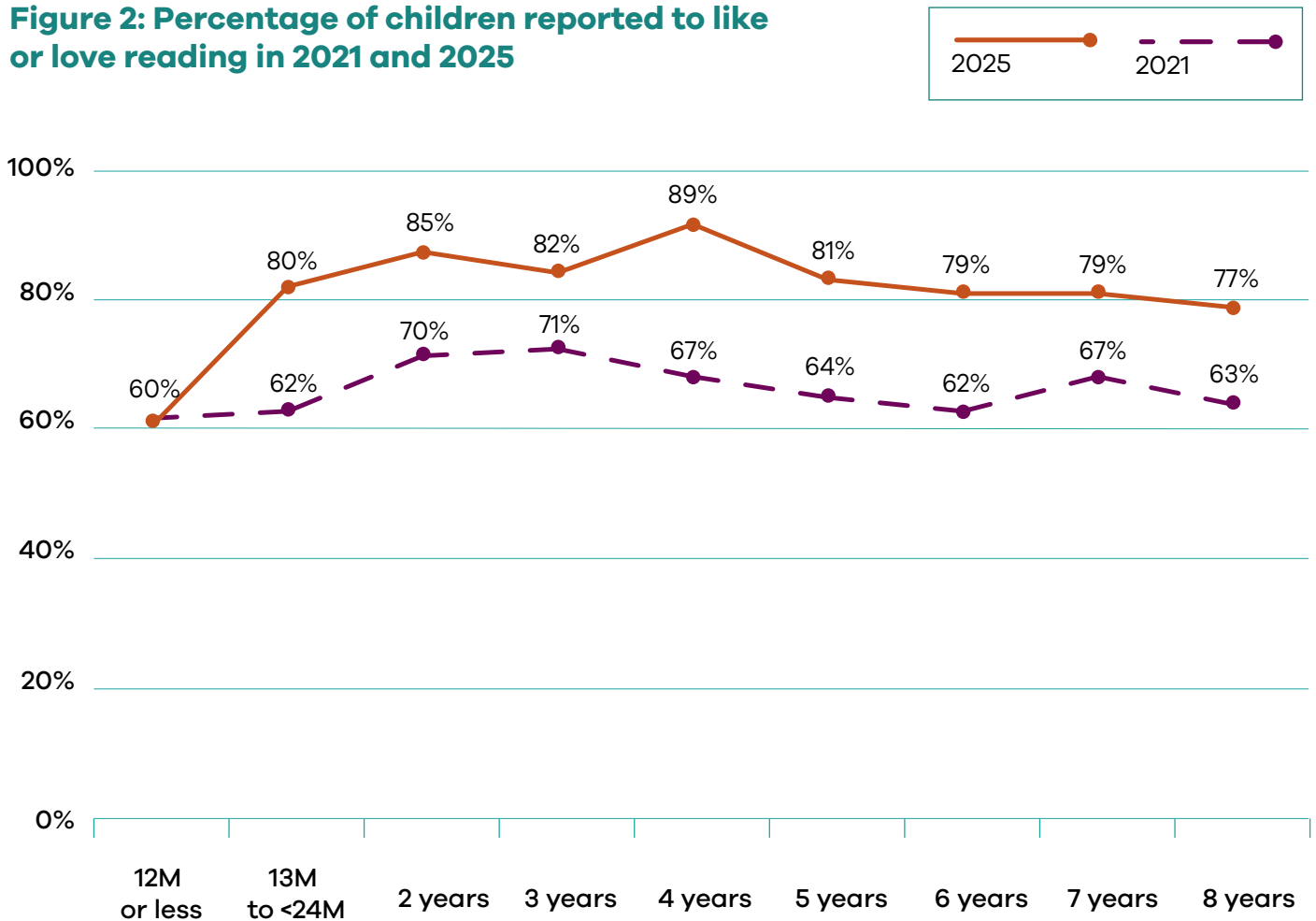
⁴ Shared reading refers to children reading with a parent, carer or another adult, as reported by parents/carers. For children aged 4–8, this excludes reading during school lessons.

⁵ This finding is broadly consistent with early years reading frequency found in other national studies. For example, the Children of the 2020s (COT20s), a major UK longitudinal study, reports that 56% of 2-year-olds were read to or looked at books daily in 2023–24 (Fish et al., 2026).

Children’s enjoyment

Most children enjoy reading and sharing books. 80% of children aged 0–8 are reported to like or love reading by their parents and carers; 46% love it and 34% like it. A further 14% are reported to feel reading is OK, 3% do not like it and 3% say they do not know.⁶ Between our 2021 and 2025 surveys, the proportion of children aged 0–8 reported to like or love reading increased substantially, from 65% in 2021 to 80% in 2025. This includes an increase in the proportion reported to love reading, from 29% in 2021 to 46% in 2025. As Figure 2 below shows, this increase in children’s reported enjoyment of reading occurred across all age groups except those under 12 months old.

Figure 2: Percentage of children reported to like or love reading in 2021 and 2025



Base: All respondents with children aged 0–8 years (2021 n=3,932; 2025 n=3,508).

⁶ This finding is higher than children’s reading enjoyment levels found in other national studies (see, for example, Clark et al., 2025), which are primarily about children’s enjoyment of independent reading. Because our measure of reading enjoyment captures a different conception of reading/shared reading, based on parent reporting and for a different age range, findings should be seen as complementary rather than directly comparable.

Parents' enjoyment and motivation

The majority of parents and carers value and enjoy shared reading. Trends across our 2021 and 2025 surveys show consistently high levels of intrinsic motivation, with most parents reporting that shared reading is enjoyable and emotionally rewarding. There is more variation in parents' confidence and in the extent to which they recognise specific benefits for themselves and their child.



84%

of parents and carers whose child has ever been read with feel reading with their child is something they look forward to.



90%

of parents and carers report high levels of enjoyment from reading with their child, including 66% who say they love it.



91%

of parents and carers feel shared reading is rewarding.



98%

of parents and carers whose child has ever been read with report experiencing at least one benefit from reading or sharing books and stories with their child.

Families' experiences of the benefits of reading or sharing books and stories together:

68% of parents and carers say it has made them feel closer to their child or more connected and present together.

66% of parents and carers say it supports their child's social and emotional development, including emotional wellbeing, confidence, empathy or social skills.

58% of parents and carers say it supports their child's communication and language development.

56% of parents and carers say it sparks their child's imagination and creativity.

53% of parents and carers say it has helped their child to relax at home.

48% of parents and carers say it supports their child's learning, including preparing for or doing well at school.

45% of parents and carers say it has helped their child to understand the world and the people around them.

40% of parents and carers say it has made them feel more confident as a parent or carer.

Interpreting these findings

Reading and sharing stories from children's earliest years has a powerful impact at this critical stage. It helps them create strong bonds with caregivers and builds foundational developmental skills as they grow. Our findings suggest that shared reading remains widespread, valued and emotionally rewarding for families with young children. Most families introduce it early, but not all end up embedding it as a stable, daily habit.

Between our 2021 and 2025 surveys, the sharper decline in daily reading compared with frequent reading suggests that shared reading continues to be present in some form for most families but is becoming less consistent. High parental motivation and rising child enjoyment alongside declining daily shared reading suggests the issue is not primarily one of motivation, but a reflection of growing practical constraints on families' time, energy and routines. Based on the patterns observed in the data, it appears maintaining a shared reading habit has become harder over time. The evidence from our surveys point to a gradual erosion of reading habits rather than disengagement from reading itself. Family life between 2021 and 2025 was shaped by the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic alongside wider economic pressures. These broader conditions are likely to have made routines harder to sustain for many families.



Section 3: Inequalities in early reading

Shared reading is shaped by the conditions in which family life takes place. Many of these conditions are common across families but vary in intensity. Our findings suggest that inequalities in shared reading are more closely associated with uneven opportunity and capability to sustain routines, while motivation remains high across groups.

While the patterns we see in our analysis are descriptive and correlational, not causal, they consistently indicate that constraints tend to accumulate. The greatest inequalities emerge where pressures on time, routine stability, material resources and social support intersect. This aligns with wider evidence that multiple forms of disadvantage often coincide, particularly across low-income households, families with disability, and some minority ethnic groups (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2026).

The comparisons below show how daily shared reading varies across groups where these pressures are more likely to cluster.

- **Income:** 46% of children in low-income households are read with daily, compared with 52% of children in non-low-income households.⁷
- **Speech, language and communication (SLC) concerns:** 41% of children with SLC concerns are read with daily, compared with 51% of children without SLC concerns.
- **Special educational needs, disabilities, or long-term health conditions:** 40% of children with special educational needs, disabilities, or long-term health conditions are read with daily, compared with 52% with no additional needs.
- **Language:** 45% of children in families for whom English is an additional language are read with daily, compared with 50% of children in families that speak English as a first language.
- **Ethnicity:** 40% of Black and 40% of Asian children are read with daily, compared with 51% of White children and 54% of Mixed children.

These differences should not be interpreted in isolation. They are likely to reflect the interaction of multiple structural, cultural and socio-economic factors, including material resources, family networks and service access.



⁷ COT20s similarly reports strong socio-economic gradients in daily shared book activity at age 2, reinforcing this interpretation that early routine protection is unevenly distributed (Fish et al., 2026).

Measures of motivation remain high overall and are less consistently patterned by inequality than differences in daily shared reading. Even among those facing greater structural pressures, high proportions of parents and carers report that shared reading is enjoyable and rewarding. This suggests that differences in daily shared reading are unlikely to be explained primarily by differences in motivation. The selected comparisons below illustrate this pattern:

- **Income:** 87% of parents and carers in the lowest income households report that shared reading is rewarding, compared with 87% in low-income households and 93% in non-low-income households. Similarly, 84% of parents and carers in the lowest income households report high levels of enjoyment from shared reading, compared with 86% and 93% respectively.
- **Ethnicity:** 83% of Black children are reported to enjoy reading, compared with 80% of White children, 74% of Mixed children and 70% of Asian children.
- **Language:** 77% of parents and carers who speak English as a first language say they enjoy reading themselves, compared with 75% of those who speak English as an additional language.



The next section explains how shared reading is shaped by practical and structural conditions. Inequalities in shared reading arise when these conditions vary in stability and availability, making habits harder to establish, sustain and rebuild. We highlight these inequalities throughout the section.

In depth: Reading in adoptive, foster and kinship families – an illustration of clustered constraints

Our work with adoptive, foster and kinship families suggests they may experience greater pressures on early shared reading. Children's prior experiences of adversity can increase the time, attention and planning required from caregivers. The caregiving context typically involves higher daily demands, more complex emotional and behavioural needs, and additional responsibilities. Navigating systems can create additional logistical and administrative obligations. These families value reading, with many aware of the particular value of shared reading as a relational tool to support comfort, stability and belonging for the children in their care. But in the context of these clustered constraints, adoptive, foster and kinship parents and carers may require enhanced support to make shared reading fit with family life (BookTrust, 2024; BookTrust, 2025e). Equally, children in these families need support that recognises and strengthens their own agency, enabling them to play an active role in shaping and sustaining shared reading routines.

“ Before, we tried to do reading and it was a bit chaotic. But because they're physically getting the [Story Explorers] books through the post and they're their books, they want to read them. They want to sit down. They want us to do it. So, it's a lot calmer and we are reading a lot more books. ”

Foster carer, England

Section 4: Conditions that shape early reading habits

Families want their children to spend more time reading, but many feel they require help to make this happen.



74%

of parents and carers would like their child to spend more time with books and stories.



53%

of parents and carers would like to receive more information and support to help their child do so.

Together with our findings that indicate a steep decline in daily shared reading, this appetite for support suggests that motivation alone is not enough to sustain shared reading. 66% of parents and carers report at least one challenge to sharing books, highlighting that the barriers lie in the everyday conditions that shape families' opportunity and capability to read together. Together with families' own motivations, these conditions form the ecosystem around the family, determining whether shared reading becomes a sustained habit or becomes vulnerable to disruption. This section draws on new findings from our survey alongside our existing research and the established evidence base on early home learning inequalities.

Time, capacity and routine stability

Daily shared reading is easiest to sustain when families have stable routines, manageable cognitive load and predictable time with their child. Where time and energy are compromised, shared reading becomes harder to protect as a daily or regular habit. Some of the barriers most commonly reported by parents and carers relate to time, energy and competing demands. For example, our findings indicate that 37% report that they lack time for shared reading due to work, caring for multiple children, or competing parenting demands, 26% report that shared reading is squeezed out by competing activities, screen time or school-assigned reading and 16% report being too tired or experiencing physical or mental health challenges that make reading together difficult.





Recent syntheses of early years system pressures show how poverty-related stress, reduced access

to early years services, and rising complexity of need interact to weaken families' capacity to protect everyday routines (Bryant & Reed, 2025). The early emergence of inequalities in reading habits may reflect differences in how routines form and persist. Our analysis of responses from parents and carers suggests that bedtime reading follows a clear income gradient. When considered across all families, 50% of children in the lowest income households read or are read to as part of their bedtime routine, compared with 56% in low-income households and 69% in non-low-income households.

Routine fragility also appears to play a role in the declining trend in daily reading. When comparing 2025 data with 2021, daily shared reading fell across all families, declining by 11 percentage points overall (from 60% to 49%). However, in the early years, declines in daily shared reading are consistently steeper among families on low incomes. For example, among children aged 13–23 months, daily shared reading fell by 13 percentage points in low-income families (from 63% to 50%), compared with a 6 percentage point decline among all families (from 66% to 60%). Among families with children aged 5–8, declines remain substantial across all groups, but patterns by income are less consistent. The steeper and more consistent declines in the early years among families facing greater structural pressures suggest that challenges may begin earlier in the formation of routines, rather than only emerging later through disengagement from reading.

In depth: The link between reading and wider family routines

68% of parents and carers report that their child has a bedtime routine they follow every or most nights. A further 21% follow a routine about half the time, 7% rarely follow a routine, and 4% do not have a bedtime routine at all. Among families who follow a routine every night, most nights or about half the time, 52% report that their child is read with daily by an adult, compared with 31% of those who rarely follow a routine or have none. Our findings show that work patterns that support routine stability (such as regular daytime hours or predictable shifts) are associated with higher daily shared reading, while parental and child tiredness are negatively associated with daily shared reading. Reading and routines appear to reinforce one another. Children are more likely to be read with daily by an adult where parents and carers report that shared reading helps build routines that work for their family, indicating shared reading can function as a routine-anchoring practice, helping families create moments of structure and connection within busy days.

“As soon as we received it, I took out the [Bookstart] pack and he was immediately drawn to the colours and particularly the touch/feel parts... I had books but never felt I had enough time to consistently read them with him. When I saw him with the pack, I realised how much he enjoyed them and am consistently making an effort every day to read and let him handle them.”

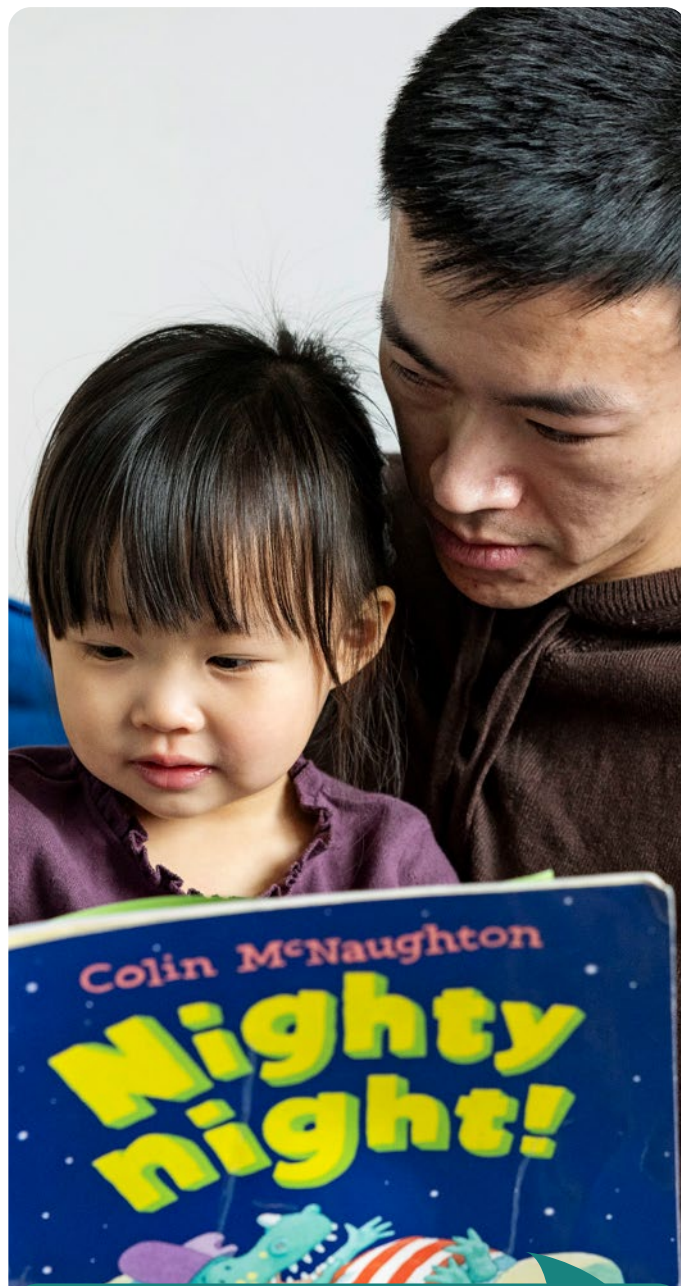
Parent, Northern Ireland

In depth: Screens as a source of routine competition

36% of parents and carers report worrying about their child's screen use. While only 13% report that reading or sharing books is made harder because reading time is taken over by time spent on digital devices (such as TV, phone, tablet, gaming, internet), the impact of this challenge is notable. Daily shared reading is lower among those who report screen time as a barrier (36%) than among those who do not (51%). Screens sit within the wider ecology of time, routine pressures and attention competition, and when they are experienced as competing with routines, shared reading becomes more vulnerable to displacement.

This pattern is reflected across age groups. Among those whose child has a bedtime routine (i.e. excluding those with no routine), reading and shared reading are widely embedded within it in early childhood. The proportion of families who include reading as a part of their bedtime routine rises from 49% in the first year, to a peak of 74% at ages 4–5, before declining to 66% by age 8. Across this same age range, use of devices (such as a phone or tablet) as part of the bedtime routine rises from 3% in the first year to 14% at ages 4–5 and 23% by age 8, suggesting increasing competition within bedtime routines as children grow older.

At the same time, many parents and carers see shared reading as part of the solution. Nearly half of parents and carers (48%) whose child has ever been read with identified 'encouraging their child to spend less time on screens and devices' as a benefit they have experienced from shared reading.



“ The time we have together in the evening is quite minimal. It would have been easier to just give them 15–20 more minutes on the tablet... But because I had the [Story Explorer] kits, that encouraged me to say no, I want to go and spend that bit more time with them... It was really, really nice and made me feel really good. ”

Parent, England

Socially embedded reading networks

Shared reading habits are more resilient when they are socially embedded – when the responsibility for reading is shared across a wider network rather than resting on a single parent or carer. When several adults read with a child, shared reading is not only spread across a wider group, it is also reinforced as a normal and valued part of family life, and therefore more likely to be sustained as a daily routine.

Our findings show that when two parents and the wider family are involved, daily shared reading becomes more likely. Among children who have ever been read with, parents and carers remain the main adults reading with their child, but extended family also contribute significantly. In the six months leading up to the survey, 35% of children were read with regularly by grandparents, 25% by siblings and 14% by aunts or uncles.

Daily shared reading is higher where this wider network is present. It rises from 49% among children overall to 53% when another parent or carer is regularly involved, 60% when grandparents are involved and 62% when aunts or uncles are involved.

Extended family participation is highest in infancy: at 0–1 years, 41% of children are read with regularly by grandparents and 19% by aunts or uncles. This reduces as children get older: at 5–8 years, 30% of children are read with regularly by grandparents and 10% by aunts or uncles. Patterns in our data suggest that when this wider reading network is limited or unavailable, social

embedding weakens and responsibility is concentrated on fewer adults, making daily reading harder to sustain.



Differences in children's reading support networks, such as the availability of two parents or wider family members to read regularly, can be seen across family circumstances, income groups and cultural backgrounds. These patterns in our data may reflect broader differences in family structures, work patterns, geographic proximity of relatives or other contextual factors. For example, 34% of children in the lowest income households are reported to have another parent or carer who reads with them regularly, compared with 56% in low-income households and 77% in non-low-income households. Grandparent involvement also varies, with lower levels among children in families for whom English is an additional language (12% versus 36% for children in families that speak English as a first language) and across income groups (23% in the lowest income households, 30% in low-income households and 38% in non-low-income households) and ethnic background (39% for White children, 32% for Mixed children, 17% for Black children and 10% for Asian children), though these should be interpreted with caution given smaller subgroup base sizes.



Access to and ownership of books

Even in the earliest years, owning a selection of age-appropriate books is important. It enables exploration and autonomy by allowing children to revisit books whenever they like, handle them in age-appropriate ways, and choose and discover different stories and formats. 28% of parents and carers report having 10 or fewer books in the home suitable for their child's age, 25% report having 11–20, and 46% report having 21 or more. Our findings show these differences in book ownership are associated not only with how often families read, but also how shared reading is approached. Just 36% of children with 10 or fewer suitable books at home are read with daily, rising to 44% among those with 11–20 suitable books, and 60% among those with 21 or more suitable books. 72% of parents and carers who report having more than 10 suitable books say they let their child choose the book or story themselves, compared with 42% among those with 10 or fewer suitable books for their child.

Families with more children's books are more likely to report using sensory, interactive and dialogic practices (such as using expressive voices or props, encouraging the child to participate through prediction or recall, asking questions, and connecting the story to the child's own experience) when reading together. Given choice, interactivity and dialogue are all important drivers of children's engagement with reading (Cremin et al., 2023), it is not surprising that our findings also show higher book ownership is associated with higher reported child enjoyment of reading. In fact, wider research shows that access to sufficient and suitable books in the home is not only positively associated with reading engagement, but also later educational outcomes (Evans et al., 2010; Cole et al., 2022; Deng & Xin, 2021).



Differences in book access and ownership shape the practical conditions in which families read. They influence how easily children can explore books and develop early reading interests. Our data shows inequalities in children's book ownership by income: 18% of parents and carers in the lowest income households report having five or less books in the home suitable for their child's age, compared with 13% in low-income households and 7% in non-low-income households. Book ownership is lower among families for whom English is an additional language: 19% reporting five or less suitable books, compared with 9% for families that speak English as a first language. Book ownership also varies across ethnic backgrounds, with 27% of Asian families reporting they have five or less suitable books, compared with 16% of Black families and 7% of White and Mixed families.

In depth: Book access and socially embedded reading networks – libraries as social infrastructure

Libraries extend children’s access to books and provide social spaces and shared activities that help normalise and support reading as a regular part of family life. For example, group story sessions are a warm, fun, low-pressure opportunity for modelling and demonstrating storytelling to parents and carers in ways that resonate and inspire ideas to try at home. Through widening both access to books and participation in reading culture, libraries act as an important reinforcing part of the wider reading ecosystem. Properly resourced outreach is essential for libraries to fulfil this role, as wider research shows library engagement is not only driven by practical constraints like proximity or time, but by awareness, personal relevance and social identity (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025).

65% of families report being registered with a library (either parent, carer and/or child). 16% of children visited a library weekly with a parent or carer in the 12 months leading up to the survey, 31% monthly, 27% less than once a month and 25% never. (These visits are reported regardless of whether the family holds a library membership.) Library engagement is associated with daily shared reading. Among families who report being registered with a library, 53% of children are read with daily, compared with 42% among those who are not. More frequent engagement shows a stronger association: daily shared reading rises from 43% among children who never visit a library, and 45% among those visiting a few times a year, to 52% for monthly visitors and 60% for weekly visitors with a parent or carer.

“ They have people come in at half term to do story sessions... We went and the kids were there from the school, and they just sat there and they watched which was dead good... I’ve noticed it the past few months... it’s getting used to go and play because they have toys. ”

Parent, England

Family reading cultures and norms

Research shows a clear intergenerational pattern, where reading practices and dispositions are shaped and transmitted within the home (Sullivan, 2001). Parents’ and carers’ childhood reading experiences and their enjoyment of reading are positively associated with both their own engagement in shared reading and their child’s enjoyment (BookTrust, 2025c; Gleed, 2013).

In our survey, 28% of parents and carers do not agree or feel neutral that reading and books were a big part of their family life growing up. Parents and carers who agree that reading and books were a big part of their family life growing up are more likely to read frequently (four or more days a week) with their child (63%, compared with 52%).⁸

They’re also more likely to report that they enjoy reading themselves (84%, compared with 58%). These differences highlight the varied cultural and social contexts in which families build their reading practices and suggest that family cultures in which stories, books or oral storytelling are valued and shared, may help build norms, identity and confidence. Where families have not experienced these being built over time since childhood, shared reading may feel less intuitive, less socially reinforced or more effortful to establish.

⁸ These percentages refer to the parent’s/carer’s own reading with their child, not reading by any adult.



Our data indicates that parents and carers for whom English is an additional language are less likely to report books and reading were a big part of their own childhood. 62% of parents and carers for whom English is an additional language reported reading and books were a big part of family life when they were growing up, compared with 72% of families that speak English as a first language. This may reflect different cultural traditions or everyday activities, rather than differences in the value placed on reading.

Knowledge and perceived effort

Throughout the early years, shared reading is typically expressive, interactive and relational. This is important because these qualities support children's language, comprehension and engagement (BookTrust, 2025b; BookTrust, 2025d). 73% of parents and carers use two or more interactive shared reading practices when reading together with their child, such as using expressive voices or props, encouraging the child to participate, asking questions and connecting the story to the child's own experiences. However, many families still experience uncertainty: 50% either feel unsure or are not always clear on how to support their child to enjoy reading, and 22% report finding it difficult to make shared reading engaging or to keep their child interested. This uncertainty matters because lack of clarity increases perceived effort. 57% of children whose parents feel clear on how to support enjoyment are read with daily, compared with 42% of those whose parents feel neutral or do not feel clear.

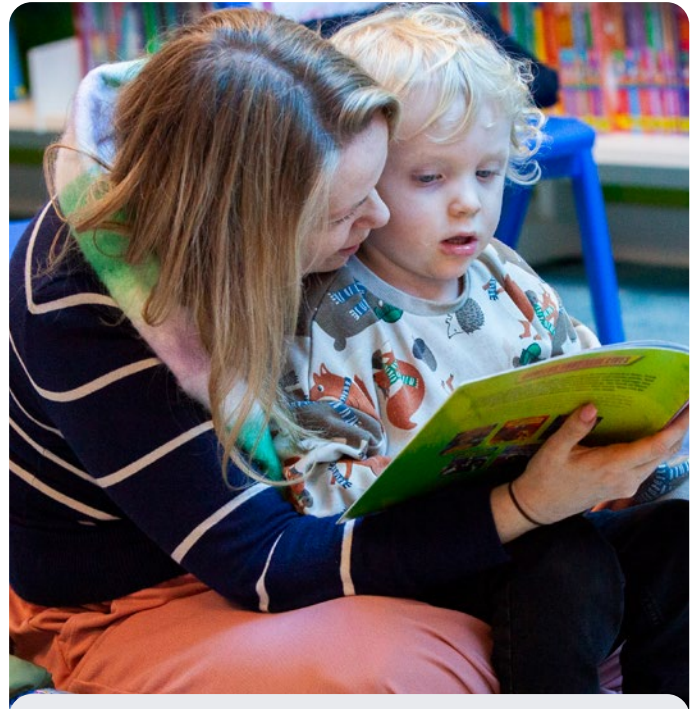




Our data suggests there are differences in parents' knowledge of how to support their children's reading

enjoyment, which may have knock-on effects on perceived effort and capability. 56% of parents and carers in the lowest income households use two or more playful or dialogic techniques when reading, compared with 66% in low-income households and 77% in non-low-income households. This income gradient is also found in levels of certainty about how best to support children's enjoyment of reading: 61% of parents and carers in the lowest income households feel unsure or are not always clear on how to do this, compared with 58% in low-income and 44% in non-low-income households.

There are also differences by ethnic background and first language. 27% of parents and carers for whom English is an additional language say they don't find shared reading easy, compared with 17% of parents and carers who speak English as a first language. 26% of parents and carers of Asian children say they don't find shared reading easy, compared with 21% of parents and carers of Mixed children, 17% of parents and carers of White children and 14% of parents and carers of Black children. This pattern is broadly reflected in the higher proportion of parents and carers who would like more support or information to help their child spend more time with books and stories. For example, 62% for parents and carers for whom English is an additional language would like more support, compared with 52% who speak English as a first language. A similar pattern is observed across some ethnic groups, although differences are less consistent. 83% of parents and carers of Black children would like more support, compared with 64% of parents and carers of Asian children, 56% of parents and carers of Mixed children and 48% of parents and carers of White children.



Interpreting these findings

Taken together, these findings suggest that although parents and carers highly value reading, many families face challenges in sustaining it as a regular habit because of pressures on routines, uneven access to books and support, and limited confidence or reinforcement. Demand for guidance remains high, highlighting the importance of early years support. Embedding reading while routines are forming and reinforcing it at key transition points can make reading habits more resilient as pressures grow. This is particularly important because reading habits are shaped not only by practical conditions but also by networks, knowledge and norms built over time. Where reading was not embedded in parents' and carers' own childhoods, or when it is not socially embedded through a supportive network, it may feel less intuitive and more effortful. These challenges can contribute to inequalities, highlighting the need to view early shared reading support as a key part of a wider ecosystem, and access to this as an important equaliser.

Section 5: What this means for effective solutions

Across our findings and the wider research base, the picture is consistent – shared reading operates as a system behaviour that is becoming harder to sustain across early childhood. This trend is not something we can afford to ignore. Not when inequalities in early child development persist or are growing (Sutton Trust, 2024) and shared reading is a powerful lever for reducing these inequalities before they deepen (BookTrust, 2025d).

Consistent with our own findings on early reading, wider evidence shows that differences in early home learning environments are socially patterned and appear very early. While these differences may seem modest at a single point in time, research suggests that repeated variations in everyday routines and interactions accumulate across early childhood, contributing to diverging developmental trajectories (Fish et al., 2026; Outhwaite, 2025). Recent longitudinal evidence shows more frequent shared reading is consistently associated with better developmental outcomes than less frequent reading (Nakamura et al., 2026).

Reversing this trend will require a system shift. Our evidence points to a set of conditions where action is most needed.⁹

Build capability – building family reading cultures and norms, and providing practical guidance, modelling and reassurance to enhance knowledge and reduce perceived effort.

Widen opportunity – supporting time, capacity and routine stability, strengthening family and community reading networks, and improving access to and ownership of books.

Sustain motivation – reinforcing the enjoyment and emotional value of shared reading, building confidence and helping families recognise the benefits of shared reading for them.

When these conditions are secure, shared reading is resilient. When strain accumulates across them, shared reading habits become less stable and more easily disrupted. Given reading behaviour emerges from the interaction between individual families and the wider social and support environment, effective policy and practice must act on conditions at multiple levels of the reading ecosystem. Efforts to reduce inequalities must focus in particular on gaps in opportunity and capability, where variation across groups is greatest, while continuing to support and strengthen motivation where needed.



⁹ This framing draws on the COM-B model (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation – Behaviour) (West & Michie, 2020), which underpins BookTrust’s Theory of Change (BookTrust, 2025f).

In depth: The transition into school – an example of system shift in action

The transition into school provides a clear illustration of how shared reading operates as a system behaviour. Between ages 4 and 5, multiple elements of children's reading lives and ecosystems shift simultaneously. The effect of this is clear: daily shared reading sees the starkest change from age 4 to age 5 – from 55% reading daily at age 4 to 47% reading daily at age 5. Reading enjoyment also drops, from 55% of children reported to 'love' reading at age 4 to 44% at age 5. This age is when the style of shared reading changes. Cognitively demanding practices (such as explaining sounds, letters or words, encouraging recall or joint storytelling) increase, while sensory, relational and playful elements begin to thin out. As reading becomes more instructional, it depends more heavily on sustained attention, children's participation and adult direction.

This shift in *how reading is experienced* coincides with broader changes in child and family life. Screen-based bedtime activities and parental worry about screen time become more common, extended family reading involvement declines, early years community touchpoints reduce and competition for time intensifies. Around 90% of parents and carers continue to see themselves as playing a vital role in developing their child's reading ability at this stage. But at this point of marked change in opportunity, capability demands and routine competition, it is unsurprising that parents' and carers' appetite for more information and support to help their child read more rises to its highest point (64% at age 5). Policy and practice should therefore treat key transition points such as this one as critical reinforcement points, adapting support to actively normalise and protect shared reading's relational and playful qualities as instructional demands increase.



“ When I think of primary school... it just makes me really nervous... Leading up to school, I've been more intentional with making sure they know, know these words mean something... so that... that it wouldn't be so foreign to him or just difficult for him, I guess. ”

Parent, England

Creating more equitable foundations for family reading

Our findings indicate shared reading habits are eroding not because families have stopped valuing reading, but because pressures on time, routines and support increase the effort needed to sustain these habits. This makes it more important than ever to strengthen the foundations that support families to read together.

Starting shared reading early appears to strengthen the foundations for sustained daily reading over time. Establishing routines in the first year of life may help protect shared reading habits as children grow older and family routines become more complex. Children aged 0–8 who were first read with in their first year are much more likely to be read with daily than those who start later, 58% compared with 31%. This means early reading support may play an important foundational role, building resilience into reading habits longer term.

Increasing equity in book access through strong public library systems with properly resourced outreach, access in early years settings, schools and community groups, and importantly, in the home, is a key aspect of the protective reading context. Availability of books lowers effort at the point of use, which helps protect reading routines, particularly in infancy and toddlerhood when shared reading depends almost entirely on adult time and energy. Continued investment in book provision is therefore essential.

Providing reading support, particularly when routines are fragile, is crucial. Families need reinforcement, reassurance and modelling that reduce cognitive and practical load. This means offering guidance that normalises playful, responsive shared reading and helps it fit naturally within everyday family routines (BookTrust and Untapped Innovation, 2023). This is often most effective when delivered through partnerships with organisations already working with families (Carpentieri et al., 2011), such as libraries, health visitors, family hubs, nurseries and schools.



Strengthening the infrastructure that supports these foundations

The mechanisms that shape reading habits are similar across families, but the structures and pressures influencing them vary. Where sustaining reading habits requires greater effort, greater support is needed. Strengthening the social and professional reinforcement around reading and ensuring that families facing the greatest structural pressures receive proportionately greater support is essential to helping shared reading endure.

Health visiting, early years settings, libraries, schools, community organisations, family hubs, early help and children's social care services form an essential family support ecosystem. They also form part of families' reading ecosystem, so reading support should be integrated across these touchpoints, creating a sustained, developmentally responsive pathway that supports families

consistently over time. Reinforcement across settings and services is likely to support more durable reading habits (BookTrust, 2025a). Trusted organisations and professionals, often with ongoing relationships with families, can act as low-stigma connectors, especially for families who report limited support networks, offering practical, relational entry points to reading support.

International evidence shows that the impact of early reading programmes comes not only from providing books, but from helping embed reading support within the networks around families and children, enabling consistent reinforcement at key developmental stages (Klass et al., 2024). In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Bookstart provides this foundational infrastructure. Creating and maintaining embedded reading support requires proactive investment to ensure families receive the support needed to establish and maintain shared reading habits.

Bookstart: providing national early years reading infrastructure

BookTrust's early years work spans multiple sectors to embed shared reading into everyday family life. Across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Bookstart is delivered in partnership with almost 5,700 early years education settings, around two-thirds of health visitors, over 2,500 libraries, more than 1,000 multi-agency family support organisations (including over 300 family hubs), and over 170 charities and community groups. Across the 0–5 age range, Bookstart Baby, Toddler, Pre-schooler and Storytime provide families with high-quality books, practical information

and engaging activities, alongside resources and guidance that help professionals to deliver effective reading behaviour-change support. Specialist Bookstart resources are also available for families with children with additional needs or those for whom English is an additional language. Our Story Explorers programme provides enhanced support to early years children in adoptive, foster and kinship families. Together, these programmes reach families at moments of high receptivity, before routines are established, then reinforce the conditions that protect shared reading when routines are under pressure. Find out more about BookTrust's work in our [Impact Report](#).



Section 6: Concluding reflections

At a time of rising economic pressures, many families are experiencing increased strain, which means the conditions in which young children are growing and developing are becoming more challenging. As a result, inequalities in children's early outcomes continue to persist, and in some areas are widening. Early shared reading, with its proven developmental benefits, is a powerful way to reduce these inequalities. We start from a position of strength because families with young children value reading. Parents and carers find it rewarding and tell us their children enjoy it. The appetite is there – what is missing are the right conditions. System change is needed to reverse the decline and ensure inequalities in early reading habits are reduced. The priority is to strengthen the infrastructure and touchpoints that make shared reading easier to start, easier to sustain, and easier to restore when routines falter or break down, as they will for many families throughout childhood. This is important not only for the generation of children growing up now, but for their ability to pass down shared reading as a core cultural inheritance of childhood. By supporting families now, we can help ensure reading remains a joyful and enduring part of childhood for generations to come.

“ If you've been read to, as a child, by someone who cares about you, you have been given an enormous invisible privilege. If we vacate that space – where child and story meet, where human love slows the world down – we will hand it to something that is not human, that does not love us. The mission is urgent. Childhood is fleeting. ”

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Reading Rights Ambassador and Waterstones Children's Laureate 2024–2026

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Methodology notes

As with any large-scale survey-based research, the findings presented here should be interpreted in light of several limitations. As with all parent-reported measures, some over-reporting is possible for high-profile behaviours such as reading. To help address this, we interpret reported enjoyment alongside behavioural and constraint-related indicators (such as routines, time pressure, access and barriers), which show coherent patterns across the dataset. While the survey sample is weighted to be nationally representative, it was conducted online and may underrepresent families experiencing digital exclusion or lower literacy. Findings should therefore be understood as broadly representative of the target population, within the limits of online survey participation. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding, and totals may be derived from rounded figures. Find out more in our [methods appendix](#).

About BookTrust

BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity. We work with over 34,000 delivery partners, operating in every local authority. Each year we reach over 1.4 million children and families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Together with our partners we deliver evidence-informed programmes that make a measurable difference to children's reading behaviours. Our work is rooted in the belief that every child, especially those from low income or vulnerable family backgrounds, deserves the chance to enjoy reading and all the lifelong benefits it brings.



Visit booktrust.org.uk to find out more or contact queries@booktrust.org.uk

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